Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies, Volume 1, 2007
南方華裔研究雜誌, 第一卷, **2007**

Canton, Cancao, and Cochinchina: New Data and New Light on Eighteenth-Century Canton and the Nanyang

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Abstract: Using data from little known eighteenth-century Dutch, Swedish and Danish documents, this article reveals the important, but previously obscured, commercial connections between eighteenth-century Canton and Nanyang Chinese and Southeast Asian commodity producers at the time. Southeast Asian imports – tin, sago and rattan – were integral to the growth of Canton's premier export trade, tea, as well as to other manufactures prized by Europeans, diasporic Chinese, and local peoples in the Nanyang. This article examines the new data and shows how it sheds new light on the complex interplay between trade, economic growth, and eighteenth-century socio-economic change as it occurred simultaneously on different shores of the South China Sea.

Introduction

This essay is a first attempt to explore a series of little-known connections between the great southern Chinese trading port of Canton (Guangzhou) and Southeast Asia during the eighteenth century. Although Canton was a major trading partner of various Southeast Asian ports at the time, these commercial ties have never been examined as integral parts of a commercial system that linked primary producers in the Nanyang, or Southeast Asia, with the major economic driver of the Chinese export economy of the time. Instead, in the traditional literature, these connections were either largely ignored or subsumed within studies of the *Hong* merchants, the foreign East India companies in China, or the Portuguese in Macao. Where Southeast Asian commerce was mentioned, it was usually treated as remote, fragmented, or only marginal to the discussion of commercial history. Conversely, when Southeast Asian perspectives dominated, the role of Canton in Nanyang regional history was largely shrouded in shadows, with the great port appearing as little more than a synonym for "destination".

The main reason for this neglect seems to lie in the sources used by previous western scholars. Their accounts of Canton's eighteenth-century trade relied primarily on the records of the English East India Company (EIC). There was a good reason for this: by the 1760s, the Company was a major customer of Canton. Its tea trade had grown seven-fold from the 1740s to the 1760s, and its investments in tea had expanded about six-fold in the same period (Chaudhuri 1978: 510, 539). However, Paul Van Dyke's recent research into Swedish, Danish and Dutch East India Companies' archival sources for the eighteenth century has shed a remarkably different light on the nature of Canton's foreign trade at the time, (Van Dyke 2002a, 2005a) one that challenges our former understanding of its size and operations. We can now quantify more accurately the size of the English Company's trade, upon which our previous knowledge of the eighteenth-century Canton trade in general rested. Two important new facts that emerged from this quantification form the starting point of this essay. First, EIC trade represented only 27 percent of Canton's commerce; and second, the junk trade to Southeast Asia, something until now largely ignored, comprised almost the same volume of shipping as that of the English Company. (Van Dyke 2005a: 147) If the value of the goods traded continued to favour the English shippers, the surprising size of the Nanyang trade revealed by the new data requires us to rethink the links between eighteenth-century Canton and diasporic Chinese and indigenous ports and commodity producers in Southeast Asia.

This essay seeks to begin that reconsideration by examining more closely the new data on eighteenth-century Canton's trade, and by considering the texture and structure of commerce between Canton and Southeast Asia. In so doing it will pay special attention to the interplay between trade, economic growth and socio-economic changes occurring simultaneously on these two shores of the South China Sea, among diasporic Chinese and indigenous Southeast Asians both. We begin with an overall view of the trade, focusing particularly on tea and showing how this most important of eighteenth-century export commodities relied heavily on inputs from Southeast Asia. We will then show that these, and other key Southeast Asian commercial inputs, were largely financed by a mixture of capital from Europe and India. If scholars agree, generally speaking, that the inflows of capital, skills and population quickened the pace of social and economic change in Southeast Asia at the time, our study suggests that this phenomenon penetrated regions previously not regarded as significant for such developments. In particular, it shows that much closer, "horizontal" links existed between the Canton trade (Wong 2003; Fletcher 1995) and urban growth and political tension in the Lower Mekong region (modern southern Vietnam and southeast Cambodia), a place of considerable Chinese immigration after the fall of the Ming but nevertheless not an area that has usually been considered as significant in this respect as other export-oriented areas like Siam or insular Southeast Asia.

Inputs and Outputs: Southeast Asian Commodities and Chinese Exports

In this section we shall briefly sketch the role of Southeast Asian imports in some of the most important Chinese export commodities. China's eighteenth-century leading export was tea. By the middle of the century English per capita consumption of Chinese tea was 1.1 pounds (including legal and illegal trade). But when the British government abolished most tea duties in 1784, consumption virtually doubled, to two pounds per head. (Walvin 1997: 18) Imported Southeast Asian tin played a key role in servicing this rising demand by making it possible to export increasing quantities of a commodity that was very delicate to transport. Tin and lead were the most practical and efficient insulators available to protect tealeaves in transit from absorbing moisture, acquiring strange aromas, and losing flavour due to aeration. These two metals were thus essential inputs that facilitated China's growing tea trade. All grades of tea needed to be packed in tin or lead-lined containers to preserve their quality. While tea for export was packed in lead-lined wooden chests, with some of that lead being imported from Southeast Asia, such chests were too heavy and clumsy for inland transport. Tin containers on the other hand were light and much easier to carry over mountain passes and ship down China's rivers. Producers in the tea lands therefore annually consumed large quantities of tin in the form of canisters that allowed their product to reach Canton safely and without risk of contamination. (Hanson 1876: 70-76; Fortune 1852: 197-207; Wirgin 1998: 290).

But tin was not only useful for making tea canisters. As there was a strong demand for this metal in Europe at the time, European tea traders also exported much Asian tin to Europe in the form of ballast. Ballast tin could easily be re-smelted after arrival to eliminate any oxidation that had occurred during the voyage, and then sold for a profit. Ingots of tin made a firm and strong floor for the porcelain chests, while its density, resistance to water damage, and saleability in Europe, made tin a good choice for this purpose. The tin used for both tea canisters and ballast, however, had first to be imported from Southeast Asia before it could be used or re-exported in China's tea trade.[1]

[1] While grain and sugar might be used as ballast in sailing vessels, they rarely show up in the Canton Records as anything but part of the cargo. Porcelain (in chests or bundles) was sometimes used as ballast, but water could damage it and it still required something underneath it to form a solid and level floor.

