

Weaver Suckin and the Canton Silk Trade 1750-1781

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The silk trade in 18th century Canton shows a side of the commerce that so far has received little attention in the history books. Studies have been done on growing, processing, and the volume of silk handled each year, but little has been mentioned about the dealers in Canton who bought, sold, and prepared the fabrics for export. Because the government put restrictions and quotas on the types and quantities of silk that could be exported, the trade in silk was much different from that of tea, porcelain and other commodities. Canton weavers had to compete for foreign business but could only sell them quantities up to the amounts that the government would allow. Consequently silk dealers could not offset lower profits with greater volume as merchants handling tea and porcelain could do. The lower volumes being handled made it more difficult to procure foreign investment capital, because silk dealers could not entice their patrons with greater quantities. There were great pressures on Canton weavers to meet the demands of the market, but they had to do it within the government's restrictions.

There are very few details that have survived from the silk dealers, which is one reason why we know so little about them. Fortunately, there is one man, Weaver Suckin, who has fairly extensive



references in Dutch and other records to reconstruct his history. But before we begin his story, we should discuss the problems of identifying him in the foreign records. Information in the sources is not always straightforward.

TRACKING WEAVER SUCKIN THROUGH THE RECORDS

Aside from a brief mention of Weaver Suckin in Jörg's study on the Dutch porcelain trade, he has been largely omitted from the history of the trade.¹ Suckin carried on a prominent fabric and raw silk business in Canton, but because he often traded indirectly with foreigners, via the *Hong* merchants, he does not appear often in those records. We know that he must have been active in the trade by at least the late 1740s or early 1750s, because he shows up in 1757 already well established and respected. The supercargoes of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) describe him that year as 'one of the prominent fabric workers in Canton'.²

In 1757, Suckin conducted some trade with the VOC under a joint account with the *Hong* merchant Tan Anqua (Chen Anguan 陈安观). In this reference, he is called 'Hou Suckin', which suggest his last name may have been 'Hou'. From 1764 to 1784, his name shows up regularly in the VOC documents as 'Suckin' or 'Weaver Suckin,' without a last name attached.³ From 1766 to 1777, there are a few brief references to Suckin in Jean Abraham Grill's private papers. Grill was

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in China in the 1760s, served as a supercargo for the Swedish East India Company (SOIC), and did some business with Suckin. From 1775 to 1781, Suckin (spelled Zukien or Sukien) also shows up in the Danish Asiatic Company (DAC) records. Unfortunately, so far nothing has emerged about him from the English or French East India companies' records or the Portuguese and Chinese documents.

Suckin's absence in other records does not necessarily mean he did no business with those parties. It was common for foreigners to order fabrics they wanted from the *Hong* merchants, rather than the weavers, which means the former show up in their account books rather than the latter. Foreigners generally had more negotiating leverage when dealing with *Hong* merchants, because of the huge volumes they handled. Consequently, it was easier to persuade a *Hong* merchant to a better price than it was a silk weaver. When the Cohong was in operation from 1760 to 1771, weavers and other small 'outside' dealers were forbidden from contracting directly with foreigners so in those years they had no choice but to sell their products through *Hong* houses.

The Dutch operated a little differently from other companies. They contracted many different types of silk fabrics with their *Hong* merchants, but then went directly to the weavers to show them exactly what colors and designs they wanted. As a result, there are many references to Suckin in Dutch records, but few references in other sources.

There were at least two other persons in Canton who went by the name Suckin (or something similar), which can be confusing. One of the prominent porcelain dealers was called 'Suchin Kinqa', which was shortened to 'Suchin' (spelled various ways). This man shows up in the foreign records from at least the 1750s to about 1805. One of the SOIC house servants in Canton in the 1760s was also called 'Loyin Suchin' or simply 'Suchin'. Thus, care needs to be taken not to confuse these other men with Weaver Suckin.

Illustration 1 (p. 109) shows a loan contract that Suckin made with a Swedish supercargo in January 1768 for 300 Spanish dollars at 2 percent interest, to be paid within 20 days before the Swedish ship left China. The Swedish text at the top right, however, shows 20 percent interest, but 2 percent is probably correct because that was the going monthly rate. From this document, we can see that Suckin did business

out of the Shenghe Dian 生和店, but the name on the stamp shows Yongcheng Tuji 永成图记. Another document in the Swedish archives shows him trading out of the Yuelai Hao 悦来号 so he seems to have been connected to multiple firms.⁴

WEAVER SUCKIN AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE SILK TRADE

As far as we can tell from the records, Suckin did business with the Dutch in 1757 and then does not appear again until 1764. In 1758, the Dutch bought many silk fabrics, but they were ordered from weaver 'Chancri' instead. This man was the main supplier of silks for the French East India Company (CFI), and in 1763, the Dutch mention that he only did business through the *Hong* merchant Ingsia (Yan Yingshe 颜瑛舍). In 1757, the French also bought silks from the fabric maker 'Tenhi'. The Dutch continued to trade with Tan Anqua in 1758 and 1759, but no longer under a joint account with Suckin. We have no references to Suckin for the years 1758 to 1763. When his name reappears in 1764, he was still respected as one of the prominent weavers so we assume he was active all along.⁵

From 1764 to 1771, Suckin appears in the Dutch records doing business through the *Hong* merchants. The Dutch ordered their fabrics directly with Suckin, but then settled their silk accounts through their three merchants of the Cai 蔡, Yan 颜 and Chen 陈 families. Together, these three houses handled most of the VOC trade from the 1750s to the 1780s, and Suckin seems to have been one of their main silk suppliers.⁶

When Suckin reappears again in the records in 1764, he was making many of the silks for two of the men in this consortium, Tsja Hunqua (Cai) and Ingsia. Suckin did the weaving, but the Dutch hired other men to color or 'paint' the fabrics. The Chinese painter Anthony Toanqua was regularly employed by the VOC from the 1760s to 1780s, and colored many of the silks for Suckin. Anthony also painted silks for the DAC and SOIC. Several other silk painters operated in Canton at this time as well, including Laqua, Leonqua, Matheus, Lo Thunqua and Puqua, so there was considerable competition between them.

There were also several embroiderers in Canton whom the foreigners hired to stitch borders on their fabrics. At the time Suckin was active, we find Soyching

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Portrait of a *Hong* merchant of Canton by Spoilum (fl. 1770-1805).
Courtesy of Martyn Gregory Gallery, London.

