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187 NAH, Canton 207, report dated 1752.02.24, Canton 210, report dated 1753.06.25 and Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*, p. 58.

188 GL, Öijareds säteris arkiv A406; and Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*, p. 18.

189 NAH, Canton 193, report for 1744 (there are no page numbers or date on this document), Canton 215, report dated 1755.02.22; and Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*, p. 56.

190 NAH, VOC 4384, rent contract dated 1760.08.01, pp. 473-474 (also reproduced in MCM 2, Plate 01.06), VOC 4386, *dagregister*, 1760.08.01, pp. 3-4; BL, IOR R/10/3, 1759.09.05, p. 107; and Morse, *Chronicles*, 5, pp. 73-74.

191 MCM 1, p. 157; and MCM 2, p. 29.

192 BL, IOR G/12/77, 1783.02.21, pp. 19-20; and MCM 1, pp. 133-134.

193 Ghent Universiteits Bibliotheek (GHL), Ms 1985, *dagregister*, 1791.04.01, pp. 41-42.

194 NAH, VOC 4577, *dagregister*, 1793.09.11, pp. 28-29. In this reference, the person who is said to have sold the Dutch factory in 1793 was ‘Pinqua’s partner’. This reference: GHL, Ms 1985, *dagregister*, 1791.04.01, pp. 41-42 shows that Locqua had purchased the building in 1791. Other entries in the Dutch records show that they paid rent to Locqua in 1791 and 1792 so he was apparently ‘Pinqua’s partner’.

195 NAH, Canton 378, rent contracts. See also MCM 1, pp. 116, 121, 134; and Morse, *Chronicles*, 2, p. 92.

196 The repairs that the Dutch did to no. 16 in 1789 are reproduced in Paul A. Van Dyke, ‘Port Canton and the Pearl River Delta, 1690-1845’ (Ph.D. diss., Department of History, University of Southern California, 2002), Table 11.

197 ICF, pp. 9-11.

198 See the *Onkosten Extra Ordinair* for 1768, 1770, 1781 and 1789 in NAH, VOC 4403, 4406, 4423 and 4444, respectively.

199 I thank Maria Mok for pointing out the marble columns to me. I looked through the Dutch records, but did not find mention to marble columns so I have not been able to confirm this assumption.

200 MCM 2, Chapter 5.

201 The list of Canton junks in Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, Plate 12, shows three junks operating out of the Yihe Hang. However, there were other junks operating out of some of these houses that are not mentioned in that document. Table 1 in this study, for example, shows fifteen junks operating out of the Mantack hang, but Plate 12 in *The Canton Trade*, shows only ten junks.

202 NM, F17, pp. T1_02307 and T1_5145-7

203 BL, IOR R/10/4, 1759.11.03, p. 133, 1760.07.30, p. 37; and Morse, *Chronicles*, 5, p. 48.

204 ICF, pp. 90-91 and 97.

205 NAH, VOC 4381, letter dated 1758.01.19; and MCM 2, pp. 20, 27 and 239. For Teunqua and Swequa’s stories, see MCM 2, Chapters 1 and 2.

206 Morse, *Chronicles*, 5, p. 87.

207 NAH, Canton 91, 1785.11.10-11, pp. 83-84.

208 ICF, p. 59.

209 NAH, Canton 91, 1785.02.02, pp. 1-4, 1785.10.08, pp. 49-50, 1785.11.10, pp. 83-84; and Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*, p. 61.

210 Paul A. Van Dyke, ‘Floating Brothels and the Canton Flower Boats 1750-1930’. *Review of Culture*, International Edition no. 37 (January 2011), pp. 112-142.

211 Davis, *A Commercial Vocabulary*, p. 15.

212 For an example of foreigners travelling in Chinese boats illegally, see Van Dyke, ‘Port Canton’, pp. 493-495.

213 For a discussion of the Canton junks, see MCM 1, Chapter 4.

214 For Poankeequa, his Chen partners, and the Dafeng Hang’s story, see MCM 2, Chapter 3.

215 MCM 1, Appendix 9G, pp. 366-368.

216 NM, F17 p. T1_02040.

217 For other paintings of Canton junks, see MCM 1, Plates 04.11 and 04.12; and MCM 2, Plates 03.01, 03.02, 08.08, and 08.09.

Trading with Traders The Wonders of Cantonese Shopkeepers

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INTRODUCTION

If one word is sought to describe the work of a foreign trader in 18th and 19th century Canton, that word might well be ‘shopping’. They were, to be more precise, there to conduct trade, and to buy and sell, but most of the time their main mission was to load their ships with staple commodities such as spices, tea, silk and porcelain, among other goods, for their market at home, in the West. The interest in trading with China went back to the Han and Tang dynasties, but massive endeavours to establish commercial contact with China were launched a few centuries later, via the sea, when marine technology permitted European powers to explore maritime routes. Also, determined by navigation conditions largely submissive to the direction of the monsoons in the days when ships were powered by the wind, the entry into China had to be from the South China coast. In 1757, along with the change of policy of the Qing government, an Imperial decree prohibited all foreign trade other than that conducted at Canton. As the city officially became

the centre of foreign trade and activity, it also became the hub where foreign traders could enjoy a stable and safe stay to conduct business. Hence, this is where our discussion begins.

Foreign traders were not the only westerners in Canton; there were also military officers, diplomats, ambassadors, surgeons, and missionaries, etc. But when it comes to shopping, traders were no doubt conducting the largest sales transactions. They were there to shop in bulk, either for the large trading companies bearing such household names such as the English, Dutch, Danish or Swedish East India companies (EIC, VOC, DAC or SOIC, respectively), or, in the case of private traders, for private companies and individual investors. These shopping activities formed the core business of the China trade. At the same time, the traders also made personal purchases, on a much smaller scale, of items for personal use for friends and family, or for sale upon their return home.