As all European commercial companies' records show, porcelain was also an important Cantonese export in the eighteenth century. Another Southeast Asian commodity played the same sort of humble but essential role in facilitating this trade as tin did for tea. Southeast Asian sago was imported into Canton in large quantities to use as loose packaging for exported porcelain. In the eighteenth century, packing porcelain in sago was one of the preferred means of preventing breakages and, like tin, the commodity could be resold for a profit in Europe.[2] In fact, if a porcelain dealer ran short of sago he might lose sales as the substitution of other packing materials noticeably increased the risk of breakages, and in turn of pressure to reimburse foreigners for damages in transit. Indeed, if enough sago was not available porcelain shipments might be suspended until more arrived. For this reason, Danish ships often stopped at Malacca to load sago before going on to Canton, ensuring supplies for their porcelain chests.[3]

Another important Southeast Asian import that played a valuable role in China's export market was rattan. Foreign ships took onboard large quantities of it to use as loose packaging (dunnage) in their hulls. The canes were ideal for this purpose: thin and strong, they had no aromatic qualities that could infect tea. A typical Dutch East India Company ship, for example, might use 8,500 lbs or 2,000 bundles of rattan for bracing and dunnage. Like tin and sago, rattan could also be easily resold at destination. (NAH: Canton 72) Rattan was equally highly regarded in the silk export trade. Both flexible and durable, it could be wound around the raw silk bundles to preserve their colour by keeping them tightly wrapped, while at the same time minimizing bulk compared to wooden chests which, in any case, did not protect the silk as well. (Morse 1926: I, 205-206) These three commodities are only the most significant of the Southeast Asian products that played important roles in facilitating Canton's export trade, roles which we are just beginning to understand and evaluate.

One of the best places to source all these valuable raw materials was in Cochinchina (modern central and southern Vietnam) and along the nearby coast. After half a century of recurring war with the north in the seventeenth century, the first three-fourths of the eighteenth century enjoyed a long truce that enabled Cochinchina to expand southwards, and enjoy an era of prosperity under successive eighteenth-century rulers, especially Minh Vương (1691-1725), Võ Vương (1738-1765) and the early years of Định Vương (1765-1770). All encouraged trade. In addition to the important seventeenth century entrepot, Hội An, a number of flourishing new ports had emerged after Ming refugees began to settle in the far south in the late seventeenth century. The two most important of these were Biên Hòa (known as Đồng Nai or Longnai in Chinese sources) and Mỹ Tho.

The most important of the Ming refugee ports was not in Cochinchina proper, however, but further along the coast, in the Gulf of Siam at what is now the Vietnamese-Cambodian border. This was Cancao (better known now as Hà Tiên), founded by the Cantonese Mạc Cửu in the early eighteenth century. Cancao's Chinese name [Kang Kau] indicates it was a port (港口 or 港口國) as did its Malay name of Kuala ["river mouth"]. (Brother Julian 1770: 173) Cancao was known to the Dutch for its trade with the Archipelago, supplying the latter with salt and rice during the southwest monsoon in exchange for pepper. Trading vessels were naturally driven towards Cancao by a strong ocean current that flowed through the Taiwan Straits, along the southern coast of China, around central and southern Vietnam, and then into the Gulf of

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[2] Using straw or chaff in porcelain chests could result in excessive breakage and there was little demand for them in Europe, where they were common.

[3] If sago is not kept dry it expands and also produces damage. [Jörg 1982: 51, 86, 129] Nevertheless, it remained the best available packaging material at the time and shows up consistently in all the East India companies' records from the eighteenth century.

Siam. (Andaya 1993: 123) Three interlocking trading networks converged and overlapped at this port. The first was the trade of the Lower Mekong area and its associated Cambodia hinterland. Second, to its north, Cancao maintained close connections with the ports of southern and central Vietnam. Third, Cancao traded with the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, the Riau-Lingga Archipelago and particularly the Palembang-Bangka region. Most of the tin Cancao re-exported to Canton came from Chinese miners in Bangka, as we will discuss in more detail later. After a shaky start, from the 1740s Cancao was on its way to becoming the primary port of the Lower Mekong region and a semi-autonomous overseas Chinese state whose influence in southern Indochina would peak from the later 1750s to the early 1770s. (Sellers 1983, Sakurai and Kiragawa 1999, Cooke 2004a)

Finally, between the two developed ports of Biên Hòa and Cancao, there also emerged some time in the mid-eighteenth-century another semi-autonomous port, at the mouth of the lower Mekong arm (the Bassac River). It was called Bassac, or Passiak in the Canton Records. The French missionary Levavasseur knew it as the port of Cambodia in 1768, when he travelled up the Bassac to Cancao via a canal linking the Mekong arm to the Hà Tiên River near modern Châu Đốc. When he passed through Bassac, Levavasseur reported seeing many more than 50 junks, large and small, waiting to load cargo there. (Van Dyke 2004a, Trịnh Hoài Đức 1820: 146; Sakurai 2004: 42; Cooke 2004c: 153, fn 18.) The large junks he saw were most likely from Canton, since a later eighteenth-century Vietnamese source reported they were the biggest of all Chinese junks (which consequently paid higher taxes than those from Fujian, Teochiu (Chaozhou) and Hainan). (Lê Quý Đôn 1776: 31b)

What we now know is that the majority of these large Canton junks sailing to Southeast Asia heavily patronised this string of ports between the 1760s and 1780s. Of the 30 or more junks based in Canton, 75 to 80 percent had a particular interest in trading with Cambodia, Cancao, and Cochinchina. It is interesting to note that, generally speaking, this was also the period between the demise of Ayutthaya, destroyed by Burmese forces in 1765, and the 1780s founding of the new Thai state based on Bangkok. It seems likely that these Cantonese junk traders suffered less from the eclipse of a major Siamese trading centre than other trading networks might have done at the time. Instead, these catastrophic political events appear to have opened an ample space in which minor ports could compete more successfully for a major commercial role.

But there was much more to the Canton–Nanyang story than the bare elements sketched above. Thanks to the powerful light that the Canton Records throw on the dim and poorly understood picture of the mid-eighteenth-century Southeast Asia–Canton trade, we can now much more successfully piece together an amount of scattered and isolated evidence whose meaning had previously eluded us. As we will discuss in the next section, the picture that emerges from this process reveals for the first time a large inter-active economic zone that linked Chinese and Nanyang shores of the South China Sea to each other and to their respective mountainous hinterlands. The reason we can now see this bigger picture is because we have a better light to illuminate the critical corners of the South China Sea, where trade and production were surprisingly integrated, at a critical juncture in Southeast Asian history.

