



Jun-1998

Trade & Culture in Maritime China: The Case of Early Modern Guangzhou

Wing-kai To

Bridgewater State College, wto@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

To, Wing-kai (1998). Trade & Culture in Maritime China: The Case of Early Modern Guangzhou. *Bridgewater Review*, 17(1), 3-6.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol17/iss1/5

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

TRADE & CULTURE IN MARITIME CHINA

The Case of Early Modern Guangzhou

Wing-kai To

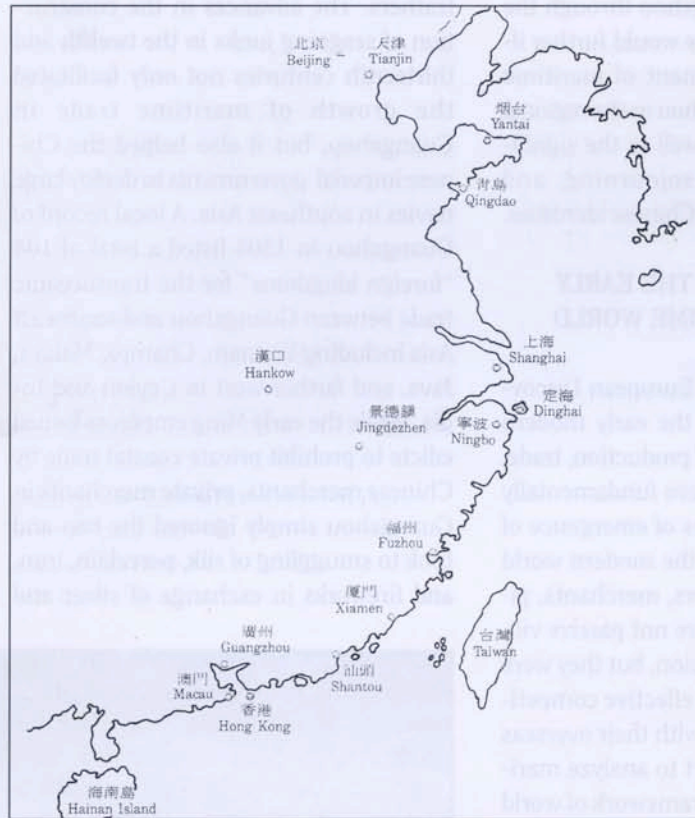
MARITIME CHINA: EMERGING PERSPECTIVES

Interest in Chinese maritime history has heightened both in China and abroad in the past two decades. With the expansion of China's foreign trade and her increasingly active role in international affairs, scholars in Chinese history, world history, political economy, and cultural studies have all begun to rediscover the salient features of China's maritime past. Recent studies have demonstrated that the exchange of goods and ideas in Chinese history did not only concentrate on the continental border in the North and between different regions of China, but the developments of overseas trade, migration, and interaction between cultures in the maritime frontier were equally impressive. From the traditional trading posts in Quanzhou and Guangzhou, to the modern treaty ports of Fuzhou, Xiamen, and Shanghai, to the contemporary metropolis in Hong Kong and Taiwan and special economic zones in Shenzhen and Pudong, southern coastal cities in the last five hundred years and beyond have connected China to the outside world and the global economy.

The significance of a Chinese maritime sub-culture casts serious doubt on the monolithic notion of an essentially land-bound state in both the imperial and socialist periods. The study of maritime China serves to highlight the multiple representation of the Chinese empire and nation on the one hand, and the ongoing forces of local, transnational, and overseas Chinese communities on the other. To put it differently, the construction of a maritime history illustrates both the incorporation of Chinese culture in a larger polity and the diversity of Chinese identities. The scholarly interests in maritime China further yield contributions in several areas

through an overview of the historical development of maritime trade in Guangzhou. More commonly known as Canton in the West, Guangzhou became the symbol of "old China trade" for her crucial role in western trade during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. European and American traders brought silk, porcelain, and tea from Guangzhou to the West and one can still see the marvelous export arts from Guangzhou in special museum collections in London, Boston, and Hong Kong. For example, New England merchants returning from China formed the East India Marine Society in late 1798 and started to preserve

and display the pictorial items and artifacts from Guangzhou and Macau including lacquer wares, silver wares, ivory products, porcelain, and wood furniture. On the eve of the bicentennial anniversary of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, the special exhibit of export arts from Guangzhou in the past year signals the importance of maritime China in the early history of the United States. From the pens of historians to the eyes of connoisseurs, the city of Guangzhou has



