

**Document 4.7a: Excerpts from a letter by William Trotter of Philadelphia, trading in Guangzhou, 1797**

*William Trotter (1774–1815) was the eldest of ten children. His father was a chair and cabinetmaker. When he was fourteen, William began a seven-year apprenticeship with William Sansom, a Philadelphia merchant. Sansom was part-owner of the Pigou, on which William Trotter sailed out of the Delaware River as supercargo<sup>1</sup> bound for China on April 13, 1796. The vessel crossed the equator on May 13 and then made its way around the Cape of Good Hope to Canton<sup>2</sup>. Trotter wrote this long letter to William Sansom. After writing about Malaysia for a page or so, he described their stop in Macao, at which point he noted that they had traveled a distance of 15,602 miles. Trotter was involved in the China Trade later in his life, from 1806–1812. For the most part he acted as the distributor of goods (tea, china ware, and silk) imported by William Sansom.*

Ship *Pigou* March 10th 1797

Respected Friend

As some remarks made during a long voyage to a country whose manners are so little known as China may not be uninteresting, I have committed to the following sheets a short account of the voyage, and a sketch of such circumstances as particularly drew my attention whilst at Canton, together with some occasional observations....

Whampou<sup>3</sup> is an extensive harbour about twelve miles below Canton, where all Vessels trading to China lay at anchor, being prohibited from proceeding any farther up the River.... Between Whampou and Canton on the River, are several Buildings called Chop Houses that are instituted by the government to prevent Smuggling; in front of them there

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<sup>1</sup> Many vessels had a “supercargo” on board. This officer was responsible for all trade decisions. If a ship did not have a supercargo, the captain made the business decisions.

<sup>2</sup> Presently known as Guangzhou

<sup>3</sup> Now spelled Huangpu

is frequently a flag hoisted. Here all boats carrying passengers or luggage to or from Canton, are obligated to stop and undergo an examination by Persons appointed for that purpose in order to discover whether there is any contraband articles on board....

The City of Canton is situated on the north side of the River Zhu [Pearl River]... about 80 miles from the Sea; it is surrounded by a thick wall about 20 feet in height, and according to information about 10 miles in circumference. There are several arched passages through the walls, by which the inhabitants of the Suberbs [*sic*] have communication with the City; to these passages are large iron gates, which are guarded during the day and shut every night. Of the interior part of the City, we can only judge from the suburbs, as the jealous laws of Chinese prohibit all Foreigners from entering. I was assured by a respectable Merchant they were much the same. The suburbs of Canton are very extensive and exceeding populous. The streets are irregular and very narrow, and so crowded with People that a stranger frequently finds great difficulty in passing them. The Houses are built of brick and wood and generally more than a story high, with a kind of balcony facing the street. The front part of the Houses and especially those near the European Factories are fitted up as shops, which [are] painted and gilded in a fancified manner. The Warehouses of some of the Silk Merchants are very large and well stocked with the valuable article they trade in.

The Hong or Warehouses of the Hong Merchants are very large Brick Buildings fronting on the river and extending a great way back with a spacious court through the middle on each side of which are capacious apartments for Caching [?] and other merchandise of their extensive Trade and every conveniency calculated for transacting business on the largest Scale. In the back part of those Hongs are commodious rooms and apartments in which the Merchant and his pursers resides, also accommodations for the Coolies or labourers, of which they employ a great number in the trading season....

The Factories of the European Nations at Canton are a range of large white Buildings facing the River. They extend back similar to the Hongs of the Chinese Merchant. They contain elegant dining Rooms and convenient apartments for the Super-Cargoes to transact their Business in. They are handsomely ornamented in front and constructed in

the style of the nation they belong to. Those belonging to the English and Dutch Companies are the most stately. They have large Virandas [*sic*] projecting in front, which affords a pleasant walk being sheltered from the intense heat of the Sun. Facing the factories are placed flag staffs on which the colors of the respective nations are hoisted, during the residence of their Chief Super Cargo at Canton.

With respect to the Trade of the Chinese, I would just observe that they are very sensible to the local situation of their Country and well assured that it produces every necessary [product] of life that can render them independent of any intercourse with the European World; they regard with a jealous eye the restless and ambitious Spirit of the trading powers of Europe; they conceive (and very justly) that if they are once permitted to obtain a footing in their Territory, they will be continually accumulating strength and thus by degrees rise to be a formidable scourge.

India affords them a striking example of the excesses committed by a nation who by continual encroachment on the right of the Natives and prompted by an insatiable thirst of gain, carried their enormities to such an height as to reduce a large proportion of its inhabitants to a state little better than Slavery. To these for circumstances we may impute the reasons why no foreigners can hold any real property in China and of their confining their trade to the port of Canton.

Canton is the only open port of any consequence in China, but notwithstanding every restriction Strangers are laid under, its lucrative trade draws the ships of all the great commercial Nations of Europe. The wealth that flows here is immense. Specia<sup>4</sup> being the principle article exchanged for those large Cargoes of Teas Nankuns (sp?) etc which are transported almost all over the world. There is a great trade carried on between Canton and the European Settlements in India, the chief commodities it receives from thence is Cotton and rice.

Unfavourable opinions are generally entertained of the Conduct of the Chinese in their

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<sup>4</sup> Silver

trade with strangers, that they take every advantage and practice numerous deceptions and impositions. However well founded these Opinions may be with respect to a part of the trading inhabitants of Canton, we ought not to censure the whole, and by no means stamp a national Character. They no doubt consider well their own interest and are sensible of the disadvantages a foreigner labours under. Never[the]less there are individuals worthy of a very different opinion, two of which I mention with pleasure....

*William Trotter's letter goes on for many pages, describing various aspects of Guangzhou that he observes. Further excerpts from the letter are included in Document 4.7b. He ends the letter:*

With sentiments of the highest esteem and affection, I am Sincerely,

William Trotter

Source: William Trotter to William Sansom, 13 April 1796, William Trotter letter, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Transcribed by Liz Nelson and Shirley Huettig Moore.