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# A TROUBLESOME TERRITORY

## French Diplomacy in Hong Kong and the Question of Guangzhouwan during the Interwar Period

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### ABSTRACT

A leasehold territory ceded to France in 1898, Guangzhouwan was supposed to rival Hong Kong in terms of commercial and maritime development. However, the small territory soon proved difficult to access and unsuited to France's ambitions. Although not completely insignificant, trade was modest and irregular, and the concession remained in the shadow of the neighbouring British colony.

This article examines the outlook of French consuls based in Hong Kong, and consequently Guangzhouwan's influence in regional affairs. It provides an opportunity to examine the conflicts of interest between the French ministries of Colonies and Foreign Affairs, which crystallised around the opium issue in particular.

### KEYWORDS

Hong Kong, Guangzhouwan, France, diplomacy, opium, China

## 令人傷腦筋的領土 — 兩次世界大戰期間法國在香港的外交與廣州灣的問題

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### 摘要

廣州灣於 1898 年被割讓給法國為租借地，本應在商業和海運發展上與香港相媲美。然而，事實很快證明，這片細小的領土實在難以通達，與法國的野心也不相配。雖然它不算是完全無足輕重，但它的貿易額既不大又不穩定，而且在鄰近英國殖民地的陰影下，租界的地位並未受到關注。

文中探討當時法國駐香港領事的前景，以及廣州灣在區域事務的影響力。本文也為研究法國殖民地部與外交部之間，尤其是在鴉片問題的利益衝突，提供了一個可能性。

### 關鍵詞

香港、廣州灣、法國、外交、鴉片、中國

The French Concession of Guangzhouwan was located about 400km WSW (251°) of Hong Kong, on the shores of the South China Sea, about halfway along the route to the French colonial port of Haiphong, Tonkin (now northern Vietnam). The strategic proximity of this leased territory invited French diplomats stationed in Hong Kong to pay close attention to its fate. However, this surveillance was seen as more an administrative necessity, or even a chore, than a real means for the development of French interests in southern China. Not a single one of these agents from the *Quai d'Orsay*<sup>1</sup> believed in the future of this tiny Chinese mirage anaesthetised by opium.<sup>2</sup>

From a strictly administrative point of view, this territory was subordinate to the General Government of the Indochinese Union in Hanoi. In practice, however, Guangzhouwan fell within the remit of three ministries in Paris (Foreign Affairs, Colonies, and the Navy)<sup>3</sup> and could be perceived very differently depending on the institution: it was a leased concession, which challenged the French imperial conception of perennial colonies; it was a part of China, which also changed the perception of the consul's interlocutors; and finally, trade statistics were always recorded separately, whether in the consulate's records or those of the Hong Kong authorities, as if the territory was autonomous.

It is therefore relevant to consider the role of this territory alone, rather than the Indochinese Union as a whole, in the diplomatic game taking place in Hong Kong between the French and the British. For France in the Far East, the interests of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were not always those of the Ministry of Colonies. The triangular relationship between the administration of the French territory of Guangzhouwan, the French consulate in Hong Kong, and the British colonial authorities in Hong Kong is a perfect illustration of this issue during the interwar period. This article will demonstrate that Guangzhouwan was a burden for French diplomats in the Far East for two main reasons: the obvious failure of the colony's commercial



development was bad for French prestige; and the opium trade poisoned relations with the British authorities in Hong Kong.

After 1918, there was more talk of the ‘cordial disagreement’<sup>4</sup> between France and the United Kingdom. While the British were concerned about possible French hegemony and sought a balance of power in Europe,<sup>5</sup> the situation was much more relaxed in southern China, and had been since 1898. Historian Steve Tsang believes that the French acquisition of the Guangzhouwan Concession was the driving force behind, or at least accelerated, Hong Kong’s expansion into the New Territories.<sup>6</sup> The acquisition was a defensive reflex that quickly proved to be useless; whether militarily or commercially, there was no question of competition between the two European powers in the region. However, the two powers had what Jean Baillou refers to as ‘divergences of appreciation, and at times, real rivalries of interests’.<sup>7</sup> Guangzhouwan was one of these sources of temporary tensions.

#### A SMALL-SCALE FRENCH COMPETITION FOR HONG KONG

Ceded to France for 99 years on 10 April 1898, Guangzhouwan—and its administrative headquarters, Fort Bayard—never attracted the attention of the French government or public opinion in mainland France. Antoine Vannière’s doctoral thesis provides a lengthy explanation of this impasse, not to say this colonial aberration.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the concession was integrated into regional geopolitical considerations in the interwar period, particularly with regard to Hong Kong. France wanted to use the territory to limit Japan’s maritime ambitions and give itself greater weight in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>9</sup> If there was a desire to compete with the British colony at the beginning of the project, this dream was long buried by the 1920s and 1930s. Guangzhouwan was unable to produce the goods or capture the trade that could establish its importance, and the territory was heavily dependent on imports from Hong Kong.<sup>10</sup>

Maritime connections were regular and, thus, links between French officials in Fort Bayard and Hong Kong should have been close. While the French consular post in the British port accepted the supervision of the General Government of Indochina until it occasionally presented itself as ‘the Consulate of Indochina’,<sup>11</sup> diplomats were reluctant to establish lasting relations with Fort Bayard. Meetings between the consul and the administrator were rare and exchanges of letters were surprisingly sparse in the archival records. Even visitations were uncommon. Between 1918 and 1941, there were no records of a French consul in Hong Kong visiting Guangzhouwan and only two references to a meeting between an administrator of the leased territory and a diplomat in