The shopping list of Benjamin Shreve of Salem serves as a sample of what could have been the personal orders of a trader: ‘1 lady’s parasol, 6 mother-of-pearl spoons, 10 tin saucers for Mandarin cups, 2 ‘teeth’ brush cases with covers, 2 ‘conscience’ cups (material of the cup unknown), 2 tubs of sugar candy, and several jars of dried candy and preserves for which his wife had requested.’¹ Besides this personal list, he also bought silverware, tortoiseshell combs, lacquerware, silks, china and nankeens for his wife and his investors.² What Shreve had been doing was what many other western traders were doing, that is, besides making bulk purchases in China trade commodities, they spent days in and out of the shops at Canton buying

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small orders of locally-produced arts and crafts and also tea, and wine and food in small quantities for personal use. These items were, just as Sir John Francis Davis generalised, ‘smaller articles not restricted to Hong merchants’.³ Most of these items were export ware, but there were exceptions. Antique shops along Curiosity Street offered Chinese antiques that were not necessarily export ware. Antique vases were much more expensive than the current ones (most export porcelain was described as ‘modern’) in these large, handsome museum-like shops.⁴

Traders were not the only foreigners walking around Canton spending days on personal shopping; they were joined by many other foreigners, who also wrote about the shops and their shopping experiences. According to a mid-19th century narrative on shopping in Canton, a ‘stranger in China may go from one store to another every day in the year ... Men, none but men, he sees at every turn’.⁵ Although the author was in fact noting the awkwardness of never meeting any ladies in the shops, where they would normally be found in the West (foreign women were not allowed in the city), rather than describing shops packed with men, we could still catch a glimpse of the narrow streets packed with busy foreign shoppers.

SHOPPING IN CANTON WAS DISAGREEABLE?

While this last imagery of foreign men in the hustle and bustle of shopping suggests the popularity of the activity, another account presents a contradicting scenario. John Francis Davis was particularly descriptive about the unsatisfactory conditions of shopping in China Street:

These (foreigners) are attracted to the several shops by inscriptions, in the European character, which sometimes promise more than they perform; as when the dauber of truculent likenesses calls himself a ‘handsome-face painter’, &c. The shops, instead of being set out with the showy and sometimes expensive front of an English or French boutique, are closed in by gloomy black shutters, and very ill lit by a small skylight, or rather a hole in the roof. The inmates, instead of showing the civility and alacrity of shopkeepers in London or Paris, and anticipating demands of their customers in the display of their

goods, slowly, and sometimes sullenly, produce the articles from their cases and cupboards as they may be asked for; so that shopping at Canton is far from being an agreeable pastime.⁶

Next he went onto describe Hog Lane, a well-known alley, where evil prevailed, or so it seems:

nothing so narrow or so filthy exists in a European town. The hovels by which it is lined are occupied by abandoned Chinese, who supply the poor ignorant sailors with spirits, medicated to their taste with stimulating or stupefying drugs; and, when the wretched men have been reduced to a bestial state by these poisonous liquors, they are frequently set upon by their wily seducers, and robbed as well as beaten ... the Chinese at length made their singularly unreasonable demand for payment, as, perhaps, a few *dollars* for what might be worth a few *pence*.⁷

To recapitulate Davis’ observation, there were at least a few very prominent characteristics that made shopping in Canton ‘far from being an agreeable pastime’, first of which would be boastful advertisements; secondly, unattractive display; then unenthusiastic shopkeepers, followed by those who literally plundered and cheated their customers.

In fact, if Davis’ portrayal was the only reference we had, then we would easily think that the shopping experience in Canton was indeed unbearable: there were nothing more than a couple of narrow dirty streets lined with tiny gloomy shops run by nasty Chinese proprietors. Yet, many other accounts present a very different picture and contradict Davis’ view in every respect. First, Davis only talked about two streets. It is unclear whether he was only referring to what he witnessed in these two streets, when there were in fact more shopping streets in the vicinity of the factories. He mentioned other streets in other parts of the book.⁸ But in reference to shopping, he only referred to China Street and Hog Lane, which does not present a complete picture.

During the 18th and 19th century, Canton was one of the greatest shopping centres in Asia, where foreign traders, or shoppers, had access to a cluster of shops and streets within and beyond the foreign factories in the south-western suburb of Canton.⁹ Within the factory quarters, the shopping streets most frequented by the westerners were Old China Street and New China Street.¹⁰ A third street, Hog Lane, was indeed mostly

where sailors went for liquor and small souvenirs, with many shops being of often substandard quality.¹¹

There were other shops and more choices if one went beyond the factories. Even though officials forbade foreigners from wandering outside of the foreign quarter, they did so anyway.¹² They were often seen on Lunehing Street—a north-south street that was positioned to the west of the factories.¹³ They also wandered to the north of the factory area on a street that ran perpendicular to the factories and parallel to Thirteen Factory Street. This avenue was known by westerners as ‘Curiosity Street’, as well as other names.¹⁴ To the northeast of the factories, they visited a place known as Carpenter Square. It lay to the east of Thirteen Factory Street beyond the Creek. The shops were laid out in this area in the form of a parallelogram, which is probably why it was called a square.¹⁵

Another popular stop was Picture Street, but its exact location is unclear. It nonetheless left quite an impression on those who ventured there, because it was full of shops specialising in glass manufacturing, where glass paintings ‘in extremely brilliant hues’ were displayed for sale.¹⁶ Foreign shoppers even ventured across the river to Honam Island. Honam was a popular shopping centre in the third quarter of the 19th century; its shopping streets were described as similar to those in the ‘old’ factories. Shops exclusively for Europeans were to be found in several streets. Unfortunately, the Chinese names of these streets and their location were not identified. Among them, Club Street was better known and was said to be close to the Red Fort. Nearby there were shops for cheap European goods and provisions.¹⁷

