

Floating Brothels and the Canton Flower Boats 1750-1930

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The floating brothels of the Pearl River Delta were part of the river scene for hundreds of years. They rose in unison with the trade, and depended heavily on it for their survival, directly or indirectly. Floating brothels at Whampoa helped to keep the peace among the visiting foreign community. The floating brothels at Canton were more commonly referred to as 'flower boats'. They serviced Chinese only.

Until recently, little was known about the social function of these brothels. In the historical literature, they are often referred to as places of debauchery, which is not an entirely true or accurate depiction of all of them. Chinese men could experience all the pleasures they desired in a flower boat, but these establishments were much more than simply floating brothels.

Being one of the major trading ports of the world, with hundreds of foreigners arriving every year, one would expect that prostitution was a regular part of the scene in the delta. During their stay in China, most of the sailors remained aboard the ships at Whampoa, and only went to Canton occasionally. The floating brothels there operated very differently from those at Canton in that the former serviced everyone, whereas the latter only serviced Chinese. Without the former, however, it would have been very difficult for the latter to maintain exclusivity so they were indirectly connected in various ways. I begin by looking at the Whampoa brothels.

THE FLOATING BROTHELS AT WHAMPOA

In the Whampoa region, floating brothels were referred to by foreigners as '*lob lob* boats' rather than flower boats. The Chinese characters are unknown. One author has suggested that '*lob lob*' may have been Pidgin English for 'love love'.¹ Paintings of Whampoa harbour from the early 19th century show that flower boat type of vessels were prevalent there as well. Other references also show that public flower boats were in operation in other areas of the Pearl River Delta such as Foshan and Macao.²

The floating brothels that operated at Whampoa serviced everyone, foreigners and Asians alike. Some of these vessels were of very limited resources, consisting of a small one-family sampan with a girl aboard. It is unclear who these girls were or where they came from. The reference below suggests that they may have been family members, but they could have also been purchased which made them the property of the sampan owners. Small one- or two-girl sampan brothels were part of the environment at Whampoa throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

European sailors, taking advantage of their necessity, will bargain with a father and mother for an embrace of their daughter. This must be done however very privately, lest they should be discovered by the petty Mandarines, who are appointed to visit often, and keep order and discipline in their floating world. These Mandarines are continually going up and down the river, searching such boats as they have any reason to suspect; and, in case a European is caught in them, with young women, he, together with the people of the boat, must

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undergo the chastisement of the bamboo, or bribe the Mandarin with a dollar or two to let them pass.³

These 'lob lob boats' in the Whampoa area, were of varying sizes and operated primarily as brothels. As far as the records reveal, they did not offer meals or other types of entertainment as did their counterparts in other parts of the delta. The Whampoa brothels also differed in that they serviced everyone, Chinese and foreigners alike.

There are some of these boats, called *Lob Lob boats*, well stocked with a number of beautiful

benefited from increased sexual exchanges and probably not the girls. But it was probably in their interests to gain customers so their owners would not be displeased with them. If they did not bring in enough money to pay for their support then owners might be tempted to sell them, which meant an uncertain future that could turn out worse than their present situations.

The freedom to provide sexual services in the Pearl River Delta did not come without a price. *Lob lob* boats at Whampoa had to pay regular fees to the local mandarins, just like their counterparts in other locations.

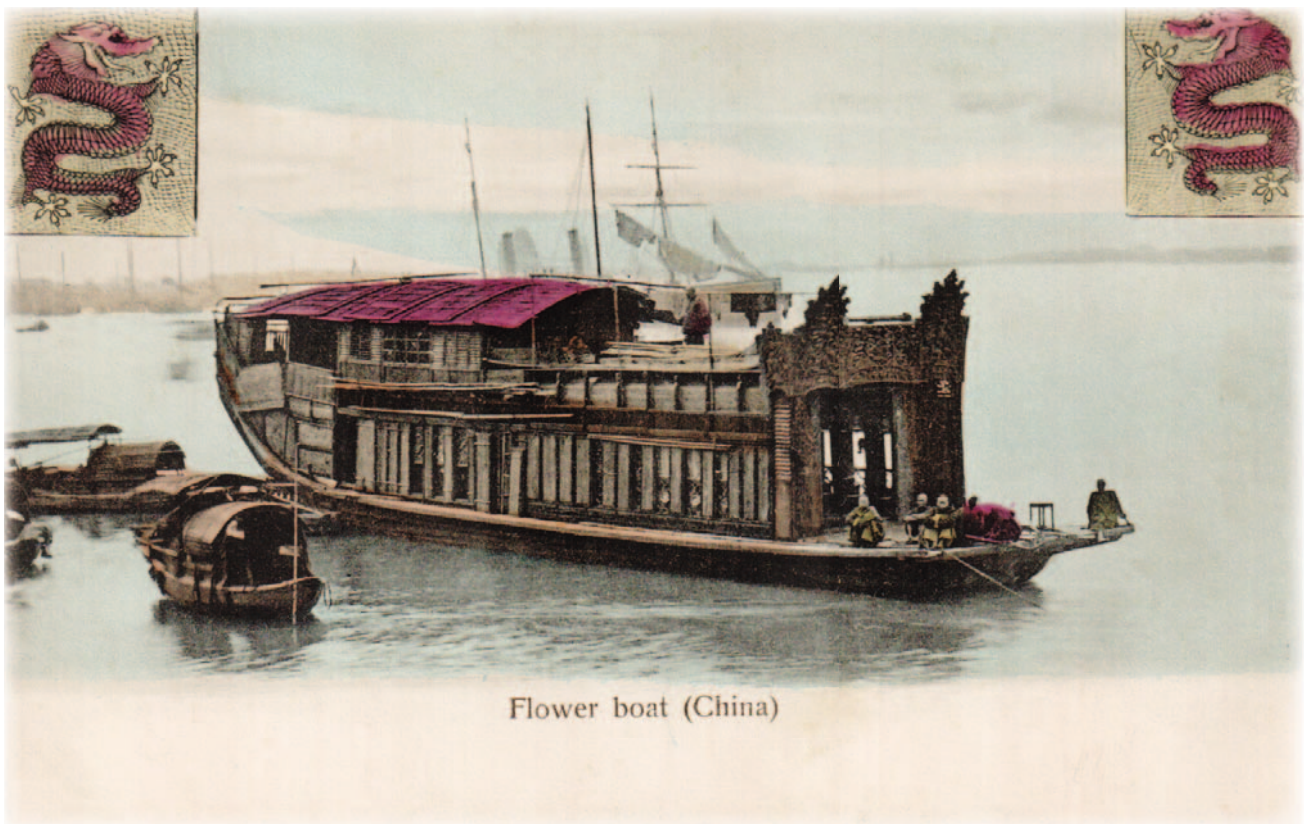


Plate 1: Canton flower boat, ca. 1910. Private Collection.

young women, of different ages, to whom everybody, Chinese or European, may have access at any time.⁴

Because of their broad customer base, it was helpful to learn a few foreign words to better entice an undecided or reluctant customer. 'Many of these [public women], as well as the washerwomen, speak English, Hindostanee, and Portuguese'.⁵ It must be remembered, however, that it was the boat owners who

Though these boats are under the jurisdiction of the Mandarines, and equally liable to punishment with the others; yet there is so good an understanding between the Mandarines and the proprietors of these boats, that they deal pretty extensively, and with great safety.⁶

Sexual diseases were as much of a concern and risk in the 18th century, as they are today. All sex in the 18th century was, for the most part, 'unprotected' so sailors who engaged these public women at Whampoa and

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Canton may have had greater risks compared to the present day. If patrons were so unlucky as to contract one disease or another, the place to go for a cure was the Chinese barber.

They [the Chinese] cure every disease by herbs. When any sailor or officer was so imprudent as visit Loblob Creek and received the reward of their folly, our surgeons could not cure them, yet the Chinese barber did so with ease.⁷

Every ship at Whampoa and foreign trading houses at Canton (more commonly referred to as 'factories') hired at least one Chinese barber during their two to four month stay in China. Barbers were often hired on a monthly basis, where they worked full-time for a ship or factory and clipped everyone's head. In other cases, they just visited the ships on a daily basis and were paid so much according to each head they clipped that day, week or month. Chinese barbers had the reputation of being 'walking newspapers' and carried all the latest news and gossip from one customer to the next. For Chinese who just arrived in Canton from the countryside, the first thing to do was to get a haircut. They could learn from the barbers where the best places were to stay, eat and find employment.

Foreign sailors at Whampoa could also order small items from their Chinese barbers such as a pair of shoes, a shirt, or a trinket to take home. The barbers would purchase the items in Canton and then deliver them to the sailors at Whampoa on their next visit to the ship. And because barbers were also in the herbal business helping with sexual diseases (and cleaning ears as well), they probably knew which public women were best to stay away from. In fact, for a small fee a sailor could probably also arrange with his barber a visit with a 'safe' woman. I have no references to this actually happening, but some of the Chinese barbers were very enterprising individuals. Besides cutting hair, they supplied foreign sailors with anything they were willing to pay for. Making sexual arrangements with foreigners was a tolerated activity so long as it was done with the acceptable women (not in the factories and not with the flower boat girls) and did not lead to trouble erupting.⁸

In regard to the public women operating at Whampoa, Noble advised staying away from them. He warned that these women were

subject to the several stages of the venereal distemper; which, either from the frequency of

their prostitution, the grossness of their food, their ignorance of medicine, or a combination with other diseases, usually arrives at the most exasperated degrees, and puts a period to their unhappy lives. I have known several instances, even in the soundest constitutions, where an infection caught from these women, has been infinitely more rapid in its progress and fatal in its effects, than in Europe. As to the leprosy, it is not so certain it can be communicated by mere contact—yet it is a risque [risk] to be avoided. Another consideration ought to deter Europeans from intercourse with these prostitutes, which is, that a proneness to venery is a concomitant symptom of this loathsome distemper.⁹

Historians often point out that it is not good to base one's assumptions on a single source of information. All historical writers, regardless who they were, had biases. Their comments need to be cross-checked with other data for accuracy. Noble could have been driven, and/or blinded, as much by his morals and religious beliefs as he was by his ignorance of Chinese society. Fortunately, there are other sources that allow us to cross-reference his information and they support some of his claims.

In 1769, William Hickey also mentioned the activities going on at *Lob Lob* Creek.

We were also shewn, when nearly half way [between Whampoa and Canton], a small inlet or creek called 'Lob Lob Creek,' from whence in 'sampans' (the name of the country boats) came forth certain women, who, if required so to do, board the boats. The females who ply at Lob Lob Creek are supposed so to do by stealth. I say *supposed*, because the fact is that they pay a proportion of their earnings to the mandarin upon duty, who thereupon, like an upright administrator of justice, shuts his eyes and his ears to the breach of the law, those public officers being invariably corrupt.¹⁰

This creek was still known by this name as late as the 1860s.

We had scarcely passed the pagoda in the neighborhood of Old Whampoa, and the towering one of nine stories on Lob Creek, when the Barrier pagoda came full in view.¹¹

This pagoda was upriver from Whampoa and called Pazhou Ta 琶洲塔. It is still a prominent landmark today. *Lob Lob* Creek, where the brothels were moored,

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ran along the north side of the pagoda. As far as their business was concerned, this was a very convenient location. Mariners could stop in the creek on their way to and from Canton. During the height of the trading season (August to January) there would have been a steady flow of potential customers passing by almost every day.¹²

An incident that occurred in 1781 at *Lob Lob* Creek suggests that mariners were free to stop and 'take advantage of their necessity' whenever they felt the need and had the money to do so. In this particular case, however, the opportunity resulted in a fatal dispute over money. But this then produced an entry in the English East India Company's (EIC) journal, which gives us one of the only detailed descriptions we have of what actually went on at this location.