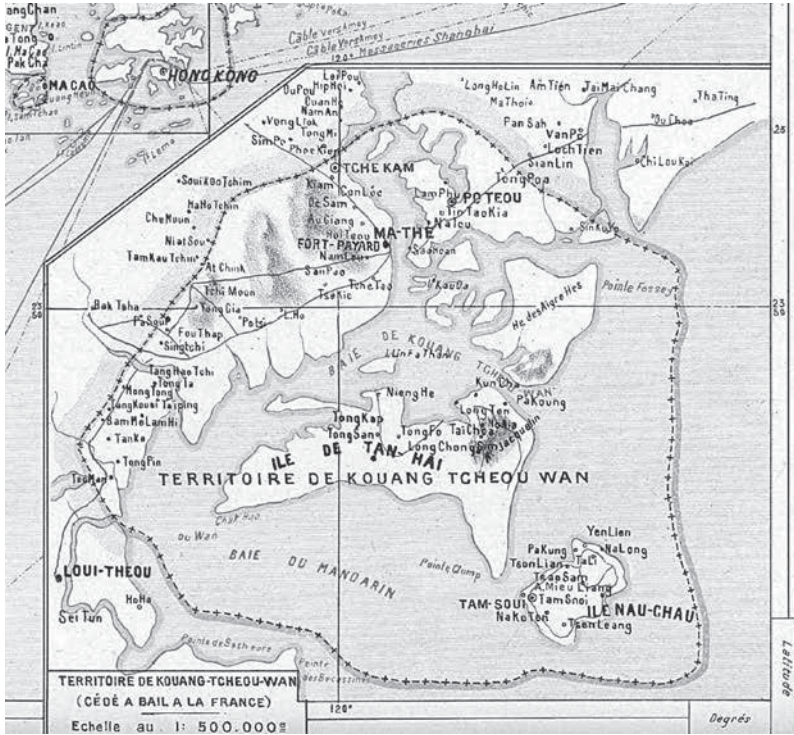
the British colony,<sup>12</sup> whom the consul only referred to while looking after the dying explorer, Haardt,<sup>13</sup> because of the embarrassment it caused him. In the post's archives, the only file devoted to the concession more often mentions problems than positive developments.<sup>14</sup> The overall impression of these records leads one to believe that diplomats did not have a high regard for this French territory; it was seen as a 'dead weight' rather than a source of prestige.

Even from a technical point of view, communications with the concession were disastrous. At the end of 1920, telegraphic communications with Tonkin were interrupted and a generator failure prevented the transmission of telegrams by radio. All information had to pass through Hong Kong. This happened again in May 1923, but in the other direction: Guangzhouwan was cut off from Hong Kong while Hanoi and Haiphong continued to send telegrams there, but they could not be retransmitted. The radiotelegraphic link was still out of service in 1925.<sup>15</sup> In addition, navigation was difficult in the vicinity of the territory. Records of five shipwrecks in seventeen years was dramatic enough to concern the administration of the French consulate in Hong Kong. The rocky island of Naozhou (Nao Tchéou) had a bad reputation and the channel, located at the entrance to Guangzhouwan, was regularly reconfigured by the most violent typhoons.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, the Hong Kong press showed little interest in this small French territory, rarely mentioning it. However, all through the 1930s, Fort Bayard proved to be an essential technical stopover for a succession of aviators making their way from Indochina to Hong Kong to avoid having to go through the complications of a refuelling halt on land administered by the Chinese authorities.<sup>17</sup>

The administration of the territory was not considered efficient. After the pirates of Bias Bay looted the steamer *Hanoi*, Consul Georges Dufaure de La Prade insinuated that the tragedy could have been avoided if the police of the concession had carried out the usual searches before boarding.<sup>18</sup> Regarding piracy, the chief administrator of Guangzhouwan wanted to respond when the Hong Kong Chinese press claimed that the bandits could easily find refuge in the concession. However, the consul and his colleague in Canton mutually agreed to refuse publication of the denial.<sup>19</sup> The porosity of the border was well known, and the slightest scuffle was perceived to show that Chinese raiders were passing through the concession to cause havoc, either out of a desire to destabilise French power or to participate in the looting.<sup>20</sup>

More importantly, the exchanges between the chief administrator of Guangzhouwan and the French consul highlight the French concession's state



Map 2. Road network and coastline markings based on the work of engineer Dessagne, in Alfred Bonningue. *Le Territoire de Kouang-Tchéou-Wan, Paris, Berger-Levrault, 1931, p. 33.* (Courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France)

of dependence with regards to the Quai d’Orsay agents and the British colony itself. All connections from France to Fort Bayard passed through Hong Kong, which relayed messages, goods and passengers twice a month via a Chinese steamer under contract with the central post office.<sup>21</sup> Whenever an expert was needed in a particular field, the French territory directed its research to Hong Kong: when a diver was needed to inspect a French steamer, he came from the British colony, and the Chinese interpreter of the administrative services was recruited in Hong Kong by the consul.<sup>22</sup> It was the French consulate that had to request estimates to install central heating in the administrator’s residence, a project that was aborted because it was too expensive for the concession’s budget. The following year, the consul even had to buy a refrigerator! These were thankless and unworthy tasks for the consul, who, in addition to this,



needed to send reminders to get providers paid for their services.<sup>23</sup> These challenges were also the result of the territory being managed by fifteen different administrators between 1917 and 1942. From 1920, the concession wanted to create an electric lighting company to equip the cities of Fort Bayard and Chekam. Consul Gaston Hauchecorne tried to contact a French company in Hong Kong, Messrs Gérin, Drevard & Co. A call for tenders was issued, but no one responded. Two years later, it was amended, though in vain.<sup>24</sup> It was not until 1926 that Joseph Durand offered his services, which displeased the consul because Durand's Europe-Asia Trading Company had a poor reputation and could only provide German equipment.<sup>25</sup> The Guangzhouwan administration distributed in Hong Kong the tendering specifications related to the award of public transport service in the territory and another for filling a dock. In both cases, all documents were written in French, which confused potential Chinese entrepreneurs. For the leasing of the indigenous clubs of the concession, the administration still went through the British colony.<sup>26</sup>