(Fang Suisheng 方遂胜), Leonchang, Akoun, Ayau, Pinqua, Samqua and Atay involved in this business. Like the weavers, painters and embroiderers spoke directly with the foreigners in placing their orders, but the sales were done through the *Hong* houses. Weavers were mainly concerned with bulk fabric and raw silk orders, which were usually no more than one or two colors on each piece, with basic designs such as stripes or checkers. Some of those fabrics were then delivered to painters and embroiderers after they were woven. They added additional colors, logos, borders, names, coats of arms, and whatever other images foreigners wanted on their fabrics.

Suckin was a major dealer in raw silk as well as manufactured silk. There were two different types of raw silk available in Canton, the Nanking variety which was produced in areas adjacent to that city, and the locally spun product from Foshan.⁷ The latter variety was known as 'Canton silk'. The Dutch ordered both the Nanking and Canton varieties each year, but Suckin appears to have specialized in the local variety. In fact, the Dutch tell us that he lived in Foshan and

came back and forth to Canton regularly to carry on his trade. Raw Canton silk was considered to be a lower quality than Nanking silk so it was usually less expensive. Transport costs, of course, were also less so the lower price for Canton silk made it an attractive export commodity.⁸

There was 50 percent less loss in processing raw Canton silk compared to Nanking silk, regardless of the quality. The Dutch estimated that in the processing of one catty of Canton silk, there was a loss of one tael (weight). When processing the same amount of Nanking silk there was a loss of 2 taels. This meant that the Canton variety enjoyed a 6 percent advantage in production over the Nanking variety. Thus, between its cheaper price, its lower transport costs, and its 50 percent less shrinkage, the Canton variety was in strong demand.⁹

In former centuries, silk was China's number one export commodity. After tea drinking became popular in Europe and the Americas in the late 17th century, that product became number one. At some point in the mid-18th century, quotas were placed on the amount of silk that could be exported, but silk had other restrictions placed on it before then. China's sumptuary laws reserved crimson and yellow fabrics for the emperor so those colors were forbidden to import or export, for all fabrics.

In the late 1750s, it was feared that the shortage of silk would push up prices so quotas were placed on its export, in both raw and manufactured varieties. Foreigners were only allowed to export eighty piculs of raw silk per ship, thirty piculs of which had to be Nanking silk and fifty piculs of Canton silk. By the 1780s, the quota had been raised to one hundred piculs per ship (fifty piculs of each variety). The size of the ships was not taken into account.

Manufactured silk was allowed to be substituted for raw silk at a ratio of 10:8 (10 catties of raw silk to 8 catties of piece goods). In some years, companies were allowed to combine the quotas from several ships and put them all onto one ship, but all of the vessels had to be in China that year. The Qing government did not allow Canton silk to be substituted for Nanking silk, or vice versa (which applied to both manufactured and raw varieties).¹⁰ The limitations placed on the silk trade resulted in that industry being dominated by small operators like Suckin. There are examples of silk dealers rising to the ranks of *Hong* merchant, but this

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happened more often with porcelain dealers. The latter had no restrictions placed on the quantities they could export, so their businesses could expand making them potential candidates for *Hong* merchant positions.¹¹

Both raw and manufactured silks varied in price according to their quality. As a general rule, the cost of most varieties and types increased throughout the period that Suckin was active in Canton. In order to keep the prices from inflating, foreigners often insisted that their merchants offer the same prices they had in previous years. In 1764, for example, the Dutch were pleased that they were able to contract some of their silk textiles for less than it cost them in 1759. Some varieties they purchased were more expensive than in 1759, but on average, they saved 4 percent on silks in 1764 compared to 1763.¹²

These efforts to keep prices from rising were somewhat effective in the short-term, but eventually the forces of supply, demand, and inflation won out. In 1765, the weather in Nanking was exceptionally cold resulting in many silkworms dying. The Dutch speculated that there would be about two-fifths less product produced that year compared to previous years. The reduction in supply pushed prices up, and regardless of the foreigners' complaints, they either had to pay the higher rates or go without.¹³

In January 1766, the Dutch tried again to peg prices to 1763 (when they were 4 percent higher than in 1764), which Suckin complained would dig deep into his profits.¹⁴ By the end of the year, the prices had jumped again, and continued to rise throughout the 1760s. In 1770, the Dutch officers told Suckin they would not tolerate another increase, and would not pay more than what they had paid in 1769.¹⁵ In February 1771, however, Suckin was again complaining that he could not supply silk for the same price as he had the previous year, owing to another price rise.¹⁶

An example in the Dutch records shows how foreigners could negotiate better prices for silk with *Hong* merchants, than with weavers, and the former provided more protection against price hikes. Poankeequa (Pan Qiguan 潘启官) faced a big loss on the silks he had contracted with the English in early 1766 because of a rise in prices. He had agreed to deliver 300 bales of raw Nanking silk at 280 taels per picul. But by December, his cost to land the silk 'free on board' (FOB) the English ships at Whampoa had risen to 320 taels per picul. Poankeequa faced a loss of

40 taels per picul, which he would have to make up on other products or future silk sales.¹⁷

Hong merchants had four options to protect their profits, when prices rose. They could insist on higher prices, which was difficult to accomplish because of intense competition; they could pressure subcontractors (weavers, painters and embroiderers) to absorb some of the loss, which might help somewhat, but was very hard to initiate; they could agree to lower prices but then deliver a product of lower quality, which would likely result in the loss of future sales with those persons; or they could make up for losses by insisting on a better deal in another product, a preferential loan, a larger advance, a surcharge on certain costs, or a better price on another item.¹⁸

Silk weavers did not have the latter options because they did not deal in other products. Suckin was certain to have been pressured by *Hong* merchants to absorb part of the loss, when prices inflated. Because weavers' occupations were labor intensive, any rise in the cost of rice or other food caused corresponding rises in the costs of processing silk. Suckin thus had few options available to him to compensate foreigners for higher prices, which is why most foreigners did not deal directly with weavers.

Coolies would also refuse to pack tea if any additional burdens were placed on them or if they were not paid sufficiently. Other laborers such as the silk spinners in Foshan and the couriers who carried the tea over the mountain passes also went on strike, on occasion, when their wages were no longer sufficient to sustain themselves. It is very unlikely that the wages for common laborers ever went beyond basic subsistence levels, but to keep them working, they had to receive enough to cover the cost of rice and other living expenses.¹⁹

In 1775, Morse lists the total tea and raw silk exports from Canton, which allow us to compare these two commodities in relation to total exports. The 26 foreign ships this year exported a total of 125,125 piculs of tea and 3,724 piculs of raw silk. In terms of weight (one picul equalled 133 1/3rd English pounds) silk exports were only 3 percent of the total.