Most streets were grouped according to their specialty; this was some kind of a custom in Canton, where each branch of trade had its distinct and separate locality. Charles Lockyer, who was in China in 1704, noted such business patterns. While the mercers had the whole street to themselves, they were not the only merchants who occupied an entire district. ‘The Bamboo Cap-makers, Laquer-men, Smiths, and others, have some part or other in the Town...for their Trades’.¹⁸ From then on and all the way to the 19th century, the local custom of allotting each trade to particular streets was upheld. Bryan Tilden recorded in his 1818-1819 journal that he saw ‘shoe makers in one street, and tailor etc etc. in another’.¹⁹ Those who came later also remarked that it was customary to see,

on each side of a certain street, rows of shops in which commodities of one and the same kind were offered for sale. The shops of other streets would have items from another industry.²⁰ Davis also mentioned that ‘several streets are commonly devoted to distinct trades... Curiosity-street (as the English call it) is devoted to the sale of antiques... Apothecary-street is full of druggists’ shops’,²¹ but he also remembered an exception: China Street contained shops which dealt in ‘carved and lackered [*sic*] ware, silks, and other articles in common demand by strangers’.²² As a different addition to local custom, the arrangement of gathering different trades on one street at the heart of the foreigners’ living quarters offered immediate convenience.

This part of Davis’ recollection coincides with what other travellers remembered, such as James Wathen, who concurred that ‘the streets within the factory quarters sold all for convenience’.²³ Unlike the streets or districts that were restricted to one particular trade, the streets within the foreign quarter had shops of all kinds of goods for sale. On the two China Streets, Osmond Tiffany from Baltimore recalled that a customer could find almost everything produced in China, and the variety was just ‘too numerous to mention’. In his recollection, there were shops that sold porcelain, silverware, jewellery and ivory on these two streets.²⁴ Other shoppers also remembered the ivory shops on China Street where one could buy the best ivory.²⁵ A black and gilt lacquer folding fan in the Hong Kong Museum of Art collection came from Houqua Lacquered Ware at No. 15 New China Street,²⁶ next to Tinquá’s famous painting studio at No. 16.²⁷ Other records indicate that further down the street at shop No. 17 was another lacquerware man named Hipqua.²⁸ Clearly, these streets inside the factory quarter were not dedicated to a single commodity but were lined with different shops, offering a wide variety of merchandise.

DARK GLOOMY SHOPS?

Davis opined that shops in Canton were no match for those in London or Paris, but other visitors’ accounts disagree with this picture. A French visitor was so impressed with the shops and the animated streets that he thought he was strolling in Paris.²⁹ The charm of shops and shopping in Canton, and its entertaining and colourful nature was most vividly captured in a mid-19th century memoir:

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... a European feels in the situation of a child, taken, for the first time in his life, into a large toy-shop containing what he considers a world of wonders.... One object after another is taken up and examined and thought well worthy of bearing home, but is quickly eclipsed by the next thing which comes to hand. On the first visit to these shops, scarcely any purchase is made, because you feel a desire to possess the whole.³⁰

This is not the only description of the 'toy-shop' fascination; there are others. The shopping alleys near the factories and the streets along the periphery were lined with shops providing a staggering selection of goods and crafts made in China exclusively for the foreign clientele. One of the highlights of shopping in Canton was no doubt the stupefying experience of finding oneself in a treasure trove of ingeniously designed and finely executed products, nicely captured by the colourful portrayal of the wonderful display quoted earlier. The displays aimed to overwhelm, to create a sense of awe. To ensure an impressive effect, one strategy was to fill a relatively small space with a large number of items. Another tactic was to please the eye; for instance, vases of enormous size would be displayed to show the richness of their colour and to attract attention. Items that required specific skills to make would also be showcased. These included porcelain pagodas, fountains, and waterfalls that were admired for the ingenuity of their construction.³¹ In fact, the intelligently designed displays were meant to manipulate and were undoubtedly proven over time to be successful, accounting for almost all shops adopting a similar approach. The effectiveness of the strategy was aptly recapped by a traveller: 'The Cantonese take great pains to make their goods strike the eye, and sell well'.³²

The visual impact of the shops and the attractiveness of their displays have created lasting memories, 'The display of rich silks at the mercers, gave us equal pleasure and astonishment'.³³ In fact, paintings adopting a shop as its subject matter became a genre by itself in Chinese export painting (Fig. 1). This painting clearly shows that the subject matter, and thus the selling point, is the magnificent display inside the shop. The British Museum has in its collection a series of drawings, possibly a repertoire of templates of this

genre.³⁴ The emergence of this genre as memorabilia confirms that the display of the shop was a phenomenal experience in Canton.

Attractive displays might contribute to an enjoyable visit but were certainly not the most essential part of shopping itself. No matter how sensational, or how carefully engineered, shop display would only be a decor if there was no-one to conduct the sales. The maestro of the shop was the shopkeeper, and sometimes also the proprietor. What were these men like?

HALFHEARTED SHOPKEEPERS?