Canton, the Financial Centre of Eighteenth-Century Asia

Now let us turn our focus to Canton. Contrary to the longstanding perception that the Canton system was corrupt, rigid and obstructive to commerce, as Van Dyke has recently shown it was in fact arguably the most approachable commercial centre in eighteenth-century Asia, and certainly the only place in East Asia with an "open" market. The Chinese government did not discriminate by race, nationality, religion, or any other factor, but accepted everyone and anyone who wanted to trade there. All products in China were available to whoever wanted to buy or sell them, a policy the Qing government insisted on maintaining over time. Canton in the early years of the eighteenth century quickly emerged "as one of the most flexible places to negotiate business". (Van Dyke 2005a: 5)

One important aspect of Canton's prosperity that was central to its growth was the port's amazing ability to attract foreign capital. This was largely due to seventeenth-century developments in places far distant from China. In Europe, interest rates were clearly trending downward by the end of the seventeenth century. In England and in the Dutch Republic, the two most commercially developed maritime trading countries in Europe, interest rates on bond debt had fallen by the 1710s to the point where 4 percent and 3 percent (respectively) was common. (Chaudhuri 1978: 445; Tracy 1991: 293-4) As a result, an imbalance developed between usury markets in Europe (and European colonies in the Americas) and Asia, which caused a huge quantity of silver coin to move from the former to the latter. The influx of New World silver into India, for instance, pushed interest rates there down to 7 to 8 percent by the end of the seventeenth century. Asia became such a magnet for European and New World investment capital at this time, that Chaudhuri insisted "there cannot be any question that the silver imported by the European Companies played an active and not a passive role" in Asian financial markets. (Chaudhuri 1978: 159)

While interest rates in eighteenth-century Asia varied considerably from time to time, it always remained the case that Chinese merchants in Canton paid higher interest rates for capital compared to what were available in Europe and in Asian ports controlled by Europeans. Because it was officially illegal to borrow from foreigners, interest charged on foreign capital was not regulated in China. The tea trade, however, could not grow without investment capital so, in practice, Chinese officials often turned a blind eye to these transactions. And despite their notional illegality, such foreign investments were surprisingly safe: if a Chinese merchant happened to fail, the Qing court insisted any debts to foreigners be honoured by forcing other Hong merchants to shoulder the obligation. Repaying foreign investors in this way ensured they were not discouraged from returning to China. (Ch'en 1990) As a result, much foreign capital continually flowed into Canton to fund all aspects of its foreign commerce.

What the Canton Records show is that much of this foreign money went into financing the junk trade to Southeast Asia. Chinese merchant houses in Canton were constantly in need of working capital, for buying tea, porcelain, and silk in China, and for financing the trade to Southeast Asia. The best, and sometimes only, source of working capital was from foreigners. The investors include Swedes, Portuguese, Spanish, Armenians, Muslims, Parsees, French, Danes, Dutch, and English, among others. These foreigners could borrow funds in Macao, Canton, or other places in Asia at 10 to 15 percent per annum and reloan the money to Chinese for 15 to 20 percent interest per annum.

The investments were made either in the form of straight loans, or as bonds known as bottomry contracts. A bottomry contract was a sort of combined insurance policy and speculative small business loan that assumed all risks of sea hazard to the vessel and cargo. High risks made for high rates: the common rate in Canton for junk bottomry, for every destination except Manila, was 40 percent per annum for the length of the voyage. Bottomry bonds enabled the investors and merchants to share the risks of voyages to Southeast Asian. The following is an example of a bottomry contract made between a Swedish supercargo, Jean Abraham Grill, and a Chinese captain in 1765:

> Wu Heguan, captain of the junk *Hingtay*, borrowed 500 taels of silver from Jean Abraham Grill for sailing to Cochinchina, at interest of 40 percent. The principal and interest are to be repaid two months after the junk returns to port [Canton]. If

> the wind and water are not smooth [i.e. a misfortune happens], each party will accept fate and is not permitted to trouble the other. (Van Dyke 2004b)

Although silver flowed continually into Canton, the demand for it was so strong that interest rates remained steadily high. So profitable was the capital market that investors could often make more money, with less risk, by financing the China trade than by trading themselves. This imbalance in rates between Canton and outside markets provided China with the incentives needed to attract a seemingly endless supply of foreign capital. As a result, a large part of the capital circulating in the Canton market never came directly from the pockets of Chinese people but from individuals who were physically thousands of miles away from Canton. Some traders continued to invest in the Canton junk trade even after they returned home to Europe or India, while other investors never even set foot in China. They depended on friends and private agents in Canton to invest the funds for them, paying a fee for those services. There was obviously good money to be made by investing in the bustling economic activities in Asia, in tea, porcelain and silk on the one end, and tin and cash-crop production at the other. (Van Dyke 2004b, 2005a)

A Hokkienese merchant family operating in Canton in this period provides an excellent clue to how foreign money largely financed Chinese trade in Southeast Asia. The Yan (顏) family managed both a foreign factory called the Taihe Hang (泰 和 行) and their own junk factory, the Taishun Hang (泰 順 行). They operated six junks out of the Taishun Hang in the 1760s, which were mostly bound for Cochinchina, Bassac, and Palembang. Other *Hong* merchants, such as the Ye (葉), Pan (潘) and Chen, (陳) were doing much the same thing. (Van Dyke 2004b, 2005a)

As Table 1 below shows, the Yan family's trade was regularly financed by foreign capital. When examining the figures, it must be remembered that they represent only a fraction of the loans the Yans were taking out from foreigners each year. And the numbers in Table 1 do not include the many bottomry bonds that the Yans took out from foreigners to finance junk voyages, which were at the much higher rate of 40 percent interest. These private transactions have been greatly under-represented in the historical literature, as have their economic significance. In July 1724, for example, when the English supercargoes arrived in Canton they found that all of the *Hong* merchants except “Suqua” (Chen Shouguan 陳 壽 觀) were greatly indebted to "certain Armenians". The scene was no different in the late eighteenth century when another Armenian, by the name of Matheus Joannes, captured so much of the capital market in Canton, including the financing of the trade to Southeast Asia and India, that when he

Table 1: Short-term and long-term loans given to the Yan merchants in Canton by the Swedish supercargoes to finance the family trade (All figures in Chinese taels, calculated by Van Dyke).