But if we look at the value of those goods, an entirely different picture emerges. Assuming that tea was worth at least 14 taels per picul and raw silk 275 taels per picul then total tea exports amounted to 1,751,750 taels and raw silk exports 1,024,000 taels.

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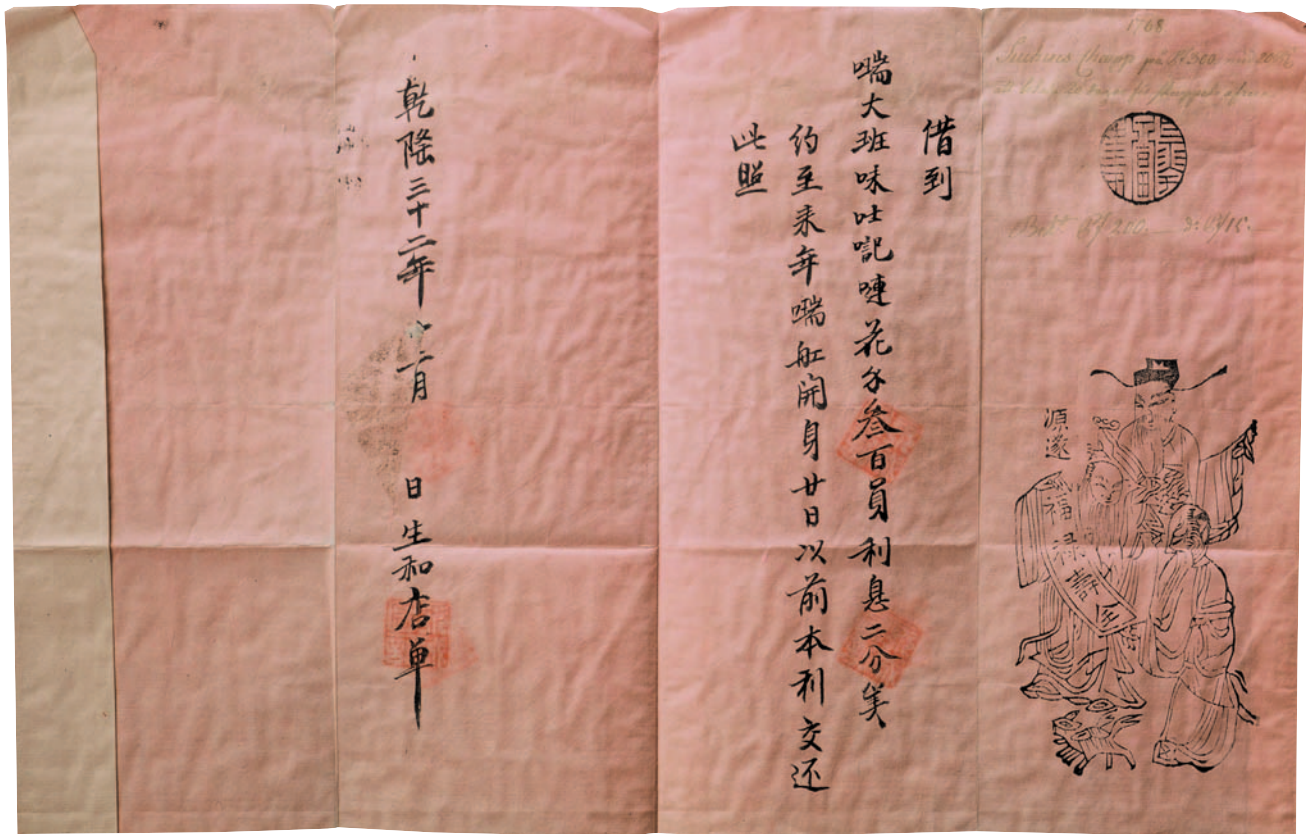


Illustration 1. Loan dated January 1768 from a Swedish supercargo to Weaver Suckin for 300 Spanish dollars at 2 percent interest to be paid within 20 days before the Swedish ship left China. The Swedish text at the top right, however, shows 20 percent interest. Courtesy of Nordic Museum Archive. Nordic Museum Archive (NM), Stockholm. Godegärdsarkivet: F17, pp. T1_05636-7.

Silk exports made up about three-fifths that of tea exports, which means for every five taels spent on tea there were three taels spent on silk. If we use a higher figure for tea of 17 taels per picul (considering that small amounts of expensive green tea would push up the average) we get a total of 2,127,125 taels, making silk exports about half that of tea. At an average of 20 taels per picul, tea exports come to 2,502,500 taels, and silk exports still make up two-fifths of that amount. Silk was clearly a major export of significant importance to the trade, which has not been fully acknowledged in previous studies.

If we look at capital investments the figures for silk are even more impressive. At 10 taels per picul for tea, the advances in 1775 come to 1,251,250 taels. At 80 percent on the value of the silk, the advances come to 819,200 taels. Silk advances were two thirds that of tea, which means for every three taels advanced inland for tea there were two taels advanced for silk. As these examples show, silk investments and exports have not

been given their due place in the history of the trade. This outcome is partially owing to value figures (taels and dollars) being unavailable, or hard to come by, and historians instead assembling volume figures (piculs and tons), which show silk being a tiny fraction of total exports.²⁰

There was a lot of pressure on weavers and merchants to supply foreigners with illegal red and yellow silk. If merchants refused to supply them, they would likely lose the sale of all their silks to those persons. The colors and types of silk were negotiated and contracted for in lots, making it difficult to separate out reds and yellows. This practice led to numerous problems for weavers and merchants.