As mentioned earlier, shopping in Canton was not fun for Davis, partly because the shopkeepers were not eager at all. Some went so far as to drugging, robbing and overcharging their customers. One of the worst experiences William Hickey, a young EIC cadet, had during his stay was being tricked by a shopkeeper and paying double for some silk stockings.³⁵

As far as eagerness was concerned, it could be true that some shopkeepers did manifest extreme contrast in enthusiasm. Tiffany vividly caricatured the bipolar behaviour of one of them. This shopkeeper did not bother to move or open any showcase for those who looked around. But when a customer showed intention to buy, he darted out 'like lightning', dived 'to the very darkest corners of his cases' and showed his goods 'with the greatest good humour ten thousand times'.³⁶

The fervent behaviour of this shopkeeper at the occasion of a possible deal—laughable as it may seem—contradicts the half-hearted image portrayed by Davis. In fact, Tiffany himself recalled another incident when the purser of Cumchong's porcelain shop on Old China Street assiduously took down every piece of chinaware on the shelves for anyone who seemed interested.³⁷ The impressions that other foreign customers had of these shopkeepers were often characterised with pressing eagerness and enthusiasm. In his 1811-1812 journal, James Wathen remembered the shopkeepers as 'extremely attentive and obliging'.³⁸ Toogood Downing's 1836 memoir noted that the shopkeepers took the greatest pain to please, and were always eager to serve, even when the customer had no intention to purchase.³⁹ Dr Melchior Yvan, surgeon to the French Embassy of 1844-1846, remembered that on both New and Old China Streets, 'as soon as a European heel resounds on the granite, every door



Fig. 1. A Lacquer Shop, Guangzhou, 19th century. Guan Lianchang (active mid-19th century). Gouache on paper. 57 x 45 cm. Hong Kong Museum of Art. (AH1975.0002).

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exhibits a Chinaman with a naked head and a flat face, lighted up with an assumed smile, which is intended to tempt a customer to his shop’.⁴⁰

Apart from drive and determination, the shopkeepers were also remembered as shrewd dealers, more or less honest, but certainly well-qualified for their business. Some shopkeepers were of course equipped with common tricks, such as loose referrals to places of origin to help complete a sale. Whenever these salesmen tried to convince, they would say the products came from Nanking, ‘when they have a mind to praise their goods, they say that they come from Nanking, viz., Nanking silk, Nanking ink, Nanking fans, and even Nanking hams’.⁴¹ Or in another case, ‘Any thing rather out of the common way these shrewd shopkeepers will insist comes from Nanking . . . while any thing absolutely unique and scarce comes from Souchow, that being the Mecca of Chinese imagination’.⁴² Another known trick was exclusivity. They would not hesitate to claim that they were selling the exclusive, with a good deal of dramatic flair, to the point where they would actually shut the street-door to ‘prevent the neighbours spoiling the market’, before they let their customer examined the ‘treasure’.⁴³ Knowing the power of word-of-mouth and that customers were more likely to return if they got a good bargain, shopkeepers did what they could to make it an enjoyable experience. No one should ‘lose face’ in China, especially not a customer, so the shopkeeper would always complain that they did not make any profit.⁴⁴ Depictions of these practices give us a vivacious image of these smart businessmen.

OUTRAGEOUS PRICES?

These tricks of the salesman were not exclusive to 18th and 19th century Canton. Shopkeepers of all times and periods and in all locations throughout the world adopt similar tactics to lure a customer and win a sale. In fact, employing a few tricks is indeed good business so long as the customer is satisfied. Davis’ remarks seem a bit exaggerated and certainly do not represent the majority of western patrons’ opinions. While he accused the Chinese shopkeepers for overcharging their customers, many other shoppers in Canton remarked how reasonable the prices were, which was obviously necessary in order to carry on a competitive business.

When it came to shopping, most visitors turned into keen traders, and became highly sensitive to quality. Many records show customers constantly comparing the quality of different products, and meticulously noting down minute differences so that they could make the best judgment as to which one to buy. Their sensitivity to quality was shown by the fact that they were not just interested in local Chinese products when they simply wanted the best. Cotton fabrics from Madras and other cities in India, for example, were known for their dexterity and long-lasting colours. Madras linen and handkerchiefs were supplied by the English ships, and could be conveniently bought in Canton.⁴⁵ When the traders found goods of better quality, they would not restrict their purchase to Chinese products.

This was what happened with export ware. Just like any other goods, export art was closely examined by the scrutinising customers. Chinese lacquerware, for example, was considered inferior to Japanese lacquerware by many foreigners.⁴⁶ Chinese ivory, on the other hand, was considered ‘far superior to any to be found elsewhere’.⁴⁷ Porcelain, by the early 19th century, began to show a decline in popularity in the face of European competition, ‘There was nothing to attract the particular notice of an Englishman in their porcelain—our own manufactories producing ware infinitely superior in elegance, taste, and materials’.⁴⁸ Silverware was still regarded as worth the price due to fine craftsmanship.⁴⁹ As for paintings, flowers and insects, or flowers-and-bird genre paintings were thought of as ‘bien supérieures’ (much better) than those in Europe.⁵⁰ Gold was considered far purer than what could be found in Europe.⁵¹

With a good idea of the type and the quality of goods in the market, foreign customers were also very sensitive to prices. Many of them made meticulous notations about prices and quality of all sorts of products, even those minor items meant for personal use.⁵² What matters most, for this discussion, is not the actual prices themselves, but whether those figures represented ‘value for money’. A comment on export paintings on pith paper certainly justified a satisfied customer: ‘They cost, for the usual class of excellence, from one to two dollars a dozen; which is not high, when we consider their truth, the time spent upon them, and the variety of colours employed’.⁵³ Upon utmost appreciation of the intricateness of the ivory ball, John Barrow who visited China on the 1792-1794

Macartney Mission, commented that ‘A very small sum of money is the price of one of these difficult trifles ... and other trinkets and trifles, are executed in a neater manner and for less money in China than in any other part of the world’.⁵⁴ Comparison between markets were also noteworthy, a set of ivory chess pieces which cost in the 19th century ‘twenty or thirty dollars in the United States, may be obtained in China for eight or ten [dollars]’.⁵⁵ The Cantonese shops were aware that low prices, or below-market prices, gave them a niche in the market. With workmanship of superior quality, Canton products were often found to be much cheaper than in foreign countries, which many satisfied customers attributed to the cheapness of labour in China.⁵⁶

No other example would testify to such awareness better than that of Lamqua, who sold his paintings at a price significantly undercutting that of George Chinnery, the only European professional painter on the China Coast,⁵⁷ by charging 80% less. A physical comparison (Fig. 2a and 2b) not only

shows that the two artists must have been serious rivals; it also testifies that Lamqua’s work was worth every single (Spanish) dollar. Competitive pricing was crucial to business in view of the level of sensitivity of customers in examining and determining which item was the best value for their money. Being competitive was how the shopkeepers stayed in business, and not by overcharging and mistreating customers as Davis’ comments suggest.