I am sorry to inform you that a very unfortunate accident happened on last Sunday Evening [11 November 1781], the particulars of which as far as I have been able to learn are as follows: About 5 O'clock in the afternoon Mr. Evans Surgeons Mate, & Mr. Burton Midshipman, both belonging to the ship *Ponsborne* engaged a passage boat to come to Canton having obtained leave of the Commanding Officer. After having passed the usual examination at the Whampoa Hoppo House they proceeded up the River & were boarded by two girls who staid with them about half an hour and then went away; soon after this they missed three Dollars, which they accused the Boatmen of having stolen; after some altercation he agreed to give them two Dollars back, but as they would not consent to that compromise, he promised to procure them other girls for the money he had taken.¹³

In the end, the Chinese boatmen did not deliver more girls or give the money back which resulted in a fight erupting. During the scuffle, Burton was thrown overboard and managed to swim ashore. He spent the night wandering through the Whampoa paddy fields until he finally made it back to his ship. The last Burton could remember was that before he had been forced out of the boat, Evans was lying in the bottom. Evans was never heard from again.

If Evans had been thrown or jumped overboard and drowned, his body would have resurfaced a couple days later. And if he had managed to escape

like Burton had done, he would have eventually been directed back to his ship. He could not have remained among the Chinese community. He did not know the language, and would not have been welcomed. Local authorities were obligated to report the presence of any non-Chinese wandering about. Because Evans disappeared without a trace, it was presumed that he had been murdered.

The *Ponsborne's* pay book in which the crew's wages are recorded shows the following entry: 'Anthony Evans Surgeon's Mate ... Drowned at China'. Wages were calculated up to 11 November 1781, which was the day of the incident. The wages owed to him were given to 'Peter Turnbull attorney to Sarah Evans the executor'.¹⁴ This was a very unfortunate end for a half hour romp with a *lob lob* girl.

The Chinese culprits were later caught by the local magistrate. After being tortured, they confessed to the crime. The reason they gave for the dispute was that 'these people [Burton and Evans] insisted on having more girls brought them, which the boatmen refused to comply with'. The EIC supercargoes recorded nothing more about the event. The local magistrate left them with the confidence that 'the boatmen will suffer the punishment their crime merits'.

This melancholy event is one example out of hundreds of sexual encounters that were likely to have occurred each year at Whampoa. As far as the EIC officers and Chinese officials were concerned, the crime was not that these men stopped to engage the women or that the Chinese boatmen were offering sexual services. The crime was that an incident had occurred whereby the foreigners suffered damage. It was feared that if the issue were not resolved quickly, it could escalate into foreigners arming themselves whenever they traversed the river and becoming suspicious of every boat they encountered. If this happened, it could easily result in more incidents.

Fortunately, out of 140 years of exchanges from 1700 to 1840, we only have a couple of examples of such misfortunes. The silence in the records suggests that these sexual encounters probably contributed more to keeping the peace than to disturbing it. In August 1763, for example, the customs superintendent (more commonly known as the Hoppo) in Canton was informed by citizens at Whampoa that 'a group of officers from the European ships' had entered their village in an effort to 'become familiar with their

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women'.¹⁵ If these brothels had not been in operation at Whampoa, there would certainly be many more incidents like this in the historical literature.

Concerning prostitution at Whampoa, Dobell wrote in 1798 that

some years ago, none but washerwomen were allowed to visit the ships, but now all sorts are permitted, and an unrestrained intercourse is as common at Whampoa as at London or Portsmouth. Certain boats, having licenses from the Mandarins, visit the ships as soon as it is dark, literally loaded with women.¹⁶

In 1748, Noble also pointed out that

The pimps are numerous. If an European wants to see a lady of pleasure, it is only speaking to these fellows, who will immediately conduct you in a small sampan, to a place, where your wishes may be gratified. These enterprises however are not always executed without danger.¹⁷

Dobell further stated that

Most of those [prostitutes] brought at night are poor girls, whom the extreme destitution of their parents has obliged them to sell for a certain term of years; and they are slaves until that time expires. Whatever they can earn belongs to their master; he disposes of them as he pleases, often times beats them, and clothes and feeds them badly. The custom of buying and selling children for a term of years is very common, and is the only species of slavery allowed in China.¹⁸

Writing in 1836, Downing gives a much different picture of these public women at Whampoa. They were still allowed to go aboard the foreign ships and engage their customers directly just like Dobell had mentioned in 1798.

They [the women] come very often on board the ships to see their old friends, and to talk over old times. Besides these, there are a few women, both old and young, who have always maintained and still preserve an excellent character, who come on board now and then to see the captain and officers. They bring their chiloes, drink a glass of wine, and talk away in a very pretty manner, so that they are esteemed very pleasant visitors. Some of them have known particular persons in the ship for many voyages, and, therefore, when the vessel leaves, they generally expect a small

present of a piece of blue nankeen or something of that kind for friendship's sake. This request is generally complied with. The names of the girls are soft and pretty, and are in accordance with their very musical voices. Great numbers begin with an A, so that it would not be at all strange if you were to find Ally, As-sou, As-say, and A-moy all in the same boat together.¹⁹

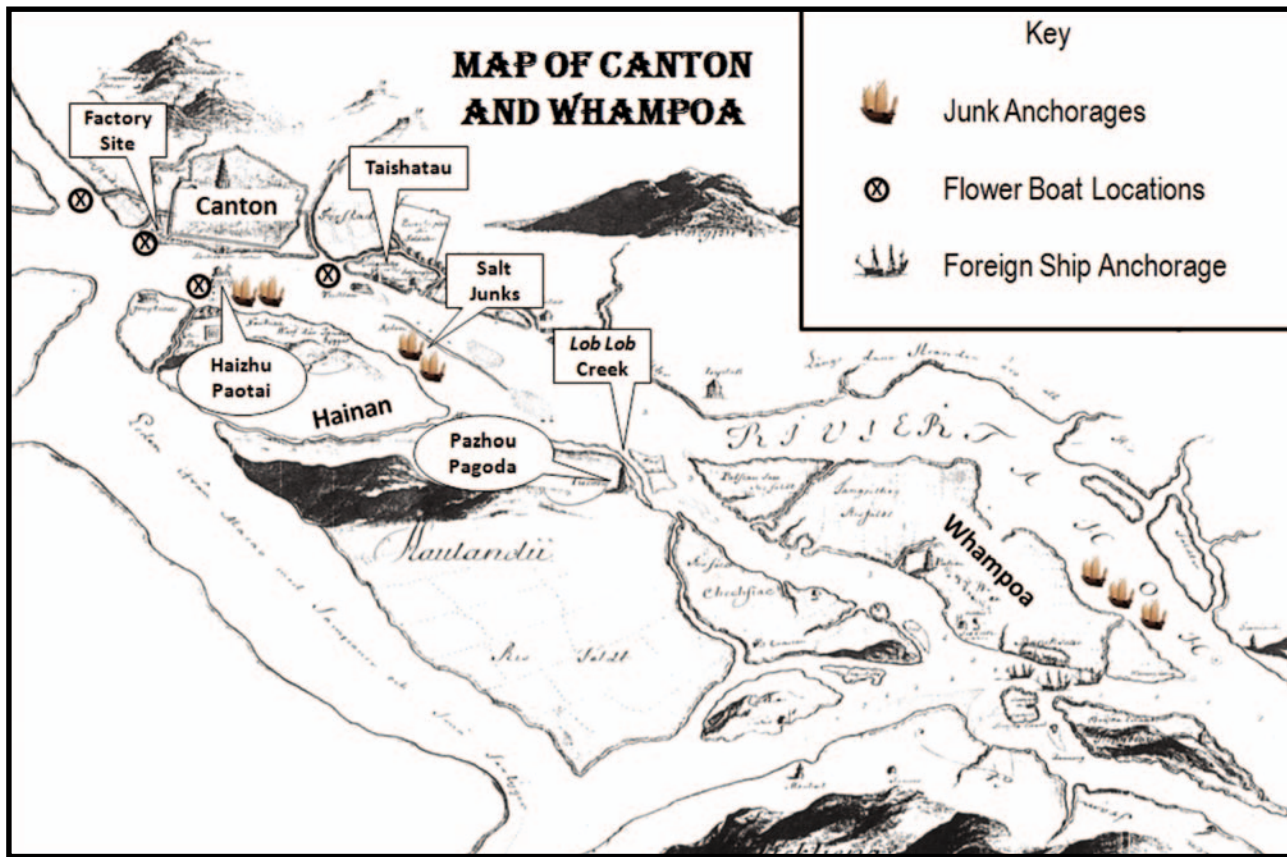
During the Qing Dynasty, children—especially girls—could be easily purchased. One author estimated in 1859 that there were upwards of six to ten thousand prostitutes in Canton. Girls of five or six years of age could be purchased from poor families for as little as four or five dollars.²⁰ Flower boat owners trained the girls in the arts of being courteous and pleasing men. They began work as prostitutes when they reached puberty, around twelve or thirteen years of age.

THE CANTON FLOWER BOATS

The term 'flower boat' is an elusive term, which some scholars have suggested had foreign origins.²¹ However, so far, the earliest references we have to these pleasure boats in Guangdong Province come from Chinese sources. During the Qianlong period (1736-1796) references to *hua ting* 花艇 or *hua fang* 花舫 begin to appear in local gazetteers.²² There were in fact many variations of these boats, with some being much longer and larger than others. Some of them had elaborate cabin structures with a copula, extensive upper rooms and deck. Each different type of vessel had a different Chinese name, but they were all part of a more general classification of 'pleasure boats'. In the late 18th and early 19th century, Chinese and foreigners alike began referring to all of these vessels as flower boats.

This is the same time that Chinese artists in Canton began producing 'China trade paintings' for export. Many of the landscape scenes they drew of the Pearl River include flower boats. By matching these images with references to them in written documents we can now restructure a good part of their history. Trade paintings are especially important to this study in helping to determine the number of flower boats in operation and their locations. Although it is acknowledged that care needs to be taken when using trade paintings as references, there are enough written and visual data to back up the scenery presented below.

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Map of Canton and Whampoa. From Kungliga Vetenskapsakademiens Bibliotek, Stockholm: RLF50.

Pleasure boats were not new to Guangdong or China. Elaborately adorned vessels were part of Chinese culture, and show up in Chinese literature, hundreds of years before the Qing Dynasty. A term with the same pronunciation (*hua chuan* 画船 or *hua fang* 画舫) was already in usage as early as the Tang Dynasty, and probably earlier.²³ Schlegel and other scholars have also pointed to much earlier references to pleasure boats such as these, with women aboard, so they have a long history in China.²⁴ But the flower boats in the Pearl River Delta went far beyond their predecessors in reputation and fame, and became known as the most beautiful boats in the world.

There are three distinctions that need to be made between the prostitutes in the Canton flower boats and those at Whampoa. First, girls in the Canton flower boats only serviced Chinese, whereas the Whampoa prostitutes serviced anyone. Second, Canton flower boat girls tended to cater to the wealthy elite, whereas the Whampoa girls paid no attention to social status and accommodated anyone who had the money to pay.

Third, the Canton flower boat prostitutes had their feet bound, whereas, as far as we know, the Whampoa prostitutes did not.

I will not go into detail about these three distinctions because except for the first one, there is not much information available about the other two. But references cited below will show all three of these differences, which need to be kept in mind. Even though brothels at both places depended very much on the growth of trade and the advancement of commerce for their livelihood, the environment at Canton was very different from that at Whampoa.

Foreigners were forbidden aboard the Canton flower boats. From 1750 to 1930, there are only a few references to foreigners actually being able to enjoy an evening in a flower boat, and these were exceptions. In each of these cases—a couple of which are described below—no sex (as far as we know) was involved. These foreigners were able to gain entrance because they were invited by Chinese friends, who were with them throughout the evening.