In December 1767, for example, the mandarins intercepted a shipment of red and yellow silks on its way from Foshan to Canton. The *Hong* merchants Ingsia and Poankeequa had contracted these fabrics with the Danes. The products were eventually released but only after significant bribes had been paid. Another

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example is on 20 November 1766, when one of Suckin's shipments of silk to the Dutch ships at Whampoa was detained at a tollhouse because the mandarins had found 'forbidden colors' in the lot. This obstruction led Cai Hunqua and his partners, who ordered some of their products from Suckin, to attempt exporting their yellow silks as the 'color of tea' instead. The emperor had stipulated that crimson (red) and yellow fabrics were forbidden, but he said nothing about silk that was the colour of tea (or the same as yellow). The mandarins, however, did not accept this argument and Hunqua had to find other secret means to export those colors.²¹

Regardless of how it was arranged, officials at the tollhouses between Canton and Whampoa had to be 'rewarded' for this connivance. One method of exporting the illegal colors was to ship them in the bottom of the foreign flag boats, which were allowed to pass the tollhouses without inspection. In 1761, for example, the merchant Namqua shipped illegal silks for several companies in the bottom of their flag

boats.²² He had to pay customs officers in Canton their 'compensation' for allowing the goods to be loaded into the boats, and also pay the officers that were anchored near the ships at Whampoa to allow the goods to be unloaded and brought aboard those vessels. If the illegal silks were processed in Foshan, then customs officers had to be bribed between there and Canton. Thus, by just including a few red and yellow fabrics in a shipment, the transport fees rose dramatically and the profits of the entire lot was reduced. If weavers and merchants refused to ship those colors then they would likely lose sales to other dealers who were willing to take those risks.²³

In some years, it was more difficult to smuggle these items than in others, because Hoppas (customs superintendents) and governor-generals were more diligent at checking these connivances. In 1759, for example, the tollhouse keepers between Canton and Whampoa had become so accustomed to trafficking illegal silks that they made a bold attempt to add a

Feeding silkworms and sorting the cocoons. Engraving with hand color (c. 1843). Drawn by T. Allom. Engraved by A. Willmore.



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surcharge of Spanish \$100 to every foreign ship, for the 'privilege of smuggling silk'. They tried to charge this fee regardless of whether ships were loading illegal silk, which, of course, generated many complaints. The English and Danish supercargoes reported the connivance to the governor-general, because not all of their ships were taking in illegal silks and they did not want to pay this fee if no benefits were to be gained. Because of their complaints, the tollhouse officers were arrested and those who managed to flee downriver were later caught near Macao. This harsh crackdown was an exception, because in most years, Chinese merchants could find ways (usually with bribes) to ship their contraband.²⁴

There was a well established practice of bribing in Canton, with set fees for every article. Mandarins only accepted bribes and agreed to the shipments if they were fairly certain they could successfully transport the goods to Whampoa without the Hoppo finding out about them. In 1834, the connivance fee to allow more raw silk to pass than what the quotas allowed was Spanish \$4 per picul, and the fee to allow forbidden manufactured silks (reds and yellows) to pass was Spanish \$2 per chest. Sometimes, however, toll officers insisted on picking out some of the silks that were being shipped as their 'reward'.²⁵

Remuneration in kind created accounting problems for foreign supercargoes so we do not see many references to this in the foreign records. The amount of goods that left Canton had to match the amount of goods that arrived in Whampoa and extracting products en route, such as in the example above, upset that balance. This factor is probably why connivance fees eventually became fixed monetary amounts charged per unit, rather than payments in kind. A monetary charge could be entered easily into companies' books as a 'mandarin's fee', which as far as foreigners were concerned was a legitimate expense and did not upset the balances between Canton and Whampoa.²⁶

If there were greater risks in one year compared to another, such as in 1759, then toll officers would either not allow the illegal goods to pass that year, or would only do so for a greatly inflated remuneration (bribe). The latter scenario could add enormously to costs and reduce profits significantly so if that happened, then contraband might have to be warehoused in Canton until a more favorable time appeared, or until they could be exchanged for a different product that could

be more easily exported. All of these factors affected Suckin's business with foreigners, and help us to understand better the pressures and constraints under which he operated.²⁷

In February 1767, we begin to see signs of Suckin having cash flow problems. Up until this year, he had been receiving the standard 20 percent advance on silk contracts in the off-season (at the time the order was placed in February or March) and the remaining 60 percent when the ships arrived in August or September. But he now demanded the VOC give him 30 percent when the contract was made and 60 percent when the ships arrived.²⁸ The Dutch refused, and continued to pay him the customary 80 percent advance (20 and 60 percent, respectively).²⁹

Strong demand and limited supplies kept constant upward pressure on usury rates in Canton, making it expensive for Chinese merchants to borrow money. It was common for Chinese to pay interest rates of 20 percent per year (or 2 percent per month), when foreigners in Canton or Macao could borrow the same money for 10 to 15 percent annual interest. Figure 1, for example, shows a loan contract Suckin made with the Swedes in 1768 for 300 Spanish dollars at 20 percent annual interest.

In some years capital was so scarce that Chinese paid as much as 40 or 50 percent interest. Thus, there were good reasons for Suckin wanting the Dutch to pay more in advance so he wouldn't have to borrow this expensive money.³⁰

Besides connivance fees and usury, there were other charges that affected the silk trade. The contracts Suckin made with the Dutch stipulated not only the price and quantity of merchandise, but also the exact date of delivery. It was common to state that the product had to be delivered aboard the ships at Whampoa in 100, 150, or 200 days from the day the contract was signed. The delivery date was then also noted on the document so there was no mistaking which day they were talking about. If delivery was not made on time, then Suckin would be charged 3 percent demurrage on the value of the undelivered fabric. Chinese and foreigners used different calendars (lunar and solar, respectively) so it was important to make the dates very clear in the contracts to avoid misunderstandings.³¹

In August 1767, another entry appears of Suckin demanding more money, but this time it was connected to the prices of the products that had been agreed upon.

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Suckin wanted the Dutch to pay 8 percent more for the 1,000 pieces of silk fabrics they ordered, because the silk he received from his supplier was of an exceptional quality. In November, the three *Hong* merchants for the VOC also said they needed an addition 900 taels for the silk textiles that had been ordered that year. If the Dutch refused to pay, then Suckin would suffer a loss, and the supercargoes would likely not get their fabrics in time before the ships departed. By the end of December when the goods were finally delivered, the Dutch compromised, and gave him 4 percent more than the price they had agreed upon.³²

In another example in February 1768 the English received much poorer silk than what they had wanted, and demanded their merchant to give them a discount of 10 taels per picul.³³ This disparity between the quality of goods that was delivered by suppliers and the quality of goods contracted with foreigners was a problem weavers had to deal with continually. There was no guarantee that what was actually ordered would be delivered, because the market and products varied from season to season. Weavers, however, had to pay their suppliers according to the quality of the products actually received, irrespective of the agreements with foreigners. All of the fabrics were ordered according to samples that foreigners gave the merchants and weavers and that were then forwarded to suppliers. But in the end, there was no guarantee what qualities would arrive in Canton. Suckin had a reputation for handling the best silks which is probably why his supplier gave him a better quality, in the example above, than what he had ordered. If he had not been fussy about quality, the man would probably have tried to deliver a poorer product (such as in the English example above) and save the better silk for another weaver.³⁴

The prices that were negotiated in these 'after delivery adjustments' were based on the situation of the market at the time, while the actual contracts had been made in the off-season, when prices and markets were mere speculations. If there was a rise in price after the contract was made, and before delivery, then foreigners usually paid no attention to this and continued to demand the same rates and quality. If there was a drop in price, however, you could be sure foreigners would pressure Chinese merchants to give them a discount. In this respect, the pricing and marketing structures as well as the usury rates in Canton were slanted in favor of foreign buyers rather than Chinese sellers. It was a

buyers' market, which is what the Chinese government wanted so the volume of trade, on the whole, would continue to expand (but that did not necessarily include the growth of the silk trade).