#### A MODEST AND DISPENSABLE COMMERCIAL TRAFFIC

One of Guangzhouwan's diplomatic interests was to help boost French trade in Hong Kong. The cumulative statistics for France, which included Indochina, Guangzhouwan, and metropolitan France, did not give the image of a second-rate trading power in the British colony. France and its empire were the leading importers and third largest exporters in 1920<sup>27</sup> (head-to-head with the United States) as well as the fifth largest importers and second largest exporters in 1931<sup>28</sup> (trailing behind China but far ahead of the others). France and its empire were key trading partners. To be fair, if all the components of the British Empire were also included, the rankings would be shifted by one less place in each category. In 1932, France ranked seventh in terms of shipping.<sup>29</sup> The fleet of Chinese junks that sailed under the French flag between the leased territory and Hong Kong certainly played a role in these results, but it was essentially only local exchanges of little value. In fact, French imperial traffic was modest.

In 1918, Hong Kong and the French concession were connected every month by two or three small Chinese steamers. Consul Paul Kremer considered this frequency sufficient. He also discouraged the establishment of a line subsidised by the General Government of Indochina as suggested by P.A. Lapique & Co.<sup>30</sup> However, his opinion was not followed, and the *Compagnie Indochinoise de Navigation* won the contract. In 1929, the administrator blamed the unreliability of the liaison ship, the *Tonkin*; its tendering specifications stipulated that the vessel had to arrive in Hong Kong every

fourteen days on Saturday morning and then leave on Tuesday afternoon, after collecting the cargo and passengers of the Messageries Maritimes' liner, which arrived that very morning in the British colony. Instead, the *Tonkin* frequently did not wait if the captain considered it more profitable to leave earlier.<sup>31</sup> Neither could one rely on the *Tai Poo Sek*, a small steamer under the French flag but owned by Chinese seafarers. It was bound by no contract and therefore not obliged to follow any regularity.<sup>32</sup>

In November 1926, the Chief Administrator affirmed:

There is no doubt that the current prosperity of our Concession has attracted the attention of the Hong Kong government in recent years. While the port of Fort Bayard–Chekam is not likely to compete with Hong Kong, it is nevertheless one of the most important secondary distribution ports for South China.<sup>33</sup>

This statement deserves some nuance. If the colonial official could boast of an increase in the number of travellers and the volume of goods, it was only due to the temporary effect of a Hong Kong boycott. Every time the British port faced strikes (such as the sailors' strike in 1922 and the troubles of 1925–26), the French concession provided more provisions to the colony. In the first case, supply was not a problem, but in August 1925, strikers were better organised, and goods were intercepted.<sup>34</sup> The administrator was not convinced by his own statement; he had already pointed out that the convention of 11 February 1925, which regulated the opium trade—the only real windfall of the concession—would soon divert a large part of the revenues to the British.<sup>35</sup> In 1933, the director of the Bank of Indochina noted the decline of the territory, explaining that in one year, Hong Kong's exports to the concession fell by 25 per cent and exports to Hong Kong fell by 39 per cent. The banker specified that the balance of trade was heavily skewed in favour of Hong Kong, which sold 30 per cent more than it bought from Fort Bayard.<sup>36</sup> This was a trend that the consul confirmed six months later: the French in the concession were much more dependent on Hong Kong than Indochina for trade, and the overall activity of the territory seemed seriously lacklustre.<sup>37</sup> In 1938, the commercial adviser of the French Embassy was even more categorical. For him, it would be better to cancel the call at Fort Bayard between Indochina and Hong Kong as it was 'commercially unnecessary'<sup>38</sup> and substitute a more commercially attractive stop at Hainan Island.

Despite these poor results, the commercial relationship should not be completely dismissed either. In 1931, France was the thirteenth largest importer in Hong Kong and the eighth largest destination for the colony's

exports in terms of value. Until 1934, Fort Bayard more or less maintained these rankings, which proved that the decline was not so much due to its own actions, but to the economic context in general.<sup>39</sup>

Guangzhouwan was built on the same legal model as Hong Kong. It was a free port and there were originally no taxes or duties on goods. No special formalities were required to set up a trading house. The General Government of Indochina counted only four major foreign companies established in the territory in 1933<sup>40</sup> and Antoine Vannière notes the complete passivity of the authorities in economic matters.<sup>41</sup> The process of establishing a sales branch did not seem as easy as in Hong Kong. In 1932, motor vehicle concession holder Wallace Harper & Co., representing the Ford brand, was surprised to see its annual tax increase from 464 to 928 piastres.<sup>42</sup> Two years later, the firm protested against the patent required for the founding of an office in Chekam and the harsh measures taken to obtain a guarantee (such as the seizure of a key for a new truck).<sup>43</sup> The dispute continued between the American company and the administrator, and the consul's intercession was requested. From Hong Kong, the diplomat was powerless. Even more revealing, in 1931, Shewan Tomes wanted to import fifteen tons of potash chlorate, twenty tons of saltpetre, and fifteen tons of sulphur into Chekam each month for a firecracker factory. The administrator refused. Consul Georges Dufaure de la Prade tried to make the civil servant bend to his will by pointing out the French origin of potash chlorate, which would open up a profitable trade flow for all. It took a year for a derogation to be granted in order 'not to ruin an active industry'. As soon as the transactions began, Shewan Tomes complained that it was the victim of new vexations: bags of saltpetre and sulphur were confiscated in the name of compliance with quotas. A few months later, tensions increased with the British importer, who was caught creating another company with a different name to double its quotas. The French authorities accused the firm of wanting to establish a monopoly. The consul tried, once again, to convince the administrator that it was, above all, a question of developing French interests through the *Compagnie de Produits Chimiques d'Alès, Froges & Camargue*.<sup>44</sup> In 1934, the official acknowledged that it was one of the most prosperous industries in the concession, but the explosion of a warehouse, causing some thirty deaths and a hundred wounded, cooled this already timid administrator.<sup>45</sup>