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Plate 2: Flower boats anchored above Canton, ca. 1910. Private collection.

From 1750 to 1850, there were three areas where Canton flower boats were normally stationed. Some time after 1850, a fourth group emerged. One area where flower boats anchored was near the mudflats in the western suburbs. This land was reclaimed in the late 1850s, and became Shameen Island 沙面. These boats serviced the community in the western suburbs and the tens of thousands of people traversing the river. After Shameen emerged, these flower boats moved farther upriver (Plate 2). At about the same time, another group

appeared on the eastern side of the city, near Taishatau (*da sha tou* 大沙头) Island. The Taishatau flower boats remained in this area at least until January 1909, when most of them were destroyed by a devastating fire (see below).

A third group of flower boats were stationed in front of the factories. They serviced the prominent Canton merchants, local officials, and inland agents who arrived each year from the interior. By about 1800, these boats had become fairly permanent fixtures and remained in this general location until the 1920s. In the early 19th century, this group consisted of about a dozen flower boats. In 1856, during the Second Opium War, all of the foreign factories were burned to the ground and rebuilt on Shameen Island a couple of years later. The flower boats, however, did not move to this new location because they serviced Chinese, not foreigners. Photos of these flower boats in the early 20th century show fifteen to twenty boats stationed at the old factory site (Plate 3).

A fourth group of flower boats serviced the hundreds of sailors that arrived every year on the Asian junks. They also serviced the sailors on the Canton junks when they were in harbour. Many of the sailors on the junks were not from Canton so they had no

Plate 3: Row of flower boats in Canton. Photo by Mee Cheung, Hong Kong, ca. 1910. Private collection.



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homes to go to in the city. The Canton junks anchored near the military fort called the *Hai zhu paotai* 海珠炮台 (Dutch folly). The salt junks from Hainan anchored near Henan Island, downriver from the Chinese dockyards. This location was rather far from the city. The junks from Siam and Cochin China anchored farther upriver. And there were also a number of coastal junks that anchored along the river in both Canton and Whampoa (Plate 4).

Unlike the foreign ships which stayed at anchor at Whampoa from the time they arrived to the time they departed, junks moved about from one place to another. They anchored near the warehouses to unload their imports and take in supplies for the next voyage. They might stay at the dockyards for several weeks for repairs, and then move back to their anchorages. When it was time to load again, then they moved back to their warehouses to receive the cargo. Thus, the flower boats that serviced the junks tended to be less stationary as well. They can be seen in paintings moving about with their customers. Depending on the number of ships arriving each

year, this group of flower boats might consist of half-a-dozen to a dozen.

The number of public flower boats operating in Canton each year (including all four groups above) increased over time. In the early 19th century, there were maybe 30 or 40 operating as entertainment houses and brothels, in the areas mentioned above (excluding those that were privately owned). By 1900, there were no less than 80 or 90 of them. There is no way to get an exact number, because the boats were not always stationary. Patrons might hire them for a moonlight cruise on the river, or request them to anchor near their residences for a night or two to entertain guests. But these estimates agree with the many paintings and photos that show them anchored along the river. Although these numbers are not large, thousands of people depended on the flower boats for all or part of their living.

Plate 4: Flower boats servicing the fleet of Canton Junks at Dutch Folly, ca. 1850s. Courtesy Martyn Gregory, London, Cat. 83, No. 97, p. 112.



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A LETTER FROM THE CANTON FLOWER BOATS

When I was scrounging through the American archives in 1999, I stumbled across a very curious letter in the Massachusetts Historical Society that was written by the eleven flower boats anchored at the old factory site in Canton.²⁵ It was addressed to Mr Forbes of the American firm Russell and Company, and dated 25 March 1868. The letter was written in English, but signed and stamped by each of the eleven flower boats in Chinese. Because we have no records from these establishments, despite the many years they were in operation, it is very fortunate to have this letter (Plate 5).

Why did the flower boat owners send the letter? In 1867, Russell and Company received permission to build a large import-export house on the old factory site. The building was completed by early 1868, and Forbes and his staff moved in. As mentioned above, the flower boats were anchored in front of this location.

After a few nights in the new building, the Americans discovered that they could not get any rest

with all the noise from the flower boats out on the water. They sent a request to the local mandarin asking him to move the boats to another location. The flower boat operators responded by writing a letter to Forbes and Russell pleading with them to reconsider the relocation. They argued that some of the boats were in very poor condition and might sink if they were moved. They pointed out that 3,000 men, women and children depended on the brothels trade for their living. If they lost their jobs because of the move, they would have no means of supporting themselves. If the Americans would withdraw their request to move, then the flower boat operators promised to keep the noise down at night so it would not disturb them.

I could not find an answer in the archives mentioning this incident again so it is unclear what happened. We know from many photographs that flower boats remained in this approximate location up to the 1910s and 1920s. A painting from around 1875 shows the Russell building with the flower boats,

Plate 6: Canton flower boat, published by M. Sternberg, Hong Kong, ca. 1910. Note the men using poles to move the vessel along. Private collection.



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Canton 25th March 1868

Honorable Forbes Esq.

Sir,

We the undersigned humbly bow & beg to appear before you, and hope that we do not disappoint and disturb your valuable time and trouble our humble petition which will effect your hearty conscience and trust that you will grant our meanest solicitations

Your honorable Hong Messrs Russell & Co had been erected on the ground of the old factory and has recently completed, we learn that your goodself and your honorable House Messrs Russell & Co intend to remove to the new building in a few days, by your honorable order, that your honorable Sir, has asked the Commissioners of Chinese Customs to drive away all the flower boats laying in front of your goodself new building, which took effect on Friday last, two or more of the customs gigs were on duty driving away the boats and were all cleared in the frontage,

Plate 5: Letter from eleven Canton flower boats to Mr. Forbes of the American firm Russell and Co., pleading with them to allow the vessels to remain anchored in front of Russell's new building for the sake of the 3,000 people who depended on their brothels business. The letter is signed and stamped by each of the eleven flower boat operators. Courtesy of Massachusetts Historical Society, Ms. N-49.67 James Murray Forbes Papers 1868-1957, Box 1, letter to Forbes dated 25 March 1868.

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and they extend to drive us too, and told us it was
a nuisance, * by your good self order

We herewith humbly beg to show to your
goodself a plan of our position, which we humbly
hope that it will not injure your feelings and grant us
our request.

We knew for many years that your good self
is a gentleman of high talent, and of great experience
would never a moment think to injure, or trying to starve
the poor which this city abounds and the meanest in trade
if it pleases your good self for us to mention, it consists
of nearly 3000 men, women & children depended
their living on the brothel-trade, and we again mention
the bottom of our boats became daily rotting, should we
move a few yards from our present anchorage our
boats will sink in no time, and starving the 3000
beings, it will be a great charity for your good self
to inform the commissioners of Chinese customs
to allow us to anchor or lay in our present anchorage,
provided we bind ourselves that we will not
make the noise to disturb your good self when in
bed, and we await your good self proposition as to
what hour we stop our music, which will be honorably

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Submit by your humble petitioners

If your honorable Sir, is busy in your office we humbly request your good self to write a note and give to us to be handed to the Commissioner of Chinese Customs telling him to allow us to stop in our present anchorage, who after receipt of your honorable note willingly permit us to lay on our berths

We are the poorest and meanest class of Chinese, bow + beg that your good self will write to the Commissioner of Chinese Customs, if not personally go across see him, and inform him of our troubles

On receipt of your note to the Commissioner of Chinese Customs, who will have much pleasure to grant us at once the permission

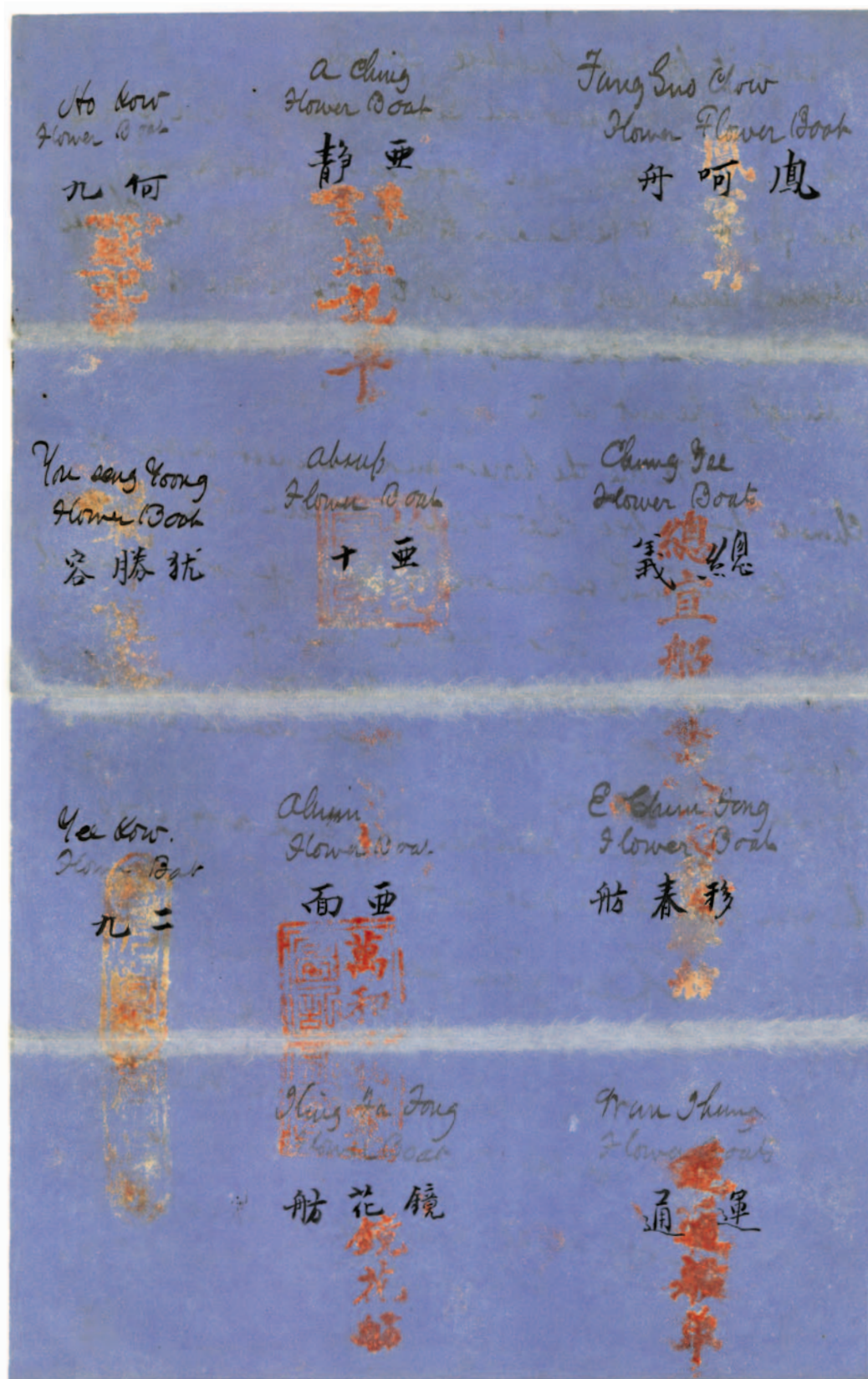
We will chin chin soos, and ask soos for your good self a great fortune + prosperity

Shall your petitioners wait for the note to the Commissioner of Chinese Customs -

Your petitioners will ever pray
we beg to subscribe ourselves

Your most humble + most obedient
slave.

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not in front as they had been for decades, but rather slightly to the east.²⁶ Perhaps this move eastward was the solution.

