

Weihaiwei - Canteen chit of the Royal Navy

R&R port for the British China Fleet 1898-1930 by Tony James

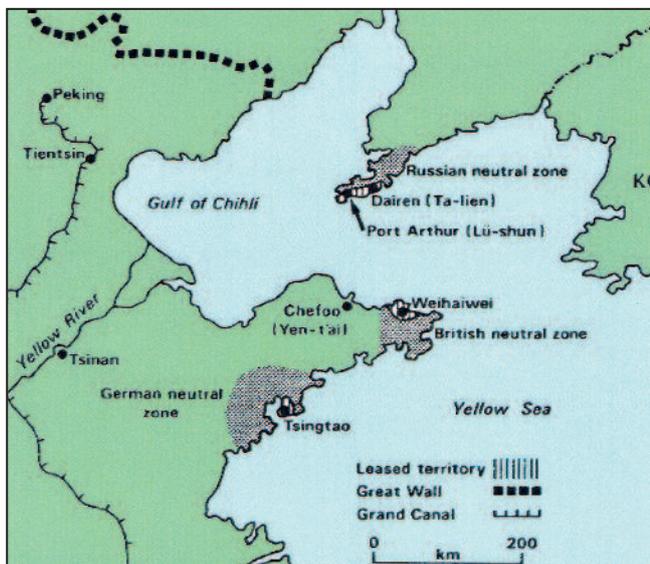
History of Weihaiwei

Weihaiwei (now known as Weihai) is a former strongly fortified naval station that was the base for the Chinese Qing empire's northern fleet. That is until it was captured by the Japanese in February 1895 and occupied by their troops until May 1898, after which it was leased together with Hong Kong to the British. The port is in Shantung province in north east China, on the Shantung peninsula strategically opposite Port Arthur on the Liaotung Peninsula, both facing onto Korea Bay.

The lease the British signed for Weihaiwei otherwise known as Port Edward, was for "as long as Port Arthur shall remain in the occupation of Russia". While this situation came to an end in 1905 with the defeat of Russia by the Japanese, the British argued that because China had not re-occupied Port Arthur, but had allowed the victorious Japanese to take it over they should be allowed to keep Port Edward. The British made no effort to evacuate the port at this time and it was only at the Washington Naval Conference in 1921, that Britain agreed to start negotiations with China on Weihaiwei. The conference was attended by nine nations with interests in East Asia, significantly Soviet Russia was not invited, to what was the first international conference held in the US and the first disarmament conference in history. Protracted argument continued due to British procrastination, unrealistic demands and the chronic political instability of China during the 1920s. One potential deal collapsed at the last moment following the coup d'état by the war lord Feng Yuxiang in Beijing in October 1924, while control of the Shandong province by a local war lord of evil reputation also delayed any settlement. Eventually, after the conquest of north China by the Guomindang in 1928, an agreement was reached and the British evacuated Weihaiwei in 1930. However, the Chinese allowed them to use the naval base as a summer station until the Japanese reoccupied it in 1938.

Royal Navy Far East Fleet

The British naval presence in the Far East was known collectively as the China Station. In December 1941 it merged with the East Indies Station to form the Eastern Fleet. The



Map showing location of British naval station at Weihaiwei (Port Edward) in relation to the German treaty port at Tsingtao and the Russian treaty port at Port Arthur.



Royal Navy Canteen chit used at Weihaiwei between 1898 and 1930 Front in English, back in Chinese

China Station had three ports, Singapore, Hong Kong and Weihaiwei, the last of which was known as the summer rest and relaxation port because of its excellent climate. It was to this destination that many ships sailed, when the humidity of Singapore and Hong Kong became too oppressive. The British naval station was not alone however, Germany had its treaty port at nearby Tsingtao and the Russians had Port Arthur across the Chihli Gulf.

The northern port known to the British sailors as "Way High" is surrounded by a hilly peninsula that juts out into the Yellow Sea and is sheltered by the Liu-kung-tao Island which ran east - west across the mouth of the bay, leaving an entrance at each end to form a small deep water port.

The Naval Canteen

A rather battered paper chit – printed in green, on what was most likely originally white paper with just two violet stamps of anchors within an oval frame are a reminder of a most common form of currency used in military installations at this time. The green ink border encloses the figures 20 in each of the four corners and it has R.N. over CANTEEN in gothic script followed by the title of the naval base WEI-HAI-WEI. The value in words is in the centre and under that the words BIG MONEY in cursive script. Underneath this is the definition "Local Currency Only" with a serial number 08022 flanked by a Royal Navy fouled anchor stamp on each side. A rosette emblem fills the bottom of the chit between the value in figures. The back of the chit is in Chinese text, a banner heading of seven symbols and three columns of text with several pictures, one of which looks remarkably like a ship's bow, and another, in the centre column could be interpreted as an illustration of the two peninsulas of Port Arthur and Port Edward. The centre column indicates the denomination in Chinese in words – twenty.

There are two sources of information regarding the establishment and running of the naval canteen.