The only official, profitable and advantageous traffic set up by Guangzhouwan came from its farms. Fort Bayard was the source of an unexpected trade in buffaloes. From 1920, the consul became the intermediary for the British colony's Bacteriological Institute ordering gangs of buffaloes to

be raised in the concession and shipped on to Hong Kong.<sup>46</sup> First in groups of ten, then by twenty, 40, and 50, deliveries reached 100 buffaloes per year from 1925 and then 200 starting from 1934.<sup>47</sup> These young animals were the most effective aids for preparing smallpox serum,<sup>48</sup> which was sorely needed by the port of Hong Kong.<sup>49</sup> In addition, fresh beef was popular, only competing with frozen Australian meat.<sup>50</sup> Export of pork was also successful since the Japanese blockade on Guangzhouwan in 1940 caused prices to rise by nearly 100 per cent in Hong Kong.<sup>51</sup>

The concession also specialised in organising the recruitment and delivery of indentured workers, known as coolies. This traffic was not limited to the First World War and its immediate aftermath. It was part of a long European tradition dating back to the mid-nineteenth century and an indirect consequence of the abolition of slavery. The Guangzhouwan leased territory would have been a logical place to recruit this Chinese workforce if it had not been the scene of a recruitment operation that turned into a disaster in 1900: in the absence of volunteers, recruitment had turned into a raid, with the soldiers laying siege to the villages. Instead of the 1,500 workers expected, only 123 left the territory. Many frightened families took refuge on the other side of the border. The affair left a deep impression on people's minds.<sup>52</sup> These activities did not resume in Fort Bayard until the mid-1920s and then in a semi-clandestine way. It is likely for this reason that the port of Hong Kong was occasionally used as a place to advertise contracts for workers for French Equatorial Africa, New Caledonia, or Madagascar.<sup>53</sup>

At Hanoi's request, the consulate supported Indochinese entrepreneurs' efforts in their regional recruitment campaigns, taking all the necessary precautions to avoid leaving room for criticism from opponents of this disputed practice. In 1928, a man named Vesser was commissioned by Saigonese firms to recruit 12,000 coolies per year for three years to meet the pressing needs of plantations in southern Indochina.<sup>54</sup> The operation was delicate because recruitment in Canton would immediately encourage local authorities to demand the opening of a Chinese consulate in Cochinchina. In Hong Kong, discretion was required to avoid attracting the attention of trade unions and the London Labour Party, who were opposed to the export of labour.<sup>55</sup> The consulate often associated itself with Paul-Augustin Lapique, a French entrepreneur who had been living between Haiphong and Hong Kong for many years. For the recruitment of 600 workers for French Equatorial Africa, Lapique 'intervened directly with the English authorities, who are aware of his projects, but who will affect to ignore his operations'. The

workers were recruited in the British colony but had to go to Guangzhouwan to sign regular contracts and then, from the concession, left on French ships, thus bypassing the British legislation on the transport of migrants. In his correspondence, the consul assured the Governor General of Indochina of his 'unofficial assistance'.<sup>56</sup> For smaller recruiting operations in the 1930s on behalf of the Netherlands, Australia, Spain<sup>57</sup> and, of course, the French colonies in Africa,<sup>58</sup> the consul in Hong Kong directed all requests directly to Guangzhouwan. This created an unfavourable shift in opinion against France in the press, particularly because of the living conditions on the ships and later, at the destination.<sup>59</sup> When it was not legally arranged, the recruitment of coolies was still easily and clandestinely organised from the concession.<sup>60</sup> The administrator did not see any 'reprehensible irregularities'.<sup>61</sup> The atmosphere of the territory seemed to dissolve a lot of scruples.

**FORT BAYARD OPIUM, POISONED BURDEN OF FRENCH CONSULS**  
The French possession was a genuine centre for the redistribution of opium in Hong Kong and southern China.<sup>62</sup> Antoine Vannière describes this trade as 'the hidden face' of the leased territory and denounces the administration's 'double game'.<sup>63</sup> After the Great War, Hong Kong's new governor, Reginald Stubbs, was determined to eradicate opium. For the first time in the colony's history, it was planned to prepare budgets without considering the income obtained by drugs.<sup>64</sup> However, consumption remained high. It was fuelled by smuggling that proved difficult to contain, despite the substantial fines imposed on Guangzhouwan ship-owners carrying illegal cargoes.<sup>65</sup> Revenues simply flowed into funds other than those of His Majesty's Treasury.<sup>66</sup> Five years after the governor's arrival, the results were not up to London's expectations and the pressure was increasing.<sup>67</sup> In this context, French consuls increasingly faced the wrath of the Hong Kong colonial government, which saw opium smuggled through the Indochinese Union as French opium.<sup>68</sup> It is necessary to distinguish between the French attitude, i.e. the way in which the consul was involved in these cases, and the British reaction, i.e. the ways in which the Hong Kong authorities were able to contain this early version of the 'French Connection'.