Besides giving us insights into the world of the flower boats, the signatures and stamps on the letter are also revealing. After examining hundreds of business signatures and stamps from the Canton merchants in the 18th century, we can see that owners sometimes signed their personal names on letters and contracts. Other persons who worked in those firms never wrote their personal names in Chinese, but only used the firms' names. Chinqua, for example, was the bookkeeper in the Fengyu Hang 丰裕行 in the 1730s. He might contract with foreigners using the Fengyu Hang name and stamp, but would not sign his own name. The owner of the Fengyu Hang, Tan Suqua 陈寿官, on the other hand, might sign only his personal name or both personal name and business name or just the business name. If there is a personal name in Chinese on a document, then that person was usually the owner. Employees did not write their names in Chinese on commercial documents.

From these hundreds of examples, we can surmise that if there are personal names included in the flower boat signatures, then those persons were probably the owners. As it turns out, seven out of the eleven signatures have personal names. The remaining four have only business names so those could have been signed and stamped by either the owners or their employees. If these assumptions are correct, then we can conclude that most flower boats were probably run by owner-operators. This suggestion concurs with what Ricalton found in 1901; that flower boats were 'generally owned by the men in charge of them.'²⁷

Despite their many differences, all of these types of pleasure vessels, large and small, private and public, were of a similar construction and propelled in the same manner. They moved along the river very slowly, but that was part of their charm (Plate 6).

The boat varies in length from thirty to sixty feet and draws about four feet of water. It is built on the familiar ark-like lines with one large room or saloon opening on to the small deck in the prow. Back of this saloon are the cramped quarters of the boat people, cabins more confined and comfortless than a dog's kennel. A narrow ledge surrounds the saloon and cabins, and serves as a foothold for the men who propel the boat.



Plate 7: View of the foreign factories (ca. 1850), with a Canton flower boat moving along the river by four rowers in the front. Courtesy Martyn Gregory, London, Cat. 77, No. 95, p. 92.

The craft is propelled by an ingenious method, possible only in a country where man is the cheapest commodity. Four or five men with long bamboo poles run lightly along the narrow outside ledges, then at a sudden shrill call drive the bamboo into the water. A swirl and the bamboo strikes bottom. Another shrill cry from the leader and with an echoing cry the men throw their weight on the poles and with a terrific push move the boat forward. It is very simple, very easy, but very, very primitive. With a heavily freighted boat progress is very slow, but this is a country where time is not money and haste is unesthetic.²⁸

Besides using the pole method above, there was another means of propelling the boats. On the open platform at the front of the boats were places for oars to be mounted. The same four to six men would sit on the platform and row the boats. This was a faster means of travel than the poling method described above (Plate 7).²⁹

Paintings and photos of Canton from the mid-to late-19th century show privately owned flower boats gradually disappearing from the river, leaving only the public brothels. These private boats often appear in the foreign literature as 'mandarin boats', even though they may have been owned by merchants, or other wealthy persons, and not officials. They were not open to the public, but were of the same type of construction as flower boats. The only distinguishable difference between private and public pleasure boats in paintings is that the former often displayed banners while the

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latter usually did not. By the end of the 19th century, private pleasure boats all but disappeared from the river, and all that we see in paintings and photographs are the public flower boats (Plate 8).

From at least the mid-18th century to the early 20th century, it was popular for Chinese in Canton to offer visiting celebrities an elaborate evening on a public flower boat. Any type of meal could be ordered, which were delivered to the flower boats by 'floating kitchens' (*chu ting* 厨艇). Floating kitchens arrived at the scene at the appointed time, and anchored near the rear of the flower boat. After the meal was prepared, servants carried the food into the boats through the rear service entrance. Guests in the main hall of the flower boats might have no idea that the food was coming from an outside kitchen (Plate 9).

There are floating kitchens, provided with an extensive brickwork cooking-range, where most elaborate dinners are cooked; these are served on board of floating dining-halls euphoniously called 'flower boats'.³⁰

Besides meals, entertainment was also outsourced.

It is not considered decorous for a Chinese gentleman to invite friends to dinner at his family residence, excepting on the marriage of a son or daughter, or when honouring the natal anniversary of a member of his family. He therefore issues cards of invitation to his friends to meet him at dinner on board a certain flower-boat. The dinner is cooked in a large floating-kitchen anchored near. At such banquets there are invariably a number of public singing-women attired in beautiful garments and highly rouged. These women are much more modest than those of their class in the streets of English cities. Whilst some of them are employed in filling the cups of the guests with wine, others sing and play upon various musical instruments.³¹

Another witness explains more clearly how an evening in a flower boat progressed as the night went on.

Late in the evening most of the diners had either moved into outer rooms close to the

thoroughfares, or had crossed the pathways to small, half-circular places sometimes railed off in front of each house-boat. There the gentlemen and ladies sat on benches in the open air, round little tables, sipping liquors and smoking. Sometimes girls were singing, or, on addition, four or five men musicians were hired.³²

Any type of entertainment could be arranged, but only in small numbers. As the many paintings of the flower boats reveal, small orchestras of three or four persons seem to have been one of the preferred forms of



Plate 8: Scene showing the foreign factories in Canton, with their flags aloft (ca. 1850). The factories burned down in 1856, and was the sight where Russell and Co. built their new building in 1867. The flower boats shown in the centre anchored before the factories are the ones that sent the letter to Russell (Plate 5). On the lower right is a flower boat displaying banners at the rear, which means it is probably a private vessel, and not a public brothel like the others in the painting. Courtesy Martyn Gregory, London, Cat. 64, No. 124, p. 57.

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entertainment. The young prostitutes on the boats were trained from youth to memorise numerous poems and songs for the entertainment of their guests.³³ Because wives of prominent persons were not allowed out in public, these evenings were exclusively the abode of male patrons. The only females present were consorts who lived in, or were outsourced by the flower boat owners. They were often referred to by foreigners as 'sing-song girls' (Plate 10).

At night, the flower boats were the most brilliantly illuminated and adorned objects along the river.

The flower-boat is illuminated by means of innumerable lamps—lamps with flaring rose-coloured glass shades with pendant prisms, as many coloured as the rainbow. It is garish, maybe, but it is undoubtedly picturesque, and it suits the Oriental in his rich satins and brocades.

After the sun sets is the best time to view a flower-boat. When the quaint little 'sing-sing girlies', who are the great attraction of the craft, put on their prettiest silken robes, heavy with



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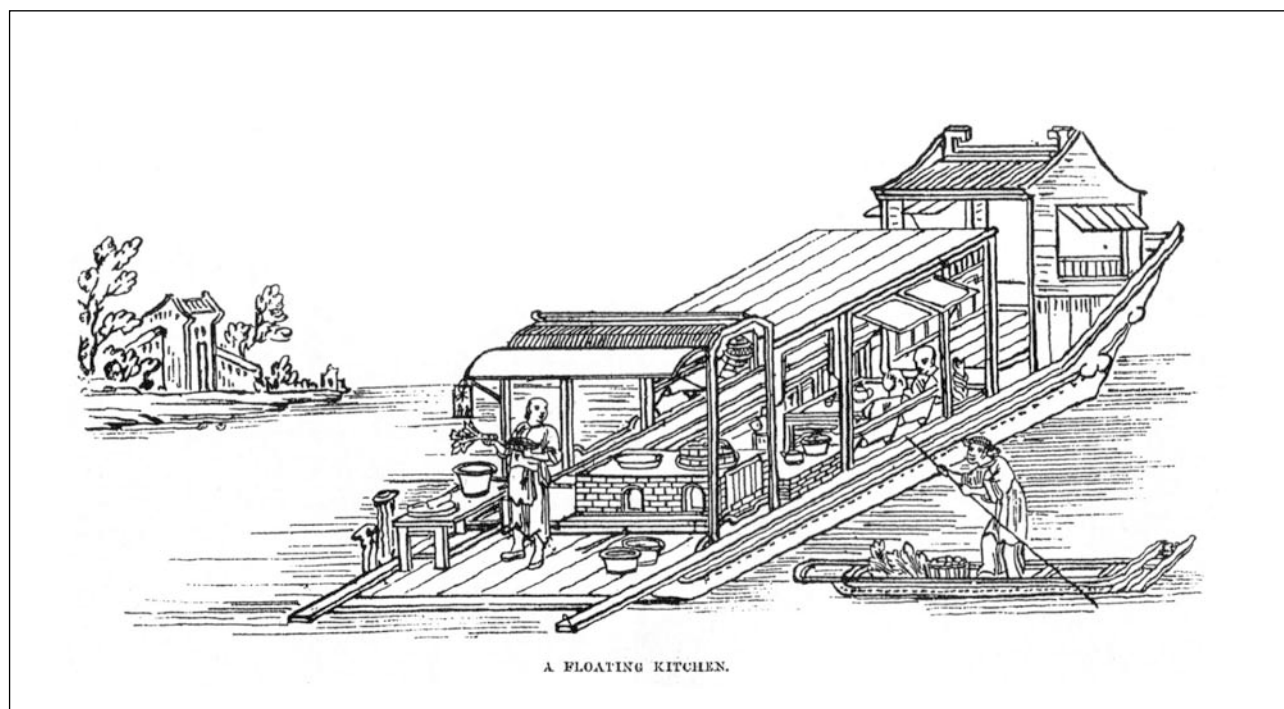


Plate 9: Drawing of a floating kitchen in Canton, ca. 1878. Reproduced from John Henry Gray, *China. A History of the Laws, Manner, and Customs of the People*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1878, vol. 2, p. 78.

intricate embroideries and in colours blended in a gorgeousness truly Oriental, then the two-stringed Chinese fiddle twangs out shrieking notes soothing to the Chinese ear, but fearfully grating to the Westerner, while the little dainty painted women sing their songs of love and war.³⁴

The reference above is from the late 19th century when glass and oil lamps were popular. In the 18th and early 19th century, the boats were equipped, inside and out, with paper and/or silk lanterns. Wax candles rather than oil provided the light at night.³⁵ In the early 20th century, photos show that the flower boats were using electric lighting, when in their stationary positions. Long cables were run out from shore to provide the electricity (Plate 11).

The smaller flower boats could accommodate a party of five to 10 customers, and the larger boats, perhaps 10 to 15 people. If prostitutes were not desired for the evening then the girls would assist where they could (keeping in mind their feet were bound). It is probable that prostitutes were rented out to other flower boats, when business was slow. As noted above, many professions in Canton were outsourced which eliminated the need to support those persons when

there was no demand for their services. Some flower boats may have had none of their own prostitutes.

Occasionally, foreigners tried to sneak into the Canton flower boats, which were open only to Chinese. Ill-intended Chinese might try to entice foreigners by promising them a secret visit, without being detected. In either case, the outcome could have very serious consequences. In reference to the late 18th century, Dobell wrote that there was

a positive prohibition for Europeans; and any stranger found in a flower-boat would not only be punished severely, but also be fined several thousand dollars.³⁶

In 1836, Downing found that the situation had not changed.

It is considered very dangerous for strangers to go near these [flower] boats during the night... A party of young men returning from town one night, ran their boat alongside of one of them, just to have a look, as they said, at the women. One, who was a little in liquor, jumped on board and was quickly assailed by eight or ten men, who seized upon him and were going to throw him into the water, and it was only by

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the greatest exertions of his messmates, that he was rescued from their hands. One poor fellow, at another time, went on board by himself, and insisted upon penetrating into the interior. It was ascertained that he had gone in, but he was never heard of afterwards. What became of him was never discovered.³⁷

After the First Opium War (1839-1842), a few foreigners managed to gain entry into flower boats, when they were accompanied by Chinese friends. Although there were exceptions, foreigners who tried to enter the flower boats on their own encountered aggressive responses from the inhabitants.

