

Rise & Fall of the Canton Trade System - II

Macau & Whampoa Anchorage

by Peter C. Perdue

Pearl River Delta

Macau

Bocca Tigris

Whampoa Anchorage

Sources & Resources

The Pearl River Delta: South China's Trading Ports

The Pearl River (Zhujiang), the third longest river in China, flows into the South China Sea through the southern Chinese province of Guangdong. The estuary of the river, called the Bocca Tigris (Humen), allows easy access by seagoing vessels. The provincial capital, the city of Canton, or Guangzhou, 75 miles from the coast, has long been a major trading city and strategic outpost in south China. The islands and shallow waters of the Pearl River protected Canton from most foreign attacks, but allowed trade under government regulation. The settlements along the coast, however, could not grow large, because they suffered frequent pirate attacks. When the Portuguese arrived in the mid 16th century, the Chinese government granted them a permanent settlement in Macau, at the mouth of the river, in order to promote foreign trade and ward off pirates. Foreign ships went first to Macau, then to Lintin Island and the Bocca Tigris, and up to the Whampoa anchorage before sending goods on smaller boats to Canton.



Map of the Pearl River Delta with rollover descriptions related to the Canton Trade System (1700–1860s)

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Macau

Driven mainly by commercial motives, Portuguese explorers in the 15th and 16th centuries sailed down the coast of Africa and across the Indian Ocean to get direct access to the spices of Southeast Asia and the luxury goods of the Orient. By the mid 16th century, the Ming government realized that reviving trade along the southeast coast would improve prosperity and tax income. In 1557 the Ming granted the Portuguese a license to trade at the city of Macau, located on a small peninsula on the south China coast, close to the major provincial city of Canton. (Macau is the official modern spelling; Macao is an older English spelling). Macau had a warm climate, an attractive beach, a good harbor, and an excellent location for trade. It prospered in the 16th and 17th centuries, but declined as a major trade port after the rise of the Canton system. The Portuguese, however, held it as a colony until they returned it to China in December, 1999.

