

English Regattas, Scottish Reels, Italian Operas, and Chopstick Dinners

The Commerce of Sociability in Canton and Macao

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This article visits a community of American expatriates, a group of men and women drawn by commercial opportunities to the coast of China during the late 1700s and the early decades of the 1800s. While in China, they experienced a dramatically different culture milieu than even their commercially prosperous and relatively cosmopolitan home ports of

Boston, Salem, New York, and Philadelphia offered. Much of the literature on Americans in China during the 19th century has emphasised the role of Christian missionaries but many more Americans ventured to Asia for commercial purposes. Until recently, most of their stories have been confined to either economic history or to a kind of hagiography often reserved for early explorers.¹

The opening of direct American trade with China in 1784 re-ignited the fascination for Asian goods, particularly tea, that had abated during the era

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Americans enjoying the porch and view from Nathaniel Kinsman's house in Macao. Oil on canvas by Lamqua c. 1843. Courtesy Martyn Gregory Gallery, London.

of the American Revolution. Republican sentiments against luxurious display and ‘riches from the east’ as well as the early boycotts on tea and imported cloth had transformed the prestige associated with Asian silks, porcelain dishes, and fine teas into something of a secret pleasure or an interest put aside in the face of graver concerns. Before the ink was barely dry on the peace treaty of 1783, enterprising Americans took advantage of the possibility of beginning their own trade with China. British navigation laws had prohibited colonial Americans from sailing to or dealing directly with Asian countries. After independence, those laws no longer applied. The first adventure to China—at the time the word adventure also referred to a business venture usually undertaken by a group of investors and involving some risk—was put together by the famous Philadelphia financier Robert Morris. The ship, *Empress of China*, sailed out of New York Harbor in late February 1784 and after some 18,000 miles reached Macao and then Canton in August.²

The arrival of Americans initially confused the Chinese trading community. According to Samuel Shaw, the supercargo or business manager of the voyage, the Chinese authorities ‘took some time’ to ‘fully comprehend the distinction between Englishmen and us (the Americans).’ To differentiate them from the British, the Chinese called the Americans ‘the *New People*.’ Shaw explained that when presented with a map and indication of ‘the extent of our country, with its present and increasing population’ the Chinese representatives seemed ‘pleased’ with ‘the prospect of so considerable a market for the productions of their own empire.’ Apparently they quickly grasped the commercial implications of trade with this new nation.³ The *Empress of China* returned home in May 1785 and netted its investors an estimated profit of 25-30%. The voyage reintroduced Chinese teas, silks, porcelain, and an assortment of lacquered, carved, and painted furniture, boxes, fans and sewing tables to the American public. Very quickly, other merchants from Salem, Boston, Providence, New York, and Philadelphia were launching voyages to India and China.

The trading system at Canton, carefully explicated by Paul Van Dyke in his recent book, felt oppressive to the first Americans. European merchants were restricted to a very small section of the city’s riverfront where different nations rented buildings called factories that included warehouse and packing facilities as

