



GUNBOATS, EMPIRE AND THE CHINA STATION

The Royal Navy in 1920s East Asia

Matthew Heaslip

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Introduction

In recent years we have seen growing discussion about the changing global balance of power. China's economic and military challenges to the United States, questions about the relevance of post-1945 multilateral conventions and renewed gunboat diplomacy all feed into those debates. This is not the first time the world has seen this kind of tumultuous transition. Comparisons have already been drawn with the interwar period as a key phase in the previous changeover between superpowers.¹ British economic dominance was usurped by America's rise. The British Empire hit its peak in size and influence, after which it began a slow decline that led to increasingly desperate attempts at maintaining the status quo, often using Britain's key global power asset: the Royal Navy. With a curious twist it is to the home of today's ascendant superpower that we must go to explore that previous process, the epicentre from which Britain's imperial system started to crumble. In doing so, we will explore the changes and challenges that affected the Royal Navy's China Station, as it worked to maintain the British Empire's interests in and around East Asia, over the course of that chaotic decade. Amid pirates and revolution, with events pushed to the verge of war, Britain's seamen fought to hold back the changing tides of fortune.

There have been some excellent studies of the two contrasting elements to developments in 1920s East Asia. A recent flurry of accounts, for example, has explored specific elements of the economic, sociological and diplomatic aspects of Britain's relationship with China.² This has given us a far better understanding of the 'diplomacy of imperial retreat', as Edmund Fung once described it.³ On the military side, discussion has long been framed by debate over the Admiralty's naval strategy in relation to Japan, and to a lesser extent the United States.⁴ Those two stories run almost entirely separately, despite both featuring the Royal Navy's China Station, one of the British Empire's two main institutional cogs in East Asia and its third-largest fleet. That will be addressed in this book. Britain's 'Far Eastern' fleet had a significant impact on its furthest outposts of

the Empire and its relationship with China. In return, events in China had an important bearing on the way the Admiralty developed its strategy for East Asia in a rapidly changing world. In the process, the region saw one of the largest ever peacetime deployments of British naval force during the forgotten 1927 Shanghai Crisis. Exploring those developments helps us understand Britain and the Royal Navy's place in modern East Asia, and the evolving struggle between the United States and China.

Bridging the decades between two of the most destructive conflicts the world has seen, the interwar period is sometimes treated as little more than a pause in which the major powers recovered their strength, before almost inevitably resuming hostilities.⁵ The very title 'interwar' highlights the extent to which the 1920s and 1930s are defined by the wars at either end of the period. David Reynolds went so far as to describe the pre-war and interwar eras as being 'punctuation marks' in our understanding of the early twentieth century.⁶ In the context of the Royal Navy, that idea of an interwar interlude has been a core theme in discussion of the power struggles with the other major players of the period: the United States, the Soviet Union, Germany, France, Italy and Japan.⁷ Naval operations during the 1920s have often been neglected, with a tendency to view the period just as background to the major power struggles in the 1930s. As a result, the decade is largely viewed as one of peace.⁸

Little research has gone into the potential for Britain to have been drawn indirectly into a war through existing commitments involving armed conflicts, such as the civil wars in China, or how those wider developments helped shape British defence policy. Perhaps the exception to that rule has been the discussion of the 1922 Chanak Affair, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's nationalist movement challenged some of the conditions laid down in the Treaty of Sèvres.⁹ Atatürk ordered the reoccupation of Istanbul and Eastern Thrace, culminating in a stand-off between Turkish troops and the Allied forces stationed to hold the Çanakkale (Chanak) region, controlling the strategically important Dardanelles Straits. Ultimately war was only narrowly avoided.¹⁰ The fact that outright war did not result from such interventions in the 1920s does not mean that the events were peaceful, or that the threat of force by a major power was sufficient to ensure the peaceful capitulation of a lesser power. In the Chanak Crisis, the lesser power, Turkey, was seemingly willing to fight and it was Britain that eventually backed down. The 'Great War' may have ended, but the world had not moved on to a 'Great Peace'.