BOASTFUL IN QUALITY?

Price was important, which meant cheap labour was also important. But an over-emphasis on these concerns might jeopardise quality, which was not good for business. Quality was often of utmost importance to foreign consumers. Davis mentioned that the shopkeepers ‘sometimes promise more than they perform’, but other visitors reported otherwise. Very often, it was simply outstanding Chinese craftsmanship,

Fig. 2a. Self-Portrait. c. 1840. George Chinnery (1774-1852). Oil on canvas. 23.5 x 18.4 cm. Collection of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. Gift of the Friends and Fellows of the Peabody Essex Museum, 1962 (M11510).



Fig. 2b. Portrait of George Chinnery. Mid-19th century. Lamqua (active 1825-1860). Oil on canvas. 24.7 x 19 cm. Hong Kong Museum of Art (AH1991.0003).



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or how it was performed, that impressed these visitors. Charles Gutzlaff highly complimented Cantonese crafts and their quality: ‘When a foreigner for the first time arrives in Canton, he is struck with the ingenuity of the Chinese artisans [*sic*]. They possess considerable skill in working ivory, mother-o’-pearl, and tortoise-shell; in manufacturing trinkets, furniture, and silk piece-goods’.⁵⁸ These were the types of goods that were sold in the shops. They were popular not only because they were cheap, but because they were of excellent quality. Today, many such items are kept in the collections of museums all over the world because they exemplified the high artistic and technical level of Chinese export art.

Quality was often seen not just in craftsmanship but in service as well. This sensitivity was mirrored in tailor-made products and services. The customers were often pampered by the shopkeepers. The acclaimed success of the *Guangcai* ware in the export porcelain business testifies to the success of this strategy. By setting up workshops in Canton to take over the decorative processes of Jingdezhen, the porcelain dealers found the perfect means of catering to their customers’ needs. Not only was porcelain painted to order, but customers even chose the patterns or combination of patterns on the spot, and in the workshops.⁵⁹ They added European designs as well, such as cyphers and coats of arms. Barrow was referring to the special service of *Guangcai* ware when he noted that ‘Great quantities of porcelain are sent from the potteries to Canton; perfectly white, that the purchaser may have them painted in his own pattern’.⁶⁰

Products by commission or special order were also offered in other businesses. In the Natural History Museum, London, is a collection of watercolours commissioned by English naturalist John Reeves. Reeves was appointed Inspector of Tea for the EIC in 1808, and was sent to Canton from 1812 to 1831, where he engaged a few Chinese artists to paint, under his supervision, over two thousand Chinese natural history watercolours.⁶¹ These paintings are realistic and naturally rendered and do not exhibit any of the gaudiness often seen in typical Chinese export botanical paintings. They are meant to be accurate pictorial documents of the botanical specimens Reeves collected.⁶² They are examples of paintings by specific order. Artists were eager to cater to other special requests. Pehr Osbeck, for example, mentioned that

the Europeans often brought glass to Canton to have it painted with roses and flowers by Chinese artists.⁶³ Almost any type of product could be ordered from the Canton shops.

Another type of special order that these Chinese export artists were so famous for was to make copies or duplicates on demand. Carl Crossman, former curator of the Peabody Museum, remarked that oil paintings based on western prints were very popular and were produced in large numbers. He discovered that certain examples in the Peabody collection are extremely faithful to their originals, so faithful that it is difficult to distinguish that they are copies. He further notes that some of them have passed for western works.⁶⁴ The quality of the Cantonese copies was well-known at the time. Soon after George Washington sat for Gilbert Stuart for a portrait in 1795, numerous copies were made across the ocean in Canton and brought back to America. Gilbert was deeply troubled by the competition between him and these excellent copies to the point where he took legal action to prevent their sales in America.⁶⁵ This is mirrored by Barrow’s comment, ‘The coloured prints of Europe, that are carried out to Canton, are copied here with wonderful fidelity’.⁶⁶ To date, many extant examples testify to these copies.⁶⁷ Sometimes the customers would bring their own work to Canton to be copied. Wathen requested the artist Tanqua to make copies of his own sketches, which were executed to his satisfaction.⁶⁸

It is uncertain how many items were specially ordered each year, but judging from Benjamin Shreve’s list, some foreign customers were quite fussy. In one letter, the requester drew out the sizes and designs of the four types of tortoiseshell combs he wished Shreve would acquire for him. Another request was also quite specific: ‘The waiters of the oval form, extended like those at your house, the common ovals hold much less than yours’, and a diagram accompanied this note.⁶⁹ Such minute attention was part of large company orders as well. Company officers would pass the specific details to the Hong merchants, who in turn had the items made. The individual traders often simply went to a shop to place their orders, and found the keepers just as accommodating to their demands. Shoppers of both large and small quantities were all very well taken care of.

Many items have survived from the trade and testify to the great attention that Canton artisans paid

to individual interests. One such typical feature was a crest or a cartouche pattern that provides a ground for initials or monograms to be added. While the fan in Fig. 3 might have been made during the off-season months (February to June), the monograms would have been added when the customers sent them the required initials to be inscribed on the items. The customers might even wait on site themselves for the items to be finished. This very common feature epitomises the customer-oriented mentality that characterises Cantonese shops.

STILL FAR FROM AN AGREEABLE PASTIME?