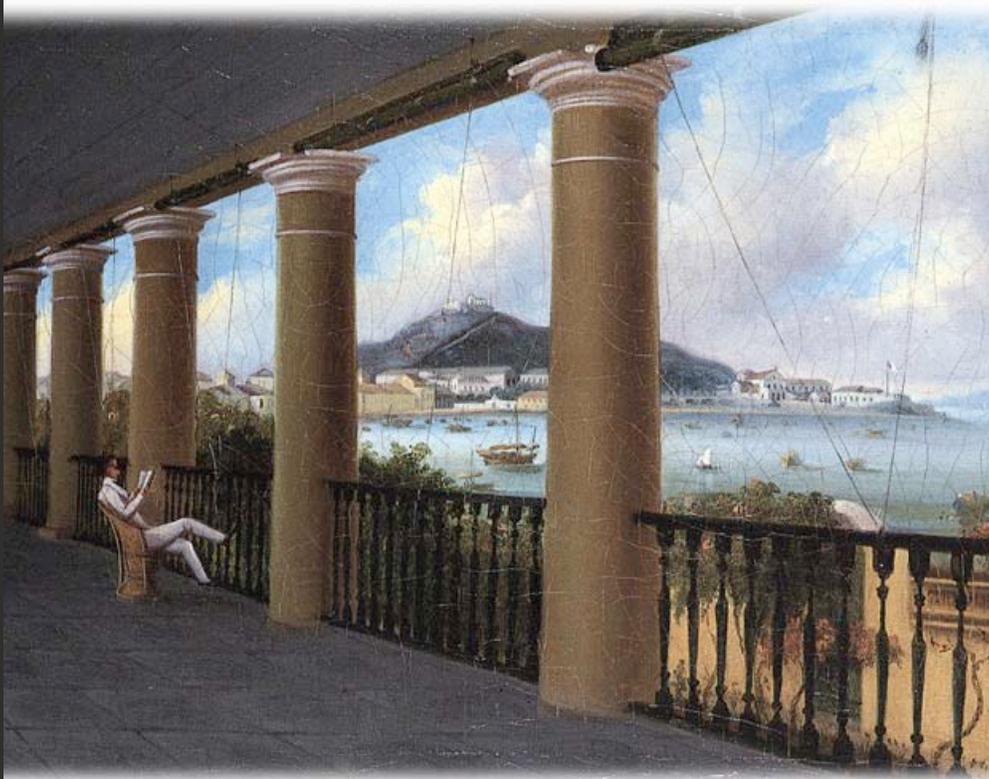


The bay of Macau, located at the mouth of the Pearl River, can be seen in this landscape. In 1557 the city was leased to the Portuguese, who helped to restore the export of Chinese silk to Japan after China had closed its ports to the Japanese due to the threat of multi-racial pirate raids.

*“Macao, View of Two Bays, ca. 1830”
Unknown Chinese artist*

Peabody Essex Museum [cwM_1830c_M975102]

As a Portuguese colony, Macau was the only location in China where Westerners and their families could live year-round. For the four months of the trading season merchants were allowed to reside up-river at Canton, though no women were allowed. Macau offered a lively social life and diverse population intermingling Westerners and Chinese. Its area of 23.5 square kilometers included granite hills topped by fortresses, whitewashed Portuguese churches, trading houses, and residences, and was known in many artworks by the distinctive crescent-shaped Praya Grande beach.



Macau was the most European of the Pearl River cities, described as a “good Portuguese town” with whitewashed churches and western-style homes. The Praya Grande beach—seen here from Nathan Kinsman’s veranda—became its most famous view. Merchants were permitted to reside in Macau with their families year-round. Kinsman’s wife, Rebecca, kept a detailed journal of her experiences in China.

*“Veranda of Nathan Kinsman’s residence in Macau,” ca. 1843
by Lam Qua*

Martyn Gregory Gallery [cwM_1843c_KinsmanPorch_ct94]

The "Paradise of the East"

Macao from the sea looks beautiful, with some most romantic spots. We arrived there about ten o'clock, took sedan chairs and went to our house, which we liked the looks of very much. The streets of Macao are narrow and irregular, but we have a garden in which I anticipate much pleasure.

[Harriet Low's journal, September 30, 1829]

Harriet Low, a twenty-year-old girl from Salem, Massachusetts, arrived in Macau on September 29, 1829, with her aunt and uncle. As one of the few young women in the foreign community, she soon became acquainted with many of the prominent men of the town. Her lively letters and insightful journal provide vivid pictures of the interactions of foreigners and Chinese in Macau. She met the hong merchant Mouqua, "a great character...very gallant," sat for her portrait by George Chinnery, and attended many balls, dinners, and parties. Sprightly and inquisitive by nature, she found herself frustrated by the confinement of foreigners and by the frivolousness of the young Englishmen. "The men are a good-for-nothing set of rascals. ...all they care about is eating, drinking, and frolicking."

Harriet Low (1809–1877) left for China with her aunt and uncle at the age of 20, and stayed in Macau from 1829 to 1833. She made a secret visit to Canton, which caused a diplomatic crisis, and posed for this portrait by Chinnery, dressed in the latest fashions brought from Calcutta, with sleeves stuffed with down pillows. She commented on her dress, "Such sleeves I never beheld—complete frights!" (Harriet Low's journal, August 18, 1830)

*"Harriet Low," 1833
by George Chinnery,*

[cwPT_1833_HLow_Chin_PE25246]