Discussion of this 'violent peace' has been largely limited to events in Eastern Europe and the former Ottoman Empire, particularly between the Russian

Revolution and the Chanak Crisis.¹¹ Otherwise areas such as the Mediterranean have been described as having seen occasional crises, but were mostly 'relatively quiet'.¹² This peaceful narrative is particularly true of naval developments east of Suez. The risk of British forces being drawn into a sustained war due to events in 1920s China has only been acknowledged as a 'thinkable', if undesirable, explanation for why the Admiralty felt it vital to build up a major naval fortress at Singapore.¹³ This may reflect British naval history's long-running hangover from Arthur Marder and his tendency to continue fighting Herbert Richmond's battles over preparations for a future major conflict. This has come at the expense of discussing what the mainstream Royal Navy was actually doing in the 1920s.¹⁴

There have been a few tantalizing references to events that highlight how the 1920s were far from peaceful for Britain's Royal Navy, particularly in East Asia.¹⁵ In dealing with a range of state and substate threats the Royal Navy and other branches of the British imperial establishment were involved in violent clashes in China, throughout most of the decade. Indeed, the country was the scene of the Navy's most sustained active deployment over the entire interwar period, and events in China came very close to ending Britain's peace.¹⁶ Along the way, new developments in technology, tactical and strategic thinking, and changing attitudes to the British Empire all affected the China Station's disposition and behaviour. Through all this the Royal Navy played a significant role in Britain's interwar foreign policy, beyond the major power struggles. Preparations for 'big wars' took place in parallel with the Navy fighting the Empire's 'little wars'.

Our knowledge of the interwar Royal Navy has been, and to some extent still is, dominated by a few key overarching topics, notably the disarmament and arms limitation conferences, and associated cruiser arms race between Britain, the United States and Japan.¹⁷ Core to these has been the debate over the seriousness with which Britain treated the Ten Year Rule. Conceived by the British government in 1919, that 'rule' effectively guided the armed services and the Treasury to assume that no war would occur in the following decade. Assessments of the rule have become more nuanced, noting that it only really applied to major wars requiring an expeditionary force to be sent to mainland Europe but not to minor expeditions and policing operations elsewhere around the world.¹⁸ However, there was a much broader spectrum of strategic deployments and challenges that affected the 1920s Royal Navy.

Chief among these was the Royal Navy's role dealing with potential localized conflicts as Britain's 'imperial gendarmerie', particularly in response to the escalating violent outbursts in Palestine between Arab nationalists, British garrison forces and Zionists.¹⁹ While considering the broader context of the

British Empire as a whole, the treatment of the Royal Navy has often been relatively one dimensional, as a tool of the Empire. There have only been brief mentions of new developments, such as faster ships, and how changes to the Navy related to those in the Empire, and vice versa.²⁰ In effect, this has become a hallmark of how imperial histories of Britain's relationship with China treat the Royal Navy's role.²¹

If histories of the British Empire in East Asia take a simplistic view of the 1920s Royal Navy, naval historians have been guilty of almost completely forgetting China. For example, while Christopher Bell provides a convincing argument about the importance of Hong Kong as a forward operating base in the developing power struggle between Britain and Japan, he makes no mention of the relationship between the naval base and events in China itself.²² Most histories of the 1920s Royal Navy east of Suez focus heavily on tracing the path to the Second World War and explaining the shift in strategic focus from Hong Kong to Singapore,²³ in particular, how Japan was almost certain to end up at war with one or both of the United States and Great Britain, given its 'Asia for Asians' rhetoric and expanding commercial interests.²⁴ Concentrating on Japan is logical and valuable when debating the origins of the Second World War, in terms of East Asia, but when examining the interwar period itself such a focus risks ignoring events that did not ultimately result in conflict.

The interwar Royal Navy comprised three sections: (1) the main fleet – centralized in order to destroy an enemy battle fleet, (2) detached cruiser forces – to protect the sea arteries of the Empire and (3) local defence forces – performing the day-to-day work of the Empire.²⁵ Due to the focus on major power conflicts, we have many excellent naval histories that follow a similar course of concentrating almost exclusively on the first two segments of the fleet.²⁶ John Linge's fascinating examination of the Royal Navy's policing of Ireland's coastline, during the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921–2, provides one of the few notable exceptions.²⁷ Given that over 400 of the Royal Navy's roughly 475 armed, sea-going vessels in commission in the mid-1920s were types used for regional defence and policing, this represents a notable oversight.²⁸ In contrast, historians of the late Victorian and Edwardian Royal Navy almost all make far greater reference to the global deployment and use of smaller warships for trade defence and imperial policing.²⁹

Examining the day-to-day work of the ordinary fleet, during moments of calm and crisis, is crucial to understanding the Royal Navy's role in shaping the British Empire's interwar foreign policy. The ordinary fleet was spread across the entire world, in contrast to the battle fleet, which by the 1920s was concentrated

in the 'Home' theatre and the Mediterranean. It was through the mainstream Navy, the bulk of Britain's fleet, that Britain was able to wield significant influence over global developments.