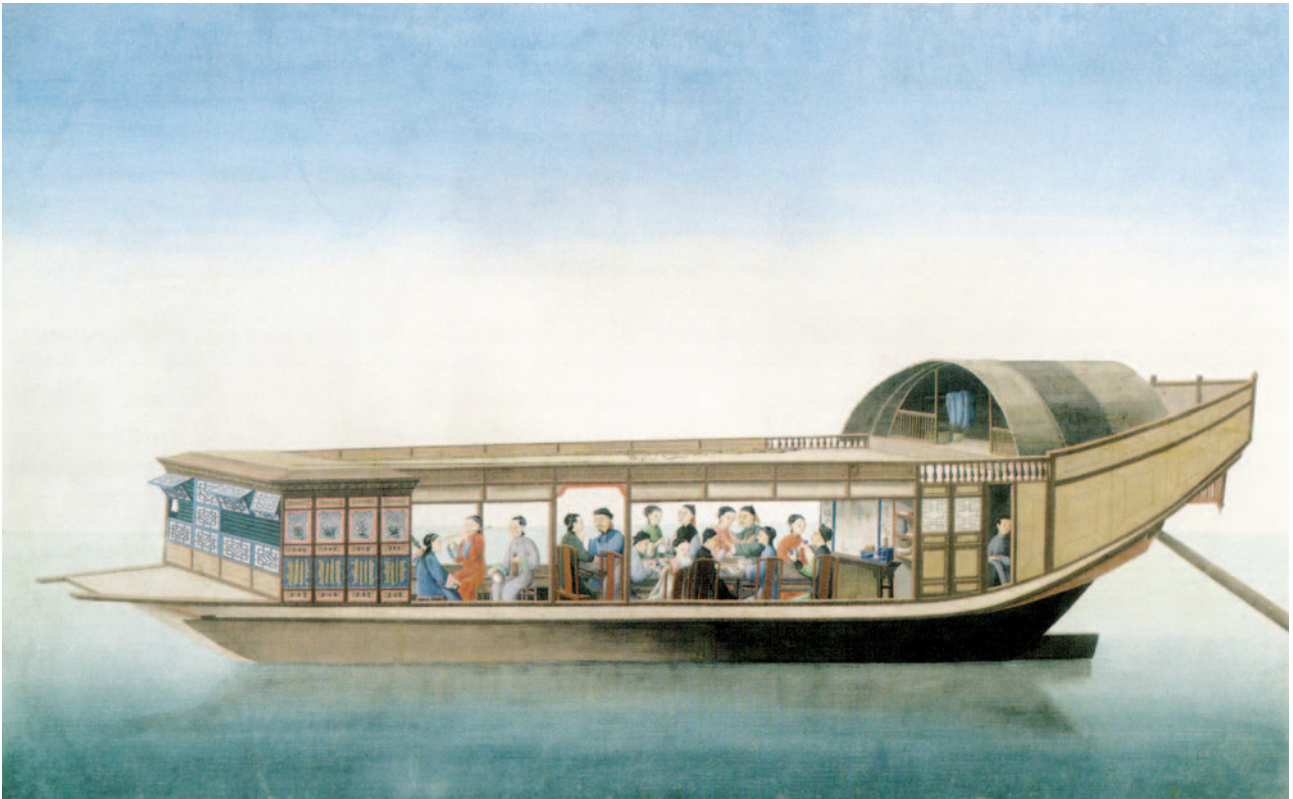
The flower-boats compose several streets in the floating city, which streets constitute the most elegant quarter in it. They are naturally the parts most frequented by idlers and pleasure-seekers; but Europeans generally purchase, at the price of some outrage or other, the satisfaction of going over them, either by night or by day. There is usually at the entrance of these handsome edifices, a crowd of blackguards, who, when they observe a foreigner, pursue him with their cries.

Generally, when the presence of a man of white race is signalled, these horrible, dirty, ragged, and hideous vagrants greet him with cries of *fán-houai*! then, seizing their greasy queues with their left hands, they make signs to him that he will have his head cut off, if he approaches the seraglio.³⁸

These prohibitions to foreigners visiting flower boats remained in effect until the early 20th century. There were brothels in Canton that serviced foreigners so there was no need for them to go to the flower boats, except perhaps to fulfil some fantasy. The foreign brothels were land-based and separate from the flower boats. A painting of this red-light district exists from the post-Opium War era, and the following is one of the few references we have to this activity.³⁹

A certain sort of ladies here [Canton], of the Cyprian order, are not, as in Europe, allowed to dispose of their own favors. Such as have

Plate 10: Cutaway of a flower boat (ca. 1780s) showing three musicians on the left, and six Chinese male guests in the centre, each with a flower boat girl attending him. A servant or owner can be seen at the right through the service door. This was the door through which the floating kitchens (Plate 9) brought in the meals. On the second storey (upper right) is a covered area where the occupants slept. Courtesy Martyn Gregory, London, Cat. 83, No. 65, p. 74.



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strayed from the paths of delicacy, and prefer a promiscuous intercourse with the other sex, to the happiness and enjoyment of the domestic comforts, are obliged to devote themselves to the mercy and disposal of men, wretches who sell, or rather hire them out to the Europeans, or others who trade here ...

.... I have been credibly informed by gentlemen, residents at the English Factories in Canton, that the common women there are more numerous than in London, whole streets being occupied by them.⁴⁰

Foreigners could also arrange, with their compradors (*maiban* 买办, provision purveyors), for prostitutes to be smuggled into their factories. Chinese authorities strictly forbade women from entering these buildings, which is why all house servants were male. And in the 18th century, East India companies generally forbade employees from inviting unknown Chinese into their residences. But if an officer had a mind to engage prostitutes privately in his room, he could find means to make it happen.

On 4 December 1749, for example, the Dutch captain Betting and officer Haganan made such arrangements. They managed to sneak two Chinese men and two 'bad' women into the factory late in the evening. The doors of the building were locked each evening at about 10 o'clock so special arrangements had to be made with the doorkeeper to give these persons entrance. Two of the intruders (a man and a 'bad' woman?) went to Betting's room and the other two, went to Haganan's room. At about 2 o'clock in the morning, after they had performed their duties, the two men and two women escaped through the water port trap (possibly the sewage drain).

This incident raised much concern among the chief Dutch officers the next day about the security of the building. But they were careful not to let the Chinese authorities find out about what had happened. Betting and Haganan, and the Dutch soldiers who were on duty at the time were strongly reprimanded and informed that all of this activity was strictly against company policies. This is the only reference I have

found to such activities in the factories. But one can imagine that there were probably other encounters such as this that never got recorded.⁴¹

The flower boats in Canton were staffed by more genteel women than the brothels that were frequented by foreigners. Some of the top people in Cantonese business, government, and society were the patrons of these boats, which gained them the reputation of being the ultimate in luxury and pleasure.

Next to quail-fighting, the flower-boats occupy most of a Chinese gentleman's leisure hours. They have assured me that the women in those boats have more agreeable conversation, and are better educated than others, and are more genteel and engaging in their manner. A well-spread table, of which the Chinese are great lovers, is always found prepared for the guests.⁴²

Dobell was informed by Chinese acquaintances 'that from forty to sixty thousand Spanish dollars are expended daily in the flower-boats in Canton!'⁴³ In 1901, Ricalton estimated that the flower boats 'cost from five hundred to a thousand dollars.'⁴⁴ In 1875, Mundy estimated the cost of hiring a flower boat for an evening, as follows.

It may be as well to mention that these houses are regular dining establishments, each party hiring one for the occasion, and the proprietor provides everything as part of his contract. These dinners for, say ten persons, usually cost from £20 to £25, which is expensive.⁴⁵

At an exchange rate of \$4.15 to one pound, the outing for ten persons would amount to from \$83 to \$104, or about \$8 to \$10 per person. This cost, of course, does not include sexual services, opium smoking, gambling, or other extras, only dining and drinks. But these figures are sufficient to give us an idea of what the owners' gross annual revenues might have been. If flower boats booked, on average, six customers every night of the week, then their minimum gross daily income would be \$48, monthly income \$1,440, and annual income \$17,280.

We can assume that the owners would have earned at least 10 to 20 per cent on their investments, after overhead and operating costs and other expenses were deducted. They could make 10 to 15 per cent on their money by loaning it out to others, so logically many of them would not have bothered with, or risked, running a business, unless they could make more

Plate 11: Photo of the inside of a Canton flower boat, ca. 1900. Holmes prided himself in taking this photo. The people inside were unaware of his presence outside, with a camera. Reproduced from Burton Holmes, *Burton Holmes Travelogues. With Illustrations from Photographs by the Author*. New York: The McClure Company, 1901, vol. 5, p. 199.

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money. This means they would have had an annual income of roughly \$1,700 to \$3,400.

Of course, prices inflated, and/or currencies deflated, over time so we cannot use these figures as constants from 1750 to 1930. But if we look at the early 19th century, for example, when the average wage for a common labourer in Canton was from \$24 to \$48 per year, then we can see why the flower boat owners were able to adorn the boats with so much luxury.⁴⁶

If these figures are at all representative of reality, then one person's evening out in a flower boat might consume as much as three or four months' wages of the common labourer. As far as poor prostitutes were concerned, who were often sold by their parents who could not afford to feed them, this was an incredible opportunity for them to possibly enter the world of the rich and famous. Of course, they had to pay dearly for this opportunity, of which they had no choice in the matter.

But considering all of the above, we can imagine how the girls' parents might have thought about all of this when they decided to sell their children to the flower boat owners. If the girls were lucky enough to catch the eye of a wealthy patron, they entered an entirely different world where everyone was clothed, had enough to eat, and a comfortable place to sleep. If they were unlucky and contracted a disease such as syphilis for which there was no cure in the 18th or 19th century, the girls at least enjoyed a good childhood and part of a good adulthood with enough food to eat everyday, a luxurious place to live and work, and a comfortable place to sleep. For many poor families, such a life was probably much more than what they could offer any of their children. As far as brothel owners were concerned, they could probably recoup their initial investments in purchasing the girls and the boats within a few years.

It is difficult to balance the pros and cons of being a flower boat girl. They were separated from their parents and had to endure the painful process of having their feet bound. And one can only wonder what they might have had to endure at the hand of their owners or patrons. If girls did not become a concubine to one of the customers, and worked until they were no longer useful to their owners, then they had little prospect of a future. Because of their small feet, they could not perform normal duties needed to take care of themselves or find employment. If the boat owners could not sell

them, and did not want to bear the expense of taking care of them any longer, then the women might be abandoned to wander the streets as beggars. Brothel owners were undoubtedly aware of this outcome and would have probably tried to sell them to someone before it reached that point (Plate 12).

Over the course of a couple of years, flower boat girls undoubtedly had many opportunities to mingle with someone who might become interested in purchasing them. Important decisions in business and government were often done on the flower boats. An inland merchant, for example, with a large batch of tea for sale would expect to be wined and dined on a flower boat before making a contract. Visiting celebrities and important persons in government were also entertained on flower boats. The music and festivities would commence every evening around five or six o'clock and continue into the early hours of the morning.⁴⁷

In the more elaborate boats, attendants, guests and entertainers were dressed out in their best costumes. Female attendants, prostitutes and musicians alike, were elaborately adorned with makeup and hairstyles which were certain to absorb much time in preparation. These floating palaces were where high male society met and intermingled so owners spared no efforts to ensure their guests were pleased and impressed.⁴⁸ The following reference was written by Florence O'Driscoll and published in 1895. O'Driscoll spent considerable time examining the activities in the Canton flower boats and described then in great detail.

When, for instance, a Chinese gentleman intends giving a dinner to three friends, he will arrange for it to be provided on a flower-boat at a certain hour, and also for the company of eight dining-out girls—two for each gentleman. I call them dining-out girls, as it best describes to me their calling. They will come prettily dressed, their hair done up in most wonderful shapes, and brushed over with a sort of varnish which makes it appear like a fantastic head-dress carved in ebony. They will ornament this structure with bright flowers, though the wreaths will be as stiff as their hair; or they may sometimes add jade, gold, or feather-inlaid ornaments. Their faces will be painted in white and pink—very artistically painted, smooth, and soft-looking; delicately traced, sharp, black crescents will mark their eyebrows.