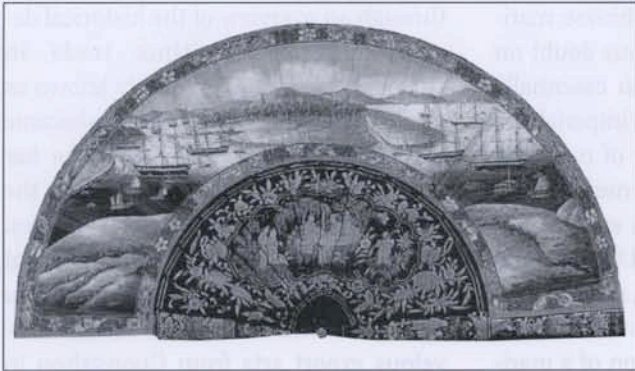
Map of Ports along the China Coast

of inquiry, including trade, migration, and nationhood, Sino-Western relations, the study of Overseas Chinese, and links with contemporary interpretations of the "Greater China" and the Asian Pacific region.

This essay aims to highlight certain diverse features of maritime China

represented the reference point to understand the changing context of Sino-foreign economic and cultural relations in the nineteenth century.

Deeply rooted in a historical tradition of overseas trade with maritime Asia and inextricably connected to regional devel-



Fan c.1850

opment of south China, Guangzhou deserves analysis not only in terms of Western impact on China, but should be analyzed in a multiplicity of regional identities. Looking at Guangzhou through the lens of maritime history would further illuminate the development of maritime Asia, the role of Guangzhou in the regional economy of China, as well as the significance of migration, sojourning, and diaspora in the study of Chinese identities.

GUANGZHOU IN THE EARLY MODERN MARITIME WORLD

During the Age of European Discovery and Expansion in the early modern world, Asian patterns of production, trade, and governance also have fundamentally shaped the long process of emergence of the maritime facets of the modern world system. Asian navigators, merchants, pirates, and investors were not passive victims of European intrusion, but they were active participants and effective competitors of maritime trade with their overseas counterparts. The effort to analyze maritime Asia in a broader framework of world history and cross-cultural trade can further modify the Eurocentric assumptions and illuminate the rise of commercial capitalism in the early modern world.

While Chinese governments limited official foreign trade from the first arrival of the Portuguese in 1514 to the abolition of the British East India Company in 1833, private merchant trade, Chinese junk trade

with Southeast Asia, traditional tributary trade, and smuggling with foreigners all flourished in the Chinese coastal trading scene. In the millennium prior to the coming of Europeans, Guangzhou was an important port of entry for traders coming to China from the maritime countries of the South China

Sea and the Indian Ocean. It served as a trading center of exotic goods such as spices, incense, pearls, opaque glass, ivory, rhinoceros horns, tortoise shells, and feathers. The advances in the construction of seagoing junks in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries not only facilitated the growth of maritime trade in Guangzhou, but it also helped the Chinese imperial governments to deploy large navies in southeast Asia. A local record of Guangzhou in 1304 listed a total of 104 "foreign kingdoms" for the transoceanic trade between Guangzhou and southeast Asia including Vietnam, Champa, Malaya, Java, and farther west in Ceylon and India. While the early Ming emperors issued edicts to prohibit private coastal trade by Chinese merchants, private merchants in Guangzhou simply ignored the ban and took to smuggling of silk, porcelain, iron, and fireworks in exchange of silver and

spices. The ban on coastal shipping also led to the emergence of illegal private trade and the first wave of Chinese emigration to southeast Asia from Guangdong and Fujian in the fifteenth century.