Perhaps a result of the focus on the battle fleet, the interwar China Station itself has also featured in surprisingly little historical literature, despite having been Britain's third-largest naval deployment over a period of decades. Those that do exist tend to skip over events in the 1920s to focus on the major conflicts in the Station's history.³⁰ In doing so they have largely missed the pivotal moments where the China Station was on the frontline in the turn of the Empire. On a day-to-day basis the China Station was involved in policing and defending the furthestmost stretches of the British Empire in China's littoral regions (Table 1).³¹

During the 1920s, the British Empire had considerable interests in China, built up after Britain forced open China's borders to Western merchants through the Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1856–60.³² In purely nominal terms, British firms had investments totalling roughly £200 million in China in 1927, equivalent to almost £13 billion in 2019 when adjusted for inflation.³³ Going into the 1920s those peripheral areas came under sustained pressure from the growing economic dominance of the United States and a more assertive Japan. As a result, those assets and trade routes were not critical, but they were

Table 1 Royal Navy global deployments

	Capital Ships	Cruisers	Destroyers	Minor Warships	Submarines	Total
1920						
Home/Atlantic	14	12	78	7	22	133
Mediterranean	8	6	22	7	–	43
China	–	5	–	21	12	38
East Indies	–	3	–	3	–	6
Other	–	10	–	7	–	17
1929						
Home/Atlantic	10	6	22	46	19	103
Mediterranean	10	9	38	7	7	71
China	1	6	9	25	6	47
East Indies	–	3	–	4	–	7
Other	–	8	–	10	–	17

Note: Only includes warships in active commission (i.e. not in reserve or at training schools).

important enough for the British government to risk localized conflict. China was not just an economic concern for the British Empire, however, with the country representing a vital tile in the jigsaw of Britain's global grand defensive strategy. In addition to the well-known imperial outpost at Hong Kong, the Royal Navy also maintained another formal base at Weihai (Weihaiwei) in northern China and saw the country as both a potential trigger for a future conflict with Japan and also a source of victory in such a war. British policy for East Asia was therefore largely one of trying to maintain existing business arrangements and trade flows, to keep hold of its strategic outposts, all the while avoiding being drawn into a larger military commitment. Diplomatic and economic policy decisions tended to fall under the Foreign Office, grand strategic planning was largely guided by the Admiralty and imperial policing was by the China Station itself. As we shall see, however, in practice things were never that simple and many decisions fell to the officers and officials on the scene, whether working in collaboration or in isolation.

Exploring how the China Station dealt with its full range of responsibilities will centre around the generally young, men that were sent out to the other side of the world and the people they encountered. As a result, it is fitting to begin with what they experienced during those first days and weeks and how that shaped their views of East Asia. During that formative period, they met men and women from around the world, some of whose lives would be changed by the events detailed in this book. Featuring heroes and antiheroes, tragic and comedic moments, this is a human tale where Britain's steel castles were a floating community that built and sometimes broke bonds with those they encountered.

At a higher level, the book will go on to consider the China Station within the wider geostrategic climate. After the First World War the Admiralty retained a gunboat force on the Chinese coast and a string of naval bases to support them, despite significant pressures on the naval budget. This section will therefore, in part, consider what relationship those resources had to the wider strategic concerns about defending against Japanese expansion in the region and the threat that posed to British imperial interests. In doing so, it will highlight the key interrelationship between Britain's strategy for China and its corresponding one for Japan, particularly in terms of the viability of defending Hong Kong.

Many of the challenges faced by the Royal Navy in peacetime along China's coastline and rivers were also dilemmas for the other major powers operating in the region, as well as for China's local and regional authorities. With almost all the countries affected having worked together previously as allies during the

First World War, continued cooperation in peacetime could prove beneficial for all concerned. The following section will focus on the China Station's interactions with America's Asiatic Fleet and Japan's First Expeditionary Fleet. While the problems faced by the three powers were often identical, government policy frequently dictated different responses. Moreover, service personnel in East Asia sometimes acted in contrast, rather than in parallel, to those at the top level. It is important therefore to consider what frontline cooperation occurred and why naval personnel sometimes chose to go against their nation's official policies. We should not assume that officers, trained in following orders, always acted obediently and exactly in line with their instructions. This is all crucial in order to understand more precisely the role of navies in interwar international relations, when they often served as extensions of their nations' diplomatic corps. The conduct of naval officers on deployment could shape foreign policy and define how countries were perceived worldwide.