On 27 July 1770, the head of the three merchant consortium, Cai Hunqua, died, and there was a temporary halt in trade while things were being sorted out in that house. Whenever a major player such as Hunqua departed the scene in Canton, it created much uncertainty in both the foreign and Chinese communities. In early August, the Dutch were very anxious to contract their silks with Suckin before a new head was appointed to Hunqua's house. The implication was that they feared they would not be able to get the same prices as in the previous year, once everyone became aware of the actual situation of Hunqua's affairs.³⁵

Because silk orders were done through the *Hong* merchants (also called 'security merchants') in the 1760s, it is not possible to show how much product Suckin actually delivered to each company. In March 1772 (after the Cohong was dissolved), Suckin insisted that the Dutch deal with him directly not only in their orders but also in their advances, deliveries, and payments. He now had the freedom to conduct trade in his own name and on his own account, and he specifically stated that he would no longer deal through the *Hong* merchant consortium as he had done in the 1760s. His unwavering demand in this matter suggests that he had not been pleased with the previous restrictions on his business.³⁶

The collapse of the Cohong was not necessarily a good thing for Suckin. Even though he had to give a percentage of his profits to a *Hong* house, he received some protection in return. The Cohong had regulated the prices for silk and the advances that were required, which provided security and stability to trade. When that society ended, each merchant was left to themselves to negotiate the terms. As a result, fierce competition broke out as merchants scrambled to keep what they had, or gain market shares from others. This cut-throat environment gave foreigners more leverage in negotiating better deals.

In August 1773, the Dutch suggested to Suckin that they would only give him a silk contract if he consented to receiving a much lower price. And they insisted that they now pay only 50 percent of its value in advance. Because the *Hong* merchants no longer took a

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cut on the profits, Suckin was able to accommodate the Dutch in price, but he would not give in on the amount advanced, because he could not order and reserve those goods with inland agents without that money. Suckin had some leverage because other weavers needed that money as well to place their orders. He was therefore able to continue demanding the customary 80 percent advance, and the Dutch finally consented.³⁷

But in 1775, the Dutch tried again to restructure the way the trade was being conducted. They suggested that instead of giving the customary 80 percent advance in the off-season for a contract on raw silk, they pay Suckin 100 percent of the amount at the time the ships arrived in August or September. But here again, the lack of capital enabled Suckin to continue to insist on the customary 80 percent in the off-season (20 percent in February or March and 60 percent when the ships arrived).³⁸

The records show that Suckin sold silks to the DAC from 1775 to 1781. In 1776, another weaver by the name of 'Samqua' begins to show up in the DAC records, bringing Suckin added competition. He and Suckin supplied the DAC with the silks they wanted each year until 1781, when both of those men disappear from the records. Table 1 shows the prices Suckin gave the Danes for different grades of raw Nanking silk in 1777.

TABLE 1: PRICES FOR NANKING SILK IN 1777³⁹

TYPE OF RAW SILK	TAELS PER PICUL
1 st Organzin Tsiely silk	348
2 nd Organzin Tsiely silk	328
3 rd Organzin Tsiely silk	313
1 st Tram Ta-cran silk	326
2 nd Tram Ta-cran silk	311
3 rd Tram Ta-cran silk	301

This list of silk grades and prices needs some explanation because top quality Nanking silk was forbidden to export and was reserved exclusively for the emperor. The application of this restriction, however, varied somewhat. Top grades might include

all of the silk produced in a specific area (which were all considered to be good) or it might include only the best products in certain areas, with lower grades from those places being allowed to export.

Because of these restrictions, there was a difference between the Chinese and foreign grading systems. The '1st Organzin Tsiely silk' in Table 1 was actually second grade silk in the Chinese grading scale. Foreigners were not quoted prices for Chinese first grade, because that product went to Beijing. Top grade silks that were earmarked for Beijing were very difficult to acquire by anyone but those persons who were licensed to handle them.⁴⁰

The grading and pricing of silk, however, was not as straightforward as the examples in Table 1 suggest. During most of the 18th century, there were no common silk standards that all foreigners agreed or conformed to so there was much confusion about which products fell into which categories. Moreover, foreign records often do not mention the grades, but simply state 'raw silk' purchases, such as in Morse's example above. Because of this ambiguity, we have no way of accurately comparing prices between companies, over time.

The figures in Table 1 from the DAC records are an exception. In other years, the Danes simply record one price for all raw silk they purchased with no mention of quality. The high and low prices for 'raw silk' in Canton that Li assembled for the years 1702 to 1799, for example, are much less than the lowest price listed in Table 1. For 1775 (two years before Table 1) Li shows prices ranging from 275 to 277.5 taels per picul and in 1783 (five years after Table 1), 275 taels per picul.⁴¹ The different ranges of prices are the result of companies maintaining different silk standards making it impossible to draw meaningful comparisons.

Moreover, the foreigners did not all use the same exchange rates to convert Spanish dollars into Chinese taels. And they used different weights to weigh their goods (including raw silk and silver) so even when we do have prices for different grades, those numbers need to be checked to see that they correspond to their equivalent weights in silver. And even if we have all of that information, we still need to check that the companies were using the same rating system for raw silk so that we can be sure the 2nd grade in one source is the same as 2nd grade in another source. Even in Table 1, there are two levels of first, second and third grades. Because of these ambiguities, we are unable

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to do meaningful comparisons with Suckin's prices and only list them (Table 1) to show there was much variation.⁴²

But despite the confusion, it is clear that first grade Canton silk was much less expensive than first grade Nanking silk. In the early 1770s, the Dutch contracted regularly with Suckin each year for 40 to 80 piculs of raw Canton silk at 190 to 195 taels the picul. The prices for raw Canton silk were again higher in 1778 so Suckin had to renegotiate his terms again with the Dutch. He raised his price to 200 taels per picul, and the Dutch could not get him to go lower. In 1779, the price of silk rose again, but this time the cause was attributed to a 15 percent hike in the customs duties.⁴³