Other marketing tactics testify to the fact that the Cantonese shops went to extraordinary measures to ensure that their customers had a truly enjoyable experience. They offered behind-the-scenes tours. Many of these shops, except those selling antiques, were hybrid workshops, combining sales with fabrication. To have products made in the shops seems to have been a common Cantonese, if not Chinese, mode of business. Many examples in the above-mentioned British Museum collection of line drawings of shops show actual manufacturing in the shops.⁷⁰ Osbeck visited a workshop on the second floor of a vault inside a shop where a famous ‘face-maker’ was at work, making figures for customers.⁷¹ Wathen noted on ‘China Street, as well as all the others which we were permitted to see . . . The ground-floor of every house is a shop, and the upper stories workshops and lodgings’.⁷² The painting shop-studio of Lamqua best exemplified this combination of a shop and a workshop. The combination was a very effective marketing strategy; it offered a demonstration of the manufacturing process, which was a major customer attraction, together with the convenience of onsite purchase of the final products after the customer enjoyed the demonstration. It is a strategy used by many shops nowadays.

Most of the shops in the factory area offered such a demonstration tour. Hickey remembered very well his visits in 1769 to a chinaware workshop, the work place of fan makers, workers in ivory, japanners, jewellers, and all the various artificers of Canton. He recalled equally well watching celebrated painters working upon glass.⁷³ On another occasion, he and his friend Pott went to watch a Chinese who made portrait figurines in clay

at his shop near the factories.⁷⁴ Staunton witnessed the manufacture of Chinaware and Chinese looking glass, probably mirrors.⁷⁵

Many other shops had their own workshops close by, very often at Honam, and frequently arranged for customers to visit. Some of these workshops were offsite venues or warehouses. Tiffany was led by the owner of a lacquerware shop on China Street to visit his workshop in ‘a different part of the suburbs up the river’.⁷⁶

These behind-the-scenes visits were usually an agreeable experience for the bored and stressed western traders, which is why they were often recorded in diaries and memoirs. These tours and demonstrations were more than simply entertainment; they were undoubtedly given in order to entice the customers to purchase something. After visiting a lacquerware workshop and overseeing the production, Tiffany was so impressed by the excellence of craftsmanship, particularly appreciating the time taken—six entire weeks—to paint a lacquer fan, that he bought the fan.⁷⁷ Thus the visit reinforced the ‘value for money’ notion; a notion well-recognised by these foreign customers, as discussed above. For instance, when visiting the artist Sanhing, Wathen saw his pupils copying some English prints with a great deal of devotion and effort to the point that the visitor worried for them, ‘Their progress was very slow; and unless they had high prices for their copies, they would never make their fortune by their labour’.⁷⁸ From our earlier discussion of prices, we can see that these artists would not likely charge high prices for their copies, as that would discourage the customers from returning and others from coming. The painstaking efforts that were employed behind the scenes in making the items reconfirmed to the customer that they were getting value for their money.

Of all the workshop visits, one shop which seemed to have offered the most intriguing and most popular behind-the-scenes tours was Lamqua’s export painting shop-cum-workshop. Its popularity was unquestionable; the following is what one visitor recalled:

Those who have been at Canton of late years, cannot fail to recollect the shop of Lamquoi (Lamqua) the painter. His house is the resort of all those who wish to pass away an hour in a pleasant and agreeable manner . . . a stranger has access to any part where he may choose to wander, and different branches of the business are transacted on each of the floors.⁷⁹

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Fig. 3. Black and Gilt Lacquer Folding Fan Decorated with Floral Design. 19th century. 26 x 43.5 cm. Hong Kong Museum of Art. (C1999.0012).

Not only were customers allowed to freely wander about and look around, but they would be offered information and explanations. ‘The Chinese are not at all discomposed by the presence of strangers . . . and show the greatest willingness to answer any question’.⁸⁰ This direct contact is a feature worth noting. Lamqua was certainly not only a master in his profession of art, but he was also a master in marketing. Visitors to his studio would find him often communicating directly and personally with his customers. ‘The painter himself stands at his easel, generally incommoded by the numerous visitors . . . who cram in to watch his proceedings’.⁸¹ He would be conversing with them in English.⁸² He was even as eloquent as to extend his conversation to non-art subjects. Arthur Cynynghame remembered very well discussing politics with him.⁸³ Apparently, a visit to Lamqua’s studio-cum-shop was far more memorable for Cynynghame than an ordinary shopping trip. No wonder his shop was a resort to

those who wished ‘to pass away an hour in a pleasant and agreeable manner’. It epitomised the strength of the Canton shops and the shopkeepers who ran them, defying with its success adverse opinions, such as those from Davis, of the profession.

CONCLUSION

The foreign community in Canton was not easy to please. Most of them were capable businessmen and top-notch negotiators, with specific and fussy demands. Even in this environment, many of them seemed to enjoy the experience and held a high regard for the service and the products provided by the Canton shops. We have read about disappointments, highlighted somewhat by Davis’ rather negative commentary, criticising the use of boastful advertisements, unattractive displays, and the misconduct of shopkeepers. Other visitors, however, recounted the extraordinary shopping experience they

had had in Canton. They are representative of the success of the shopkeepers to please their customers. As a result, many other foreigners were attracted to Canton as well. Convenience was a key factor in making the shopping experience a pleasant one. Not only were the shops located within the foreign factory compound, but there were shopping streets in close proximity to where foreign customers came to visit on a daily basis. As soon as they passed the shops, the overwhelming displays drew them in, and ensured that they would at least have a look inside. The extraordinary display of high quality and fascinating items were all the enticement many visitors needed to make the next step through the door. While they were being dazzled by the splendour of the items on the shelves, the next and most important factor—the shopkeeper—entered on stage, with all his mastery in manipulation and bargaining, which many traders warned about in their memoirs. And those who had heard of shopkeepers who cheated, they might be relieved to find lots of top quality goods often supplemented with tailor-made service at below-market prices, instead of dishonest shopkeepers.