With that strategic position established, part three will consider the China Station's peacetime role in interwar British foreign policy, along with the challenges posed by the revolution and subsequent civil wars in China. It will look at what Britain sought to influence, control and protect and how those priorities translated into requirements for the Royal Navy. The lightweight sloops and gunboats that formed two-thirds of the China Station's standing force were clearly not there to counter the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), which regularly sent battlecruisers and cruisers to China's ports.³⁴ The peacetime work against piracy and banditry, and the efforts to keep Britain's imperial outposts in China secure during a period of turmoil, must therefore be considered to fully understand Britain's naval presence in East Asia developed. This will explain why so many local defence vessels were posted to China and how that force evolved over the 1920s – in particular, how a new piracy problem forced the Royal Navy to work with both British imperial and Chinese authorities in an attempt to counter it.

An evolving crisis in China from 1925 relegated piracy to a secondary concern as events pushed the Royal Navy's stretched resources to breaking point. What happened in and around Shanghai in 1927 features heavily in histories of the British Empire's relationship with China, but it also triggered the most significant peacetime deployment of naval power by the Admiralty in the period. Addressing the near-complete absence of that task force from existing naval accounts, this section puts the events into context and takes another step further away from the 'Road to 1939' narrative of interwar developments. Developments in China were considered important enough to elicit a pronounced military response, not only

in their own rights but also against a background fear in Whitehall of a global Soviet plot to undermine the British Empire.

With the 1920s Royal Navy required to respond to such significant operational and financial challenges, technology was proposed as a source of solution to the emergent problems. Wireless communication, faster vessels and effective military aircraft offered the potential to transform how the post-First World War Navy went about its role in supporting the British Empire. Technology played an important role in reinforcing the international prestige of both the Royal Navy and the wider British Empire, and yet once again most research on military innovation during the period has focused on major power conflicts, to the neglect of its role in Britain's 'little wars' and in peace.³⁵ To rectify this, part four examines how new technology influenced the 1920s China Station in three key areas. First, it considers the role technology played during the decade in reinforcing imperial prestige, 'waving the flag', to strengthen Britain's influence in the region. Secondly, exploring the roll-out of wireless equipment demonstrates how technology affected the Navy's ability to both understand and control how its warships went about their peacetime work at the periphery of the Empire.³⁶ In doing so, we will need to be mindful that not all outcomes were intentional, as a result of deliberate efforts by the Royal Navy to address the challenges it faced in East Asia. Finally, we will consider the role technology played in the outcome of key flashpoints.

The deployment of HMS *Hermes* to the China Station offers a significant case study in exploring the extent to which the exploitation of new technology was really intended to improve the efficiency of peacetime operations. Public announcements from the time explaining why Britain's first purpose-built aircraft carrier was being sent to China for imperial policing purposes obscured the Admiralty's real, secret motivation behind the move. Events in China simply provided Britain with an excuse to contravene the terms of the Washington Treaty to strengthen its strategic position in the region. As we shall see, those findings are of great significance to existing discussions about the later 'Allied' nations' attitudes towards the Treaty.

Technological factors have always been a feature of naval history, if sometimes discussed ad nauseum to the point of being unable to see the wood for the trees. However, technical details have played a significant role in key events. The bombardments conducted by British warships at Wanxian (Wanhsien) and Nanjing (Nanking) were two such pivotal moments in Britain's relationship with China. Wildly varying claims over the number of casualties have been thrown around over the years, but no one has attempted objectively to weigh those

estimates or consider the naval factors behind the casualties. The outcomes were not decided by what calibre of guns were available on Britain's warships, but similar details help draw together evidence about how many people died and what factors led to their deaths. This analysis does not change our core understanding of the consequences of those events, but it provides significantly greater depth to our knowledge of what happened and why.