In 1778, there were rumors circulating in Canton that the Hoppon was going to issue a declaration requiring all goods to be handled through the large merchant houses again so he could crack down on smuggling (and probably also to gain more control over *Hong* merchant bankruptcies, which were now a problem). As a precautionary measure, Suckin sent all of the silks that he had obtained for the VOC to the house of the *Hong* merchant Tsjonqua (Cai Xiangguan 蔡相官). Tsjonqua was not only a *Hong* merchant, but his father-in-law was a mandarin in another district so this gave Suckin some protection in the event the new policy was put into effect.⁴⁴

As merchants expanded in the vacuum that was left behind by the *Hong* merchants who failed in the late 1770s, stiff competition broke out, and this affected the weaving industry as well. We have already seen how the Dutch tried to benefit from the increased competition by attempting to renegotiate the terms of their contracts with Suckin. In 1780, the Dutch also approached Weaver Tiqua, who was the main silk supplier for the English East India Company (EIC), for his prices, which were found to be 3 percent lower than Suckin's. As a further incentive to lure the Dutch his way, Tiqua did not insist on an advance for raw Canton silk, but continued to demand the customary 80 percent advance for silk textiles. Suckin contracted a fair amount of textiles this year with the VOC, but lost their trade after that. The competition had effectively pushed him out of the market.⁴⁵

Unknown to Suckin at the time, even without Tiqua's competition he would have lost most of his trade with the VOC in the early 1780s because of war. The

Dutch were fighting Britain in those years resulting in few VOC ships making it to China. In 1781, only one ship showed up when there had been previously four each year; in 1782, no VOC ships made it to China; and in 1783, the Dutch commissioned two 'Prussian' ships to China. The VOC trade with China did not return to its previous volume until 1784 so even if Suckin had managed to compete with Tiqua and retain his Dutch account in 1780, he was doomed to lose it anyway.

SUCKIN'S TRADE DATA

The figures in Table 3 show Suckin's transactions with the VOC from 1757 to 1780 and the DAC from 1775 to 1781. Because silk was an expensive commodity, it actually made up a significant proportion of the overall value of the cargoes, even though the volume was small. Table 2 shows that Suckin supplied an overall average of about 8 percent of the value of the VOC cargos from 1772 to 1780. This is quite noteworthy considering his small status.⁴⁶

The trade figures from the DAC are missing for these years, but we can see from the various items that were handled in Table 2 that Suckin probably sold them a substantial amount of silk as well. No detailed figures have survived from the SOIC for these years, but Suckin is mentioned in those records from 1766 to 1770 as a 'silk man'.

Jörg mentions that Suckin went broke in 1778, but as we have seen, he continued until 1781. In March 1782, the Danish supercargo, who stayed over in China, listed the major merchants with whom the DAC should consider doing business with in the coming season. A 'Suqua' appears on the list, but there is no mention to Suckin. This Suqua, however, could possibly refer to Suckin's nephew, Kyt Siouqua (see below).⁴⁷

REFERENCES TO SUCKIN AFTER 1781

Suckin is mentioned in the Dutch records again in 1783 in reference to the *Hong* merchant Pinqua (Yang Bingguan 杨丙观). According to the report, Pinqua was left with a quantity of silk textiles from Suckin, who had ceased operations two years before. The Dutch mention that Pinqua finally disposed of the goods on the Danes.⁴⁸

In 1784, one of Suckin's nephews, Kyt Siouqua (second part of the name is also spelled Sjouqua,

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Sjonqua, and Kiouqua), is mentioned in the Dutch records dealing in silk. Like his uncle, he insisted on the customary advances (presumably, referring to the 80 percent advances mentioned above). The Dutch, however, were able to convince him to accept a 60 percent advance at the time the ships arrived, and the remainder when the product was delivered. But the *Hong* merchant Tan Tsjoqua (also known as Chowqua: Chen Zuguan 陈祖官) had to stand security for the duties that he owed (and probably for the 60 percent advance as well).⁴⁹

Siouqua had worked very closely with his uncle in the business. He could speak Portuguese, which means he probably handled Suckin's trade with the Portuguese and Spanish in Macao. Like his uncle, the Dutch found Siouqua to be well stocked in all the varieties they needed, so he apparently continued to handle only the best merchandise as his uncle had done. Siouqua did some business with the VOC in 1784, and offered products to the Dutch again in 1786, but then disappears from the records.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

Restructuring the trade of the Canton weavers has not been an easy task, because of the scarcity of information available. Because we have no business records from the weavers themselves, the only good sources are the documents that have survived in foreign archives. Foreign records, however, usually do not mention the weavers because they preferred to deal with *Hong* merchant, who could be more easily persuaded to better prices.

From the analysis above, several patterns emerge that give us an idea of how the silk trade was structured. Before and after the Cohong, Suckin could arrange his sales directly with foreigners, but had to go through that society in other years. But as the Dutch examples show, foreigners could go directly to Suckin in all years to stipulate what colors and designs they wanted on their fabrics. During the Cohong era, they had to contract with *Hong* merchants, but in other years, they contracted directly with Suckin, but then

TABLE 2: WEAVER SUCKIN'S TRADE WITH THE VOC 1772-1780

YEAR	SHIPS	SUCKIN	TOTAL RECEIPTS	% OF TOTAL	PRODUCTS TRADED	SOURCE
1772	4	50,809	944,765	5.4	zt,zr	Can 35; VOC 4410
1773	4	60,272	670,531	9.0	Nk,zt,z	Can 36, 82; VOC 4411
1774	4	50,831	603,020	8.4	zt,zr,z,Nk	Can 37, 83; VOC 4412
1775	5	60,161	693,437	8.7	zt,zr,Nk	Can 38; VOC 4413
1776	4	70,640	676,401	10.4	zt,zr,Nk	Can 39; VOC 4414
1777	4	61,153	796,175	7.7	zt,zr,z	Can 40, 86; VOC 4415, 4556
1778	4	83,589	765,224	10.9	zt,zr	Can 41, 87; VOC 4418
1779	4	74,320	799,117	9.3	zt,zr,z	Can 42; VOC 4419
1780	4	20,452	732,092	2.8	zt,z	Can 43; VOC 4421
1772-1780	37	532,227	6,680,763	8.0		
ave/shp		14,385	180,561	8.0		
ave/yr		59,136	742,307	8.0		

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TABLE 3: WEAVER SUCKIN AND PARTNERS' TRADING ACTIVITIES WITH THE VOC, SOIC AND DAC 1757-1784