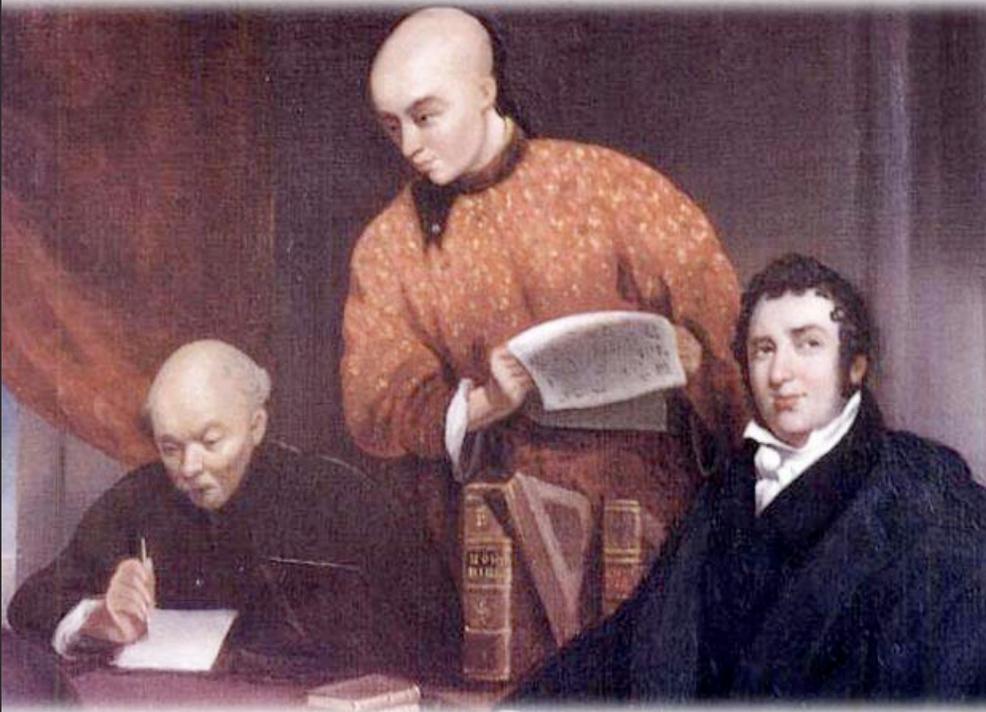


Miss Low longed to visit Canton, the truly Chinese city up the river. Although the Chinese banned all foreign women from Canton, several Englishwomen had secretly made the trip. She and her aunt embarked in November 1830, dressed as boys, and walked straight into the American factory. As they walked up and down Old and New China streets, the Chinese stood staring at them quietly, until sailors drove the crowds away. When the Chinese authorities threatened to shut down all trade if the ladies did not leave, they had to go. Harriet's adventure showed that the Chinese still controlled foreign access to Canton; as she said, "The Chinese are very cunning, and know very well what they are about."

Harriet Low often heard sermons by the pioneering Scottish missionary Robert Morrison, and knew the medical missionary Thomas Colledge:

Have been to church this morning, my dear, and heard an excellent sermon read by Dr. Morrison. The subject was that the chief end of our existence was to do good, certainly not to enjoy, for the trials and troubles we are subjected to in every stage of life prove that. I thought his reasons and arguments very good, but, if this is the purpose of our existence, how few fulfil it! ... I know one person here who does, and that is Mr. Colledge. He is continually going about doing good; he makes every one love him, he is so universally kind and obliging, and exerts himself to make all happy who come in his way. We call him "the sunbeam," for everything smiles when he approaches. His greatest pleasure is in doing good, and his face speaks the goodness of his heart. [January 6, 1833]

Robert Morrison arrived in China in 1807 and stayed there for nearly 27 years. As the first Protestant missionary in China, he faced heavy opposition from the resident Catholics as well as imperial officials, who tried to prevent him from learning the Chinese language. But he persevered on his own, obtaining a post as translator for the East India Company, which allowed him to live in Canton while his wife stayed in Macau. The foreign merchants appreciated his skills, but when he began translating Biblical texts the Qing government declared it a capital crime to publish Christian books in Chinese. Still, Morrison produced on his own a translation of the Bible into colloquial Chinese and the first Chinese English dictionary, after 16 years of work, distributing them secretly with Chinese helpers. He also founded both a dispensary to give ordinary Chinese effective Western medicines, and the Anglo Chinese college at Malacca. He trained several Chinese assistants to carry on his work, creating a small Christian community. Morrison died in 1834 and was buried in the Protestant cemetery in Macau.



