



HOW FREEMASONRY CAME TO CHINA



The Spread of Freemasonry in the Eighteenth Century

Following the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge in 1717 in London other Grand Lodges were founded followed by York, Ireland, Munster, France and Scotland. Freemasonry then rapidly spread throughout Europe during the eighteenth century then to North America, India and the East. The marine supported empires such as Britain, Sweden, Holland and France expanded and brought with it a number of administrators and armed forces personnel to the East.



Adding to the numbers of Freemasons were merchants trading regularly with Asian countries. It was with a trading ship of the Swedish East India Company, the 'Prince Carl', that Freemasonry first reached China. The Freemasons on board the Prince Carl held a document giving them permission to hold Masonic meetings 'wherever they came ashore' and they did so in Canton (Guangzhou) in late 1759 to 1760. Apparently, there are no records of the working of the lodge there. (See [Canton factories left](#)) Under the engraved list of lodges under the Premier Grand Lodge of England shows No. 407, the Lodge of Amity meeting in Canton in 1768. It is open to conjecture that this English Lodge may have met in the Swedish Factory in

Canton. The East India Company was an early exporter of porcelain to Europe from China. Some commissioned Chinese porcelain decorated with Masonic emblems and bowls can still be seen in some museums from this early period.

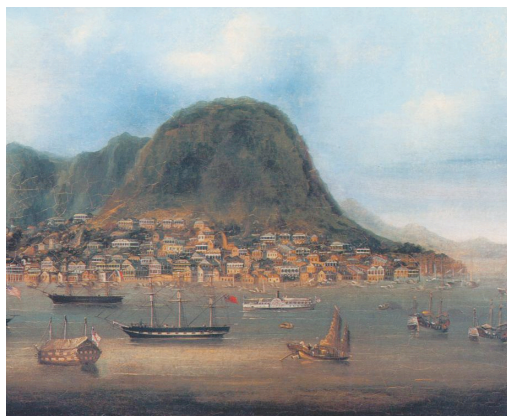


Discontent over Trade

However, in the early nineteenth century saw greater discontent over restrictions on trade between the Chinese and the ‘barbarian’ European merchants in Canton. The foreign merchants, possibly buoyed by the victories at Trafalgar and Waterloo felt that they should press the Chinese for greater concessions. Another factor was the growth in opium trading and the increasing demand for tea and silk. (See the opium clippers at Lintin Island in the Pearl River)



These differences over trade, unfortunately, resulted with Britain commencing hostilities against China mainly over the pernicious sale of opium as the trade was profitable for those involved. The first bitter attempts by the Chinese to suppress the illegal opium trade failed in 1839. The British decided to obtain their trading objectives through force and sent a strong expedition in 1840 to pressure the Emperor into agreeing to the foreigner’s demands. The Chinese authorities eventually capitulated to the British superior forces resulting in the signing of the so called ‘unequal treaty’ at the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. The treaty opened trade at five ‘Treaty Ports’ on the China coast. On their part the British also acquired the ‘Barren Rock’ the territory of Hong Kong.

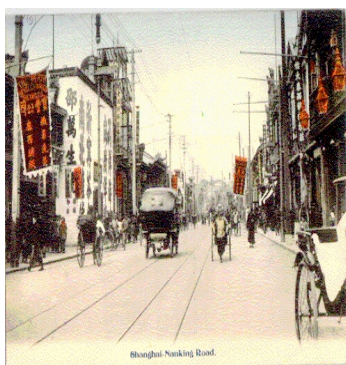


Lodges take Root in Hong Kong

Two lodges were soon established in Hong Kong. The first was Royal Sussex Lodge No. 501 EC warranted on 18 September 1844, named after the Duke of Sussex, who was then the Grand Master in London. The first meeting was held on 3 April 1845. The first senior warden of the Lodge was Richard John, Viscount Suirdale, the 4th Earl of Donoughmore. A number of the Donoughmore family have been Grand Masters of the Grand Lodge of Ireland. The second lodge erected in Hong Kong, Zetland Lodge No 525 EC, was warranted on 21 March 1846 and named after the Marquis of Zetland, Grand Master 1844 to 1870. In 1848, Royal Sussex Lodge moved to Guangzhou and later to Shanghai. Zetland Lodge still claims seniority, as it has remained in Hong Kong since its formation. The Lodge constructed their own Masonic hall and the foundation stone was laid in February 1853 with full Masonic honours at the corner of Zetland Street and Ice House Street. The small hall was known as The Bungalow.