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Plate 12: Photo of the Canton flower boat girls, youths and adult, ca. 1930s. Private Collection.

Dainty, demure dolls they will appear, and pretty to look upon; but seemingly one touch would destroy their artistic effects, as a rough hand the radiance of a butterfly's wing.

Two of these young ladies will attend to each gentleman, sitting slightly back from the table at each side of the entertained. They will fill his liquor-cups, sip from them, and pass them on, pick out dainty pieces of 'chow' (food) with chop-sticks, and hand them to him; crack jokes, fill and light his pipe, and all the while chat gaily, and eat dried watermelon seeds. That is all I ever saw them eat. Behind each group of three a solemn-looking coolie, or waiter, will stand to fan them all the while. Other waiters bring in food, wine, and tea, change the dishes, and attend to their wants. The meal will last for a long time. Eventually all will rise, and retire to an outer room furnished with broad couches covered with matting. Opium-pipes will be there for those who

care for them, and tobacco and cigars in plenty. The girls will sit on the couches, laugh, fill the pipes, and still eat watermelon seeds, while the gentlemen will recline at their ease, enjoying their society.⁴⁹

O'Driscoll, and a few other foreigners, did not believe that the women in these boats were prostitutes. The girls did not look or act like the public women they were used to seeing in their own countries. In fact, they sometimes compared them with the most genteel and educated women from their homelands. But many references above and below, written by foreigners and Chinese, confirm their connection to brothels. In 1793, for example, a Chinese traveller by the name of Shen Fu visited the Canton flower boats. He wrote a famous journal entitled *Six Records of a Floating Life* (*Fu Shen Liuji*) which has been since published many times in Chinese and English.⁵⁰ Shen Fu also talked about the prostitutes he encountered in the flower boats.

Here is a more accurate description from Walter Del Mar in 1903.

One evening after dinner a party of us went by sampan to visit the 'Flower Boats' (*hwat'ing*), so called because the young women to be met with there occupy the relation of flowers to the male butterflies who resort to them. The finest of these house-boats are moored side by side in long rows with planks from one to another just below the landing stage, and you are welcome to walk from one to another, and look in upon the amusements going forward without let or hindrance. These boats are used for all the purposes of clubs, music halls, gambling dens, and brothels. Some of them are private, some may be hired for an evening, and some are open to all who can afford to pay. In one you may see a group watching two veterans contest a game of *go* with black and white counters on a board of 324 squares. In another there may be a domino competition. Fan-tan may absorb the occupants of a third, and a singing girl with an orchestra of four pieces may be entertaining at a fourth. A big dinner may be going on in one, and behind the diners will be seated their women, sedately nibbling watermelon seeds whilst the men gorge themselves with Javanese bird's-nest soup, salted duck's eggs, cooked dog's meat, and a hot dish of boiled or steamed dough cut into strips like

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nouilles. Flour is increasingly consumed in China in this way; but bread is practically unknown to the Chinese. The favourite drinks seemed to be warm *samsbu* (or *samsu*), a sort of arrach distilled from rice, and tea scented with chulan seed or rose leaves.⁵¹

The flower boats that Del Mar visited were those located at the old factory site. O'Driscoll and Del Mar both mentioned the women eating nothing but watermelon seeds, which probably had two reasons behind it. The most obvious, of course, would be not to gain weight. A second reason might be to keep the cost of the evening down, and competitive with other flower boats. The latter rationale is not unlike tour guides today in Canton who take their patrons to nice restaurants, but they themselves return to the bus for a box lunch. If flower boat girls and tour guides were allowed to partake in the same meals as their guests, then the costs of their services would increase accordingly, and make them less competitive with other businesses (Plate 13).

As was pointed out, the girls were renowned by the male population as being the best at satisfying men's desires. But to get the best customers, they needed to keep their reputations pure (free from foreign contamination). After Del Mar's visit above to the flower boats, he was later invited by a Chinese acquaintance to enjoy an evening in one of the vessels. He and others, who had such fortune, commented how the women on the boats were very careful to keep their distance from foreign guests.

These and the other young women present [in the flower boat], many of whom were between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, were all richly dressed, and freely covered with powder and paint, and were all of the higher caste of Chinese women, who resort to foot-binding, and of a physique which seemed as fragile as their morals. But no amount of persuasion would induce any one of them to so much as shake hands with us, and our host apologized for this in explaining that they were bound to avoid all contact with Europeans for fear of losing caste, and endangering their chances of advancement to the position of concubine with an established legal position. Only the sampan women, who are physically the finest class in Canton, but who are at the bottom of the social scale, prostitute

themselves to Europeans, and on the way back to Shameen, where we stopped to watch two old boat-women quarrelling, until the climax of the row was reached in the deadly insult conveyed by shaking their trousers at one another, we received many offers from these enterprising creatures for considerations ranging from four down to two shillings.⁵²

Walter Mundy also spent a long evening on a flower boat with another foreigner in the early 1870s. The two men were accompanied by seven Chinese friends, who had invited them to join the dinner party. Mundy and his partner received the same treatment from the flower boat girls.

None of them [flower boat girls] spoke anything but Chinese, so conversation was out of the question; besides, it is not at all sought for by them, as they shrank away at the slightest sign of approach on our part, the reason being that they lose caste among their own people if a foreigner even chances to touch them.⁵³

Prostitutes on the flower boats could indeed improve their situations considerably if they were purchased by a wealthy patron. In the 1850s, for example, Melchoir Yvan was informed by Pun Chi Toung (the descendent of the famous merchant family Pan 潘) that two of his concubines had been purchased from the flower boats.⁵⁴ It was in the interests of both the girls and the brothel owners to do their best at attracting wealthy and prominent customers. Thus, when we read accounts of flower boat girls showing themselves off, such as Downing's comments below in 1836, we can understand what might have been going through their minds.

The women [on the flower boats] sit out in rows on the balconies, dressed in the gayest style, with flowers in their hair and jewels adorning their persons. Some toddle about to show off their little feet, which are considered the extreme of beauty in this singular country.⁵⁵

During the Qing Dynasty, the colours yellow and red were reserved exclusively for the emperor. But flower boat girls, who were hidden away inside walls of the most elegantly adorned surroundings, might use those colours to create a greater sense of grandeur. In 1858, Yvan grabbed a glimpse of one of these girls when the boat was temporary upset during a collision.

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... this little collision created a commotion among the passengers of the Tze-Toung [flower boat], and one of them [girls] appeared at a port-hole of the elegant craft. She wore handsome gold bracelets, or, at least, perfectly gilt ones. Her gown was of a clear yellow, and embroidered with flocs silk; in a word, she was armed, from head to foot, ready to lead a formidable attack on the heart of some rich person.⁵⁶

THE END OF THE FLOWER BOAT ERA

In 1848 and 1849, gold was discovered in the San Francisco area and in Australia. These events set off a large migration of Chinese going to try their luck in the gold fields. Or they might go in order to service those who were searching for gold. Many Chinese, of

Plate 13: Stereoview of the Canton flower boats, published by C.H. Graves, Philadelphia, in 1902. Private collection.



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course, had been traversing the globe for decades by this time, so this was not the start of such activity. But the attraction of the gold mines gave additional boost to the numbers of Chinese who went abroad. Because almost all of these adventurers were men, there very quickly emerged a strong demand for Chinese prostitutes in these new communities.

There have been many studies done on Chinese prostitution in these areas and the thousands of women who were purchased in South China and sent abroad to work in the brothels. I mention it here only to point out that as more Chinese prostitutes arrived in those countries, foreign attitudes towards the Canton flower boats, who were training and selling many of these girls, turned negative. At the same time, attitudes in China towards this type of human trafficking also began to change. Flower boat operators and agents who were recruiting women to send abroad came under sharp criticism from many directions.

Obviously, these changes in attitudes towards prostitution, the purchasing and selling of young girls, and the training of them to serve as prostitutes, had a huge impact on the flower boat culture in Canton. In the early 1890s, a group of overseas Chinese and foreign women from Singapore and Hong Kong paid a visit to Canton. Many of the Chinese prostitutes in those cities had originated from the Canton flower boats so the ladies wanted to see first hand what those establishments were all about. The delegation included overseas Chinese who could speak Cantonese.

When the group arrived at the Canton flower boats, they went from one vessel to the next examining all of the operations. They were welcomed at each place, and shown around as if they were a customer looking to purchase some young prostitutes. The following is what they recorded in their journal (Plate 14).

1894, Feb 14: 'We went in company with a missionary and a native, both of whom could talk both English and Chinese, and visited some 'flower-boats' on the river. Many of these boats are quite pretentious, with their rich wood-carving, fine furniture, and gaudy display of tinsel. There were whole streets of them—floating houses moored together; we walked along the length of the street on one side, stepping from the bow of one boat to the next, the bows of the boats constituting front verandahs. We called at almost every place, but a description of one will do for

all. First, as we entered, was a couch for opium smoking; just beyond this a reception room, very gaudy, with dozens of hanging lamps, and at one end a shrine for the gods, and offering before it. In a room back of the reception room, and also upstairs, there were girls in large numbers. A hard-featured old woman came forward from the back room, who, our interpreter said, was as good a specimen as we could possibly have seen of an old brothel-keeper of Canton, one who had been in the business for many years of buying or otherwise obtaining babies and girls, and training them for prostitution. The girls came crowding to the door of the back room, and looked in upon us with eager curiosity. Our interpreter called our attention to the manner of dressing the hair—like married women—indicating their bad life. The interpreter said they were inducted usually at about thirteen years of age. They were all dressed very showily, and heavily powdered and painted, excepting some mere babies who were plainly dressed. Troops of little girls, from four to five years of age, swarmed out of the neighboring 'flower-boats' and gathered around us, screaming and scrambling, falling, laughing, and following us the full length of the street, which was made up of about twenty such boats on either side. And none of these innocent little things at all realized the fate in store for them. In one place we saw two very old women in the front room. In another, a woman knelt before the idolatrous shrine engaged in her devotions. At one point there was a very large boat brilliantly fitted up for music, dancing, smoking opium, and feasting. At the far end of the street was a 'kitchen-boat,' from which supplies of food, ready cooked, could be bought. All the way along we saw little girls with the unmistakable signs of their destiny upon them. Our interpreter said the girls were usually made to stay upstairs during the day time, but at night the whole place was illuminated and alive; then they were brought down and to the front. Occasionally we would see one of these huge house boats full of painted girls, floating down the middle of the stream, for they move about from place to place at will.⁵⁷

There is much more in this journal about their experience at the flower boats, and their attempts to

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capture some of the girls, but this extract is sufficient to show how and why the flower boat culture came to an end. As the world inside and outside of China, became more aware of how women were being bought, trained, used and sold for prostitution, more pressure fell upon the flower boats owners to change their ways. In the early 20th century, it was still popular for tourists to sneak a peak into the mysterious vessels, but they continued to lose their appeal and with that change,

they began to lose their customer base. Pictures from the 1890s to the 1920s show them gradually falling into decay (Plate 15).

In 1908 and 1909, the Canton flower boats in the Taishatau area suffered a couple of disasters which further propelled their decline. Many of the boats were

Plate 14: Stereoview of the Canton flower boats, published by Underwood & Underwood in 1900. A note at the bottom states that they are 'places of Amusement and debauchery'. Private collection.



