



An Irishman in China: Robert Hart, Inspector General of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs

Zhao Changtian

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It was a long journey—in more ways than mere geography—from a childhood in Northern Ireland to becoming the most influential foreigner in 19th-century China. This historical novel follows the life of Robert Hart, whose career in China spanned more than half a century during the turbulent last decades of the Qing dynasty.

As the Qing government's Inspector General of the Maritime Customs Service, Hart was involved in many major events of late Imperial China. While negotiating his way through civil dissent and foreign conflicts, he played an instrumental role in the country's modernization. A rare foreigner who learned the language and developed a deep interest in and sensitivity to the culture, Hart had a passion for his adopted country but continually struggled in his dual role as British subject and employee of the Chinese government.

Hart's personal life was not without its own challenges as he grappled with his relationship with his Chinese lover and the children he had with her, as well as his British wife and their family together. Long periods of conflict, loneliness and doubt lurked behind the professional triumphs for which he became world-renowned.

Based on exhaustive historical research, the story is enlivened by dialogue and plot elements suggested by the author's deep knowledge of Hart and the country and times in which he lived. The reader will be rewarded with insight into this pivotal period in Chinese history through the lens of the life of one fascinating individual.

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