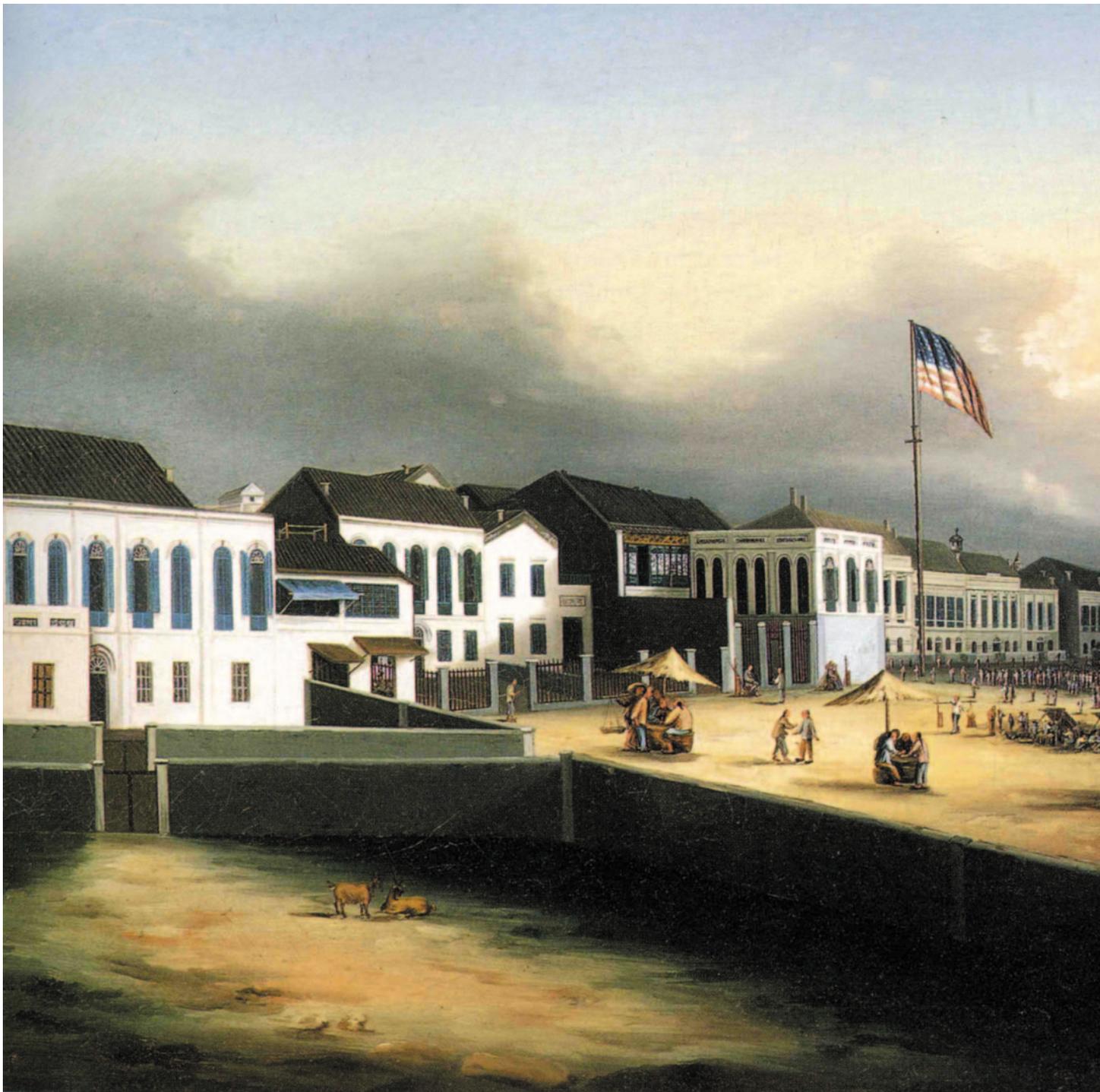
well as offices and living quarters for the merchants and clerks. The Chinese authorities believed in the superiority of their culture and feared that Westerners whom they referred to as ‘fan kwae’ or foreign devils, might prove a negative influence on their subjects. The relationships between some American merchants and their Chinese counterparts, as we will see, transcended the political and cultural barriers to develop into genuine friendships, but the system tried to control and limit contact between East and West as much as possible.

The restricted number of Chinese—the Hong merchants and their underlings—who were permitted contact with foreigners allowed for only a very limited interaction. Shaw described ‘with some frustration’ the restrictions imposed because, in his view, ‘the jealousy of the government confines all intercourse between its subjects and the foreigners who visit it to very narrow limits, in the suburbs of a single city.’ The factories were situated outside the city walls and Westerners could not enter Canton except under special circumstances. Even the opportunity to dine at the home of a hong merchant did not satisfy Shaw’s curiosity because ‘even then no new information is obtained.’ Shaw noted that ‘every thing of a domestic concern is strictly concealed, and, though their wives, mistresses, and daughters are commonly there, none of them are ever visible.’⁴

On first sighting the riverfront in Canton, Westerners expressed amazement at the number and variety of ships that ranged from ‘immense coasting junks to cargo boats, passenger boats, floating residences, Government cruisers and flower boats’ to a ‘prodigious’ number. In addition, visitors described sampans, ferry boats, ‘barber’s boats, vendors of every description of food, of clothes, of toys, and what would be called household requirements’ and ‘boats of fortune-tellers and of theatrical performers,’ as well. One American, in describing the scene asks us to ‘imagine a city afloat, and it conveys a very correct idea of the incessant movement, the subdued noises, the life and gaiety of the river.’⁵ Seagoing vessels actually had to anchor some miles south of Canton in a wide area of the Pearl River called Whampoa Reach. The sailors usually lived aboard their ships during the trading season.

