

Humanities Geographical Information Systems: The Robert Hart Diaries Exemplar Project

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Sir Robert Hart (1835-1911), Inspector General of the Imperial Customs, Peking, 1863-1908, is a key figure in China's 19th century history and its foreign relations with the West. He was the only Westerner in the latter half of the nineteenth century to occupy an official post in the metropolitan bureaucracy, a position which gave him daily access to China's highest officials in the Grand Council and Zongli Yamen. He built the first modern institution in China, the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs (CIMC), played a crucial role in China's imperial politics, and significantly influenced its internal reform and diplomatic policy. It is impossible to write a history of the late Qing Empire without reference to Hart. The Hart Collection at Queen's University Belfast is a key source of information about Sir Robert Hart and the Qing period. The collection includes 77 volumes of Hart's personal diaries (1867-1908), covering his whole career in China. The diaries provide candid comment on his work, personal life and interactions with and comments on family, friends, colleagues, Chinese (Qing) officials, Chinese Imperial Maritime Custom (CIMC) staff, and the Western legations. Other items of interest in the collection include correspondence, notes and papers relating to Hart's experiences in Beijing, with numerous photographs, slides etc of Sir Robert, his relatives, friends and colleagues, c 1854-1911, and a small collection of various printed works containing articles on Chinese history, politics, trade, policies and diplomatic relations with other countries, some of which were authored by Hart himself.

In this paper, under a ground breaking international collaboration between Academia Sinica and Queen's University Belfast, the analogue Hart collection is described, its conversion into a digital format is discussed, and the potential to make this rich multimedia resource available through the China in Time and Space Historical GIS developed in by Academia Sinica in Taiwan is outlined.