Defying Chinese government prohibitions, Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary in China, learned Chinese and hired assistants to help translate the Bible into Chinese and produce the first Chinese-English dictionary.

*"Dr. Morrison Translating the Bible," 1830
by George Chinnery*

[cwPT_1830_morrison]

In Macau, Harriet Low became a good friend of Dr. Thomas Colledge, one of the first Western medical men to practice on Chinese patients. While an employee of the British East India Company, he set up an ophthalmology clinic in 1827 in Macau, specializing in the removal of cataracts, and treated over 4000 patients during his time there.



"Dr. Colledge's Eye Hospital," 1838

by George Chinnery

Medical History Library, Yale University [cwM_1838_ColledgeClinic]

In his studio, Harriet saw Chinnery's most famous picture, which portrays Dr. Colledge after he has restored the sight of a nearly blind Chinese woman. Colledge rests his hand on the woman's forehead, lifting her eyeglasses and asking his servant to interpret for him. The woman's son, with the long queue, kneeling in front of him, presents a red envelope containing a letter of thanks. In the far left, an old man kneels with his eyes bandaged waiting for treatment. Harriet Low was shocked by the large number of blind beggars she saw on the streets. Seeing a blind man, she "could not help asking myself what feeling or principle he could have within that could induce him to bear such loads of misery."



Dr. Colledge's eye clinic in Macau was the first medical service run by a Western doctor for Chinese patients. This famous portrait by Chinnery shows the doctor after he has completed an operation on a Chinese woman, explaining the outcome to his servant, who acts as an interpreter. The woman's son kneels in front, presenting a letter of thanks. Chinese officials opposed the influence of foreign missionaries who had only religion to offer, but they encouraged those who brought knowledge of useful arts such as medicine or weaponry. After Colledge, the Yale graduate Peter Parker continued his medical and missionary work in Canton.

*"Dr. Thomas Colledge with Patients," ca. 1833-1835
by George Chinnery*

Peabody Essex Museum [cwPT_1833-35_M23017]

Visualizing Macau

Although Macau never attained the commercial importance of Canton and, later, Hong Kong and Singapore, artists like Chinnery and his compatriots, disciples, and successors succeeded in conveying a sense of human vitality often lacking in depictions of the more thriving treaty ports. Vignettes of the city and surrounding countryside include native people as well as foreigners, and convey at least a general impression of life beyond the foreign community—temples and crowded public places, for example, as well as the back alleys of Macau.



Chinnery documented the ordinary life of Macau in paintings and sketches. In this view of the Praya Grande, he places the Chinese boat people in the foreground against the backdrop of the foreign buildings.

*"The Praya Grande, Macau," 1825–1852
by George Chinnery*

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwM_1825-52_AH6410]



Many forts topped the mountains around Macau—here, Fort Guia and Monte. Built by the Portuguese for defense against pirates in the sixteenth century, by the 19th century these had become mere backdrops for scenic excursions. The funeral depicted is likely a Chinese ceremony as they preferred to bury their dead on hillsides, where the fengshui, or geomancy, was more favorable. The hand coloring, however, is inaccurate—black and red were not worn in funeral rituals.

*“Macau from the Forts of Heangshan,” 1839 & 1842
published in Borget’s Sketches of China and the Chinese*

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwM_1839-42_AH8821]



This Chinese temple was dedicated to Amagao (Mazu in Chinese), the Queen of Heaven and patron goddess of sailors of the south coast, for whom the Portuguese named the city of Macau. Chinese residents are gathered here for family outings, gambling, tea, fortune telling, and worship.