Not only were sailors marooned at Whampoa and foreign traders restricted to a small factory region, but all foreigners were required to leave Canton after the end of the 5-6 month trading season. Most merchants

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View of Foreign Factories, Canton, 1825-1835, attributed to Lamqua (active 1825-1860), Guangzhou, China. Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum.

who stayed in China year round, retired to rented accommodations in Macao, a peninsula on the Chinese coast located about a day's sail South of Canton. Western women and families were never permitted in Canton.

Those women and families who chose to accompany their merchant and seamen fathers and husbands lived in Macao year round and were joined by male family members and friends during the off season.

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By the time Americans arrived, Macao embraced a remarkably multicultural population. Peopled by many Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, Chinese, Macanese (the term for people of mixed Portuguese

and Chinese descent), merchants from India termed Parsees, and people from all over what one scholar terms Monsoon Asia, the city had a very European feel with numerous Catholic churches and Portuguese-style public buildings.⁶

The extant letters of two young Americans, who lived in Canton and Macao during the 1830s, provide us with a window into the workings of an international commercial enclave and a view of life as an expatriate American in China. Robert Bennet (Ben) Forbes returned to China for his second sojourn in the late 1830s, as a member of Russell and Company, the most influential American firm in the China trade. Forbes's letters to his young wife Rose provide a remarkably frank and detailed look at life for a merchant in Macao and, during the trading season, in Canton. Our other correspondent, Harriet Low, a young woman from Salem, accompanied her aunt and uncle as he also took up a partnership in Russell and Company's Canton office. Low's collected letters offer an alternative outlook on the world of female expatriates in Macao. Low remained in China for four years (1829-32). Her journal, written in the form of letters to her sister, gives us a vibrant picture of the social life that American and European families created for themselves so far from home. Social activities became almost a form of commerce where men and women traded information and exchanged hospitality, in part to support the business they were all, at least indirectly, engaged in. Sociability also filled time and allowed participants to reaffirm their own individual and group identity in a setting that challenged cultural beliefs and national differences.

From her first days in China, Low demonstrated her determination to 'cut a figure' as a fashionable young lady even in this remote location. Macao was an extremely cosmopolitan city and polite behavior became an important asset to success in this foreign setting. One merchant noted that 'it is expected of any Lady established . . . [in Macao] that she should entertain all transient visitors of her country.' She must 'take in all the Captains wives & other loafers' and 'must see all Americans & even English Gentlemen who visit Macao.' And if she refuses, 'they talk, [since] it is a place of much gossip,' gossip that enforced the social norms.⁷

Low and her aunt worked diligently to live up to their position as important American hostesses. They

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could not go out walking until they had ‘[carrying] chairs (which are being made in Canton) and someone to wait upon us.’ But they kept busy, ‘purchasing dresses, receiving things from Canton, and writing letters.’ When prepared to go about in public, they soon found themselves visiting Mrs. F in her beautiful house ‘furnished elegantly,’ and attending a ‘fancy ball’ at Captain W’s. Low reported ‘The night of the ball ... Everything was elegant and the costumes were of all countries and ages.’ The women took tea and walked in Mrs. F’s garden which Low deemed ‘the most romantic place... very extensive and bound in serpentine walks’ with ‘immense rocks and trees,’ several temples, and ‘a beautiful view of the sea.’ And that was just the beginning of a seemingly endless round of walks, teas, dinners, parties, balls, and musical evenings including an Italian opera sung in Spanish. Noting ‘the ladies dress a great deal,’ Low and her aunt determined not ‘to vie with the English ladies in anything but good conduct.’ In fact when the ‘very genteel’ Mrs. Blair and Mrs. Montgomery arrived from India they brought the ‘latest Calcutta fashions.’ Low disliked the new look saying, ‘Such sleeves I never beheld—complete frights!’ Judging from her portrait however, she was soon persuaded to favor the new sleeves.⁸

