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DESULTORY NOTES
ON THE GOVERNMENT
AND PEOPLE OF
CHINA, AND ON THE
CHINESE LANGUAGE

ILLUSTRATED WITH A SKETCH OF
THE PROVINCE OF KWANG-TUNG,
SHEWING ITS DIVISION INTO
DEPARTMENTS AND DISTRICTS

THOMAS TAYLOR MEADOWS

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Inspired by the lectures in Munich of the German orientalist Karl Friedrich Neumann, Thomas Taylor Meadows (1815–68) devoted himself to the study of Chinese in 1841, with the aim of entering British service. He arrived in China early in 1843 and rose quickly to the post of consular interpreter at the key treaty port of Canton (Guangzhou), where he remained for several years. During this time, he developed a keen understanding of Chinese affairs, shrewdly cultivating an intelligence network of amenable informants. First published in 1847, this work addresses diverse topics, ranging from the difficulties in learning written and spoken Chinese, through to the nature of bureaucracy and corruption in Canton province. The book sheds light on the period and the tensions in southern China prior to the Taiping Rebellion, a subject later covered by Meadows in *The Chinese and their Rebellions* (1856), which is also reissued in this series.

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ISBN 978-1-108-08048-4



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Meadows

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University Printing House, Cambridge, CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108080484

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2017

This edition first published 1847
This digitally printed version 2017

ISBN 978-1-108-08048-4 Paperback

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J.R. Robbins. del.

A MANDARIN OF THE SECOND CLASS IN FULL DRESS UNIFORM; WINTER CAP

Published by W.H. Allen & Co Leadenhall Street March 1847

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ON
THE GOVERNMENT AND PEOPLE
OF
C H I N A,
AND ON
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ILLUSTRATED WITH A
SKETCH OF THE PROVINCE OF KWANG-TÛNG,
SHEWING ITS
DIVISION INTO DEPARTMENTS AND DISTRICTS.

BY
THOMAS TAYLOR MEADOWS,
Interpreter to Her Britannic Majesty's Consulate at Canton.

LONDON:
W. M. H. ALLEN AND Co.,
7, LEADENHALL STREET.
1847.

TO

ROBERT THOM, Esq.,

HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S CONSUL AT NING-PO,

These Notes

ARE DEDICATED,

AS A

TESTIMONIAL OF RESPECT FOR HIS HIGH CHARACTER
AND TALENTS,

BY

HIS OBLIGED AND GRATEFUL FRIEND,

THE WRITER.

P R E F A C E.

THAT the reader may be enabled to form some judgment as to the degree of reliance to be placed on the statements and opinions put forth in the following Notes, I shall here shew on what grounds I found my title to write on China.

I conceive myself entitled to write on China, firstly, because I have some practical knowledge of the Chinese language; secondly, because I have bestowed my whole time and undivided attention on Chinese affairs for nearly five years; and thirdly, because, during nearly three years of that period, I have been placed in an unusually favourable position for acquiring a knowledge of those particular subjects on which I have ventured to write.

I commenced the study of the Chinese language in November, 1841, at the Royal University of Munich, with the express view of seeking a place in the service of our Government in

China. I attended the lectures of Professor Neumann at the University during the winter term, and almost immediately gave up every other study I was residing in Germany to prosecute for this one. I arrived in China in the beginning of 1843; and in July of the same year, on the opening of this port under the new system, I was sent here with the late Mr. Lay by Sir Henry Pottinger. Since that time I have held the post of interpreter to the Consulate. Mr. Lay understood Chinese himself; but since his departure in June, 1844, i. e. for a period of two years, all the Chinese business of the Consulate has necessarily been and necessarily continues to be transacted through me. To those who are acquainted with the extent of trade at this port, and with the multifarious duties incumbent on the Consular establishment in consequence of our treaties, this will be irrefragable evidence that I possess some practical knowledge of the language. Exclusive of a half-yearly number of about 2,500 printed Chinese forms connected with the reporting of ships and goods which are issued from the Consulate, and are filled up, &c. by me and under my superinten-

dence; and exclusive, also, of a considerable number of local proclamations on subjects connected with foreigners, which I have translated for transmission to H.M.'s Plenipotentiary at Hong-Kong, I have translated upwards of 350 official letters that have passed between the mandarins and H.M.'s Consul on a variety of special subjects. It must not be forgotten that, in addition to this, all the oral communication which has taken place in conferences with the mandarins, &c. has been kept up solely through me.

I have troubled the reader with these details because I do not conceive that any man is entitled to write on a foreign people unless he possess a practical knowledge of their language. Without this knowledge it is next to impossible that he should write any thing original about them. He may collect information from those that do know the language, and he may adopt their opinions, but he cannot form them for himself; or if he does risk it, they can scarcely have other foundation than his own imaginations. That this is the case with respect to our neighbouring countries in Europe, every one who,

possessing a knowledge of the language, has lived in one of them, will admit, and will I think be ready to allow that it must be eminently the case with respect to China.

Since my arrival here I have availed myself of every opportunity that has offered to associate with Chinese, who before have had no intercourse with Europeans, with the object, which I have constantly kept in view, of making myself acquainted with the institutions and government of the country, and with the character of the people; of discovering the reasons for so many of their actions that appear very odd until these reasons are known; and of learning generally by what motives they are actuated in their conduct to us. I conceived it necessary that a government servant should obtain clear and distinct ideas on all these subjects; this could of course be best done by composing short dissertations on them, and hence the origin of these Notes.

I have reduced them to less than half their original size, by suppressing all that related to Anglo-Chinese affairs. Of the purely Chinese matters, too, this volume treats only of two kinds: of those which are nearly, or entirely, new to the