Countering the challenges facing the China Station was not just a matter of technology and finance but also the willingness and ability of naval officers to develop and adopt new methods. We therefore also need to consider three key questions: Did the China Station proactively adopt new ideas and tactics? What impact did the presence of new ideas, or continued use of outdated approaches, have on the work done by the China Station? Lastly, were the tactics used chosen by junior officers in the course of their work, the commander-in-chief of the China Station, or were they imposed by the Admiralty? The final part of this book will therefore feed into discussions about anti-intellectualism in the Royal Navy and the speed with which centralized command and control was adopted.³⁷

Central to this will be a review of when the Royal Navy's attitude towards using Victorian 'gunboat diplomacy' tactics in China changed and how. To what extent did Austen Chamberlain's much discussed 1926 December Memorandum really influence the China Station's operating procedures? This is integral to understanding how tangible the link was between the changing diplomatic and military approaches to China, across all three levels involved: Whitehall, the Royal Navy's senior command and junior officers on the scene. While many imperial histories treat the Royal Navy as a uniform entity, there was considerable variety in officers' attitudes and behaviour, influenced by human and institutional factors. As we shall see, those factors produced a gradual shift in the Navy's approach before the official change in policy from London, and for different reasons to that top-level pivot. The variety of approaches came to the fore during the surge in warships arriving on the scene in 1927. The introduction of so many ship captains who were unused to the local circumstances, with minimal knowledge of Britain's strategy for China, was highly influential in the outcome of key events and has previously been overlooked.

In addition to changes in strategy and mindset, this book will also consider structural developments such as the planned reorganization of the Royal Marines, discussed by the Madden Committee in 1924, to turn the marines into a rapid response force.³⁸ The Madden Committee reviewed the structure of the Royal Marines, to assess whether their duties could be fulfilled at a lower cost by the mainstream Navy or alternatively whether greater value could be secured

from the existing force. The committee proposed to modernize and adapt the Royal Marines into a rapid response role, allowing a few carefully located units around the Empire to settle swiftly most threats to imperial stability. Ultimately those recommendations were dropped due to concerns about the upfront costs of such a reorganization. Nonetheless there has been some debate about whether the Royal Marines developed into the proposed force by the time the 12th Battalion was despatched to Shanghai in January 1927.³⁹ We shall see that the benefits of a true rapid response force would have been beneficial during major incidents, but it may have also proven counterproductive on a day-to-day basis.

Together all these strands weave a story involving tens of thousands of British service personnel and the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people they encountered while serving on the China Station. Posted far from home and away from the prestigious fleets that measured the balance of global power, their experiences and actions framed a key period in the slow transition from British to American hegemony. Their mission was to maintain the status quo against the growing military reach of key rivals, amid regional upheaval and violence, and backed by a state struggling to cope with fiscal challenges. While events in China did not precipitate the ultimate collapse of British imperial power, they saw Britain's final confident display of the naval mastery secured by Nelson. A century on from that transformative decade, it is worth appreciating the complexity of those past events before we look forward to what might prove an equally dramatic phase in world history.

Notes

- 1 John Maurer and Christopher Bell, 'Introduction', in *At the Crossroads between Peace and War: The London Naval Conference in 1930*, ed. John Maurer and Christopher Bell (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014), pp. 1–6.
- 2 E.g. Robert Bickers, 'The Colony's Shifting Position in the British Informal Empire in China', in *Hong Kong's Transitions 1842–1997*, ed. Judith Brown and Rosemary Foot (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); Robert Bickers, 'Shanghailanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843–1937', *Past and Present* 159 (1998), 161–211; Robert Bickers, *Empire Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai* (London: Penguin, 2004); Robert Bickers, 'Ordering Shanghai: Policing a Treaty Port, 1854–1900', in *Maritime Empires: British Imperial Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. David Killingray, Margarette Lincoln and Nigel Rigby (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004); Ian Phimister, 'Foreign Devils, Finance and Informal Empire: Britain and China c. 1900–1912', *Modern Asian Studies* 40/3