Low’s account of life in Macao provides several examples of the multicultural nature of the community which at times she seemed to abhor and at other times embrace. She often describes various Catholic religious processions including one where ‘an image of a female was laid on a state bed, very richly dressed, and carried round with banner, the Host, etc.’ Low asked her maid about the meaning of the procession and ‘was quite shocked at her literal translation from the Portuguese.’ The maid said, “‘God’s mamma had died that day” and they were burying her in effigy.’ Low pronounced the whole thing ‘Horrid!’⁹

Occasionally however, the Low family would breach the religious divide and attended a Catholic Church. Recalling her first Christmas Eve in Macao, Harriet wrote, ‘A year ago to-night we were about going to the Church of San Jose. Now the bells are ringing, and the people are again assembled, saying mass and singing, and to-morrow will be a day of rejoicing that Christ our Saviour was born.’ The British East India Company had constructed a Protestant Chapel and cemetery on Macao for those who passed away in this distant location. But apparently few attended services

there; on their first Sunday in China, the Lows found only six others at Church.¹⁰

Low seldom expressed a favorable opinion of the Chinese residents of Macao. Her remarks seemed to have a class dimension to them, as she commented primarily on the poor and uneducated residents. She complained frequently of the way Chinese women carried their babies on their backs, referring to it as a ‘common mode of carrying children among the poor, and the poor little thing only has a shaking if it cries.’ She added, ‘they sometimes use their children very cruelly.’¹¹

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At other times she offered a broader kind of condemnation that centered not on a single action but on a wide array of cultural differences. In describing a Chinese procession in honor of ‘dedicating a new church or Joss house’ she marveled at the garments ‘made of the most splendid colors and materials you can imagine’ but she decried they way they were worn, ‘loaded on in a style that cannot please the eye of any person possessed of taste.’ She wondered at the accompanying music, if such discordant sounds ‘could be called music... for never was there such a noise, the horrid gongs beating so that we could not hear a person’s voice.’ She also seemed to dislike hearing the language often referring to it as ‘jabbering’ or ‘low, guttural sounds,’ or ‘the confusion of Babel.’ She concluded at one point that the Chinese were ‘a stupid set of people, and spend most of their time in sleeping.’ To her sister she wrote vehemently, ‘I assure you there is no comparison to be drawn between the Chinese and any other nation in the world.’ They will not allow ‘any innovation upon ‘old custom,’ and ding those words into your ears forever—if it is not for their interest to violate it.’ She continued her diatribe

by commenting on ‘Another thing they acknowledge is that they ‘cannot talky reason,’ and must be ‘bullied.’ In drawing this conclusion, she participated in a widely held assumption among Europeans about the unchanging nature of Chinese customs.¹²

Low, whose approach to others seemed as far from a cosmopolitan sensibility as one can imagine, not only expressed disdain for the Chinese peoples but also directed harsh judgments toward other Europeans in Macao. She fulminated against ‘this wretched set of people, the Catholics,’ attempting to explain her aversion by noting as she observed another religious procession, ‘If I could discover any signs of devotion in their hearts, I could tolerate them; but to see such mockery is beyond anything.’ At times her yardstick for evaluating the many Europeans and other foreigners she came across, appeared to be based on conformity to a code of social behavior, a kind of politeness that was correct but not too stiff. She had no love for English men either. She styled them as ‘a good-for-nothing set of rascals’ who only cared about ‘eating, drinking, and frolicking.’ A formal dinner for sixty put on by the British East India Company she deemed ‘amazing stiff,’ but did admire the ‘splendid’ table furnishings. The English ladies, with whom she socialised in Macao, seemed to rank higher in her esteem except for an unfortunate tendency to overdress. She and her Aunt determined not to vie with them in fashion but only in ‘good conduct.’¹³

When comporting with the more fortunate residents Low seemed open to encountering cultural variety. One Sunday afternoon, after a visit from two British merchants and Mouqua, one of the Hong merchants from Canton, she enthused to her sister about the Chinese trader as ‘a great character,’ asserting ‘he was very gallant I assure you.’ At another dinner with several ‘security’ (Hong) merchants she found them amusing as they ‘gave a full account of their customs,’ but in most cases, when faced with people of the lower sort, she could not conceal her antipathy.

