

The Formation and Application of Hydrographical Knowledge by the British to the Downstream Regions of the River Min in the Late Qing Dynasty (1843-1884)

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Abstract

The River Min was the main waterway for shipping tea in the Wuyi Mountains of Fujian, and the British considered that Fuzhou located in the downstream regions of the River Min to be the hub city and fit for tea export before the Opium War. After the Opium War, although the Fuzhou port was opened, the British, during the survey and hydrographic information-compiling of the River Min, realized the complexity of the River Min's downstream river course, from Fuzhou to the estuary, and the difficulty of navigation. However, with the increase of understanding on various kinds of hydrographical information and the build-up of navigational aids, the safety and efficiency of ship navigation on the downstream regions of the River Min had been promoted successfully. It can be said that the recognition and application of hydrographic knowledge was the basic condition for the huge increase in Fuzhou's foreign tea export trade from the 1860s. Through the comparison between different versions of important hydrographic books and various kinds of historical documents in Chinese and Western languages, this article deduced the emphasis and changes in different stages of the British survey on the downstream course of the River Min during the period from 1843 to 1884. The probable connections between the construction of hydrographical knowledge and the Royal Navy's works, the foreign local merchants' appeals, the staff of Imperial Maritime Custom Service and Fuzhou's export trade are discussed as well.

Keywords: River Min, Fuzhou, hydrographical knowledge, Royal Navy, tea trade