Re-Viewing
Early American Trade with China
1784-1833
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Rhys Richards, of Wellington, New Zealand, is a retired diplomat who has published over a dozen books and fifty articles primarily about Pacific maritime history. His first book, Whaling and Sealing at the Chatham Islands led him to examine those trades throughout the Pacific before 1850, and particularly to study the role of American maritime activities in that period. His current interests lie strongly in studying the Pacific art and artifacts brought home by American whalmen.

It has long been known that the opening of trade with China by daring American merchants in tiny ships was crucial to the economic growth of the young United States. New research reveals, however, that this trade was more than twice the size previously estimated. This startling conclusion has emerged through combining the scattered and fragmentary American sources with the meticulous records kept at Canton by the supercargoes and scribes of the British “Honourable East India Company” and their Dutch counterparts, the Verenighden Oost-Indiensche Compagnie, or VOC. Because the British and Dutch were intensely suspicious of American “interlopers,” they reported home as much as they could about their new competitors.

A preliminary report published in 1994 brought the total number of known American trading voyages to China between 1784 and 1814 up to 618; this article extends the same study from 1815 to 1833, when the British closed their warehouses and residences at Canton. Thus we have learned that there were at least 1,352 officially acknowledged visits by American ships to China between 1784 and 1833.
The early American China trade had three main branches: voyages made to China directly from the United States; fur trading voyages made by way of the northwest coast of America; and voyages made in the Pacific Ocean for furs, seal skins, aromatic sandalwood, bêche-de-mer (dried sea cucumbers—a Chinese delicacy), and other Pacific products that could be sold at and around Canton.

This trade’s growth in its first two decades, from 1784 to 1804, was extraordinary. The first American merchant ship arrived alone in 1784, and none followed in 1785, yet within a decade American vessels were soon often as numerous as the English Company’s ships or their intraregional “Country” traders from India and the East. In one year, 1803, American vessels outnumbered those of the British and all other nations combined, and over the first two decades they averaged over twenty percent of the total number of ships visiting China.

Almost all the American vessels, however, were quite small; most were about one quarter the size of the stately East Indiamen sent from Europe. In 1802 and 1803 some fifty-nine U.S. vessels averaged just under three hundred tons apiece, while those of the British each averaged almost 1,200 tons. In July 1787, after cruising alone halfway round the globe, the crewmen of one of the first American ships to arrive, the little 120-ton Columbia, were much amused when haughty Company officials mistook them for a mere tender to some larger vessel like their own.

The outstanding feature of the Americans’ trade at Canton was that they bought three times as much as they brought. This persistent deficit between imports and exports required that generally two-thirds of American purchases had to be paid for with silver coin—an especially scarce commodity in the infant U.S.
Consequently, in order to obtain teas, silks and other wares for American and European markets, American traders put every effort into finding alternatives. When they could, they sold New England goods en route, purchasing raw cotton, for example, at the Île de France (now Mauritius) or in India, which when sold at Canton sometimes paid for as much as a third of their own purchases. But here too the small size of the American vessels told against them, and between 1784 and 1804 U.S. vessels accounted for only three percent of the raw cotton that foreigners delivered to Canton.

The canny Americans therefore sought out specialty or novelty trades to provide whatever the Chinese would buy. Ginseng roots, which grew wild in the Hudson Valley, were usually worth almost their weight in silver to the Chinese, who prized their medicinal properties. Their price, however, proved unreliable. Lead from home was another significant item, but a wide range of odd products were collected en route. A list of items sold to the Chinese in 1799 included sandalwood, camphor, furs, mother of pearl, elephant teeth, dragon’s blood (a resinous substance used to make varnishes), mother of pearl, mocha stones (moss agates), delicacies including cloves, nutmegs, birds’ nests, fishmaws, shark fins, bêche de mer, and products coveted for their real or imagined medicinal properties, such as cow bezoars—concretions from bovine stomachs supposed to neutralize poisons—ginseng, and rhinoceros horn. Americans did little trade in opium until after the price per chest soared from $580 in 1802 to $1,350 in 1804.

Sea otter pelts were the prize sought in 1787 by the first American vessels in the Pacific Northwest, the little Columbia and Lady Washington. The discovery of the Columbia River by the former was an accidental by-product of the China trade.

A contemporary artist’s impression, © 2003 by Gordon Miller; courtesy of the artist
The Americans developed the previously modest fur trade, and soon dominated it. An enormous growth in the fur trade is apparent in British Company records, even though many American captains preferred to smuggle their furs through the back doors of the Celestial Kingdom. In 1792 the English sold 77,330 “fine furs” such as sea and river otter, beaver, fox, marten, and fur seal, while the Americans sold only 7,579, or one tenth as many. These roles soon reversed. From 1800 to 1804, the English annually sold an average of 26,776 fine furs, while the Americans’ annual average was no less than 324,264 sold. Of the latter total, ninety percent were fur seal skins, worth altogether about a quarter of a million dollars each year. Sea otter pelts, though far fewer in number, were much more valuable, and the 42,527 sold by Americans officially in Canton in 1802 probably fetched close to a million dollars. Moreover, almost all of that was profit, since the expenses incurred in sealing or in trading on the Northwest Coast were very small indeed.

American purchases were much less varied, with black teas generally well over half the total in value. In 1792, for example, teas accounted for half the total American cargoes by value, wrought silks for twenty percent, and quicksilver (mercury) for fifteen percent. Comparatively small shipments of raw silk, sugar, durable “nankeen” cloth, porcelain, lacquered goods, and other “China wares” made up the remainder. But here again the small size of the American vessels is evident, for although over these two decades American vessels numbered twenty percent of the total, they carried on average only ten percent of the tea exported, and under four percent of the silk.