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Joining the China Station

By the early 1920s, knowledge in Britain about China, its history and its culture was improving. Paintings, books, newspaper articles, photographs and even early cinematic depictions all served to enlighten the British public to what life was like in the world's most populated country at the time. Not all of this was accurate, fair or complimentary, but it did increase awareness about life on the other side of the planet. Nonetheless, for those who travelled out to the region on service whether in Britain's armed forces, in the Foreign Office or as civilians, the experience was both exciting and profoundly disorientating. For many, perhaps even most, of those who set out to East Asia it was not their first experience outside of British waters. Indeed, the journey itself required short halts at regular intervals at harbours along the way, notably Singapore. While those port calls provided an opportunity to gain insights into other cultures, the impact was often quite limited. For Royal Navy crewmen the stops were normally quite brief before departing on the next leg of their journey, involving social and sporting events with other naval vessels, as well as the chance to 'blow off steam' in bars ashore. Those pauses were busy affairs, but some individuals did find time to explore and encounter experiences that started to change their view of the world. Leading Seaman William 'Robby' Roberts, for example, started to question his pride in the British Empire, after witnessing the brutality of some of his fellow countrymen, which was not in keeping with what he 'expected of an Englishman'.¹

When first arriving into Hong Kong's harbour the crews were confronted with a band of three- and four-storey buildings in an Edwardian Baroque colonial style, framed against the backdrop of the imposing, mist-enclosed Victoria Peak. Sometimes even before the men made it to shore, they were 'swarmed' by an array of Chinese tradesmen offering to repair boots, make suits and mend clothes and selling various other items.² Initial impressions of all this were varied. Some later recounted how they were drawn to the vibrancy of the city and embraced

the unusual new culture. Others complained about dirty conditions and the heat. Sweltering in high humidity, even those buildings that underwent regular cleaning struggled to compete against the near ever-present mildew and mould.³ When the sun set, attention shifted from shore to sea, as Britain's warships lit up the bay with an electrical glow.⁴ To many British visitors the contrast between the calm, clean, bright white-painted warships, illuminated by the latest technology, and the conditions in some areas ashore reinforced their belief in the British Empire's supremacy and their own mission as its representatives.

Hong Kong was a hybrid city combining local culture and architecture with a pronounced British imperial influence. As a result, it eased British service personnel into life in East Asia with a degree of familiarity. A variety of English-language newspapers with common titles – the *Telegraph*, *Mail* and *Sunday Herald* – featured news from home, advertisements for British brands and all the latest sporting results from far and near. A growing array of cinemas showed films and news reels from Britain and the United States, although from 1922 there was a budding array of locally produced Chinese films too.⁵ Many of the Hong Kong Chinese population spoke a 'surprising' amount of English, making day-to-day interactions much easier for the new arrivals.⁶ Even the now-iconic trams had been manufactured in Preston and were little different from those still perambulating around Britain's towns and cities. It was strange and different, daunting to some, exotic to others, but one in which they felt secure.

For those who remained in the city over the following weeks, months and even years, life retained that feeling of familiarity, with a degree of homeliness. In contrast to Victorian times when there was an unwillingness to study what was regarded as the 'bestly' local language, many officers, seamen and civilian officials in the 1920s made a conscious effort to learn at least basic Cantonese.⁷ While this was officially done through formal classes and day-to-day activities, some naval personnel favoured finding and supporting a local Chinese girlfriend, although how commonplace this was is difficult to tell. Certainly, there were occasional cases that became the talk of the town, particularly where a married officer's British wife was also present in Hong Kong.⁸ Not all such liaisons were temporary or transactional, however, with some resulting in happy marriages. To the Hong Kong population all of this was normal life, even if they did not always approve of what it entailed. As a major port and trading hub, the city maintained a significant transitory population and so Hongkongers, whether of Han Chinese, British or other descent, were used to the regular rotation of new faces.

For most Royal Navy personnel on the China Station, Hong Kong was not their end destination, although it was a regular halt for those aboard ocean-going warships or the West River gunboats. Those men took the next step, further into the unknown, immersing themselves in a very different environment. One destination in particular stood out in the minds of many of those who visited it: Shanghai. In recent years the city has become one of the largest in the world, but the roots of that growth date back to the early twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1920 Shanghai underwent a vast transformation in size and stature. In those twenty years its population grew from approximately 350,000, comparable with Lisbon or Bristol at the time, to roughly 800,000, including over 23,000 foreigners.⁹ While that was still relatively modest compared with the major global metropolises, Shanghai gained a reputation as the bustling hub of East Asia.