Unlike Macao, Canton was a Chinese city, with the exception of the confined quarter of the foreign factories. Foreign women were prohibited from coming to Canton, even the factory area. Following the lead of a few British wives, Low and her aunt decided to visit Canton which for them represented ‘the forbidden city.’ Their exploit almost created an international incident, yet Low seemed more interested in recounting her

impressions of the ‘exotic scenes’ she encountered. She recorded the event in her journal saying ‘for the first time we entered a Hong [or factory] in the Celestial city of Canton.’ Admiring the ‘moonshiny night’ as they sailed up the Pearl River from Whampoa, Low described the scene. ‘At eleven the moon rose in splendor, so that we had a fine view of the pagodas as we neared Canton, and the endless variety of boats.’ She deemed it ‘more Chinese than anything we had seen before.’ The immense tea-boats formed ‘complete streets upon the water’ and ‘there are also houses built upon boats, and forming streets.’ When she and her aunt arrived at the American factory, Low was astounded by the gentlemanly entertaining and the fashionable furnishings in the factories’ living quarters. ‘You have no idea how elegantly these bachelors live here. I don’t wonder they like it’ she exclaimed.¹⁴

The ladies’ escapade nearly caused an international incident. The Chinese threatened to stop trade with the Americans and British; the local governor sent to the Emperor for instructions but finally the Lows and the British families agreed to depart and the confrontation dissipated. Feisty Harriet Low seemed to find Chinese restrictions very provoking, commenting ‘These despicable Chinese, who are not worth our notice, have the power to disturb us all ... saying that trade would be stopped ‘if one Low did not immediately remove his family to Macao.’ Wisely, the Lows agreed to return.

To be fair, Low did credit the Cantonese people with perfect civility during her visit there. She recalled an evening walk one ‘delightful moonshiny night’ in the factory area when the locals discovered her and her aunt. Then, ‘Lights were called for, that the Chinamen might look at us. They kindled up fires in an instant to behold our fair faces, and we had quite a rabble round us before we reached the front of the factories again, though they were all perfectly civil, and made no noise, but only showed a little curiosity, of which they have a share in common with their fellow-creatures of more enlightened parts.’¹⁵ This marked one of the few times when Low willingly extended a recognition of kindred feeling to the anonymous Chinese she encountered during her four-year sojourn.

The sociability that brought together the foreign community, on the other hand, coalesced around the display of carefully chosen possessions and appropriately displayed manners. Shortly after their

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anticlimactic return to Macao, the Lows' attention turned toward a party they intended to give for the elite commercial society. In her diary, Harriet noted 'Busy as a bee all day, making preparations for our party ... [but] Nevermind that ... must dance all night!' She donned a gown of blue crape over white satin while her aunt wore 'a china gauze over white satin,' and her friend Caroline chose 'pink aerophane over white.' Each woman adorned her hair with flowers sent by admirers. A Spanish gentleman, Mr. Ibar, was master of ceremonies and 'made everything very agreeable. Friends furnished a piano and played and sang while a guitarist and four Portuguese fiddlers provided dance music. Harriet danced until the party broke up at 1:30 am. Like another fair lady, she 'could have danced much more,' having 'got just enough excited to forget my fatigue.'¹⁶

The multicultural community of Macao was well represented at the Low's gala. Harriet observed, 'We mustered about forty—four American ladies, English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Swedes, Scotch, and I'm sure I don't know what others. We made the Scotchman dance a reel, and I joined in myself.'¹⁷ These elaborate gatherings among the families of the commercial community in Macao and the frequent social interactions in the parlors and concert halls played a key part in smoothing over cultural differences among Western nations, and, in some instances, between Westerners and the Chinese merchant community as well.

