

Document 4.7b: Additional excerpts from a letter by William Trotter, 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 supercargo¹ bound for China on April 13, 1796. The vessel crossed the equator May 13 and then made its way around the Cape of Good Hope to Canton². 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....

Having procured a Pilot at Macao we proceeded up the River, and on the 26th July came to an Anchor at Whampou³, where we hired a Passage Boat [and] set off for Canton, where we arrived about 5 o'clock the Same afternoon.

The scenes which strike the eye of a European on his first arrival in this part of the world are so curious and interesting that I should mainly attempt to describe his feelings on the

¹ 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.

² Presently known as Guangzhou

³ Now spelled Huangpu

occasion. The immense Population of the inhabitants, the entire different mode of life, from that which he has been accustomed to, the great contrariety of manners between the Chinese and his Countrymen, the new and extraordinary appearance of every object around him all rushing on his imagination, bewilder his senses and have him lost in amazement.

Whampou 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. There is also a small town on the North side of the River of the same name. The tops of the Hills on Danes Island and French Island abreast of which the ships anchor at Whampou, command a fine prospect of the surrounding Country, which is in a state of high cultivation. The eye stretches over the extensive rice fields bordering on the River, and on the numerous Canals which branch from it in all directions. These are the objects of the greatest attention of the Chinese husbandman and their fertility repay him for the care he bestows on them. From them he derives his chief support, and is sensible of the mournful consequences that must ensue on the failure of a Crop. These Islands are of considerable extent, very fertile, and so well cultivated, that the sides of the steep hills facing Whampou appear at a distance like large flights of steps reaching from the base to the very summit exhibiting in one view the assiduous labour of the industrious Chinaman, and his anxious desire not to lose a spot that he can render capable of yielding any increase....

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 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....

[A] person accustomed to European built Vessels is disgusted at the sight of these Junks, for the ideas of the Chinese in ornamenting them are so widely different from what is termed beauty and proportion in the eye of a European. That what is considered by the

former as a handsome decoration appears to the latter to add deformity of the whole for to speak the truth, I don't think more ill-shapen clumsy hulks could be imagined. But the Chinese are great friends to Old customs and the manners of their ancestors, which is handed down from one generation to another and never imitating the manners of other nations, they must consequently make but a slow progress in many of the useful arts....

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 suberbs, as the jealous laws of Chinese prohibit all Foreigners from entering. I was assured by a respectable Merchant they were much the same. The suberbs 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 Honges 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 [?]⁴ and other merchandise of their extensive Trade and every conveniency calculated for transacting business on the largest Scale. In the back part of those Honges 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. Some of the

⁴ Where words in the original handwritten document were unclear, the transcribers have added "[?]".

principle Merchants have large Houses and Gardens in the vicinity of the City, at one of which we were invited to dine. On entering the House we were led through several spacious rooms, and along curious avenues, and after a number of turnings and windings, we came to a pleasant Room fronting the Garden where we sat down to refresh ourselves after the walk. The Garden however soon drew our attention and we left our seats to take a view of it. Here we had a specimen of the taste of the Chinese in arranging and ornamenting their Garden. Tho the inclosure was rather small yet the variety and art displayed in the arrangement had a very pleasing effect. Near the middle was [a] fish pond walled with Stone and shaded by the wide spreading branches of several venerable trees; on all sides were placed Pots containing Plants of different kinds here and there intermingled with small fruit trees, over which in different parts of the garden we could perceive the craggy sides of the artificial rocks: this decoration the Chinese are particularly fond of in which they imitate all the irregularity and rudeness of Nature. Some of the Rocks represent a natural flight of steps others a kind of arch. After satisfying our curiosity in viewing the Garden, Summer Houses we sat down to an elegant dinner, and a dessert of the most delicious fruits in the greatest profusion. We were then entertained by a Chinese Concert upon instruments much more harsh and sonorous than soft and musical to a European ear.

The Factories of the European Nations at Canton are a range of large white Buildings facing the River. They extend back similar to the Hong 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. Specia⁵ 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 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.

Samgua and Eshing, two of the principle silk Merchants in Canton, are Men of the first

⁵ Silver

respectability and confidence possessing a sense of honour and good faith in all their commercial transactions. Samgua is well advanced in life. He has been a long while in his present business in which he is very large. He does not confine himself to silks, though they are the chief articles of his trade. Eshing carries on his business in the same manner and as extensive scale in all the principle productions of China. He is a younger man than Samgua, speaks very good English, and is supposed to be the most intelligent and best informed person in Canton. Contrary to the contracted minds of many of his countrymen who seem quite indifferent as to the events of the rest of the world, confining their ideas within the limits of their Empire. Eshing unbiased by any narrow prejudices is desirous of acquiring a knowledge of European manners and of gaining information on such useful subjects as are universally interesting.