One last argument against the prejudiced statement denoting that shopping in Canton was disagreeable could be the enjoyment shared by many during the special site visits and behind-the-scenes tours where the manufacturing process was put on display. These bonus events often impressed and induced potential customers to buy by showing the strenuous task behind the making of a product. The experience was inherently local in the sense that it tallied with the operation mode of these Cantonese shops; they were often a combination of a shop and a workshop, with retailing and manufacturing under one roof, or if not, the workshop would be close by. Judging from illustrative narratives by impressed customers, shopping must have been an agreeable and entertaining event, a colourful interval in a somewhat ‘laborious, monotonous, contemplative’ sojourn.⁸⁴ **RC**

Author’s Note:
This paper is part of the author’s doctoral thesis.

NOTES

1

Benjamin Shreve came to China as supercargo and captain of the *Governor Endicott* in 1819, but also sailed to China in 1815, 1816, 1817, and again in 1820 on the *Coronet*. The quoted list was of his voyage in 1819/20, extracted from the Shreve papers in the Peabody Museum, see Carl L. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of The China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1991), pp. 21, 31, 33.

2

Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of The China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities*, pp. 21-33.

3

John Francis Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of China and its Inhabitants* (London: Charles Knight, 1840), II, p. 10.

4

Osmond Tiffany Jr., *The Canton Chinese, or The American Sojourn in the Celestial Empire* (Boston: James Munroe, 1849), p. 90.

5

Ibid., II, p. 59.

6

Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of China and its Inhabitants*, II, p. 24.

7

Ibid., II, pp. 24-25.

8

Ibid., II, p. 9. He described Carpenter Street, Curiosity Street and Apothecary Street and the business conducted in these streets.

9

For a comprehensive description of the location of the streets and on what they sold, see Patrick Conner, *The Hongs of Canton* (London: English Art Book, 2009), pp. 75-88.

10

The origins of the name of these two well-known streets has been debunked. It is a common belief that there was three shopping street in Canton: New China Street, China or Old China Street and Hog Lane. Recent research has found that there was only Hog Lane before 1760, and New China Street was only created after the 1822 fire, see Chapter 9 in Paul A. Van Dyke and Maria Kar-wing Mok, *Images of the Canton Factories 1760-1822: Reading History in Art* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015).

11

See Alfred Spencer, ed., *Memoirs of William Hickey (1749-1775)* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1913), p. 226; Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese, or The American Sojourn in the Celestial Empire*, p. 60; Melchior Yvan, *Inside Canton* (London: Henry Vizetelly, 1858), p. 41.

12

For issues on restrictions in access for westerners in Canton, see Maria Mok, ‘Some Restrictions on Westerners in Canton in the First Half of the 19th Century. A Study based on the Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection’, *Arts of Asia* 41: 4 (2011), pp. 102-115.

13

Like many names of people and places in China trade histories, multiple spelling was used for this street; it was also known as Leuenhing Keae, or Lunehing Kai, and 联兴街 in Chinese. It was a very busy street: ‘As you pass along the street, you will see on your right and left, and sometimes almost blocking up the way, priests, necromances, workers in iron, brass, wood, etc; apothecaries, victualers, changers of money, and retailers of almost an endless variety of commodities’. See *The Chinese Repository*, 1835, Vol. 4, May 1835-Apr. 1836, p. 535.

14

The exact location of the Curio Street, also called Physic Street, and in Chinese Tsiang Lan Kai 柴栏街, is noted in N.B. Dennys, Wm. Fred

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Mayers, & C. King, *The Treaty Ports of China and Japan: A Complete Guide to the Open Ports of those Countries, together with Peking, Yedo, Hongkong and Macao* (London: Trübner and Co, Hong Kong: A. Shortrede & Co, 1867), pp. 150, 183. It was where numerous shops for the sale of ancient (and imitation) porcelain and bronzes could be found. See Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of China and its Inhabitants*, II, p. 9.

Ibid.

Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese, or The American Sojourn's in the Celestial Empire*, p. 104. This may also be Looking-glass Street that Benjamin Ball visited in 1848, see Conner, *The Hongs of Canton*, p. 88, note 31.

See Dennys et al., *The Treaty Ports of China and Japan*, pp. 181-182.

Charles Lockyer, *Account of the Trade in India* (London: S. Crouch, 1711), p. 163.

Bryant P. Tilden MH-219 Journals (Typscript) 1815-1837, p. 192.

John Henry Gray, *Walks in the City of Canton* (Hong Kong: De Souza, 1875), p. 20.

Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of China and its Inhabitants*, II, p. 9.

Ibid., II, p. 24.

James Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage in 1811 & 1812 to Madras and China* (London: J. Nichols, Son, and Bentley, 1814), pp. 192-193.

For colourful details of shops, see Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese, or The American Sojourn's in the Celestial Empire*, pp. 68-75.

Félix Renouard de Sainte-Croix, *Voyage commercial et politique aux Indes Orientales* (Paris: Archives du Droit Français, 1810), III, p. 191.

This fan (Accession no. C1991.0001) entered the museum collection with a box that still carries a label with name and address of the shop.

The address of Tingqua's studio is inscribed with the date of the 4th year of Xianfeng period (1854) on the cover page of an album in the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art (Accession no. AH1975.0001).

Hipqua's lacquer shop at 17 New China Street was noted by Crossman, see Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of The China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities*, p. 336. Another address was: the first shop on Club Street, See Dennys et al., *The Treaty Ports of China and Japan*, p. 182. This shows that these shops might moved to different locations.