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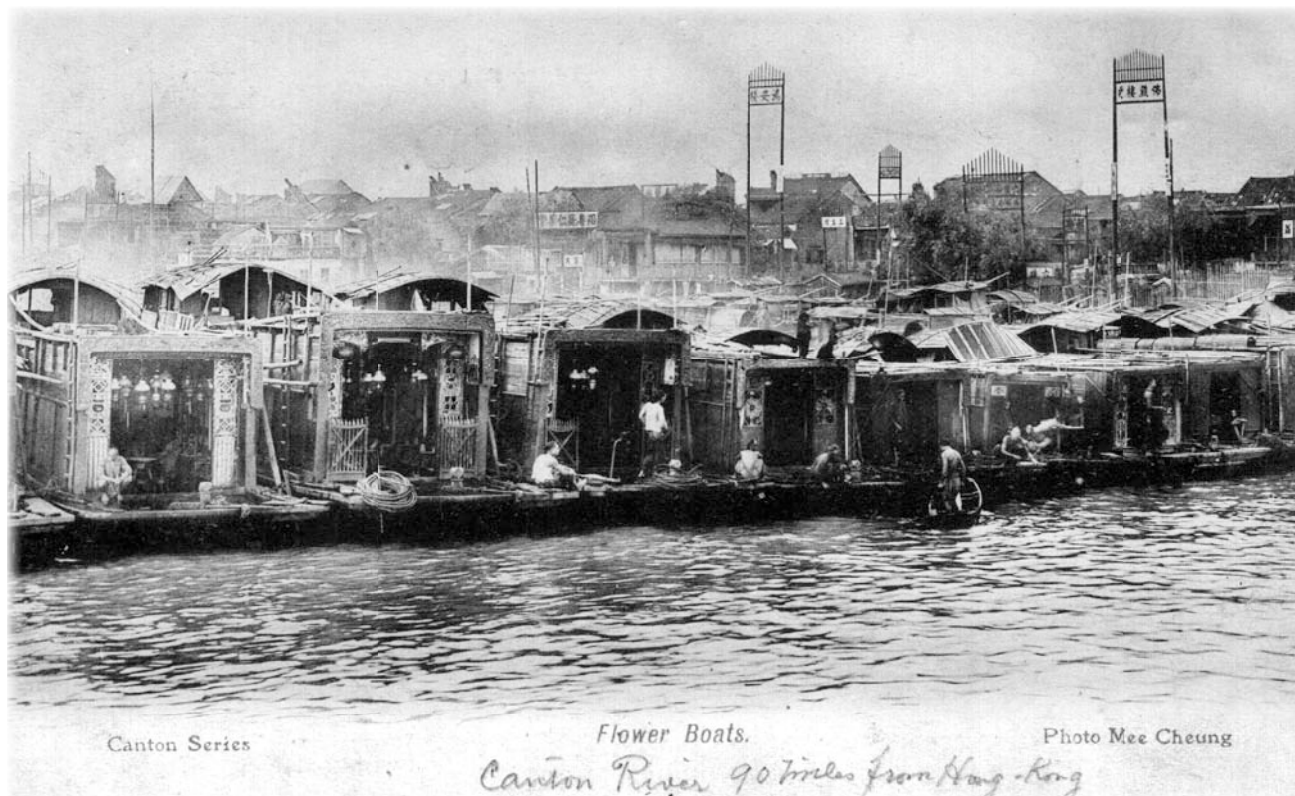


Plate 15: Photo of the Canton flower boats, by Mee Cheung, ca. 1910s. Note how the boats are beginning to fall into disrepair. There are electric cables coiled in the front. Private collection.

damaged by a typhoon on 27 July 1908. Then on the evening of 30 January 1909, a fire broke out in the Tsoi Kee flower boat at the Taishatau anchorage. The fire grew rapidly and one by one many other boats caught fire.

When the flames were finally extinguished 'about 40 flower boats were entirely gutted'. It was estimated that one thousand people lost their lives. Many prominent persons were among the victims, including several Chinese officials, and 'about ten bankers and a number of prominent business men'. The fire police went about trying to rescue the inhabitants and prevent scavengers from plundering their contents. The crew of the steamer *Fu Shiu* was also on hand to save who they could.

The next day hundreds of dead bodies were discovered, many of whom had drowned after jumping into the water. A few years earlier a fire had caused much damage to the flower boats as well. This fire in 1909, however, marked the decline of the flower boat culture in Canton. People who were opposed to the establishments hoped that the Canton officials would

forbid the construction of new ones. They argued that the boats were fire-traps and potential disasters waiting to happen.⁵⁸

By the late 1920s, there were only a few of these boats left on the river. Some of them were outfitted with a full second storey and converted into cheap hotels. They lost their former glamour and took on a rather grotesque appearance—like huge rectangular boxes protruding out of the water. Pictures from the time continue to show a few of these large boats anchored in the river. But by the late 1930s, they had disappeared from the landscape (Plate 16).

CONCLUSION

Floating Brothels were central to the advancement of trade in Canton. The increase in ships and junks arriving in the Pearl River Delta coincided with the increase in brothels. At Whampoa, prostitutes waited at *Lob Lob* Creek and enticed men into their vessels as they passed by on their way to and from Canton. At night, they went down to the ships and junks anchored

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at Whampoa. They serviced all sailors Asians and non-Asians alike. They were the brothels for the common man. Being such, we would not expect these women to have had bound feet, and we have no references stating that they did.

In Canton the floating brothels became known as flower boats. They also grew in number and in luxury as the trade expanded. However, unlike the Whampoa prostitutes, the flower boat girls only catered to wealthy Chinese. Foreigners were not allowed on the boats. After the First Opium War, there are cases when foreigners were invited to spend an evening on the boats in company with Chinese friends. These were exceptions. I have found no references to foreigners being allowed in flower boats before the opium war. A few men tried to enter, but were sharply expelled.

Many of the most important decisions were made on flower boats. If a wealthy merchant wanted to purchase a large batch of good quality tea from an inland agent, he might first need to treat him to an evening out on a flower boat. When important dignitaries and officials arrived in Canton, they might

also be treated to a night on a flower boat. The vessels gained the reputation of being the most beautiful boats in the world, and surrounded by much romanticism (Plate 17).

But these establishments were for Chinese males only. Chinese women did not accompany their husbands outside of the home. Instead, each flower boat had women who were trained from youth in the arts of pleasing men. The girls were purchased very young, at maybe five or six years old, from poor families. Their feet were bound, and the girls went through years of training in how to be polite and attractive. Then when they reached puberty at about 12 or 13 years old, they began working as prostitutes. They were adorned with expensive clothing, and with artistically designed hair and makeup. They intermingled with the elites of society, so the girls needed to know how to speak with them, and learn how to impress their guests with the recital of a famous poem or hymn.

Plate 16: View of a 'Flowery Boat, Canton', ca. 1930s. As the flower boat culture drew increased criticism in the late 19th and early 20th century, they began to lose their customer base. Some of these vessels were given a second storey and converted into inexpensive hotels. Private collection.



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The flower boat girls might work ten years before they were diseased or no longer attractive to customers. If the women were lucky, and caught the fancy of a wealthy patron, then they could enter his household as a concubine, and live the rest of their lives in luxury. Prostitutes were property and sold to whoever was willing to pay the price. Flower boat owners probably tried to sell their girls before they reached the point that they could no longer attract customers.

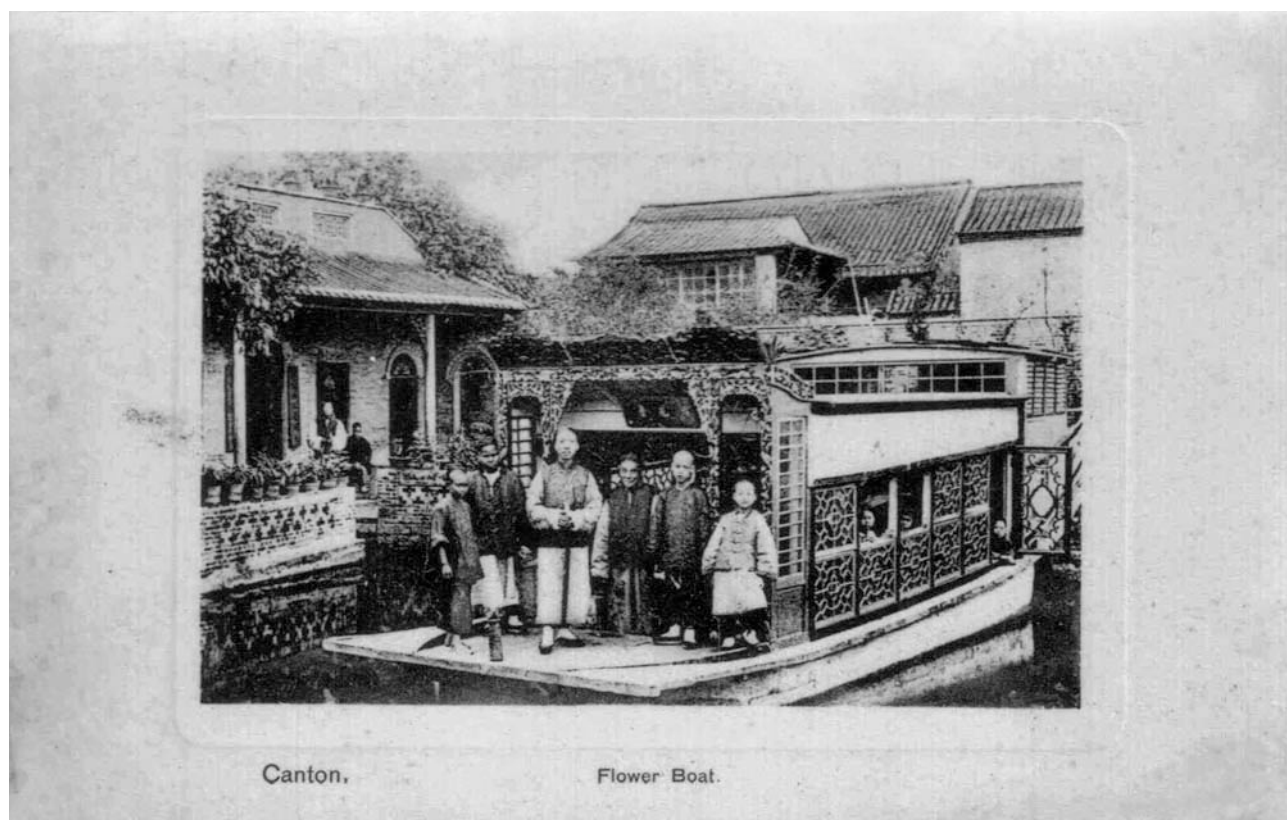
If owners were not successful at selling them and the women could no longer make money, then the prostitutes were in a very vulnerable situation. Owing to their small feet, they could not do many of the normal daily tasks of taking care of themselves or finding employment. If the flower boat owners rejected them, they might be left to wander the streets as beggars.

Owning a flower boat was probably a very lucrative business. According to rough estimates, owners might have been able to recoup their initial investments of purchasing the boats and prostitutes

within a few years. But having all of your money invested in one boat could also be quite disastrous if a fire occurred or a typhoon struck. And because flower boats were the ultimate in luxury, they were also targets of local thieves so there were considerable risks involved.