Ngan Hongsia			Short-term Loans: Interest Tabulated by the Month			
	loan signer	Rate	Months	Debit	Credit	Balance
1764.11.08	Grill & Grubb	0.020	2.00	10,000.000		10,400.000
1765.11.31(?)	Grill & Grubb	0.020	2.00	12,000.000		12,480.000
1765.00.00(?)	Grill & Grubb	0.020	2.00	7,770.000		8,080.800
1765.01.31	Grill & Grubb	0.020	2.00	12,000.000	355.200	12,124.800

1765.11.10(?)	Grill?	0.020	2.00	7,770.000		8,080.800
1766.01.10	Grill?	0.020	2.00		310.800	7,770.000
1766.11.31(?)	Grill?	0.015	2.00	6,941.200		7,149.436
1767.01.31	Grill?	0.015	2.00		208.236	6,941.200
Ngan Hingsia			**Long-term Loans: Interest Tabulated by the Year**			
Ingsia	**loan signer**	**Rate**		**Debit**	**Credit**	**Balance**
176?.00.00	Grill & Grubb?	1.18		18,500.000		21,830.000
176?.00.00	Grill & Grubb?	1.18			3,330.000	18,500.000
1768.12.13	Hahr & Grill	1.20		3,700.000		4,440.000
1768.12.19	Hahr & Grill	1.20		3,700.000	(via Fritz)	4,440.000
1769.12.13	Hahr & Grill	1.20			4,440.000	
1769.12.13	Hahr & Grill	1.20		4,440.000		5,328.000
1769.12.13	J Hahr	1.20		4,440.000		5,328.000
1770.10.22	J Hahr	1.20		3,552.000		4,262.400
1769.12.13	J. Grill	1.20		2,960.000		3,552.000
1769.12.31	J. Grill	1.20		3,552.000		4,262.400
1770.12.13	J. Grill	1.20		4,440.000		5,328.000
1771.12.13	J. Grill	1.20		5,328.000		6,393.600
1772.12.31	J. Grill	na		3,700.000		(for junk trade)

died in 1794 the city fathers in Macao refused to allow his estate to leave. They feared that if all the funds were withdrawn from the city's coffers at once the economy would collapse. (Smith 2003; Smith and Van Dyke 2003)

These are but a few examples of the many commercial loans made each year. We know about these examples because some private records have survived; but they are only a fraction of the total number of such transactions taking place each year in Canton. If we had much fuller information regarding all such private transactions, it would surely reveal a huge influx of capital into eighteenth-century China. The funds were then dispersed in many directions, much of them going to finance junk trade because that was where the most money could be made. As long as financiers spread their investments over several junks, even if one or two junks perished they could realize as much as 37 percent on their money each year. If their luck held and the junks suffered no casualties, investors could make 40 percent profit, without ever touching a single chest of tea or any other commodity.

The business of Chinese merchants and supercargoes in Canton was so intertwined with overseas investors that, in 1779, English creditors in Canton found that 32 percent of Chinese debts were owed to consignors, who were resident in Indian settlements and had invested via the supercargoes in Canton. (Morse 1926: 46) In this year, the debt of Yan Ingsia alone amounted to a colossal 1.5 million Spanish dollars, almost all of which (92 percent) was owed to the principal creditors of the private English traders. His fortune in Canton and the Southeast Asian trade ended that same year with the arrival of a British ship, the HMS *Seahorse*, from India. It carried "a petition prompted by outraged English country traders against Yngshaw [Ingsia] and other failed merchant [that] left officials with no choice but to report to Peking lest the warship should take the complaint to Tienstin". (Cheong 1997: 152-153)

The point we are leading to, and which is abundantly shown in the Canton Records, is that the production of tin and various cash crops, which was largely carried out by Chinese labourers in late-eighteenth century Southeast Asia, was in fact financed by mixed non-Chinese capital, especially by European and Indian investors. What Jackson observed in regard to "Chinese" capital in early nineteenth-century Singapore could well be applied to later eighteenth-century labourer colonies in Southeast Asia: that “without a system of financing of this type, extensive agricultural colonisation could never have occurred in early nineteenth-century Singapore”. (Jackson 1968: 13)

It now appears that the increasing involvement of foreign capital, entrepreneurs, and labour, which has always been considered a characteristic feature of the colonial period in Southeast Asia, started about one century earlier. As foreign merchants took a large share in intra-Asian commerce as private traders, Asian entrepreneurs were able to profit from the situation, finding ways to accommodate or co-operate with them. (Blussé and Gaastra 1998: 9) Thanks to the Canton Records we are no longer so sure where the line can be drawn between Asian and European traders. Dutch merchants, for example, hired cargo space on Portuguese ships, and they regularly shipped goods to Batavia aboard several of the Canton junks, some of which even flew the Dutch flag. The Danish and Swedish records both show that some of the *Hong* merchants, who owned and operated junks in Canton, also regularly issued bottomry contracts to foreign ships bound for Europe. The Armenians, Muslims and Parsees from India were all intricately involved in these transactions on many levels. (Van Dyke 2005a)

We now turn to a deeper investigation of the increasing involvement of this mixed capital, entrepreneurs and labour at the Southeast Asian end of the South China Sea, and its implications for the economic development and political tensions of the late eighteenth century. We begin with Cancao and the Chinese tin market.

Cancao as a Tin Market for Canton

The Canton Records provide crucial data on Cancao in the 1760s, showing that it had by then emerged as an important mature port in the trading world of the South China Sea. Cancao’s prosperity blossomed between 1740 and late 1760s, due to the misfortunes of its competitors, in particular the Dutch massacre of the Chinese in Batavia of 1740 and the Burmese destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767. The first factor was evident in a report by Li Qingfang, a Guangdong official, to the Qing court in September 1741:

> Because of the chaos and the incident in Batavia last year [i.e. the 1740 massacre] most of the Amoy junks turned to trade in Pontiemas [Cancao], Songkla, Johore and Nakon, and came back with huge profits. The number of junks going to Batavia was reduced. What is more, the junks that did make the trip to Batavia were not sent by the rich and resourceful Chinese merchants. (Qing Archives of the Grand Council: vol.7790, no.9)

In the 1740s, Cancao was well known in China as a centre for the rice trade, with its name appearing repeatedly in reports to Emperor Qian Long. (Qing Archives, vol.342) Located between two rice surplus areas, the Mekong Delta and Chaophraya basin, Cancao was easily able to obtain rice cheaply and trade it with nearby ports.[4] By the 1750s, however, information in the Canton Records shows Cancao expanding its commercial specialities to become a centre for the tin trade to China. The figures in Table 2, although admittedly only scattered data, still hint clearly at the importance of Cancao in the tin trade of the time.