Initially, the long-established European merchants were amazed that the American cockleshell adventurers could survive and prosper in such competitive, speculative trades. Ultimately, however, it was the restrictive chartered monopolies like the British and Dutch East India Companies that could not survive against the freer competition of the small, individually-owned vessels of the Americans.

Sea otter fur was worn by high mandarins in coat linings or collars, esteemed for its lushness—otters have about 650,000 hairs per square inch, while the entire scalp of an average human has only 100,000. Yankees, Britons, Russians, Aleuts, and even California Indians hunted them. Pelts fetched $30 apiece on Canton’s streets in 1830, where the fur seller below was painted around 1805. Only opium, smoked by addicts in “dens” like the one engraved in 1843 at left, proved more lucrative.
The standard currency was the Spanish 8-real “piece of eight,” stamped by Chinese officials with “chop marks” certifying correct purity and weight. Silver reached China aboard ships like the *Vancouver* of New York, at right, flying the house flag of David Ogden’s Red Cross Line. The Chinese artist who painted her in Chinese waters around 1850 was probably commissioned by her captain or owner.

Coin courtesy Edward von der Porten, photographed by John Wright; painting © 2003 The Kelton Foundation

In the third decade of American trade with China, from 1805 to 1814, 308 American vessels visited—almost double the number previously estimated by other scholars. The new total is probably still incomplete as this was a period of substantial American smuggling through Macao, or the bays nearby, in order to avoid the heavy taxes and “squeeze” exacted by Chinese authorities at Whampoa and Canton. During the War of 1812, the British Navy blockaded Whampoa, Canton’s anchorage, and though a few brave or foolish captains escaped, most of the U.S. vessels that reached Whampoa stayed there till the war was over.

After the Peace of 1815, American reliance upon opportunistic cargoes gathered en route declined as trade developed in more enduring commodities and, later, in opium.

Meanwhile the American home market had grown, with more capital and more silver specie, so that the trade shifted away from individual investors and small partnerships to concentrate in the hands of a few large companies in larger ports like New York, Boston, Salem and Philadelphia. The trade grew to average $6.3 million each year, but under forty percent was paid for by commodities, while bills of exchange and Spanish silver dollars accounted for over sixty percent of all American purchases. American trade with China after 1815 was marked by consolidation and growth, without the feverish expansion of preceding decades.

This American trade with China was very much larger than previous sources have suggested. In the five years from 1816 to 1820, for example, there were at least 196 American visits—or almost four times as many as the fifty-four known previously. An average of thirty-seven American merchant vessels called at Canton annually from 1815 to 1833.

Besides setting the record straight about the true scale of American trade with China, recent research lays to rest old rivalries over which ports sent the most vessels to China. Among the 1,077 declared homeports of American ships trading with China between 1784 and 1832, Boston and Salem accounted for one third of all American visits; Philadelphia and Baltimore together were over a quarter, while New York and “Rhode Island” made up twenty-four and twelve percent respectively. Of the other voyages from minor ports, eleven were from New Haven, while, rather surprisingly, nine hailed from New Bedford and six from Nantucket.
From these painstakingly assembled vessel-by-vessel lists, it can be seen more clearly that the early China trade was not a mere passing phase, but played an important role as the young United States developed its new export trades on a scale that was substantial, and truly global.

NOTES


2 Primary sources for this article include a table summarizing trade commodities and totals, 1804-1821, box 244, Carrington Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, and a ledger at Mystic Seaport listing vessels and their captains, with extensive detail on cargoes, for the seasons 1819-20 to 1832-1833. (Untitled Ledger, George W. Lyman Invoices and Trade Papers 1812 to 1821, M.I. HFM 176, G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport, Mystic, Connecticut.) The remaining 1816-1819 gap was filled by analysis of “Records of the Directors and the Select Committee of Supercargoes of the Honourable East India Company,” East India Office, British Museum, CFR Canton Diaries and Consultations, series G/12 (cited hereinafter as “EIC Records”), vols. 204 to 257. These revealed names and captains for almost all U.S. vessels trading legally at Canton except the 1816-17 season. Data for 1816-17 was found in records of the Dutch Committee at Canton, VOC 1.04.20, 1742-1826, at the Dutch National Archives, The Hague. They also frequently provide details not recorded by the English.

3 The figure is probably still incomplete given the prevalence of smuggling. Because this overview is based upon statistics compiled from sources too numerous to cite here, please see the bibliography for the 1784-1815 period in Richards, “United States Trade.” Apart from the sources mentioned therein, five additions are required. To the manuscript list may be added the aforementioned ledger at Mystic, and the 1804-1821 table and “Reminiscences of William C. Townsend” at the Rhode Island Historical Society. To published works may be added James Hunnewell, “Hawaii in the 1820s,” Papers of the Hawaiian Historical Society, 1895, pp. 6-16; Mary Malloy, “Boston Men” on the Northwest Coast: The American Maritime Fur Trade 1788-1844 (Fairbanks, AK: Limestone Press, 1998); Sandra Wagner-Wright, ed., Ships, Furs and Sandalwood: A Yankee Trader in Hawaii 1823-1825. Charles H. Hamnett (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999). Copies of the work on which this article is based, “United States Trade with China: List of U.S. Vessels at China: An Extension from 1815 to 1820,” are at the Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, in the G. W. Blunt White Library, and at the Rhode Island Historical Society.

4 EIC Records, book 127.

5 Between 1784 and 1832, Boston- and Salem-based ships accounted for 306 and 56 China visits respectively; at times, however, these ports seem to have been listed almost interchangeably. 260 others came from Philadelphia, 254 from New York, 124 from Rhode Island, and 32 from Baltimore. Data is unavailable for 1821 and 1826.