Robert Bennet Forbes of Boston had a rather different perspective on life in Canton and Macao. It was his second tour of duty in China. He had spent several years in the early 1830s managing the Lintin Island opium station which allowed him to return to America as a wealthy young man. Apparently he was a soft touch, giving, loaning, and investing large sums with relatives and friends often for rather dubious schemes. He also expended considerable funds building his mother a beautiful house in Milton, south of Boston. By the end of the 1830s, with a wife and newborn son, he found himself in dire financial straits so he determined to return to China for two or three more years to make his second fortune. (Later Forbes would say 'perhaps Providence took away my fortune because I made it in opium,' and he foreswore this business during his second stay.) His wife Rose and infant son Bob stayed in Massachusetts; it is the

correspondence of Forbes to his wife that provides us with another glimpse of expatriate life in Canton and Macao.¹⁸

Many of the Americans who worked closely with the Hong merchants in Canton expressed a very positive view of the Chinese traders' honesty and business acumen. Perhaps as a result of years of experience, Forbes developed real respect for many of the Chinese Hong merchants. His relationship was especially close with Canton's leading merchant Houqua. Forbes called the venerable merchant 'a grand old fellow' and treated him as one might treat a much loved favorite uncle.¹⁹

The terms of Forbes's partnership with Russell & Co. had not been fully negotiated so on his arrival in China he went immediately to see Houqua and seek his advice. He also hoped that Houqua would commit to funneling his business dealings through Forbes at Russell & Company. A few months later he wrote to Rose, 'I consult daily with Houqua about the general trade & am in his confidence.' The friendship extended beyond business associations. In letters to Rose, Forbes wrote, 'Houqua sends his love to you, as do the Miss Houqua's.' The two men maintained a close friendship and an excellent working relationship even after Forbes returned to Boston. A ship built by A. A. Low & Co. in 1844, shortly after the venerable merchant's death, was named *Houqua* in his honor, demonstrating the respect many members of the American community held for the esteemed leader of the Hong merchants.²⁰

Forbes was invited to a series of 'Chinese chop stick dinner[s]' at several of the Hong merchant's elegant homes and extensive gardens on Honam Island across the Pearl River from Canton. He described, in detail, one of these dinners at Mingqua's home. The table held about 20 dishes filled with 'small pyramids of fruits seeds fancifully arranged with flowers' and plates of dried fruits and roasted nuts.' Each place held a porcelain spoon and a pair of chop sticks, 'two ebony sticks the size of a pipe stem, square at the handle & round to the other end, shod with silver at the end.' Forbes described the dinner and the methods of eating and drinking for each of what must have seemed like an endless rounds of courses. The dinner guests took a short walk after the first six courses and continued on for several more hours after that. The dinner concluded at 11pm, with the host showering the guests with roses, carnations, and jessamine blossoms, and then the company drank many toasts. These gatherings set

the standard for what Forbes termed ‘the best style of Chinese Gentry.’²¹

Like the ‘bachelors’ mentioned by Harriet Low, Forbes wanted an elegant situation in the Canton factory used by Russell and Company. He stayed with friends until he could secure a spacious room and suitable furnishings including an oriental carpet and a large carved desk. One of the gentlemanly activities involved sailing on the Pearl River. Forbes was soon admitted to the Regatta Club. He had a Massachusetts-made yacht shipped to China for his use on the river. With it, he won a coveted silver cup in the annual regatta on the Pearl River. He also joined the exclusive Union Club made up of 15 of ‘the best people.’ Always this concern to associate with the best, the elite of Western and Chinese gentry formed a critical part of the Americans’ interactions with other Europeans and Asians. Perhaps by guarding their social position, they felt safer in what might initially have seemed like a dangerously alien environment.²²

After the trading season, Forbes moved to Macao with the rest of the foreign merchants. Some of the long-term residents of the American trading community had specific homes built for them which they rented from the Portuguese. Like Harriet Low, Forbes appreciated the beauty of the peninsula surrounded by water on three sides. He described the view from his lodgings to Rose, ‘the little bay in front presents a very pretty scene—there are 15 schooners & sloops and a dozen large ships—boats anchored there, ready to embark.’ Forbes loved his large rented house there and called it ‘my own castle,’ even quoting to Rose, ‘I am monarch of all I survey,’ from the poem about famous castaway Alexander Selkirk.²³ The only thing Macao lacked in his view were his wife and child. In one letter he mused, ‘looking up at the splendid moon I could not help saying, well if Rose were here & my Boy I should be content never again to see home, here might I rest for life & be happy, the situation may justly compare with Nahant or the Morlands though the beauty is a different kind.’²⁴

With the seasonal arrival of merchants from Canton, gentlemanly occupations like billiards joined ladies’ events such as teas and garden walks. Mixed gatherings—balls, concerts, plays, and operas—also competed for attention during the height of the social season. Samuel Shaw, appointed as America’s first Consul to China, had not looked forward to his first

season in Macao, away from the business action in Canton, but he soon came to appreciate the pleasures of female company and the polite sociability that suited him so well. Even Forbes, though he fully recognised the importance of social interaction to the foreign community, seemed a bit dismayed at the necessity of paying calls on all the ‘ladies and babies’ in Macao.²⁵

Many of the Americans who worked closely with the Hong merchants in Canton expressed a very positive view of the Chinese traders’ honesty and business acumen.