Attitudes towards prostitution, the purchasing and selling of women, and the raising of children to work in brothels began to change in the late 19th century. Flower boats came under increased attack from within and without China for their 'inhuman' treatment of women. As attitudes changed, the flower boats' customer base began to dwindle. By the early 20th century, photos reveal many of the flower boats falling into decay. Some of them were refitted with a full second deck and turned into cheap hotels. Photos reveal that a few of these floating hotels lasted into the late 1930s, and then they disappeared. This ended the long 180-year history of the flower boat culture of the Pearl River Delta. **RC**

Plate 17: Photo of a Canton flower boat and crew, published by M. Sternberg, Hong Kong, ca. 1910. Private Collection



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NOTES

- 1 Kingsley Bolton, *Chinese Englishes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Pidgin English for the word 'have' was pronounced 'hab', and by extension, 'love' would have been pronounced 'lob'.
- 2 For a brief history of prostitution and flower boats in Macao in the latter half of the 19th century, see Isabel Nunes, 'The Singing and Dancing Girls of Macau. Aspects of Prostitution in Macau'. *Review of Culture* 18 (1994), pp. 61-84.
- 3 Charles Frederick Noble, *A Voyage to the East Indies in 1747 and 1748* (London: T. Becker and P.A. Dehondt, 1762), p. 280.
- 4 Noble, *A Voyage to the East Indies*, pp. 280-281. 'We had scarcely passed the pagoda in the neighborhood of Old Whampoa, and the towering one of nine stories on Lob Creek, when the Barrier pagoda came full in view'. Mrs. H. Dwight Williams, *A Year in China; and a Narrative of Capture and Imprisonment, when Homeward Bound, on Board the Rebel Pirate Florida* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1864), p. 176.
- 5 Peter Dobell, *Travels in Kamtschatka and Siberia; with a Narrative of a Residence in China*. 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830. Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 140-141.
- 6 Noble, *A Voyage to the East Indies*, p. 281.
- 7 Tim Flannery, ed. *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), p. 107.
- 8 For a discussion of the Chinese barbers, see Van Dyke, 'Port Canton and the Pearl River Delta' (Ph.D. diss., University of South California, 2002), pp. 207-209, 538-539.
- 9 Noble, *A Voyage to the East Indies*, pp. 280-282. See pages 237-243 in this journal for a description of a foreigner illegally visiting a Chinese brothel in Canton.
- 10 Alfred Spencer, ed., *Memoirs of William Hickey (1749-1775)*. 4 vols. (London: Hurst & Blackett, Ltd., 1913; reprint 1950), vol. 1, p. 198.
- 11 Williams, *A Year in China*, p. 176.
- 12 All of the pagodas along the Pearl River downriver from Canton still stand today. The Pazhou Pagoda is located not far from the Canton Trade Fair pavilion.
- 13 British Library (BL): India Office Records (IOR) G/12/73, letter dated 1781.11.14, pp. 12-13.
- 14 BL: IOR L/MAR/B/0462-O(1) Ponsborne Ledger 1780-1782, folio 6.
- 15 Paul A. Van Dyke and Cynthia Viallé, *The Canton-Macao Dagregisters*. 1763 (Macao: Instituto Cultural do Governo da R.A.E. de Macau, 2008), August 27.
- 16 Dobell, *Travels in Kamtschatka and Siberia*, vol. 2, p. 140.
- 17 Noble, *A Voyage to the East Indies*, p. 281.
- 18 Dobell, *Travels in Kamtschatka and Siberia*, vol. 2, pp. 140-141.
- 19 Toogood C. Downing, *The Fan-Qui in China in 1836-7*. 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1838), vol. 1, pp. 245-246.
- 20 William W. Sanger, *History of Prostitution: its extent, causes, and effects throughout the World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), pp. 433-435; Williams, *A Year in China*, p. 208.
- 21 Earlier versions of this study were presented at various places in Macao, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Responses from the audience have suggested that the term 'flower boat' was of foreign origins. Some of this conjecture derives from a note written by John Henry Gray in 1878, stating that 'there are large boats on the Canton river called by the Chinese Wang Lau, and by the foreigners flower-boats'. John Henry Gray, *China. A History of the Laws, Manner, and Customs of the People*. 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1878), vol. 2, p. 77. Writing in 1858, Yvan thought the name had European origins. 'It was not the people of the extreme East who gave the flower-boats their poetical name, but the Europeans. The Chinese, much more prosaic in the things of this life, call these establishments simply *houses of the four pleasures*, designating them, according to their importance and dimensions, by the names of Keng-Heou, Cha-Kou, Tze-Toung, and Tuen-Pou.' These latter terms were the Cantonese names for the different types of flower boats. Melchior Yvan, *Inside Canton*. London: Henry Vizetelly, 1858), pp. 144-145. But as shown above, the term 'flower boat' (*hua fang* 花舫 or *hua ting* 花艇) was already being used by Chinese during the Qianlong period. By the late 18th century the term 'flower boat' became popular among foreigners. As will be shown below, Chinese sources show a term similar to this as early as the Tang and Song dynasties so it is unclear where the term came from.
- 22 The *Funing fu zhi* 福宁府志 and *Panyu xian zhi* 番禺县志 show the terms being used in the Qianlong period. *Funing fu zhi* vol. 36, p. 689; and *Panyu xian zhi* vol. 17, p. 338. These terms continue to show up in Guangdong gazetteers up to the Republican Period. For several examples, see *Guangzhou fu zhi* 广州府志 vol. 15, p. 311 and vol. 163, p. 4345 (Guangxu period); *Panyu xian zhi* vol. 6, p. 48 and vol. 23, p. 448 (Tongzhi period); *Shunde xian zhi* 顺德县志 vol. 27, p. 632 (Xianfeng period); *Qingyuan xian zhi* 清远县志 vol. 12, p. 640 and vol. 13, p. 688 (Min Guo period).
- 23 In a Tang Dynasty poem by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846), there is a description of an evening of entertainment on a boat in the Xunyang River 浔阳江 (part of the Yangzi). The passengers spent an evening on the river dining and listening to music. The terms *hua fang* 画舫 and *hua chuan* 画船 appear frequently. Although *hua fang* 画舫 (painted boat) is a different term from 花舫 (flower boat), the pronunciation is strikingly similar. They both refer to a type of pleasure boat where one went to enjoy an evening out on the river. Exchanging characters with similar pronunciations was common in the Qing Dynasty even with personal names. Thus, it is possible that foreigners translated the terms *hua fang* 花舫 or *hua ting* 花艇 from Chinese, into 'flower boat' in English, rather than the other way around. I thank Elizabeth Sinn at the University of Hong Kong for pointing out this reference to Bai Juyi, *Bai Juyi Shigejingsuan* 白居易诗歌精选 (Bai Juyi. Selected Poems), sel. Shi Yizhi 时宜之. Shijiazhuang: Huashanwenyi Chubanshe, 1996.
- 24 G. Schlegel, 'A Canton Flower-boat'. In *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1894), pp. 1-9. See page 4 for references to Chinese pleasure boats in the Liang Dynasty (CE 502-556).
- 25 Massachusetts Historical Society: MS. N-49.67, James Murray Forbes Papers, box 1, letter addressed to Forbes dated 25 March 1868.
- 26 Charlotte Havilland, ed. *The China Navigation Company Limited. A Pictorial History 1872-1992* (John Swire & Sons Ltd., 1992), see view of Canton on page 7.
- 27 James Ricalton, *China Through the Stereoscope: A Journey Through the Dragon Empire at the Time of the Boxer Uprising*. (New York: Underwood & Underwood, 1901), p. 33.
- 28 Elizabeth Lovatt, 'River Life in Canton', *The Newcastle Weekly Courant*, 5 August 1899. *The Newcastle Weekly Courant* mentions that this article was copied from the *San Francisco Chronicle*.
- 29 Paintings show how the boats were propelled by rowing. For a couple examples, see Martyn Gregory, *Artists of the China Coast* (London: Martyn Gregory Gallery, 1994) Cat. 64 No. 124, p. 57 and Martyn Gregory, *Hong Kong and the China Trade* (London: Martyn Gregory Gallery, 1997), Cat. 70 No. 90, p. 53.
- 30 C.F. Gordon Cumming, *Wanderings in China* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1900), p. 59.
- 31 Gray, *China. A History of the Laws, Manner, and Customs of the People*, vol. 2, pp. 78 and 272-273. Gray's wife and other authors

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- mentioned the floating kitchens as well. Mrs. Gray, *Fourteen Months in Canton* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1880), p. 153; and Elizabeth Wheeler Andrew and Katharine Caroline Bushnell. *Heathen Slaves and Christian Rulers*. (Plain Label Books, 1907), p. 189.
- 32 Florence O'Driscoll, 'Scenes in Canton. The Punishment of Criminals, and the River Population', *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (January 1895), p. 367.
- 33 Some of the popular poems and songs could be purchased in Canton. Schlegel reproduced a few of these, which he purchased during his visit to Canton in 1861. He could speak Cantonese and mentioned that these tunes were the same that the flower boat girls sang. Schlegel, 'A Canton Flower-boat', pp. 1-9.
- 34 Lovatt, 'River Life in Canton'.
- 35 Silk lanterns were still being used as late as the 1870s. 'And still another kind is soon seen, the most gaily decorated of all, which have carved fronts, gaily painted, silken lanterns suspended from their roofs, with looking-glasses, pictures, and verses of an amatory character, inscribed on colored paper, hanging on their sides. These are called the 'Flower Boats,' and are sinks of iniquity.' Rev. I.W. Wiley, *China and Japan: A Record of Observations made During a Residence of Several Years in China, and a Tour of Official Visitations to the Missions of Both Countries in 1877-78* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden, 1879), p. 306.
- 36 Dobell, *Travels in Kamtchatka and Siberia*, vol. 2, p. 226.
- 37 Downing, *The Fan-Qui in China*, vol. 1, pp. 243-244.
- 38 Yvan, *Inside Canton*, pp. 144-145.
- 39 Lee, *Philadelphians and the China Trade*, p. 35.
- 40 George Wilkinson, *Sketches of Chinese Customs & Manners, in 1811-12* (Bath: J. Browne, 1814), pp. 127-130.
- 41 NAH: Canton 12, Resolution dated 1749.12.05. The corporal who was on duty at the time, and who allowed the water port door to be opened, was sent to Whampoa aboard the ship *Sarah Jacoba*, where he was to be punished in front of the crew as an example to others not to allow such things to happen.
- 42 Dobell, *Travels in Kamtchatka and Siberia*, vol. 2, p. 225.
- 43 Ibid., pp. 224-225.
- 44 Ricalton, *China Through the Stereoscope*, p. 33.
- 45 Walter William Mundy, *Canton and the Bogue. The Narrative of an Eventful Six Months in China* (London: Samuel Tinsley, 1875), p. 150.
- 46 The Canton and Macao price and wage data from about 1700 to 1830 are available online at the International Institute of Social History webpage: www.isg.nl.
- 47 Dobell, *Travels in Kamtchatka and Siberia*, vol. 2, pp. 225-227; Delight Sweetser, *One Way Round the World*. (Indianapolis: Bowen-Merrill Co., 1898; reprint 3rd ed. 1899), pp. 126-127.
- 48 There are many references to these elaborate occasions on the flower boats, with everything beautifully adorned and attendants dressed in elaborate costumes.
- 49 O'Driscoll, 'Scenes in Canton', p. 367.
- 50 Leonard Pratt and Chiang Su-hui, trans. and eds. *Shen Fu. Six Records of a Floating Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1983. Flower boats are mentioned on pages 120-127. The Chinese name for the book is *Fu Shen Liuji* 浮生六记.
- 51 Walter Del Mar, *Around the world through Japan* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1903), pp. 98-99.
- 52 Del Mar, *Around the world through Japan*, pp. 99-100.
- 53 Mundy, *Canton and the Bogue*, p. 152.
- 54 Yvan, *Inside Canton*, pp. 176-178.
- 55 Downing, *The Fan-Qui in China*, vol. 1, pp. 241-242.
- 56 Yvan, *Inside Canton*, p. 144.
- 57 Andrew and Bushnell. *Heathen Slaves and Christian Rulers*, pp. 187-189.
- 58 The information about the fire in 1909 is mentioned in two articles entitled 'The Chinese Disaster. Burning of the Flower Boats' and 'Arrest of Looters' in *The Advertiser* (9 March 1909) (Adelaide, SA: 1889-1931), p. 8. Different reasons were given for the cause of the fire. One report said it was the result of a kerosene lamp falling. Another report claimed it started in the kitchen of one of the boats, while another said it was the result of incendiarism. The information was taken from the *Weekly Post* (6 February 1909) and reprinted in *The Advertiser*.