Table 2: Canton Tin Imports from Select Ports in SE Asia 1758-1774 *(piculs)*[5]

year	Siam	Passiack	Cancao	Palembang	Terengganu	Macao
1758			7000			
1762				5000		1500
1763				10,000		
1764				8000		
1765				10,000		
1766						1500
1767		3163	1984	11,000		
1768	100	1000	2700			
1769			6000			
1770			2000			
1773					320	
1774			5000	7000		

One remarkable point emerging from these figures is that Cancao supplied Canton with a large quantity of tin even after the founding of Bangkok, whose control of this profitable product had been rather limited. Siam largely missed the most productive years of Palembang, i.e. between 1760 and 1780, due to Burmese invasions and the internal warfare following the Burmese destruction of Ayuthya in 1767. The absence of a rival created an opportunity for Cancao. Although no reliable figures exist on tin exports from Cochinchina, it seems obvious that it was also actively capitalizing on this opportunity to expand trade with the Archipelago. (See below)

It took Siam a considerable time to regain its position in the tin trade. In 1781, for example, the Siamese king's "tribute" ship arrived at Canton with 10,000 piculs of redwood, 3,000 piculs of pepper, 100 piculs of elephant's tusks, 3 elephants, peacocks etc., but only 300 piculs of tin. (Morse 1926: 72-73) Cancao, in contrast, supplied no less than 2,000 piculs of tin for several years up to at least 1770. Cancao was also the tin market for Amoy and Limpho [Ningbo]. (NAH: Canton 79) The tin brought from Cancao was so remarkable for its consistent quantity and quality that even the rumour of incoming Cancao junks might drag the tin price down. In 1772, for example, the tin price fell on the expectation of a large amount to be brought by six or seven junks from Cancao and by various foreign ships. (NAH: Canton 81)

Cancao's mid-eighteenth century connection with Palembang was important, as Palembang, "one of the wealthiest Indonesian kingdoms" at the time, was firmly in control of the tin mines on Bangka. (Andaya 1993:185) The Cancao-Palambang connection appears loud and clear in the Canton Records. For example, in 1779, the Dutch supercargoes in Canton learned from their Chinese merchants "that the two junks from Cancao arrived at Palembang, and it was said that each would have 3,000 piculs of tin". (NAH: Canton 88) The Palembang-Bangka connection provided a key source for Cancao's surprising emergence as the centre of the tin trade. Although the

[4] Cambodia was also long known to have supplied rice to Palembang. In 1768, a missionary saw junks from Palembang buying rice directly from Cambodia. Levavasseur's journal, 17 Jan. 1769, cited in Cooke 2004b.
[5]The 1767 figures for Passiak and Cancao are from Alexander Dalrymple, *Oriental Repertory*, (London: East India Company, 1808), vol.1, pp. 281-283.

largest percentage of tin produced in Bangka was sold to the Dutch, a good portion was apparently either sold to Cancao with the permission of the Sultan of Palembang, or smuggled out by the Chinese miners in Bangka. This tin arrived at Canton by way of Cancao. (Heidhues 1992: 20)

Tin flowed continually into Canton from different places. So many different vessels from Cochinchina and other Southeast Asian ports replenished the tin supply in Canton in such a regular way, that the Hong merchants were able to use the situation effectively to keep the price of tin down.[6] Table 3 (below) shows that, despite fluctuations, the figures reveal supply generally kept up with demand.

The large quantity of tin being produced in this period helps to explain a phenomenon observed by Leonard Blussé among the Dutch in Batavia, that while Chinese and Portuguese formerly bought tin from the Dutch as a ballast commodity for their trip to China, the situation changed after 1740. "Instead of buying, they sold increasing quantities to the Dutch authorities. This is a surprising development as the export of copper and tin was strictly forbidden in China". (Blussé 1991:240) The tin sent to Batavia was so abundant that in 1763 the VOC, which had always anxiously guarded tin from being traded (or in its eyes, "smuggled") to anywhere but Batavia, had to set a 30,000 picul limit on its purchase from Palembang. (Somers Heidhues 1992: 8) The same thing happened in Canton in the 1760s, as can be seen in the following statement from 1766: "it is a very difficult year for that article [tin], as *the entire land* [China] is filled up with it". (NAH: Canton 29) It is clear that Palembang's tin production was knitted into markets at both ends of the South China Sea, via the Cancao junk trade in particular. As this example shows, the South China Sea can be genuinely regarded as one large inter-active economic and commercial zone at the time. But it was not only tin that demonstrated this inter-linkage. Rice also played its part, as the next section discusses.

Table 3: Tin Prices in China, 1751-1782[7] (all figures in Chinese taels)

year	in Canton	in Amoy
1751	14	
1758	13.2	
1763	12	
1764	11.2-12	
1765	15.2	17-17.2
1766	5-15.5	
1768	12.4-12.8	
1769	11.34	
1770	14.6	
1772	very low	
1774	12.5	
1776	14	

[7] These prices come from Dutch and Chinese sources. For some items, the foreign price could be 20 percent higher than the Chinese price, because the former included all transport charges, factory expenses, handling charges, and duties. The Chinese junk traders, on the other hand, had to pay those expenses themselves so they are not included in the Chinese price. Most of the prices listed in the 'Canton' column of Table 2 are the foreign price, while the 'Amoy' column shows the Chinese prices. The way Canton and Amoy arrived at their prices also varied according to the costs and duties that were factored into the prices and the different weights used in each port. Because of these variables, the prices in Table 2 should not be taken verbatim, but used only as a rough guide.