In 1923, at the National Assembly in Paris, Deputy Marius Moutet denounced a form of 'smuggling, more or less tolerated' and demanded an investigation into the opium trade in Guangzhouwan.<sup>69</sup> More pressing, the United Kingdom brandished reports from J.D. Lloyd, superintendent of imports and exports in Hong Kong, which firmly blamed the French concession.<sup>70</sup> The Quai d'Orsay politely asked the Ministry of Colonies 'to

bring French administrative practice into line with international commitments in this area'.<sup>71</sup> Antoine Vannièr explains that sensitive information was often filtered from the concession to the metropolis.<sup>72</sup> In 1924, the French consul in Hong Kong, Raoul Tulasne, ignited the powder keg by bypassing the usual diplomatic obstacles: 'It is well known that opium smuggling on Indochinese merchant ships leads, under the benevolent aegis of the customs and other authorities of Indochina, to an intense and productive trafficking.'<sup>73</sup> His report caused a lot of fuss. The Minister of Colonies 'has difficulty in considering as well-founded the allegations made by the report' and questioned some of the shortcomings that were pointed out. The consul was reprimanded by the governor in Hanoi, who criticised 'the inanity of the stories that Mr Tulasne and the British government have complacently echoed', adding that 'it is nonsense of this kind that creates legends'.<sup>74</sup> Even though Superintendent Lloyd provided further solid evidence following new seizures,<sup>75</sup> the Ministry of Colonies adopted a line of defence that remained unchanged: this cabal was, for the British, a way of influencing the League of Nations. The governor general repeatedly explained that it was 'natural for the British government to seek to divert the attention of the League from what was happening in its colonies in India, Singapore and Hong Kong by denouncing the alleged misdeeds of French Indochina'.<sup>76</sup>

However, the British relied on scathing investigations against the French territory, denouncing, for instance, the ingenious labelling systems used to cover up the trade. Supported by these investigations, the prosecutors persisted and showed that Indochina was selling much more opium in Guangzhouwan than its population needed.<sup>77</sup> The officials in charge of the territory defended themselves sluggishly or with blatant insincerity, but the multiplication of busts on steamers from Fort Bayard did not work in their favour.<sup>78</sup> In 1927, the consul was once again taken to task and forwarded a long report from the British authorities: the opium would come from Yunnan, pass through Tonkin with Hanoi's consent in exchange for considerable income, and then leave for Guangzhouwan, where it would be redistributed in the region.<sup>79</sup> Of course, the governor general asked for these allegations to be refuted.<sup>80</sup> Further investigations by the French consul in 1929 showed that 'for the first time, it can be said that Kouang Tchéou Wan has ceased to be one of the main suppliers of illicitly prepared opium'.<sup>81</sup> During the second half of 1928, the British reported that they seized only 5,569 taels of opium from ships originating in Guangzhouwan. One piece of evidence that the concession had been the source of the problem, was that most of the ships on which

seizures had been regularly made had since then been either reassigned to other routes or decommissioned due to the lack of profitable goods for their voyages. This would be a short respite. In 1936, the concession was again blamed<sup>82</sup> because smuggling remained active.<sup>83</sup> The following year, the consul noted that heroin was gradually replacing opium in the Far East. At the same time, Jules Leurquin cynically noted the decline of the 'territory of Kouang Tchéou Wan, this French replica of Macau'.<sup>84</sup> This lucid comparison with the Portuguese colony was often hinted at between the lines of the reports. Opium was Macau's main economic resource: about 80 per cent of its income in 1921<sup>85</sup> and still 23 per cent in 1935.<sup>86</sup> It was difficult to consider structural developments with such a drop in income; the same was true for Fort Bayard.

Beyond opium, the territory was involved in all kinds of illegal trafficking, which were all thorns in the consul's side in Hong Kong. In 1922, for example, the Guangzhouwan administration was accused of promoting arms smuggling between Fort Bayard and Hong Kong.<sup>87</sup> In 1924, Captain Menanteau was caught red-handed in Haikou on his Hong Kong-registered steamer, *Reims*. The French consul there specified that it was not just a trial run. Captains of these small vessels were often ship owners and charterers at the same time. They depended on the freight business and could not ignore loads as large as those that were seized. However, Alfred Menanteau did not escape, but his status as a Westerner gave him a feeling of impunity which he abused by threatening a customs officer with a weapon. On his return to Fort Bayard, he was prosecuted for this offence, but not for smuggling.<sup>88</sup>

## HONG KONG AUTHORITIES AND THE GUANGZHOUWAN SUPPLY CHAIN

The opium issue was complicated because trafficking, whether official or clandestine, took various and changing directions depending on the many vested interests, the governments' budgetary needs, and pressure from international bodies. During this period, the Hong Kong government's attitude was ambivalent. On the one hand, there was a firm desire to reduce traffic and consumption, and on the other hand, the colonial authorities were waiting for China to act. As long as the Chinese did not put in place a serious and comprehensive policy to reduce the number of consumers and eliminate crops, the British did not see any point in adopting drastic measures that would bring benefits to China, but would not reduce traffic through Hong Kong. A senior official summarised: 'We are perfectly willing to wash our floor if we can keep it clean'.<sup>89</sup>

Chinese drugs were very competitive with the British monopoly, as they were on average 30 to 40 per cent cheaper. Therefore, smuggling developed on a large scale.<sup>90</sup> Competition was also fierce with Macau, whose revenues depended 95 per cent on opium in 1919. Although the Portuguese colony gradually reduced its economic dependence on this drug, it remained an essential distribution centre in the region.<sup>91</sup> Yunnan production also represented a health and economic danger for Hong Kong and Indochina.<sup>92</sup> In the other direction, some traders used the British port as a springboard to move opium to Indochina, sometimes as a transit point and sometimes for local consumption. This was the case for the influential Hajeé Mohamed Hassan Nemazee—a Persian-born British subject at the head of a large tea, opium and general trading firm—whose attempt to corrupt the General Director of Indochinese Customs in 1924 embarrassed the British, who were usually so quick to complain about French negligence.<sup>93</sup> Finally, the international context was increasingly hostile to this traffic, even when it was official. The International Opium Convention signed in The Hague in 1912 entered into force in June 1919, putting increasing pressure on the various colonial authorities.<sup>94</sup> In 1922, ten resolutions of the League of Nations forced governments to pay more attention to the policies of their colonies in this regard.<sup>95</sup> The organisation's commissions of inquiry were also the occasion for diplomatic conflicts,<sup>96</sup> one of the main effects of which was to reactivate the divergent views of the Colonial and Foreign Affairs Ministries on the subject.<sup>97</sup>