Foreigners valued not only social gatherings but also the interchange of objects to sanction both their privileged (but restricted) position and their cultural and familial ties. One of the key ways that Americans reaffirmed their identity and communicated with family while in China, was through the exchange of portraits and other paintings. The work of Chinese artists, easily accessible and skillfully rendered, provided an outlet to visualise and communicate certain values among the local Western community, to those back home, and to oneself. In spite of the hectic social life, both Forbes and Low missed their families greatly. They used not only letters, but also an exchange of portraits to assuage their longing for family and friends.

Miniature portraits enclosed in letters helped to keep the bond of family connections strong. It is difficult for us in this age of instant transmission of images, to understand the significance of seeing the likeness of a loved one after months and years of absence. Harriet Low described the emotional experience of receiving a small painting of her sister. She first read a letter from Captain R., in which he said, ‘I send your sister’s miniature!’ Low, describing the experience to that very sister, apologises for wanting to sustain the pleasure of anticipation. ‘Think of my having a resemblance of you in my hand, my dearest sister, and not opening it first!’ she says. She savors the suspense but, ‘at last I extricated it from its snug bed of cotton, where, with

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your own dear hands, you had placed it.' In an poignant moment, Low embraces the portrait as if greeting her own sister after a prolonged absence. 'The tears came in showers then, for I saw the same dear face; ... Yes, it is you, my dear. I have kissed it again and again.' This image created an expressive immediacy that belied the 18,000 miles and several months voyage that separated the two young women. The static image, continued to represent intimacy for Low as she 'laid it by to read my letters, but ever and anon my eyes wandered to the picture.'²⁶

To please her parents and keep the bonds to distant family as strong as possible, Low decided to have her portrait painted by the famous English artist George Chinnery, who resided in Macao for over two decades and made a career of painting Europeans as well as likenesses of some of the leading Hong merchants. Just before her twenty-fourth birthday, Low sat for several three-hour sessions during which the artist kept her engaged in conversation. She appreciated his talent as 'a great observer of human nature.' Since his profession brought him into contact with 'people of high and low degree,' she found 'a good deal to be gathered from his conversation.' Her likeness however, promised to 'lower [her] vanity.' The painting inspired her to borrow Chinnery's sketchbook and make copies of several of his drawings of picturesque views.²⁷

Portraits and other paintings helped to reaffirm individual and community identity as Americans and Europeans actively pursued objects and rituals that strengthened a sense of solidarity and purpose and celebrated their commercial activities. Two highly regarded Chinese artists, brothers known as Tinqu and Lamqua, maintained shops and studios on New China Street in the Western Factory area of Canton. They



Harriet Low, by George Chinnery, 1833.
Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum.

trained with Chinnery to develop their skills in a Western aesthetic tradition. Forbes used the talents of Lamqua, one of the Chinese brothers trained by Chinnery, to render his own image.²⁸

Forbes not only had his own portrait painted by Lamqua, but also used the services of a Chinese painter to create a likeness of his little dog Flora who had accompanied him to China. He noted in a letter, 'went to a Portrait painter to day & made Flora sit for her portrait—to fix her in one position, I procured a cockatoo which she gazed at fixedly for half

an hour.' When Forbes received a small painting of his young son Bob, he reported, 'it stands near me and is my constant companion;' he hung the portrait by his bedside where he could look at it as he drifted off to sleep—no doubt thinking how perfect everything would be if they could all be together.²⁹