Lodges take Root in Shanghai

In China, a warrant was granted to Northern Lodge of China No. 570 EC in 1849. The first meetings were held in houses of Chinese construction in Shanghai not far from the Cathedral compound which was established in 1847.



The first Masonic hall in Shanghai was constructed in Nanking Road (formerly known as Park Lane) in 1856 but later, another hall was built in Canton Road in 1861. Royal Sussex Lodge moved from Canton to Shanghai in 1866. Thereafter, lodges were formed in Qingdao, Wei Hai Wei and Tianjin, and eventually more lodges were erected in most of the ports of China including Foochow, Swatow & Beijing. These lodges operated under Grand Lodge charters granted by various countries including England, Massachusetts, Scotland, Ireland, Germany and later the Philippines.

Chinese Freemasons

Because of restrictions imposed by the Imperial Government, it was almost impossible for a Chinese person to become a Freemason during the Qing Dynasty, although in 1873 the leader of a Chinese educational mission in Massachusetts did so. The first known Chinese to become a mason in China was a lieutenant in the Imperial Chinese Navy (Bro. Shan Hing Yung) who was initiated into Star of Southern China No. 2013 EC in Guangzhou in 1889.

Formation of new Lodges and Orders Erected in Hong Kong

The formation of new Lodges and Orders gradually followed. In 1865, Zetland Lodge undertook a purpose built Masonic hall (see right) for its meetings on the upper part of Zetland Street.



From the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 to 1945 in China

The District Grand Lodge of Northern China English Constitution and the American Massachusetts Constitution were particularly active in Shanghai and northern China. Consequently, several Constitutions operated in China with the utmost cordiality before the commencement of World War II. The number of Chinese members increased, especially those meeting under the Grand Lodge of the Philippines prior to 1937.

Hong Kong under Attack 1941

Hong Kong was attacked by Japanese forces on 8 December 1941. Freemasonry went into the dark. Some Masonic paraphernalia and records were secreted but most foreigners were interned or placed in POW camps. Some Masons were able to meet together occasionally in the Stanley Internment camp but it was rather dangerous to do so.

Hostilities in China between China & Japan



The effect of hostilities between Japanese and China forces on the mainland was gradual. However, by 1942 a Nazi inspired investigation into Freemasonry commenced with the Japanese authorities in Shanghai and harassed prominent members of the Craft and many office bearers of societies or organisations were thrown into prison custody for many weeks in appalling conditions followed by years of Internment.

Freemasons in some of the occupied areas of China were able to continue and meet but it became more difficult for the lodges to operate. One Lodge in China was specially established under the Grand Lodge of California in Chungking, and one, Szechwan Lodge No. 112 PC met for several years on the University campus in Chengdu. Foochow Lodge No 1912 EC met in Fuzhou for the greater part of the war until 1944.

With the end of hostilities in 1945, some of the lodges in China and Hong Kong were able to revive from the ashes while others fell to the wayside following those difficult days.

Hong Kong Returns to the Light



Unfortunately, the Masonic Hall in Zetland Street was destroyed during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. After the war, the site of the damaged hall was sold to the Hong Kong Electric Company and there is an electric sub-station still on the site.(See left)

A new Masonic hall (the fifth) was erected on the site of an old hotel on 1, Kennedy. The first Irish Lodge to be consecrated in Hong Kong after the Pacific War was

Shamrock Lodge No 712 in 1947. A former member of Shamrock Lodge No 712, the late W. Bro. William Lamprill, was present at the Foundation Stone Laying in 1947. He was initiated in May 1947 and was called to the GLA when he was nearly a hundred years of age when he was residing at the China Coast Community in Kowloon. The rededication of Zetland Hall took place on 30 January 2000.