The Porcelain China ware, for which this Country has been so long famous, is principally made at Hintelin (sp?) (an immense city where it is said there are 500 Porcelain Furnaces and a million People employed)....

The social intercourse between Foreigners and the Chinese seldom extends further than what is necessary for trade. There are however some exceptions. As such I mention Konsigua (sp?), a Gentleman of Fortune and formerly a Hong Merchant, but the perplexities and grievances they undergo from the Mandarins induced him to retire from that situation and lead a more private life. He used frequently to visit the factories, speaking good English and, possessing much politeness and engaging frankness of manners, was esteemed by the Americans as a agreeable and entertaining Companion.

The language of the Chinese is composed of very harsh sounds with a great variety of modulations; they [?] not the use of letters, but communicate their ideas by arbitrary hieroglyphical marks which admit of almost unbounded variations and render it very ambiguous and difficult to be attained by Foreigners. Figures not being known among them all their arithmetical calculations are performed by means of a number of Balls ranged on a stick and fixed in a box by a particular method of moving these balls. They ascertain any amount with great exactness. A tender is entirely at a loss in any

calculations without the assistance of this numerical Box.

Women of the higher rank in China are seldom seen by Europeans, being confined to apartments out of sight. When they visit each other, they are always closely shut up in Palanquins and borne through the streets on men's shoulders. I had an opportunity of getting a glimpse of one now and then through the glass of their Palanquin as I passed them.

The Merchants and rich men have from two to six wives, some instances of their having considerably more. It has been the custom time immemorial to confine the feet of their Girls when very young. By this means when they are grown up their feet are as small as a Child's of three years old. It is considered both as a mark of beauty and of rank, tho' such a one as must cost them very dear, for independent of the pain they suffer, they are almost deprived of the natural use of their feet, and in their attempts at walking, they observe the greatest precaution at every step in order to preserve a just equilibrium, which they must infallibly lose on the least inclination on either side.

The Poor People at Canton live very low, their chief sustenance being rice & fish. Great numbers live entirely in Sampans or boats, which are very conveniently constructed having a bamboo covering that they can put on or off at pleasure, which shelters them from the heat of the Sun, and defends them from the inclemency of the weather. They have also an apartment for Cooking, etc. A single Boat is commonly the habitation of a whole family. The Wife has as much the management of the boat as the Husband, at which She is very dexterous. I have often seen Old Women who to appearance would be supposed past all labour, Mothers with their children lashed to their baskets and in fact almost all ages & sexes tugging at the oars, intent on their employment sculling their boats up & down and, as they have always been ignorant of a better, seem contented with their humble situation.

Opposite Canton, and for a considerable distance above and below, the boats in the river appear like a floating town in continual motion. To form a judgment of the number of

People living thus on the Water, from the number of boats, they may be rated on a moderate computation from forty to fifty thousand. Numbers of labouring Men are employed by the Merchants during the trading season, who find [?] them rice & fish and give them from 2 to 4\$ per month for their services. As no animals of burden are used in Canton, all laborious work is performed by the Coolies, who are the most willing and best Porters in the World.

In all quarters are to be seen numbers of Pedlars Fruiterers (or Trinkerers) and others following some handicraft occupation the necessary tools of which they contrive to have portable, and the constant business the profession of Barbers meet with from every man's being obliged to shave his head (except a single lock which hangs down almost to his feet) renders them so numerous that you see them in all directions running up and down with all the requisite apparatus of their profession.

The oppression under which the People groan from the Mandarins⁶ raises our indignation at the abuse of Power and exemplifies the baneful effects of an arbitrary government badly administrated. The Mandarins are persons whose authority cannot be called in question for any exaction however unjust and contrary to every natural right. They are Persons who purchase their Offices who take every step to fleece the People, use every means to increase their own emolument, and practice every tyrannical measure to make themselves a speedy indemnification for what they may have advanced for their situations in a word their caprice is their law, and from their avarice there is scarcely the shadow of redress....

After describing his journey back to the United States, Trotter ends:

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

William Trotter

Source: William Trotter to William Sansom, 10 March 1797, William Trotter letter, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Transcribed by Liz Nelson and Shirley Huettig Moore.

⁶ Officials; government employees