Forbes also had a painting prepared for his mother depicting the Christian cemetery in Macao. It was here that his brother, Thomas Tunno Forbes was buried. Slated to take over the Chinese office of Perkins & Company after ten years in China, Tom Forbes died suddenly at the age of 27 when his schooner capsized during a typhoon. Since he left no suitable successor, Perkins and Company merged with Russell and Company to form the largest American firm in the China trade.³⁰

Chinnery and the highly esteemed brothers produced portraits not only of European and American sojourners but also of important Chinese hong merchants and officials. They also produced many landscapes and genre scenes that depicted the work of craft production, as well as the steps in harvesting and packing tea for export. They also created many views of individual merchant ships, the anchorage at Whampoa, and the many vessels travelling up and down the Pearl

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River. These images blurred the line between business and art; they engendered both a greater demand for artworks and supported the conviction that commerce was a worthy subject of artistic representation.

These paintings for the foreign market, primarily watercolors, although portraits were more frequently rendered in oil, became important collectables for Americans and were displayed in private and public collections like those of Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum in Philadelphia (1838-1841) and the East India Marine Society of Salem (now the Peabody Essex Museum). The appetite for export paintings reportedly kept as many as thirty artist's studios busy in 1830s Canton.³¹

Using paintings, yachts, fashionable clothes, and polite conventions to recreate many of the aspects of elite American social life, sojourners in China, such as Low and Forbes, promoted American commerce and helped to assuage their own loneliness and awareness of cultural difference. They collected family images and repeated familiar rituals to bridge the vast sense of distance from their home. However, the excitement of being in such a foreign and cosmopolitan environment and participating in European-style entertainments obviously intrigued both of them. The uniquely profitable business climate also gratified American entrepreneurs. It was this mix of the exotic and the familiar (and the possibility of acquiring substantial wealth) that I believe so appealed to people like Low

and Forbes. On arriving in Canton, Forbes described his exuberance the first night when he stayed with his friend Russell Sturgis; 'whenever I awoke I asked some new question & continued to talk all night.' Many months later, Forbes finally admitted to his wife, 'I like the climate & the excitement of good business so well, that were you here, I should not think of going home until I had half a million'.³²

On his last days in China, Forbes, who kept his intentions never to return a secret from all but a few close associates, said an emotional farewell to his dear friend, 'old Houqua,' as he 'struggled to keep the show of feeling down.' Forbes also made a last visit to his brother's grave. Unlike Low, who had at first excitedly devoured and then quickly tired of the delights of Macao, and headed home with eagerness, Forbes said goodbye to friends and to his brother, interred in Chinese soil forever, with sadness and regret. As he sailed for home on a Sunday in July, 1840, he may have been reminded of that moment on the porch of his rented house overlooking the moonlit bay of Macao, when he thought, 'if Rose were here & my Boy I should be content never again to see home, here might I rest for life & be happy'.³³ RC

Identified as a View of the Foreign Cemetery on Dane's Island by Sunqua c.1840. This may be the painting Forbes commissioned for his mother. Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum.



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NOTES

- 1 In their volume on America's *China Trade in Historical Perspective*, published in 1986, Ernest May and John Fairbank noted that 'very little research or writing has dealt with the China trade ... or the actual economic relationships between Americans and Chinese.' Instead they suggested that the 'Old China Trade,' meaning the period before the Opium Wars of the 1840s, is still shrouded in legend and romance. Their extensive bibliography included titles such as *Merchant Prince of Boston, China and the Golden Weed*, and *The Days of Sail*. With only a few notable exceptions, this is, for the most part, still the case. Ernest R. May and John K. Fairbank, *America's China Trade in Historical Perspective: The Chinese and American Performance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. V.
- 2 Philip Foster Chadwick Smith, *The Empress of China* (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Maritime Museum, 1984).
- 3 Samuel Shaw, *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw, The First American Consul at Canton with A Life of the Author by Josiah Quincy* (Taipei: Ch'eng-Wen Publishing Company, 1968. Originally pub. Boston, Crosby and Nichols, 1847), p. 183; On the Chinese drive to sell products to the West as part of engine for consumption there, see Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 161
- 4 Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), uses the term 'the Canton System' to describe the combination of customs, governance, and rules of exchange that evolved to control trade in China before the Opium Wars; William C. Hunter, *Bits of Old China* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, Ltd, 1911), p. 218; Shaw, *Journal*, pp. 178-9.
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