The Peoples of the Republic of China



By January 1949, the northern cities of Beijing and Tientsin were in the hands of the Communists.(See left Mao zi-dong) By the end of the year the whole of China was under Communist control. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, many of the lodges managed to continue to meet. The lodges that met in the American Masonic Temple in Shanghai decided to close down. The Korean War had already commenced. The English District Grand Master of Northern China offered to close if the Central People's Government requested it, affirming that regular Freemasons always give obedience to the lawful government of whichever country they reside. No request was made and the British lodges meeting in at the Masonic Hall in Shanghai continued to meet.



Formation of a Grand Lodge of China

With the Japanese occupation over in China, there was a new enthusiasm towards Freemasonry. There were six Philippine lodges meeting in China with almost entirely Chinese membership. They were desirous of forming a Grand Lodge of China and the

members of other Constitutions led by the English supported this cause. A Concordat was drafted in early February 1949.

This Concordat was communicated to Grand Lodge in London in 1949 with the informal agreement of the Irish and Scottish colleagues in Shanghai. The new Grand Lodge was consecrated on 18 March 1949 at the American Masonic Temple, Route Dufour, Shanghai.



The earlier enthusiasm waned in the face of the whirlwinds of political change and the chances of survival became more unpredictable. The policies adopted by China in respect of foreign enterprises had the effect of the European community leaving China and with it many brethren not because of any outward conflict with the authorities. As a result a number of the lodges in China transferred their warrants to Hong Kong in the early 1950's, as it was under British rule. The last lodge, Northern Lodge, met in Shanghai until around 1962 when it transferred to Hong Kong (now extinct).

The Ministry of the Interior required the Grand Lodge of China to register. However, The Grand Lodge was unable to register it with the authorities. Consequently, many Chinese brethren followed the Nationalist Government to Taiwan.

Taiwan

In Taiwan, the inception of US Military Assistance Advisory Group in 1951 added to the number of Masons. An application to the Grand Lodge of China in Hong Kong was received for permission to consecrate a Lodge in Taipei. After some difficulty with the local authorities, Liberty Lodge No. 7 was consecrated in 1952 and

initiations were held under dispensation. The Grand Lodge of China was then reactivated in Taipei in 1955, as were the former six Lodges in China.

[Hong Kong becomes a Special Administrative Region of the PRC](#)

On the 30 June 1997, in Hong Kong, the Union 'Jack' flag was lowered after 150 years of British rule and the Chinese flag hoisted. The territory of Hong Kong reverted to China and was designated a Special Administration Region of the People's Republic of China.



The Basic Law of the Hong Kong SAR permits organizations such as the Craft to continue without interference, as long as it does not contravene the law. To this point in time, there has been no interference by the authorities in the operation of the Craft in Hong Kong.

[Former Masonic Halls in China](#)

Some of our former Masonic Halls in the PRC are still standing and have been visited for sentimental reasons and Masonic research purposes in view of our long Masonic heritage in China. Some of the halls still standing are used for other purposes today.

Wei haiwei



Qingdao



Tienjin

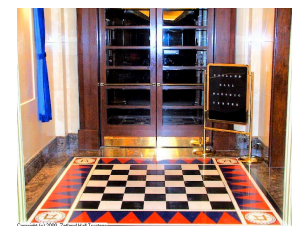
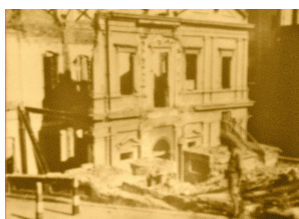


Shanghai



The 1931 Masonic Hall in Shanghai is now being used by the Chinese Medical Association (Shanghai Branch). However, the Craft in Hong Kong still prospers after 200 years.

Hong Kong



Brian L. Coak

Email: briancoak@gmail.com