1778	13	
1780	15	
1782	18.9	

Links Between Tin and Rice

Although there had been a long history of trade between rice from the mainland and pepper and tin from the Archipelago, by the eighteenth century the need for trade between the two became more intense and acute. The decisive characteristic of these overseas Chinese communities played an important role in tightening the economic connections between the tin producing area of Palembang and rice producing areas of mainland Southeast Asia's Water Frontier. Different from the earlier Chinese immigrants, who had settled in Southeast Asia over a relatively long period and had better adapted to the local societies, (Reid 1996: 15-50) the Chinese of the eighteenth century arrived within a relatively short time and rarely sought to be well integrated locally. In any case, their products were not intended for local markets. (Trocki 1997: 86-89) For instance, all of the 73,000 piculs of Bangka tin produced annually from its seventeen-plus Chinese tin-mining settlements were exported. (Andaya 1993: 190) Because Chinese producer settlements never became self-sustaining economic entities, they needed to have essential commodities, especially rice, brought to them from elsewhere.

Such massive production like that of Bangka tin was only possible if a pattern of food provisioning was firmly established. One tin worker required half a picul (30 kg) of rice per month (Heidhues 1992: 35), and in 1757 the number of Chinese labourers on Bangka was estimated at about 25,000. (Andaya 1993: 218) This means that mining communities had to import 150,000 piculs of rice per year to sustain tin production, plus salt, dried fish and vegetables (Cooke 2004b) This was where Cancao (and Cambodia to a lesser extent) found its niche market. Cancao could never have become the thriving tin centre serving Canton without its easy access to the large-scale rice surplus of the Mekong Delta, a major centre of rice production since the 1740s (Li 1995), which is precisely when the tin production in Bangka took off.

It is interesting that these three phenomena, rice production in the Mekong Delta, tin production in Palembang/Bangka, and the trade of tin between Cancao and Canton, coincided so closely with each other and covered roughly the same period. According to Thomas Horsfield, tin production in Palembang reached its peak between 1760 and 1780, "and Bangka’s inhabitants later recalled the reign of Sultan Ahmad Najamudin (r.1757-74) of Palembang as a golden age". (Quoted from Heidhues 1992: 17) These years were also the golden age for Cancao and Cochinchina. It is striking to think that Palembang, a place a thousand miles away from Cancao and Cochinchina could have served as an important engine for their growth in the 1760s, but this seems to have been the case. The volume and frequency of the rice/tin trade between the two coasts must have been considerable. Cochinchina was a significant competitor in the tin trade at this time, and Cochinchinese junks often carried tin to both Amoy and Canton. (NAH: Canton 74). Its main port, Hội An, levied a tax rate specifically designated for Palembang and Cancao in the 1760s, (Lê Quý Đôn 1776: 116) which suggests a rather regular and frequent trade between Cancao, Palembang and Cochinchina at this time. Indeed, so much tin was coming into Cochinchina at the time that several sources show Macao ships and others loading quantities of tin from Cochinchina and carrying it to China as well. (*Huangchao jingshi wenbian* 1826: vol.83; Dalrymple 1808: vol.1, 289).

The price of rice from Cochinchina would have been considerably lower than the rate given by the Sultan of Palembang to the Bangka Chinese miners, yet the latter was lower than the rice price in Cochinchina in its bad years. (Andaya 1993: 219; Lê Quý

Đôn 1776: 101, 105, 138)[8] The distance between the Mekong Delta to its north, Huế, was about 10 days' travel, only slightly shorter than the trip to Palembang. Nevertheless the rice price set by the Sultan of Palembang was not unreasonable either, as it was lower than the rice price in Cochinchina in its bad years.[9] The rice supplied from different sources evened out disruption to the production in particular localities and ensured that the labourers in Palembang were well fed and stayed productive.

Urban Growth and Consumption

The foregoing information and discussion on trade and production at two ends of the eighteenth-century South China Sea all begs one basic question: how significant was the impact of such economic activities in Southeast Asia, and what effects did they have on local societies and the lives of people? Did it all represent "growth without structural change", in that while foreign trade brought about more economic activities it was absorbed into existing relationships and institutions without really changing them, and that significant changes had to wait until the landmark changes wrought by colonialism? For example, how did commerce affect the living conditions and the wages of the Chinese labourers and how did they compare with the coolies of the high-colonial period? We ask this question because, from what we can gather from the recent data, the frequent exchanges of tin, rice and other products stimulated a marked increase in imports of consumption products in the coastal areas of Southeast Asia where there were frequent trade with Canton. This was most evident in their demand for Chinese tea. In parallel with the in-rush of tin mentioned above, the Canton market observed rising tea prices caused by demand from the junks from Cochinchina and Batavia, as the following entries show.

> 1763: The prices of fine teas rise daily owing to the Cochinchinese junk people picking out and buying up so many of the best chops.
>
> 1764, Jan 23: We learnt that the Cochinchinese and Batavia junk people have begun to contract Congo at 17 taels and common Souchon at 21 taels, and before they have what they need, there is nothing much that we [the Dutch] can do.
>
> 1764, Feb 10-18: Most of the fine tea goes to Batavia and Cochinchina, and because both of the Batavia junks left today … and the Cochinchinese have taken away all [they] need, we will now have the pleasure to purchase the remaining fine tea.
>
> 1765, Jan 22-27: The junk people already have been quoted very high prices for their cargos to Batavia and Cochinchina.
>
> 1771, Dec 21: This tea [Congo?] makes up the dominant part of the Cochinchinese junks' tea. They buy up a considerable amount to export to there. (NAH Canton 35: 71-74)

A large quantity of tea must have been sold in the areas between Cochinchina and Batavia, and the Chinese labour settlements might have formed a market with considerable buying power. In the absence of the real wages of Chinese labourers in Cochinchina and Cancao at this time, some figures from the Chinese *Kong Koan* records in Batavia in 1790 might serve as a reference point. In July that year, 47 Chinese agricultural labourers complained to the Kong Kuan that a sugar mill owner

[8] It was reckoned at a set price of 100 rials the *koyan* regardless of whether it was a good year or bad year for the rice harvest. Rice brought from the Mekong Delta to the Cochinchinese capital, Huế, was about six times cheaper than that of Palembang. Cochinchina's usual price in Huế of the 1770s was 0.3 quan.