In Hong Kong, many French consular reports describe the British opium policy in detail including budgetary, judicial, and health issues. The French point of view, which was comprehensive but inevitably biased, is illuminating when cross-referenced with British research.<sup>98</sup> However, a question of particular interest is the specific role of the French. At the beginning of the period, clandestine supplies from Haiphong were the most frequently mentioned in consular correspondence in Hong Kong. Substitute Chancellor Felix Yung was even accused of taking part in this trafficking through his Vietnamese connections. Yung, the consul's trustworthy man, was presented by a witness, Jeanne Rambaud, as 'a fatty obsequious cunning man'; the Frenchwoman's opinion was formed when the secretary tried to coax her to approach her Chinese husband in order to conclude some discreet business.<sup>99</sup>

Guangzhouwan remained the core of the opium problem in the region. In 1923–24, increased pressure from London led to the dismantling of a Yunnanese organisation through Beihai and Haikou<sup>100</sup> and the decline of the Nemazee opium trade.<sup>101</sup> Did this void, left by traffickers, open the way for the French



sector? Or, since the Crown demanded results, was the pressure on all trafficking increasing, thus revealing its scale within this overlooked part of the Indochinese Union? Raoul Tulasne believed that the drug traffic was the main support of the commercial fleet attached to the concession. The case of the *Cochinchine* suggests the extent of this commercial activity. The Macanese customs, seeing this large French steamer moving at a low speed in an unusual direction, decided to board her. The ship then lowered its flag and set sail at full speed. The hunt was on and the *Cochinchine* was found not far away, together with a Chinese junk, before fleeing again. The boarding of the junk resulted in the seizure of 230 boxes and 55 cases of raw opium. When questioned by the consul in Hong Kong, Captain Alfred Menanteau—him, once again!—did not deny it. Instead, he faithfully declared that he carried out this operation every time he travelled with the drugs recorded in his manifests and signed in accordance with the rules of the Haiphong customs. The shipmaster did not consider himself responsible for what happened to the freight and for him, if there was a culprit, ‘it is the government of Indochina itself’.<sup>102</sup> As Xavier Paulès explains, the situation in Guangdong calls into question the notion of smuggling when the flow is partly controlled by a government that violates its own laws.<sup>103</sup> In situations where French people were involved, however, one could consider it illegal when the product is distributed outside the monopoly of Indochinese management.

Upstream and downstream, this regional traffic mainly involved Chinese actors. The French nationals working in this trade were mostly seafarers and acted as intermediaries. However, it is very difficult to obtain more information on these discrete actors, who were less recorded and less monitored by administrations. Moreover, unlike weapons which can be trafficked on an *ad hoc* and opportunistic basis, people involved in opium were usually part of an organised network: either officially and Indochinese, such as the captain of *Cochinchine*, or mafia-like and international with ‘ramifications throughout the Far East’ as indicated in the British reports.<sup>104</sup> These two structures were complementary and interconnected: opium came from Yunnan, passed through Indochina and Guangzhouwan, and then disappeared somewhere between Fort Bayard and Hong Kong to join the underworld. A British search in Hong Kong in 1926 clearly showed the porosity between the two circles; 21 partners were unmasked, one of whom was in Haiphong. Documents clearly accused Alfred Menanteau. He could not ignore what happened to his loads since he was paid in Hong Kong by the recipients!<sup>105</sup>

The previously mentioned British report of 1927 was uncompromising for the French authorities.<sup>106</sup> The writer acknowledged the existence of many supply

chains via Macau, Xiamen, or the border with Guangdong, but pointed to Guangzhouwan as the main source of illegal supply. The Hong Kong authorities carried out a detailed investigation which showed that the drugs arrived from the French concession by steamer, in small packages of 500 taels, and were unloaded onto sampans that kept stocks until they were exhausted. Passengers reported witnessing such scenes on some evenings to the south of Hong Kong Island.<sup>107</sup> The administrator conceded that he was aware of the existence of this flow but denied any responsibility; most of the time, ships loaded opium after leaving territorial waters during rapid trans-shipments at sea.<sup>108</sup>

In the early 1930s, the situation changed a little. Guangzhouwan temporarily ceased to be the main concern of the British,<sup>109</sup> while the share of opium in the revenues of the Hong Kong government symbolically felt below 10 per cent.<sup>110</sup> Consumption was likely decreasing, but smuggling remained active, now via Wuzhou.<sup>111</sup> The Indochinese Police also explained that the reason for the lower seizures was that smugglers preferred to throw their cargo into the water in case of danger, rather than face the increased severity of the British authorities.<sup>112</sup> Perhaps it was also because traffickers innovated and knew how to hide their goods better. In 1934, a large quantity of opium was seized in Hong Kong on the steamer *Canton*, in a batch of cowhides. The crates came from Yunnan, and Indochinese customs certified having inspected them without finding anything.<sup>113</sup> After investigation, it turned out that the skins were saturated with boiled opium.<sup>114</sup>

This new traffic escaped the vigilance of Indochina, which could not be held responsible for all flows, and was probably not part of the usual networks. Besides, as a sign of the times ahead, heroin and cocaine appeared in Hong Kong in the mid-1920s. Transactions were carried out by sailors, always in small quantities.<sup>115</sup> As soon as it became a question of large-scale trafficking, the Indochinese Union disappeared from the picture.

