
Chapter One

The Early Years

Each morning at 8:00 am, the Communications Operator hands a sheaf of telexes and facsimile correspondence into the Canadian Commission's Registry, or fileroom, for sorting and distribution. Those destined for the Trade Section are usually from Canadian businesspeople, asking the Trade Commissioners for advice on selling their wares.

Nova Scotia fisheries firms want to sell salmon; Ontario companies want to find markets for their machinery and Vancouver electronics makers want to distribute their computers. A sculptured-mirror salesman from Brantford, Ontario would like to know about the popularity of his product, while a manufacturer of artificial flowers wants to open a branch. An enterprising Alberta restaurateur even hopes to export rice cakes to China!

Though they are now sent by microwave and satellite across the Pacific, the requests are not peculiar to the 1980's. Sixty years ago, the inquiries arrived by Canadian Pacific steamer and were delivered by rickshaw to the Trade Commissioner's office. None of the early Commissioners would have found anything unusual about the activities conducted in the Commission today. The Canadian Trade Commission has been open for business in Hong Kong since May 1928.

The National Archives in Ottawa have no records concerning its opening. The idea of a Canadian presence in a British Colony, as separate and distinct from the interests of the United Kingdom, necessitated a very low profile. Canadian commercial agents had operated in the Pacific region as early as 1895, and an office for "commercial intelligence" opened in Shanghai in 1912. But Canadians were still British subjects, and part of a mercantile system that ensured that London, not Ottawa, was the chief beneficiary. The Canadian Commercial Intelligence Service, a grandparent of the Department of External Affairs, and its Trade Commissioners, confined themselves to matters of trade, and enjoyed none of the privileges

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Hong Kong as it was when the Canadian Trade Commission opened for business in May 1928. The present offices in Exchange Square are where "M35" is indicated.

accorded diplomats. Yet, thousands of miles from home, they nonetheless became the Canadian "consul" in Hong Kong, representing the country at functions.

In 1938, L. Dana Wilgress, then Director of the Commercial Intelligence Service and former Trade Commissioner to Czarist Russia, criticised the lack of diplomatic status of his officers. Wilgress, who had lived as a youth in Hong Kong, understood the need for recognition within the stratified expatriate community. Whatever the status, in 1928, a Trade Commissioner was sent to Hong Kong with the responsibility of promoting Canadian interests in China and the Philippines.

Until then, all matters to do with trade between Canada and Hong Kong had been handled by Canadian Pacific Steamships and Dominion Express Limited. They had their offices on the ground floor of the Union Building on Pedder Street and Connaught Road. There was a Canadian Government Immigration agent in Hong Kong and its Commissioner, Mr. D.F. Warren, had an office in the China Building which also housed the stenographer, Miss R. Judah, and an interpreter, Li Kam Hi. Besides these two establish-

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