TRADE NAMES: Suckin, Suchin, Sukien, Zukien, Zuchin, Sucking, Sucqin, Housuckin, Souchin, Sauchin, Hou-Sucking, -Swekeen, -Swekien, -Swekin				
SCHEDULE OF TRADING ACTIVITIES WITH THE VOC				
YEAR	TRADE NAME	COMMENTS	PRODUCTS TRADED	SOURCE
1757	Hou Sucking, Housuckin, Sucquin	a reputed silk weaver		JFB: B 1758 fNe
1764	Weaver Suchin, Suckin		zt,sat	Can 27
1765	Weaver Suckin		zt	Can 28
1766	Weaver Suckin		pq,tx,zt	Can 29
1767	Weaver Suckin		zt	Can 30
1768	Weaver Suckin		zt	Can 31
1770	Weaver Suckin		zt	Can 33
1771	Weaver Suckin			Can 34, 80
1772	Weaver Suchin, Suckin		see Table 2	Can 35; VOC 4410
1773	Weaver Suchin, Suckin		see Table 2	Can 36, 82; VOC 4411
1774	Weaver Suchin/Sucking		see Table 2	Can 37, 83; VOC 4412
1775	Weaver Suckin		see Table 2	Can 38; VOC 4413
1776	Weaver Suckin		see Table 2	Can 39; VOC 4414
1777	Weaver Suchin/Sukin, Suckin	deal in Canton raw silk	see Table 2	Can 40, 86; VOC 4415, 4556
1778	Weaver Suchin/Suckin	deals exclusively in Canton raw silk	see Table 2	Can 41, 87; VOC 4418
1779	Weaver Suckin/Suckin		see Table 2	Can 42; VOC 4419
1780	Weaver Suckin, Suckin	silk is secured through Tsjonqua	see Table 2	Can 43; VOC 4421
1784	Weaver Suckin		z	Can 46
1784	Weaver KytSiouqua, Kytsiouqua	Suckin's nephew, speaks Portuguese	zt,z	Can 46; VOC 4426
1785	Kyt Sjouqua		tx	Can 47

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SCHEDULE OF TRADING ACTIVITIES WITH THE SOIC				
YEAR	CHINESE NAMES	COMMENTS	PRODUCTS TRADED	SOURCE
1766	Souchin, Sauchin			NM: F17.T1_06430-1
1768	Suchin	of the Shenghe Dian		NM: F17.T1_00052-3, 05346, 05360-1, 05636-7(bc), 05355-7, 07285
1769	Suchin	silk man		NM: F17.T1_00235-6, 01979-89
1770	Suchin			NM: F17.T1_05628-9
1777	Zuchin			NM: F17.T1_00290
SCHEDULE OF TRADING ACTIVITIES WITH THE DAC				
YEAR	CHINESE NAMES	COMMENTS	PRODUCTS TRADED	SOURCE
1775	Sukien, Zukien		zt,lu,sat	Ask 1173-1174
1776	Zukien		zt,lu,sat,pq	Ask 1175
1777	Zukien	silk dealer, places order through Samqua	zt,sat	Ask 1177-1178
1778	Zukien		zt,Nk,tx	Ask 1179
1779	Zukien		zt,pq	Ask 1180
1780	Zukien		zt,sat,psy,lu,pq,Nk	Ask 1183
1781	Zukien		zt	Ask 1185

KEY TO TABLES 2 AND 3

Product Abbreviations:

lu = illustrating (fabric),
 Nk = Nankins,
 pq = Pekings (fabric),
 psy = Pordesoy (fabric),
 sat = satin,
 tx = textiles,
 z = silk,
 zr = silk-raw (unprocessed),
 zt = silk textiles.

Archive Abbreviations:

Ask = Danish Asiatic Company Archive in the National Archives, Copenhagen
 Can = Canton Archive in the National Archives, The Hague. 1.04.20
 JFB = James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota. The B 1758 fNe collection contains Dutch records from Canton, 1758
 NM = Nordic Museum Archive, Stockholm. Godegårdsarkivet Archive F17.T1_00290 refers to page numbers in this archive. The page number with "(bc)" attached indicates that this page has the "business" (b) name written in Chinese and a "chop" (c)
 VOC = Dutch East India Co. Archive in the National Archives, The Hague 1.04.02

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channeled the sales through one of the *Hongs*. The *Hong* merchants who handled the trade for Suckin received a commission for their services. Suckin's eagerness to do away with those middlemen in 1772, suggests that he strongly disliked that arrangement.

The weavers in Canton, like Suckin, handled only common textiles of one or two colors, with basic designs (stripes, checkers, etc.). They left the more specific orders of other colors and embroidery work to painters and embroiderers. Suckin handled all types of silk textiles from raw to manufactured, and both Nanking and Canton varieties, but he specialized in the latter. He and his nephew Siouqua captured the top-end of the market supplying the foreigners with the best raw silk and silk fabrics available.

Even small merchants like Suckin were heavily dependent on foreign capital to finance trade. Silk dealers in Canton, large and small, demanded 80 percent advances on orders, and some, like Suckin, tried to insist on larger advances so they would not have to use their own money or take out a high interest loan. The fact that all merchants insisted on this policy, and that foreigners were continually pressured to give larger advances on silk orders, point to an extreme shortage of local capital in Canton. Even small businessmen like Suckin resorted to borrowing money from foreigners at 20 percent annual interest, and almost all of the *Hong* merchants were doing the same.

Even though Suckin seemed to prefer trading directly with foreigners, rather than through the Cohong, he did not do well in the competitive environment that emerged after the end of that society. Because of the quotas placed on silk exports Suckin did not have the option of expanding the amount he traded with each foreigner to offset losses. He could only expand his operation if more ships arrived. This

meant that it was especially important for silk dealers to maintain their patronage, as they could not replace the loss of one customer by simply increasing sales to another. Suckin's trade with the Dutch and Danes was steady for a few years after the Cohong, but by the end of the 1770s, Suckin was in serious trouble. Other weavers were now offering better prices and terms, and Suckin lost market shares.

Like most of the merchants in Canton, Suckin also depended on written agreements that were binding and carried penalties for negligence and noncompliance. Contracts gave him the assurance that he would not lose that part of the trade to others, but if he did not deliver the product on time, then he had to pay demurrage fees. Contracts also stipulated specific qualities, but weavers had little control over the products they received from inland suppliers. If they were given better quality than expected, then they had to pay a higher price to suppliers, which were very difficult to pass on, in full, to foreign customers. If they received poorer quality from suppliers, foreign buyers would pressure them to give a discount greater than what inland suppliers had discounted them.