### THE CONCESSION, A MARGINAL DIPLOMATIC TOOL

Seeking to weaken the French hold, China regularly demanded the handover of the territory, especially after the Nationalist Party took over Canton. In 1927, when Guangdong organised the boycott of Japanese interests in the region, newspapers reported that a similar movement would be launched against the French concession. Consul Georges Dufaure de la Prade also learned that the supporters of a rebellious general would hold their meetings there to plot against Canton. For the consul, it was—above all—a new way of pressuring for a return of the territory to the Chinese fold. The Cantonese government was

very sensitive towards this issue, stirring up Hong Kong newspapers at every opportunity.<sup>116</sup>

To China's recurring demands, the two European nations always responded with firm commitments but unclear dates. Since their December 1926 declaration, the British stated their intention to return their domains, but as far as Shamian (Shameen), the Anglo-French concession in Guangzhou was concerned, British diplomats noted that it would be difficult to consider a withdrawal without an agreement with France. In tune with Guangzhouwan, the French ambassador in London took up the official position and added that the end of extraterritoriality could only take place when the situation in China had calmed down. British diplomats were embarrassed because, by supporting Nanjing, they had moved too far on their promises.<sup>117</sup> This example puts into perspective the attitude of 'followers of the Anglo-Saxons'<sup>118</sup> that, according to Jacques Binoche, characterised French policy in the Far East between the two world wars. In 1927, the Colonial Secretary gave the consul a translation of an article recently published in a Cantonese newspaper about the handover of Guangzhouwan. Dufaure de la Prade then reported a fruitful exchange about the sustainability of the two countries' presence in China,<sup>119</sup> which confirmed what historian Robert Boyce pointed out: 'the Foreign Office possessed the reputation of being pro-French in outlook'.<sup>120</sup>

In 1930, the British retrocession of Weihai obviously did not help France's case for staying in Guangzhouwan.<sup>121</sup> This was particularly so in the context of the unprecedented financial disengagement by the General Government in Hanoi, the consequences of which undermined the position of the administrators of the small French territory.<sup>122</sup> Shortly afterwards, the French consul in Hong Kong became involved in a controversy between his own Ministry and that of the Colonies. In the spirit of the Washington Naval Conference (1921–22), the French Minister in Beijing, Damien de Martel, was ready to consider an early transfer of the leased territory, to the great displeasure of Governor General Pasquier. The Quai d'Orsay then reassured Hanoi by reaffirming France's official position in favour of a handover, but from all involved countries at the same time.<sup>123</sup> After an investigation, Georges Dufaure de la Prade wrote a 19-page note in 1931, concluding that the British certainly had no intention of abandoning the leased New Territories of Hong Kong.<sup>124</sup> Six years later, Consul Jules Leurquin confirmed his predecessor's analysis and noted that development projects, particularly water reservoirs, clearly showed that 'many do not imagine returning (the New Territories) at the end of the lease'.<sup>125</sup> France was therefore at peace with its diplomatic

conscience and could continue to confirm its promise from Washington. It was a token of goodwill which, moreover, made it possible to transfer Chinese diplomatic pressure to the British.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs associated the fate of Fort Bayard with that of Hong Kong, making Guangzhouwan dependent on the future of the British in the region. The Quai d'Orsay would be willing to sacrifice the concession, like an Iphigenia in the Far East, to satisfy its ambitions in China.

The British authorities were also disturbed by the apparent vagueness of the powers of each ministry, which was sometimes convenient for Hanoi. When Indochinese opium spread in Hong Kong, the Foreign Office asked for increased cooperation between the Hong Kong authorities and Indochina, notably via the French consulate. The British ambassador in Paris reported a conversation with an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; this official, Mr Bourgois, clearly informed him that 'at present the latter [Indochinese authorities] were inclined to endeavour to evade their responsibilities and to leave the government offices in Paris and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in particular, to deal with any difficulties which arose'.<sup>127</sup> The British ambassador blamed the Indochinese authorities more than the diplomats' lack of responsiveness. The French Consulate in Hong Kong therefore had limited room for manoeuvre, between the goodwill of its Ministry and the assumed passivity of the neighbouring colony.

## CONCLUSION

From a French Indochinese point of view, between the wars Guangzhouwan looked towards the South. The territory was part of a colonial and maritime strategy in the China Sea. The vision of the Quai d'Orsay was different: the consuls who succeeded one another in Hong Kong saw it as an extension of French diplomacy and activities in mainland China and, therefore, as a space turned towards the North. Seen thus, the territory was more of a constraint than an asset in the region. It had moribund trade with no international scope, its national prestige was damaged by opium trafficking and it was inhabited by unsavoury and shady citizens. Diplomats had little interest in defending the sustainability of the concession and the status of extraterritoriality there. This situation illustrates the frequent dilemmas facing consuls, torn between fidelity to their own ministry and their necessary support for the colonies. It was also a balancing act between the hope of establishing stable bilateral relations with a hypothetical Chinese central government and the short-sighted pursuit of French imperial interests of the previous century.

## NOTES

- 1 The name by which the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs is generally known.
- 2 Nantes Diplomatic Archives Centre (hereafter NDAC), Hong Kong office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter HKGO), folder 38 of which contains letters from French consuls in Hong Kong concerning the leased territory.
- 3 Antoine Vannière, *Kouang-Tchéou-Wan, colonie clandestine. Un territoire à bail français en Chine du Sud* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2016) p. 23.
- 4 Robert Boyce, 'Behind the façade of the Entente Cordiale after the Great War', in Antoine Capet (ed.), *Britain, France and the Entente Cordiale since 1904* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p. 41.
- 5 Martin Alexander, William Philpott, *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) p. 1.
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- 7 Jean Baillou (ed.), *1870–1980, Histoire de l'administration française. Les affaires étrangères et le corps diplomatique*, volume 2 (Paris: CNRS, 1984) p. 459.
- 8 Antoine Vannière, *Le territoire à bail de Guangzhouwan : une impasse de la colonisation française en Asie orientale (1898–1946)*, 2 volumes, (Paris: PhD thesis under the supervision of Nora Wang, University of Paris 7 — Denis Diderot, 2004) p. 12.
- 9 Antoine Vannière, *Kouang-Tchéou-Wan...*, pp. 331–33.
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- 11 National Archives of Overseas France (hereafter NAOF), Indochina, cardboard 111, file 1046, 30 August 1924.
- 12 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 13 March 1931.
- 13 NDAC, HKGO, 13, 18 March 1932.
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- 16 NDAC, HKGO, 43, 7 February 1918; 38, 27 March 1924, 12 May 1927, 18 April 1933, 27 November 1935; 38, 24 September, 17 and 24 October 1932. *The Hong Kong Telegraph* (hereafter HKT), 27 April 1934.
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- 19 NDAC, HKGO, 29, 21 June 1928.
- 20 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 9 May 1936. *HKDP*, 12 September 1925.
- 21 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 25 November 1924.
- 22 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 13 November 1926 and 21 February 1927.
- 23 Idem, 28 December 1928, 26 March 1930, 19 and 22 May 1930.
- 24 Idem, 11 March 1920 and 9 December 1922.