P.C. Briand, *Les jeunes voyageurs en Asie, ou Description raisonnée des divers pays compris dans cette belle partie du monde* (Paris: Chez Hivert, 1829), p. 10.

C. Toogood Downing, *The Fan-qui in China in 1836-1837* (London: Henry Colburn, 1838), II, pp. 49-50.

Ibid., II, pp. 74-75.

Remark made by Olof Toreen who was in China from 1750 to 1752, in Pehr Osbeck, *A Voyage to China and the East Indies* (London: Printed for Benjamin White, 1771), II, pp. 244.

Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage in 1811 & 1812 to Madras and China*, p. 189.

The author is grateful to Prof. Paul van Dyke and Dr. Susan Schopp for bringing the said collection to her attention. There are at least 230 pieces of drawings, ink on paper, bound in 4 folders, in the British Museum collection.

Spencer, ed., *Memoirs of William Hickey (1749-1775)*, p. 226.

Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese, or The American Sojourn's in the Celestial Empire*, pp. 61-62.

Ibid., p. 69.

Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage in 1811 & 1812 to Madras and China*, p. 187.

Downing, *The Fan-qui in China in 1836-1837*, II, p.54.

Yvan, *Inside Canton*, p. 51.

Olof Toreen in Pehr Osbeck, *A Voyage to China and the East Indies*, II, p. 244.

Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese, or The American Sojourn's in the Celestial Empire*, p. 64.

Downing, *The Fan-qui in China in 1836-1837*, II, pp. 63-64.

Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese, or The American Sojourn's in the Celestial Empire*, p. 64.

Pehr Osbeck, *A Voyage to China and the East Indies*, I, p. 242.

Sainte-Croix, *Voyage commercial et politique aux Indes Orientales*, III, p. 193. Also in Charles Gutzlaff, *China Opened* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1838), II, p. 146, where he commented 'Chinese lacquered ware is inferior to the Japanese'.

Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage in 1811 & 1812 to Madras and China*, p. 188.

Ibid. Gutzlaff's also made similar comments, 'In regard to porcelain manufactures, the Chinese have been entirely outdone by foreigners. Foreigners buy it at present, merely as a matter of curiosity', Gutzlaff, *China Opened*, II, p. 146

Sainte-Croix, *Voyage commercial et politique aux Indes Orientales*, III, p. 198.

Ibid., p. 199.

Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese or The American Sojourn in the Celestial Empire*, p. 73.

On ivory fans, first class was noted at 20 piastres, second-class at 7 piastres, and third-class at 5, see Sainte-Croix, *Voyage commercial et politique aux Indes Orientales*, III, p. 191.

Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese or The American Sojourn in the Celestial Empire*, p. 84.

John Barrow, *Travels in China from Peking to Canton* (London: Cadwell & W. Davies, 1806), p. 206.

Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese or The American Sojourn in the Celestial Empire*, p. 75.

Ibid., pp. 73, 89.

The price of a work by Lamqua is about five times cheaper than one by Chinnery. Patrick Conner quoted the following entries in James Matheson's personal account dated 1840-1841: \$34 and \$60 to Lamqua, and \$150 and \$250 to Chinnery, and in March 1842: Lamqua \$18.50, G. Chinnery \$100. Patrick Conner, *The China Trade, 1600-1860* (Brighton: The Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery & Museums, 1986), p. 54.

Gutzlaff continued in length his discussion of the quality of each type of these goods, see Gutzlaff, *China Opened*, II, pp. 142-147.

C. J. A. Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), p. 126.

Barrow, *Travels in China from Peking to Canton*, 218.

Conner, *The China Trade, 1600-1860*, p. 68.

Images of the collection can be browsed at the Natural History Museum website at <http://www.nhm.ac.uk>.

Osbeck, *A Voyage to China and the East Indies*, I, p. 233.

Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of The China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities*, pp. 162, 167, 170.

Patrick Conner and Anthony Hardy, *Paintings of the China Trade: The Sze Yuan Tang Collection of Historic Paintings* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Maritime Museum Ltd, 2013), plate 109, p. 124.

Barrow, *Travels in China from Peking to Canton*, p. 219.

There is a highly convincing reverse-glass painting of King George III now in a private collection in Hong Kong. The painting is by Chinese hands, based on a mezzotint engraving of the 1760s. See Patrick Conner and Anthony Hardy, *Paintings of the China Trade: The Sze Yuan Tang Collection of Historic Paintings*, plate 110, p. 125.

Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage in 1811 & 1812 to Madras and China*, p. 188.

Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of The China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities*, p. 24.

One excellent example in the British Museum collection is found in an album entitled: Occupation. Trades and Shops, c.1800-1831, painted on paper, museum registration number: 1877,0714,0.501.

Osbeck, *A Voyage to China and the East Indies*, I, pp. 220-221.

Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage in 1811 & 1812 to Madras and China*, p. 188.

Spencer, ed., *Memoirs of William Hickey (1749-1775)*, p. 210.

Ibid., p. 227.

Staunton, *Staunton's Diary*, pp. 227-230.

Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese or The American Sojourn in the Celestial Empire*, p. 80.

Ibid., pp. 80-82.

Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage in 1811 & 1812 to Madras and China*, p. 188.

Downing, *The Fan-qui in China in 1836-1837*, II, pp. 90-96.

Ibid., II, pp. 95-96.

Ibid., II, p. 114.

M. La Vollée, 'L'Artiste. Revue de Paris', *The Bulletin of the American Art Union* (1850), p. 119.

Arthur Cunynghame, *An Aide-de-camp's Recollections of Service in China* (London: Saunders-Otely, 1844) 2, pp. 98, 237.

Melchoir Yvan summed up life in Canton with these words to describe the western male community who according to him was either confined on the ship or in the small tract of land within the factories, while deprived of female companions, see Yvan, *Inside Canton*, p. 48.