Whether Suckin dealt with foreigners directly or through the Cohong he had to deal with this problem of receiving a different product than what had been ordered. This was a great disadvantage to him, and was undoubtedly one of the factors that contributed to his demise in 1781. Being based in Foshan gave him a strategic advantage in controlling the quality of local silk he received. As a result, we find him favoring Canton silk over Nanking silk, which he could not control. But even with these advantages and specializations, Weaver Suckin could not keep up with the increased competition after the Cohong ended, and his trade collapsed. **RC**

NOTES

- 1 Christiaan Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982, p. 84.
- 2 James Ford Bell Library (JFB), University of Minnesota: B 1758 fNe.
- 3 JFB: B 1758 fNe. Sources for other years can be seen in Table 3.
- 4 JFB: B 1758 fNe; and Nordic Museum Archive (NM), Stockholm. Godegårdsarkivet: F17 (hereafter referred to as NM:F17), pp. T1_05636-7.

- 5 JFB: B 1758 fNe; National Archives, The Hague (NAH): VOC 4381; and Paul A. Van Dyke and Cynthia Viallé, *The Canton-Macao Dagregisters*. 1763. Macao: Instituto Cultural do Governo da R.A.E. de Macau, 2008, pp. 177, 185. Hereafter, these translated and printed Dutch *dagregisters* will be referred to as CMD.
- 6 A few examples of the Dutch dealing directly with Suckin, but then taking delivery via their three *Hong* merchants, can be seen in NAH: Canton 28, 29, 30, 75 and 76.

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- 7 For an extensive study of the silk production areas in China, see Lillian Li, *China's Silk Trade: Traditional Industry in the Modern World 1842-1937*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- 8 NAH: Canton 27, 42, 74, 75, 78. In a VOC Resolution dated 14 September 1779, the Dutch wrote: 'zo wierd verstaan den Weever Suckin, woonende te Faisant, te laeten ontbieden om ten spoedigsten herwards te komen, ten einde met hem te reguleeren de quantiyt en priesen der nog ontbrekende stoffen' (we have requested Weaver Suckin, who lives in Foshan, to come here [Canton] quickly so we can establish the prices and quantities of silk that we are in need of). NAH: Canton 42.
- 9 NAH: Canton 73, 18 March 1764.
- 10 A 1763 reference to the 80 piculs limitation can be found in CMD 1763, p. 11. As late as 1836, foreigners were still complaining about the quotas placed on silk exports, but were unable to convince the Qing court to remove them. *Canton Register* (8 November 1836).
- 11 Li, *China's Silk Trade*, pp. 62-9. For a discussion of the many incentives that encouraged the tea trade to grow, see Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005.
- 12 NAH: Canton 27, 28.
- 13 NAH: Canton 74.
- 14 NAH: Canton 75.
- 15 NAH: Canton 79.
- 16 NAH: Canton 34, 80.
- 17 NAH: Canton 75.
- 18 NAH: Canton 74.
- 19 Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, p. 65; and NAH: Canton 82.
- 20 Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635-1834*, 5 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926; reprint, Taipei: Ch'eng-wen Publishing Co., 1966, vol. 2, p. 11.
- 21 NAH: Canton 29, 32, 34-6, 39-41, 43, 75, 78; and Rigsarkivet (National Archives), Copenhagen (RAC): Ask 1157, 1160.
- 22 NAH: Canton 25, doc. no. 9, 15 October 1762; and CMD 1762. Macao: Instituto Cultural do Governo da R.A.E. de Macau, 2006, p. 102, n. 76.
- 23 For a discussion of the smuggling going on in the bottom of the foreign flag boats, see Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, pp. 117-20.
- 24 Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, pp. 95-6.
- 25 Ibid., p. 129 'Table 7: Tidewaiters' Connivance Fees in Whampoa and Canton, 1834'.
- 26 By the late-18th century, most of the connivance fees seem to have been monetary charges rather than payments in kind. The connivance fee for opium, for example, was about Spanish \$20 per chest. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, pp. 127-34.
- 27 Paul A. Van Dyke, 'Port Canton and the Pearl River Delta' (Ph.D. diss., University of South California, 2002), Chapters One, Five, and Six; and NAH: Canton 78.
- 28 NAH: Canton 76.
- 29 NAH: Canton 32, 33, 34, 35, 43, 76.
- 30 NM: F17 T1_00048-52; and Van Dyke, 'Port Canton,' Chapter Five.
- 31 NAH: Canton 32, 33; and Hosea Ballou Morse, *Chronicles*, vol. 1. p. 288.
- 32 NAH: Canton 76, 77.
- 33 NAH: Canton 77.
- 34 NM: F17 T1_00235-239; NAH: Canton 77, 86 and VOC 4556.
- 35 NAH: Canton 33.
- 36 NAH: Canton 35.
- 37 NAH: Canton 36, 37, 38.
- 38 NAH: Canton 38-40.
- 39 RAC: Ask 1178.
- 40 Li, *China's Silk Trade*, pp. 66-9.
- 41 Ibid., p. 69.
- 42 For an example of the great variance in the way silk was graded, Morse shows that the English called 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade raw silk, 'Head', 'Belly' and 'foor', respectively. But then in other entries they simply list 'raw silk' in the account books, without stipulating the grade. Hosea Ballou Morse, *Chronicles*, vol. 1, pp. 90, 97, 110, 123, 124. All of the records consulted for this study have these entry discrepancies in companies' account books.
- 43 NAH: Canton 38-42.
- 44 NAH: Canton 41, 46, 87.
- 45 NAH: Canton 43, 44.
- 46 Paul A. Van Dyke, 'The Yan Family: Merchants of Canton, 1734-1780s,' *Review of Culture*, International Edition No. 9 (January 2004), pp. 30-85; and Paul A. Van Dyke, 'Cai and Qiu Enterprises: Merchants of Canton 1730-1784,' *Review of Culture*, International Edition No. 15 (July 2005), pp. 60-101.
- 47 RAC: Ask 1190; NAH: Canton 43-5; and Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*, p. 84. For the number of Dutch ships in China each year, see Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*, Appendix I.
- 48 NAH: Canton 45. I have not been able to track this transaction down in the Danish company records. The Danes did indeed buy silk textiles in the early 1780s, but from the merchants Asing, Kiauqua, and Samqua. They also dealt with Pinqua but mostly in tea. It is possible this was a private transaction done between Pinqua and the Danish supercargoes.
- 49 NAH: Canton 45, 46, 90.
- 50 NAH: Canton 45, 46, 48, 90.