One is a paper by Henry J. Letherbridge of the University of Hong Kong on Sir James Haldane Stewart Lockhart – Colonial Civil Servant and Scholar, in which he notes that "the island of Liukung became the headquarters of the permanent naval establishment and the site for the naval canteen which was formerly a picturesque Chinese official



*Bank of Communications 1 Choh
issued by Weihaiwei branch in 1914 Pick P113f*

“yamen” and the United Services Club with bungalows for summer visitors an large hotel and offices of a few shipping firms...”

The second is in the “Convention for the Rendition of Weihaiwei with annexes and agreement regarding certain facilities for His Majesty’s Navy after Rendition” signed at Nanking April 18 1930. The Annex list of facilities to be leased to the Government of the United Kingdom by the Government of China includes item number 2 - Royal naval canteen teahouse. Item number 13 - Royal Naval canteen (temporarily pending the provision by the national Government of the Republic of a suitable building in lieu). Other facilities mentioned are item number 1 - a golf club, and item number 6 which included the Warrant officers’ club and tennis courts, Officers’ and men’s recreation grounds together with the buildings thereon and hockey and cricket grounds and tennis court, and the officers’ “squash courts.”



Government House, Weihaiwei

The term “Big Money” usually refers to the importance of the item, bearing in mind that the system of chits used in military installations was designed to ensure that the locally-employed serving staff did not handle cash and to prevent any chance of pilfering.

Development of port

When the British took over the territory in 1898, the port was named Port Edward and the area comprised a belt of the mainland that extended the area of British jurisdiction to 285 square miles. The Colonial Office had the right to erect fortifications, station troops and take any other measures necessary for defensive purposes. They did not interfere with Chinese administration and no troops other than Chinese and British were allowed in the territory. The 1st Chinese Regiment of Infantry was raised and paid for by Great Britain, led by British officers the force occupied barracks in Port Edward. However, it was disbanded in 1906. Some of the members of this regiment later became members of the local police force, while the last servicemen left in Weihaiwei after 1906 were a small body of Royal Marines of the Island Guard.

The importance of the port of Weihaiwei was noted by the Earl of Onslow, Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, in the British Parliament Hansard (Feb 10 1902), who commented that “it is also an extremely healthy station and used as a sanatorium for Hong Kong and Shanghai. It will also be used as a sanatorium for our military and naval forces...”



Sino-Japanese War, 1894-1895. Woodcut triptych shows Japanese troops surprising Chinese soldiers at Weihaiwei and the death of a Chinese officer on horseback leading his troops into battle. Artist: Chikanobu Hashimoto (1838-1912). Image courtesy Library of Congress.

Government of a Territory not a Colony

The British started their occupation with the appointment of a Naval Commissioner, Sir Edward Seymour, who was also the Commander of the British Naval Forces in China. He was followed by the Civil Commissioner, Sir Arthur Dorward, who served from 1899 until 1901 when an officer-in-charge was appointed for 6 months until the arrival of a famous and extremely able Commissioner James Lockhart. He occupied the post from 1902 until 1921. As Lieutenant-Governor Lockhart ranked lower than a Governor of a first class colony, however without a Legislative Council, he had more power than most Crown Colony governors.

Lockhart was a keen golfer and made good use of what was China's first golf course built in 1902 on what is now known as Liugong Island. Today the Weihai Fanhua Golf Club is one of Asia's most challenging golf courses as each hole faces the sea! Lockhart also had a lifelong interest in numismatics and over the years of his service in the Far East built up a fine collection of Chinese copper coins. He wrote a three-volume work entitled "The Currency of the Far East," published by Noronha & Co. Hong Kong in 1895-98. In 1915 "The Stewart Lockhart Collection of Chinese Copper Coins" appeared as a one-volume supplement to the Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, described as the first of its kind and remained even until 1967 as 'one of the all-time standard works on collecting Chinese coins'.

End of an era

Commissioners Arthur P. Blunt (1921-23) and Walter R. Brown (1923-27) followed Lockhart until Johnston took over in 1927. Reginald Johnston, the last British Commissioner of Weihaiwei, had been a former tutor of the last Emperor, and it was noted that relations with the Chinese had been for the most part very cordial during Lockhart's long reign.

The day before the handover local Chinese leaders thanked the departing British colonial administrator, presenting him with a symbolic bowl of pure water. On the day, the incoming Chinese commissioner said the colonial power had ruled wisely and warned "evilly-disposed persons" not to cause mischief during the transition period. There were some merchants, fearful of what a change in sovereignty might mean, who started to shift money and salt stocks to Japan. There were street riots over new taxes and the number of government officials quadrupled, land prices collapsed and Weihaiwei lost its status as a Freeport. The great efforts put into education, to stop foot binding and close opium dens, were short lived, as the Japanese invaded on March 8 1938 and the city was once again under foreign rule.

This scrap of paper

This physical reminder of a facility used by many naval ratings during their posting to the China station would bring back more pleasant memories of service life than the combat more often seen. The Royal Navy had to pay a special allowance to servicemen who manned the warships that patrolled the Chinese rivers during the hot humid summer months. Weihaiwei was a haven from this oppressive climate and a visit was eagerly sought after by new ships crews unused to the ways of the China Fleet.

References

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