[9] Rice was often more than 10 times its usual price in the bad years. Li and Reid eds, *Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen*, p.138.

had not yet paid their wages, which they were anxious to receive in order to send money home when the junks left for China. The wages owed to the 47 workers amounted to 1,938 rixdollars, making an average wage of 41 rixdollars each (about 22 taels). (Blussé & Chen 2003: 21) In comparison, in Guangdong Province in 1795 the wage for sugar press-workers was from 500 to 750 cash per month (5 to 7.5 taels). (Mazumdar 1998: 283) If these figures are reliable and representative of the actual situation at the time, then wages for common labourers in Batavia were four times higher than in Guangdong. This comparison also confirms the study by Robert Allen on the low wages of China on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and explains why China was competitive in the production of manufactured goods. (Allen 2005)

The situation of Chinese labourers in mainland Southeast Asia would have been similar. In Bangkok in the early 1820s, according to Crawfurd, an ordinary day labourer cost about 11 pence. Using an exchange rate of one tael equals 43.2 pence gives a daily rate of 0.25 taels. Common day labourers in the foreign factories at Canton at this time were earning only 0.15 taels per day and, as noted above, other ordinary labourers in China were receiving much less, so these wages would surely have seemed very attractive to them.

Compared with the contemporary China and India, the wages in Southeast Asia was most likely higher in the eighteenth century. Crawfurd reported that a common house carpenter earned one shilling and three pence per day in Southeast Asia, which he thought to be "extraordinary". Labour in Cochinchina was also said to be fairly expensive, and estimated as twice as high as in Calcutta. (Crawfurd 1828: 453, 522) As was usually the case in Southeast Asia, Chinese labourers' costs were always higher than the indigenous labourers. Taking all this into consideration, the wages of Chinese tin miners in eighteenth-century Bangka too were very likely higher than that of the nineteenth century. Dutch reports of nineteenth century Bangka seem to confirm this: "many miners achieved their goal of returning to China during the more prosperous decades of the eighteenth century", and those Chinese "obtained a reward for their labour far more abundant than in after periods". (Heidhues 1992: 17)

With their comparatively well-to-do status and low food costs in Southeast Asia, Chinese labourers must have formed a considerable pool of consumers, as was reflected in their ability to buy up good tea and other Chinese products in the Canton market. An important point here is that such a development should not be seen as outside of the urban-mercantile growth of Southeast Asia in areas such as Cochinchina, Cancao, or Palembang. As Carl Trocki points out, the Chinese settlements should be seen as specialised offshoots of the urban growth of Southeast Asia. (Trocki 1997: 89). While urbanism was never an alien imposition but "a way of life" in Southeast Asia, the growth of Chinese settlements and port-cities participated in the process of the indigenous construction of early modern cities. (O'Connor 1995: 30-31) This characteristic is especially important to the Water Frontier, since this multi-ethic region at the time was never primarily a zone of subsistence agriculture. It was on this basis that we see remarkable port-towns in Cochinchina, the prosperity that only now, with the fuller perspective of the larger picture, we can begin to understand and appreciate. This was the description of market of Đồng Nai (or Lonay) in Biên Hòa in the 1760s and 1770s:

> The houses were made of brick and walls were painted. Row upon row of houses of different stories was shining along the river and against the sky. The houses were stretched for five *li* (1 li = 500 metres) and expanded in three main streets. The main streets running north-south were paved with white stones and the east-west main streets with *đá ong*. While the minor streets were paved with bluish bricks, the whole town was curbed with stones. Merchants and traders gathered here, ocean junks and river boats anchored and queued here one after the other. As it was

> such a big metropolis this place saw the concentration of the rich merchants, and such situation was not seen anywhere else [in the country?] (Trịnh Hoài Đức 1810: 24)

The degree of wealth in the society of Cochinchina was described vividly, with perhaps some exaggeration given the scholarly background of the shocked northern author, in the following account of the early 1770s:

> The officials, no matter how high or low their position, all lived in ornamented buildings, with gauze and satin as curtains and mosquito nets. Their pots were made of copper, their furniture of precious wood. Cups and trays were made of china, and saddles of gold and silver. Clothes were made of brocade and coloured silk, and mats of very good quality rattan. They showed off and competed with each other for richness and distinction. The common people also wore satin shirts with flowers and damask trousers as their daily wear. To be dressed in plain cotton was considered a disgrace. The soldiers all enjoyed sitting on mats, with incense burners in their hands, having good tea with silver or china cups. Everything came from China, from spittoons to chinaware, even the food. For every meal they had three big bowls of rice. Women all dressed in gauze, ramie and silk, with embroidered flowers around a round collar. People here looked upon gold and silver as sand, millet and rice as mud; their lives could not be more extravagant. (Lê Quý Đôn 1776, vol.6: 227b)

The Ties that Bound

It is clear from the discussion above that there was an increasing trend toward a closer economic integration of largely Chinese producing settlements of tin, pepper and rice as Southeast Asia entered the 1760s. This was the time when the tin mines under Palembang's control came into maturity and began producing massive amounts of tin; when pepper production was revitalised and carried to unprecedented heights (Bulbeck, Reid et al. 1998: 64, 74-75); and when the Mekong Delta became populated and was producing abundant and cheap rice for the market. The need for traders and communications between Island and Mainland Southeast Asia had never previously been so acute. But this was also the time when Siam fell increasingly into chaos as Ayutthaya was attacked and finally destroyed. The 1760s thus provided the golden opportunity for Cancao and Cochinchina, both of which responded quickly and prospered greatly. As a result, they became major players in Southeast Asian trade. But none of these commercial activities could have existed or developed by themselves without the Canton factor, a situation which seems different from the inter-Southeast Asian trade that had been carried out in the Age of Commerce (1450-1680) (Reid 1988, 1993). Indeed, eighteenth-century Canton seems to have played a similar role in financing production and then trade between Southeast Asia and China as Singapore, Melaka, and Penang would play in the nineteenth century. As with those nineteenth-century economic heavyweights, it is clear that some of the Canton merchants had "agents in Palembang" year-round buying up tin, or in someway controlling the supply. (NAH: Canton 73) Transaction costs were thus greatly reduced, when the same group of Chinese men and their associates managed both trade and production.