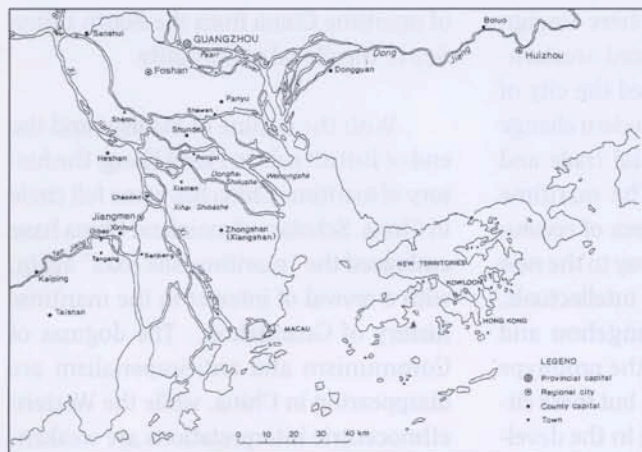
The arrival of western traders in the sixteenth century created both challenges and opportunities for coastal traders in Guangzhou. The Portuguese were initially expelled from Guangzhou in 1521, gradually gained access to coastal markets in Zhangzhou, managed to discover Japan in 1542, and finally received Chinese official recognition to establish a trading post in Macau in 1557. The problem of piracy threatened the security of the South China coast from the 1520s until the 1560s and provoked wariness of maritime trade with foreigners in Guangzhou. Yet Guangzhou, like other areas on the south China coast, benefited from the importation of silver bullion from Japan and Mexico via the Philippines. The Portuguese depended upon supplies of Chinese merchandise from Guangzhou and their sales of Indian and Japanese goods at the Guangzhou market.

The oscillation of imperial policy towards overseas trade coincided with the increasing presence of English and French ships in the ports of Guangzhou. When the Manchus lifted the coastal ban on maritime trade in 1684, a system of im-

perial customs posts was established to handle the collection of custom dues and the enforcement of regulations for managing trade with foreigners. By 1754, Chinese officials utilized the tradition of licensed merchants in Guangzhou to deal with the traders of European companies. The establishment of this system from 1755 to 1761, along with the designation of Guangzhou



View of the Canton Factories, 1805-1806



Map 2: The Pearl River Delta

as the sole legal port for foreign trade, led to the famous “Canton system” of regulations until the outbreak of the Opium War in the 1840s. What is significant of this multifaceted maritime trading pattern is that the Canton system after 1757 should be viewed less as a major departure of historical precedent, but more as an expedient policy to manage the diverse local commercial interests coupling with the anxiety of local defense.

The above overview of history of maritime trade in Guangzhou prior to the nineteenth century serves to provide a necessary corrective to the focus on the anti-seafaring view of a “Continental China” in overseas trade. Instead of viewing Chinese maritime history as a process that revealed the fundamental differences between the Chinese xenophobia and the emerging western concept of free trade, the bureaucratic arrangements and commercial interests associated with the Canton system owed much to the long-standing tradition of maritime trade in Guangzhou. The Guangzhou coastal network of merchants and their involvement in commercial activities, junk trade, and smuggling with maritime Asia provided a framework for European traders to trade with the local populations.

GUANGZHOU IN THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

If the analysis of maritime Asia looks at the extraregional trade between Guangzhou and overseas traders who came from South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, the development of the hinterland economy contributed to

the intraregional trade of commodities in Guangzhou as a maritime export market. It is indeed fundamental that a commercial revolution in south China at least since the sixteenth century transformed Guangzhou from a coastal port limited to the trading of luxurious goods to a prosperous region for the marketing of rural handicraft products and other cash crops.

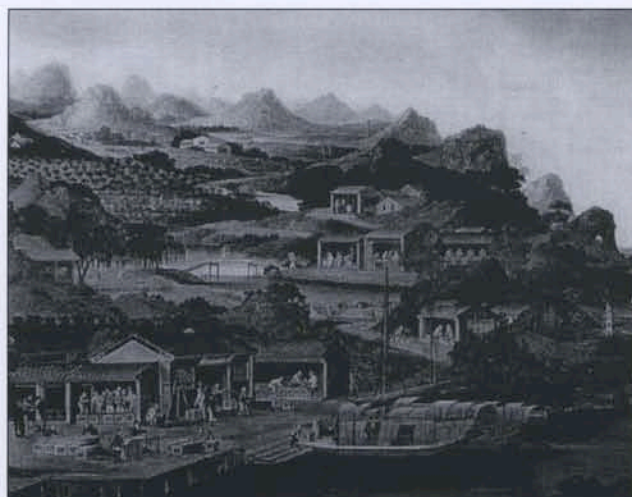
The accelerating political and economic development in the area near Guangzhou was the result of improved water transport to the delta within the drainage system of the Pearl River system, of the gradual migration and settlement of people after the eleventh century, and of the official interest in extracting local

resources especially rice and salt in the domestic markets. Through centuries of land development, dike-building, and commercialization of agriculture, local inhabitants gradually developed the Pearl River delta into a highly productive region with an integrated marketing structure. A large volume of commodities from the rural hinterland was transported through a network of riverways to the trading center of Guangzhou. In addition, Guangzhou developed into a commercial center of the iron, silk and pottery industries by the sixteenth century. Owing to Guangzhou's close proximity to the manufacturing region of pottery and the silk industrial districts, the growth of handicraft production contributed to the development of Guangzhou as a commercial center for maritime exports.