The loosely regulated British-led International Settlement and neighbouring French Concession, both at the heart of the city, oversaw a wave of economic growth and construction, adopting many of the latest elements of municipal planning. This was fuelled by an influx into the wider city of economic migrants and refugees from around China, along with many wealthy and enterprising Chinese businesspeople. As a result, Shanghai modernized at a rapid pace with the population embracing new technologies, such as the installation of an electric traffic light system before New York or London.¹⁰ There was nowhere else quite like it in China and few rivals around the region as a whole. Royal Navy crews were thrown into the hubbub of Shanghai life – a world of theatres, racecourses, dance halls, brothels and a confusing mixture of nationalities, social classes and identities. Arriving at the Bund in 1920 would have been no less impressive than standing by those same buildings today and looking across the river at the skyscrapers of Pudong, representing another new era for Shanghai (Figures 1 and 2). At the time, however, Chinese observers tended to see ‘that imposing place as a visible proof of the exploitation of China by the foreigner’.¹¹

Resentment in Shanghai was not one dimensional or limited to race. Behind the well-lit facades of the International Settlement there were serious underlying tensions between the different segments of society. The elite Shanghailanders community regarded itself as superior to all but a few outsiders, including the British policemen, teachers and other professionals who enabled their comfortable imperial outpost to function. In return, the lower-status British expatriates regarded the Shanghailanders as pompous, rich and disconnected with reality.¹² Both acted more ‘British’ than the British, yet their first loyalty was to the Settlement. Likewise, the entire city was reliant upon its links with



Figure 1 Shanghai Bund in 1928.

Source: Shanghai Bund, 1928, Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC), NH81603.

the Chinese population, through business connections, as workers in factories or through the Shanghai Municipal Police, most of whom were local recruits, and yet racial prejudice was endemic.¹³ A large proportion of British trade, for example, went through Chinese middlemen ‘Yanghang’ firms based in the major cities.¹⁴ On a day-to-day social basis, even those well-educated and successful Chinese city elites who engaged in similar cultural pursuits were shunned by the Shanghailanders.¹⁵

The arriving seamen found themselves in an unusual position amid all that tension. With the International Settlement’s safety largely reliant upon the background presence of the Royal Navy, the Shanghailanders were relatively welcoming of their guardians. The Royal Marines were particularly popular and received extra loud cheers during the Empire Day parade, as they were always the first servicemen to head ashore during periods of trouble.¹⁶ Not all interactions were so positive though, with Commander Cedric Holland noting in his diary that while the men were friendly and entertaining, the Shanghailander women were rude, despite having ‘nothing to be snobbish about ... They are



Figure 2 HMS *Hawkins* at Shanghai in 1927.

Source: HMS *Hawkins* at Shanghai, 1927, NHHC, NH105067.

in fact a truly terrible lot.¹⁷ Likewise, the local Chinese population seemed to have been surprisingly welcoming of Royal Navy crewmen. Perhaps as outsiders who behaved in a different and less dismissive manner to the Shanghaianders, Britain's seamen were treated on their own merits. That said, one cannot help but question how positively they were regarded when marching through the Settlement with bayonets atop their rifles during times of trouble.

For most naval personnel their memories of Shanghai are perhaps best summarized by 'Robby' Roberts who described it as having one of the best nightlives of any city in the world. Petty Officer Douglas Poole attempted a more poetic account: 'The jazz bands clash and clang high – In Shanghai in Shanghai – and people dance – at every chance – until the night is gone.'¹⁸ Roberts's one criticism was that he disapproved of the open prostitution that took place in many bars and hotels.¹⁹ Indeed, one or two more religious crewmen took a strong dislike to 'wicked' Shanghai given the all-night partying and mingling between men and women.²⁰ Aside from hazards to their health associated with the heavy partying, there were a few more pronounced risks to the 'exciting' city. Crewmen were mugged and occasionally disappeared, presumed killed when they drifted onto quieter backstreets at night.²¹ For most, however, Shanghai felt to be a 'fabulous' location for shore leave.²²

After Shanghai the experiences of China Station crews depended to a large extent on which warships they were assigned to and therefore where they would patrol. The Station's cruisers were relatively large vessels with hundreds of men and boys aboard, all of which had been constructed during the latter years of the First World War. While hardly luxurious, those vessels had many of the

latest modern conveniences, making life afloat a little more bearable. Crucial for a posting in East Asia, they had large fridges for storing fresh food in the hot conditions, but a wide range of new electrical appliances had a cumulative positive impact upon life aboard. The new 5,850-ton HMS *Diomedé* that joined the China Station in 1922, for example, contained a greater length of electrical wiring than the 34,050-ton battleship HMS *Queen Elizabeth* launched only a few years earlier.²³ In addition to those comparatively comfortable conditions, the cruisers and sloops spent their time touring China's coastal treaty ports and on diplomatic visits to Japan, the American-ruled Philippines, Dutch East Indies, French Indo-China and beyond. These visits provided the opportunity to enjoy shore leave in exotic new locations, but the ceremonial events themselves were a source of pride and enjoyment if hard work for the crew. Awnings would be strung across the decks for hosting cocktail parties with local dignitaries and officials, with parades and ship bands adding a degree of pomp to the occasions.²⁴