Scholars have long noted that the characteristic feature of Chinese agricultural enterprise in nineteenth-century Malaya was that it was controlled by urban-based financiers. The town of Malacca, for example, was the focal point for the Chinese tapioca (sago) industry while Singapore served the same function for the gambier and pepper planters. (Jackson 1968: 38) The gambier and pepper plantations in Riau and Singapore in the 1830-40s give us some idea of how the industry was run, with financial support coming from Chinese shopkeepers and merchants in Singapore, who usually claimed a percentage on future production and traded under conditions that were highly favourable to the capitalists. Thus, it was observed in 1841 that "almost the whole of the pepper and gambier plantations have been made, and are now it is believed up-held by borrowed capital - so that the actual cultivators are nearly at the mercy of the Chinese merchants of the Town". (*Singapore Free Press* 1841: vol.6, no 46)

Scholars have suggested that, in Southeast Asia, Europeans mainly invested in trade before 1870s, and that mining and cash-crop production were basically Chinese industries. Indirectly though, as Drabble pointed out, the European involvement in financing mining and agricultural ventures was considerable. (Drabble 2000: 55) For example, although in 1864 the Chinese merchants of Singapore claimed that they had advanced over one million dollars to develop the plantations of Johore, most of the money in fact had been borrowed originally from European merchants. It is fascinating to realize how closely trade and production were bound up with each other at this time. It was reported in the 1830s that "there were 100 gambier shops and over 200 provision stores in Singapore which relied almost entirely on the Johore trade", (Turnbull 1959: 44) which was but a tiny spot in the vast Asian trading picture of the early nineteenth century. Wyatt was certainly right, when he mourned that "so many hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of Asian traders were involved – especially Chinese – and the commercial activities of these traders usually were not measured, at least not in any records known to have survived". (Wyatt 2003: 51) However, that is a gap that we are now increasingly hopeful of being able to begin to fill, however slightly, with materials like the Canton Records.

With the increased involvement of this mixed capital came social and political consequences among entrepreneurs and labourers at the two ends of the South China Sea. Economic and social conditions changed rapidly in eighteenth-century Southeast Asia and placed much stress upon existing relationships. Taxes on rattan, for example, rose dramatically in mid-eighteenth-century Cochinchina. The enormous quantities needed for the packing of tea seems to have become a push factor for the Nguyễn court to increase its taxes on the uplander suppliers. Until 1769, a grade one taxpayer (tráng) had only paid 1000 pieces of rattan per year as tax, but after 1769 he had to supply 3920 pieces. This was a near four-fold increase in taxes. (Lê Quý Đôn 1776: vol. 4, 11a-11b) It might not be an exaggeration to say that in this respect the Nguyễn court acted as the agent of the Canton junks, collecting and sometimes organising the production for Canton and other overseas markets, which gained them enormous wealth. A statement by a captured Chinese pirate found in the Qing archives shows the magnitude. According to him, in 1774 they robbed the ship of Cochinchinese king and his family who were fleeing south, after the early success of the Tay Son rebellion. The booty included several hundred taels of gold and silver, but by far the most significant part of the treasure, which weighed 27,190 taels, was western silver coins. (Qing Archives of the Grand Council: file 7777, no.15)

The Canton trade also tightened the link between the court and the local Chinese merchants in Cochinchina. The eighteenth century saw the emergence of a powerful local Chinese group in Hội An. Chen Chingho once pointed out that if Chinese active in Hội An in the early seventeenth-century overseas trade were mainly merchants and merely connected to the court, others would became government officials by the late seventeenth century. (Chen 1973: 50-51; Li and Reid 1993: 31) The strongest links seemed to have been those built in the eighteenth century, between the *Hong* merchants and those of Cochinchina, as they involved not only trade but also production. These merchants in turn reinforced each other's positions. It may not be a coincidence that the Taihe Hang in Canton mentioned above collapsed in 1780, only a few years after the Tây Sơn rebellion broke out in Cochinchina (Van Dyke 2004b, 2005d).

There are other examples as well. The Cai and Qiu families and the Ye merchants in Canton traded regularly to Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Passiack, and they were all deep in debt or broke by the mid-1770s. Two (of the three or four) Chen houses in Canton and the Ni (倪) merchants also failed in the 1770s, and all of them were deeply involved in the Southeast Asia trade. One Chen house involved in the Nanyang trade managed to survive the crisis of the 1770s, but had collapsed by the end of the 1780s. None of the problems and tensions in Southeast Asia which were concurrent to these *Hong* merchant failures have been fully considered or often even discussed in previous studies of the Canton trade. Of course, many other elements undoubtedly contributed to these collapses but, as we hope to have shown, hitherto unrecognised Southeast Asian factors were certain to have significantly influenced and shaped their outcomes. (Ch'en 1990; Van Dyke 2005a-c and 2006[10])

These events at two distant parts of the Canton trading world suggest that we can no longer think about the significance of the foreign export trade in Canton simply on its own terms, but need to consider the influence of the junk trade and its Southeast Asian markets, and the ways in which they contributed to each other's rise and fall. As James Warren has demonstrated for Sulu, where the price of development of global trade in eastern Asia intensified slavery in the Sulu zone as part of the new division of international labour, Cochinchina's internal changes might also be best understood as a series of intersections, encounters or "historical accidents usually due to contact with foreign formations"(Warren 1998: 15)

Much larger questions still remain to be explored. For instance, at the regional level, do these factors suggest there were qualitative changes by the mid-eighteenth century in the coastal areas of Southeast Asia where the web of Chinese trade, labourer colonies, and productive enterprises were concentrated? Or, from a global perspective, we might wonder to what extent did the rising volume of financial liquidity in Europe stimulate economic production in Asia, and thus Chinese labourer emigration to the Nanyang? Obviously such questions are beyond the scope of this introductory assessment. But we do hope that the new data and new light discussed here will encourage others to adopt a similarly horizontal approach in future studies of the interactions and interconnections between these two shores of the South China Sea.

Glossary of Chinese Family and Hong Names

Taihe Hang (泰 和 行)

Taishun Hang (泰 順 行)

Yan (顏) Ye (葉), Pan (潘) Chen (陳) Cai (蔡) Qiu (邱), Ni (倪)

Chen Shouguan 陳 壽 觀

Wu Heguan 伍和観, captain of the junk *Hingtay* (恒泰)

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[10] Several chapters in this manuscript deal with these collapses. They are: "Tan Suqua and Family: Merchants of Canton 1716-1778", 15-16, 20; "Mandarin Quiqua and Family: Merchants of Canton, 1724-1794", 6-7, and "Tan Hunqua and Company: Merchants of Canton 1723-1781", 12-14.

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