英國東印度公司與對華貿易

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介乎貿易與帝國之間的公司

1600年獲頒特許狀的英國東印度公司，到19世紀初已成為一個獨一無二的混合體：它既是一家股東在倫敦開會的股份公司，亦是一個透過自己的軍隊和文官體系管治印度次大陸大片地區的主權力量。公司職員同時是商人、行政官員和外交官，他們的決定受商業盤算、英國國家的戰略利益以及其在亞洲的官員的抱負所左右。[1]

國會透過定期續期特許狀監督公司。1813年《特許狀法令》終止了公司在印度的商業壟斷，但茶葉和鴉片貿易以及對華貿易除外。[2]自1813年起，英國私人商人可自由與印度貿易，而對華貿易則仍由公司專營，直至特許狀下一次由《1833年印度政府法令》續期為止。[3]新加坡正是在這兩項法令之間建立的，當時對華貿易是公司最有價值的業務，亦承受着私人商人日益增加的壓力。

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對華貿易與茶葉專營

對華貿易的核心是茶葉。18世紀英國對中國茶葉的需求不斷增長，公司在廣州的採購遂成為其利潤的主要來源，亦是英國國家收入的主要來源，因為茶葉一到岸便須課稅。中國當局把對外貿易限於廣州，並限於一個獲特許的商人行會，即行商；外國人須以白銀向行商購貨。[4]

由印度前往廣州的航線途經馬六甲海峽和新加坡海峽。由加爾各答、馬德拉斯或孟買駛往中國的船隻，需要可以躲避風暴、補給食水和糧食並等候季候風的港口。公司擁有1786年建立的檳城。1818年時，公司仍期望保有在拿破崙戰爭期間佔領的馬六甲和爪哇。根據和約安排，這些領土歸還荷蘭，令海峽南面出口落入荷蘭的影響之下。[5]

港腳商人、鴉片與白銀問題

公司解決對華貿易白銀問題的方式，塑造了東南亞此後一個世紀的經濟。英國及印度私人商人即港腳商人（country traders），把印度貨品運往中國及群島各港口，主要是棉花和鴉片，而孟加拉的鴉片生產由公司控制。港腳商人在中國賺取的白銀，存入公司在廣州的庫房，換取可在倫敦或印度兌付的匯票。公司其後用這些白銀購買茶葉。[6]

這個機制值得注意，因為它在本質上描述了一個金融體系。貨物朝一個方向流動，白銀朝另一個方向流動，匯票則朝第三個方向流動。加爾各答、廣州、倫敦及海峽各港口的商人，憑藉這些匯票以及對彼此信譽的了解，相互提供信貸。航線上的港口既是貿易場所，也是信貸網絡中的節點。新加坡自建埠之時便加入了這個網絡。本書B部分所探討的代理行（agency houses），正是由此發展而來。

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鴉片貿易亦是這個體系在道德和法律上的陰影。由於中國當局禁止輸入鴉片，這項貿易依賴走私和官員貪腐。在海峽各港口，鴉片是合法並須課稅的。下文將會說明，鴉片銷售的收入成為新加坡公共財政的支柱。港口的成長與一項後世所譴責的貿易之間的關聯，是金融中心歷史的一部分，將在B部分探討。

1818年的戰略難題

1818年，公司在亞洲的官員面對一個戰略難題。馬六甲和爪哇歸還荷蘭，可能令荷蘭控制印度洋與南中國海之間的兩條通道，即馬六甲海峽和巽他海峽。荷蘭人在1784年的廖內已顯示，他們準備以武力強加控制。此外，他們的壟斷和稅費制度敵視英國私人貿易。檳城位置太北，無法保護南面航線。

1818年，印度總督黑斯廷斯勳爵（Lord Hastings）被說服資助一支遠征隊，在區內建立一個新的英國基地，但附帶條件是不得與荷蘭人為敵。[7]這項授權相當審慎。公司希望在南面航線上設立據點，但不想與荷蘭發生衝突，因為拿破崙戰爭後英國在歐洲重視與荷蘭的友誼。這兩個目標之間的張力——既要建立一個削弱荷蘭控制的基地，又不能激怒荷蘭人——塑造了建埠過程及其後的外交爭議。

註釋

1. 關於19世紀初英國東印度公司作為商業企業與領土勢力的雙重性質，參見Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History*, London, Longman, 1993，以及H.V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006。 ↩

2. Wikipedia, “Charter Act of 1813”（2026年9月瀏覽）：“the Company’s commercial monopoly was ended, except for the tea and opium trade and the trade with China”。 ↩

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3. Wikipedia, "Charter Act of 1813"（2026年9月瀏覽）：特許狀其後由Government of India Act 1833續期。 ↩
4. 關於廣州貿易體制、行商及對華貿易的白銀問題，參見Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2005。 ↩
5. 爪哇於1816年、馬六甲於1818年9月歸還荷蘭；關於荷蘭人於1818年9月重返馬六甲，參見Wikipedia, "William Farquhar"（2026年9月瀏覽）。 ↩
6. 關於印度、中國與英國之間的三角貿易以及鴉片和匯票的角色，參見Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800–42*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1951。 ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Founding years of modern Singapore"（2026年9月瀏覽）：黑斯廷斯於1818年被說服"fund an expedition to establish a new British base in the region, but with the proviso that it should not antagonise the Dutch"。 ↩

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