Not all such visits were so pleasant for the crews. One emergent role for the Royal Navy during this period was the rendering of humanitarian assistance during natural disasters. Having steamed at top speed carrying supplies and medical teams to Yokohama after the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake, for example, the crew of HMS *Hawkins* encountered horrific scenes, with dead bodies floating all around the harbour. Marine William Greenland recorded in his diary that most of the marines had seen service on the front during the war and so were accustomed to such horrors, but still felt ashamed that they were not able to do more to help.²⁵ In addition, Royal Navy crews also offered their assistance to city authorities as firefighters during major incidents.²⁶ These sorts of events were still relatively rare but added a new edge to life on the China Station.

For those aboard the China Station's smaller warships, particularly the gunboats patrolling the various waterways on which British merchant steamers passed, life was quite a different experience. The small West River *Heron*-class gunboats and slightly larger upper Yangtze gunboats were all under 150 tons, carried up to twenty-five crew and were normally only capable of chugging along at a sedate walking pace. While crews did their best to keep them shipshape and homely, they were rather uncomfortable vessels – right down to the tent-like 'heads' (latrines) perched atop the stern. Sometimes hundreds of miles from other British warships, deep into China where only small colonial communities existed at the local ports and starting the decade without radio communication, life was described as 'humdrum'.²⁷ That mundane existence was not without danger, however, involving occasional firefights with groups of brigands and through misunderstandings with Chinese troops, and also occasional

groundings along an unpredictable and ever-changing river. Captain John Clegg, for example, noted that even two years was not long enough for commanders to gain a reliable knowledge of troublesome stretches.²⁸ Simply catching a rapid section at the wrong angle was sufficient to jolt a gunboat severely, in one case resulting in the destruction of half of HMS *Widgeon's* crockery and glassware.²⁹

The men who joined the gunboat force entered a colourful, natural environment steaming up and down stretches of river between the various inland treaty ports. With limited storage facilities aboard, fresh food was generally obtained along the route. Some officers used the relative freedom of their location to supplement their diet, often through pausing to go shooting, with duck a favourite choice.³⁰ In contrast to those serving on coastal routes, shore leave for gunboat crews offered much less in the way of entertainment, except when lucky enough to call at Shanghai or Hong Kong. Within the general briefing notes for China Station commanders, there were rough descriptions of the key attributes of a range of ports along the main waterways. For many locations, under the subheading 'entertainment' there was a simple 'none' recorded in bold.³¹ As a result, when posted to or patrolling along the Yangtze, only Hankou and Nanjing really offered the prospect of much more than sport to help crews unwind.

Reactions from the local Chinese populations to the arrival of British gunboats varied to a considerable degree. When Royal Navy commanders arranged ceremonial port calls or feasts to coincide with local celebrations or anniversaries, they were given 'extremely hearty' welcomes.³² The presence of a foreign warship in such circumstances appears to have been regarded as an honour rather than a threat or insult. At quieter times, British officers would dine with local dignitaries. Twenty-four-year-old Lieutenant Anthony Pugsley recounted how he and his commanding officer ended up playing Mahjong for money stakes against General Yang Sen in Wanxian. Pugsley enjoyed the game until it was brought to a polite halt when he stumbled upon a particularly strong set of tiles. Yang Sen's advisor apparently informed him later that Pugsley was about to win \$500 – quite a large sum at the time, which might upset the general.³³ As clashes and the body count started to grow over the decade, such genial welcomes to British gunboats became rarer, with growing hostility at the unequal treaties that framed their presence on China's waterways.

The toughest conditions were reserved for the two submarine flotillas serving in the region, although somewhat counter-intuitively they also seem to have had the happiest crews. The often-undermanned *L*-Class submarines were cramped and prone to engine problems. In one case *L2* was forced to 'limp' into Singapore