The case of Guangzhou thus suggests that maritime China did not stop along the coast that faced the South China Sea. The internal market for rural production in the river basin of the Pearl River delta supported the export of silk, palm-leaf fans, pottery, cotton cloth, iron products and incense. Although Guangzhou was not self-sufficient in grain production and relied on transportation of tea from Fujian and porcelain from Jiangxi for the supply of maritime export trade, the prosperity of regional economy was critical to the success of Western trade in Guangzhou.

GUANGZHOU IN THE CULTURAL BORDERLANDS OF MARITIME CHINA

I have suggested that an emphasis on political economy and world system seems to provide a better model than the stagnation of continental China in the study of maritime history. The



The China Tea Trade, 1790-1800

history of Guangzhou can be better understood not in terms of Chinese xenophobia and western intrusion, but in terms of local negotiation of commercial interests and cultural meanings in the maritime frontier. On one hand, the flourishing of overseas trade in Guangzhou was inextricably connected to the geopolitics of maritime Asia and the growth of regional economy in late imperial China. On the other hand, the political economy of maritime China also provide a meeting ground for various ideological constructions -- modern Chinese nationalism and anti-imperialism, western colonialism and romanticism (or orientalism), and contemporary narratives of global transnationalism. The meanings and interpretations of maritime trade were shifted under different historical circumstances. It reveals a fluid construction of maritime China in which myths and ideologies were articulated along with economic interests.

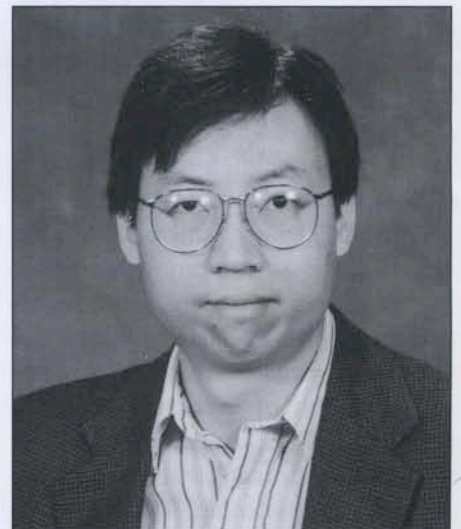
The narrative of Guangzhou based on Chinese expansion in the maritime frontier was first challenged by the discourse of nationalism and westernization after the Opium War. While the local inhabitants of Guangzhou in the 1840s still resisted western traders to move beyond the

western edge of the city where foreign quarters are historically located, westernized intellectuals have viewed the city of Guangzhou as a symbol of modern change which was marked by coastal trade and the spread of new ideas. The maritime frontier became a reputed area of revolutionary tradition and a gateway to the new world. For modern Chinese intellectuals, coastal cities such as Guangzhou and Shanghai not only serve as the prototype of Chinese maritime culture, but these cities should also take the lead in the development of a new China and in the reform of old culture.

The contestation of cultural meanings in the understanding of maritime China was further complicated by the amorphous representations of Chinese identity in diaspora. The emergence of Hong Kong as a British colony after 1842 has heightened the tensions between the center and the periphery in the construction of Chinese identities. The massive migrations of Chinese in the last few centuries to Hong Kong, southeast Asia, North America, and other parts of the world have profoundly influenced our perceptions of Chineseness. In other words, the history of migration, sojourning, and diaspora in modern China has extended the frontier

of maritime China from the South China Sea to the global community.

With the decline of Maoism and the end of British rule in Hong Kong, the history of maritime China has come full circle in China. Scholars of mainland China have embraced the "maritime silk road" again, with a revival of interest in the maritime history of Guangzhou. The dogmas of Communism and anti-imperialism are disappearing in China, while the Western ethnocentric interpretations are weakening as well. One can hope that studies of maritime China in the future will not only highlight the tensions in Sino-foreign relations, but will further address the flow of goods, ideas, and images in the maritime milieu. The study of maritime China will continue to fascinate social historians who are primarily concerned with urbanization in coastal cities and other social scientists who are interested in the contributions of overseas Chinese and transnational idioms of modern culture.



Wing-kai To is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and a Member of the Asian Studies Group