- 25 Idem, 19 December 1925 and 18 June 1926. *HKT*, 20 April 1926, 8 November 1928.
- 26 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 29 November and 3 December 1926, 29 October 1931.
- 27 NDAC, HKGO, 12, 15 June 1921.
- 28 La Courneuve Diplomatic Archives Centre (hereafter LCDAC), Political Affairs (hereafter PA), series E, sub-section British Possessions, No. 84, 9 January 1932.
- 29 NDAC, HKGO, 17, 16 March 1932.
- 30 NDAC, HKGO, 28, 4 June 1918.
- 31 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 21 November 1929.
- 32 NDAC, HKGO, 29, 11 March 1930.
- 33 NAOF, Indochina, GGI, 43 042 and 43 057, 10 November 1926.
- 34 NDAC, HKGO, 12, 23 January 1922 and 15 September 1925.
- 35 NAOF, Indochina, GGI, 43 042 and 43 057, 10 November 1926.
- 36 Bank of Indochina, Foreign Branch Management 010-2, 1931–1933, 3 June 1933.
- 37 NDAC, HKGO, 13, 28 January 1934.
- 38 LCDAC, PA, series E, sub-section Common Affairs (hereafter CA), No. 69, July 1938.
- 39 Idem, sub-section British Possessions, No.84, 9 January 1932 and 9 January 1936.
- 40 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 26 October 1927; 27, 13 April 1933.
- 41 Antoine Vannièrre, *Le territoire à bail de Guangzhouwan*, p. 387.
- 42 NDAC, HKGO, 29, 15 June 1932.
- 43 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 4 July 1934.
- 44 Idem, 16 November, 8 December 1933; 17, 17 February, 23 May, 10 June 1933. The company became Péchiney in 1950, now part of Alcan.
- 45 NDAC, HKGO, 24, 27 January 1934. *South China Morning Post* (hereafter *SCMP*), 29 January 1934.
- 46 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 10 November 1920.
- 47 Idem, 28 December 1921, 6 January 1923, 5 November 1923, 13 March 1925, 23 January 1930, 14 November 1931, 14 November 1932, 24 October 1933.
- 48 Pierre Peytavin, *Le buffle en Cochinchine, étude descriptive et zootechnique, rôle économique* (Lyon: Éditions Bosc Frères & Riou, 1927) p. 57.
- 49 NDAC, HKGO, 38, 14 November 1931.
- 50 NDAC, HKGO, 35, 22 June 1934.
- 51 *SCMP*, 21 August 1940.
- 52 Antoine Vannièrre, *Le territoire à bail de Guangzhouwan*, pp. 306–307.
- 53 NDAC, HKGO, 12, 16 May 1929 and 20 September 1929.
- 54 NDAC, HKGO, 26, 26 May 1928.
- 55 NDAC, HKGO, 29, 16 July 1928.
- 56 NDAC, HKGO, 26, 6 May 1929; 17, 15 May 1929; 27, 7 March 1931.
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- 59 *HKDP*, 12 August 1927; NDAC, HKGO, 12, 29 July 1929. Translations of Chinese Press.
- 60 NDAC, HKGO, 30, 3 May 1938.
- 61 Idem, 10 June 1938.

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- 65 *HKT*, 5 October 1921.
- 66 NDAC, HKGO, 12, 9 January 1924.
- 67 The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA), CO537/759 and 763, 16 May 1924.
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- 69 LCDAC, AP, series E, sub-section Common Affairs, No. 61, 28 August 1923.
- 70 NAOF, Indochina, GGI, 43 042 and 43 057, December 1923.
- 71 NDAC, HKGO, 3, 11 January 1924.
- 72 Antoine Vanni re, *Le territoire   bail de Guangzhouwan*, p. 408.
- 73 NDAC, HKGO, 16, 14 January 1924.
- 74 NAOF, Indochina, GGI, 43 042 and 43 057, 14 & 16 April, 20 August 1924.
- 75 TNA, CO129/485 p. 164–178, 4 September 1924.
- 76 LCDAC, AP, series E, sub-section Common Affairs, No. 61, 23 October 1925.
- 77 NAOF, Indochina, GGI, 43 042 and 43 057, 23 September 1925.
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- 103 Xavier Paulès, *L'opium à Canton (1912–1937)* p. 69.
- 104 NDAC, HKGO, 3, 11 January and 17 March 1924; LCDAC, AP, series E, sub-section Common Affairs, No. 61, 26 January 1926.
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- 106 NDAC, HKGO, 29, 16 June 1927.
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- 111 Xavier Paulès, *L'opium à Canton (1912–1937)*, p. 73.
- 112 NDAC, HKGO, 37, 2 September 1931; TNA, CO129/548/1, p. 220, 16 July 1934.
- 113 NDAC, HKGO, 29 and 27, 20 September and 27 October 1934; NAOF, Indochina, GGI, 43 042 and 43 057, 11 December 1934.
- 114 NAOF, Indochina, GGI, 43 042 and 43 057, 11 December 1934.
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- 123 NDAC, HKGO, 27, 30 April 1930.
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- 125 NDAC, Beijing Office, series A, No. 281bis, 1 February 1937.
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