*“The Square Outside the Ma Kok Temple,” 1838
Drawn from nature by Aug. Borget, lithograph by Eug. Ciceri*

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwM_1838_AH643329]



Another view of the Ma Kok temple was made from the riverside by William Heine, who contributed several evocative sketches of Macau when the Perry expedition to Japan made stops in China.

*“Chinese Temple in Macau,” 1853
by William Heine*

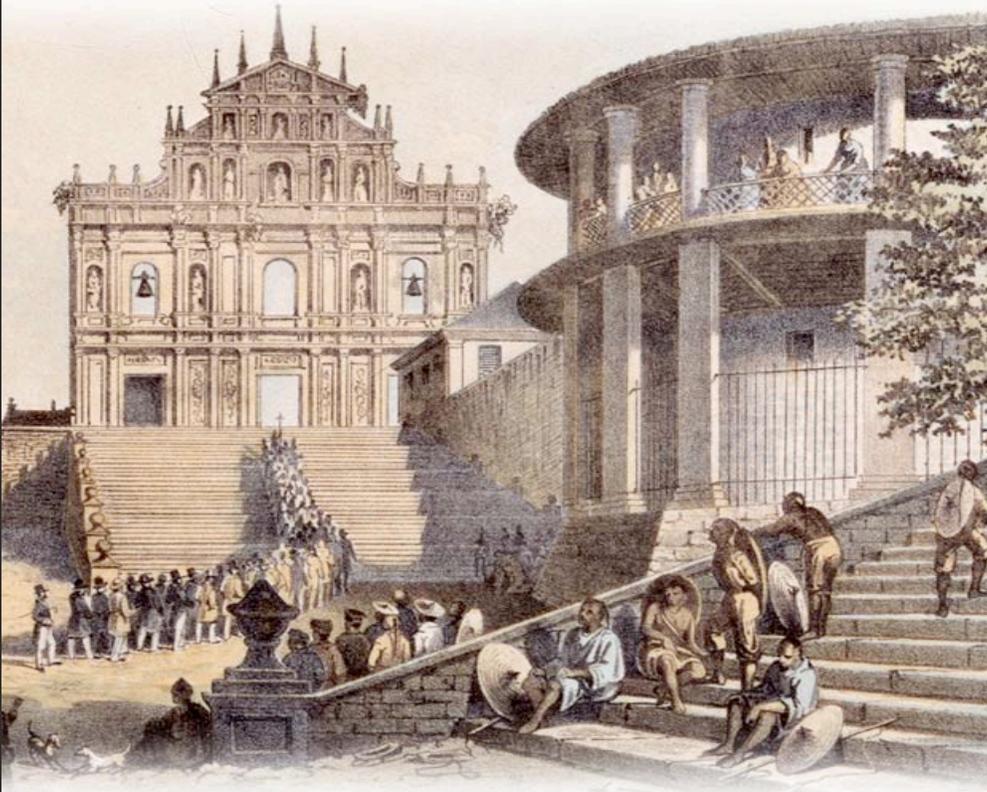
Perry's Narrative of an Expedition [cwM_1853_Heine_Temple_bx]



Heine drew a romantic view of the Praya Grande crescent illuminated at sunset, with women in white, possibly Western Christians visiting a grave.

*“Macao From Penha Hill,” 1854
by William Heine*

Perry's Narrative of an Expedition [cwM_1854_Heine_Macau_bx]



One of the most famous sites in Macau was the subject of another Heine view: St. Paul's church, built in 1582 for the Jesuits, burned in 1835 and only its facade remains. Japanese Christians expelled from Japan carved its stone facade.

*"The Facade of St. Paul's Church, titled 'Jesuit Convent, Macao,'" 1854
by William Heine*

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwM_1854_AH644191]



Chinnery also did sketches of the back streets of Macau, which depict the everyday life of the local people. He showed peddlers, porters, food shops, and others resting in the shade behind the St. Dominic's church.

*"Macao Street Scene," 1840-45
Watercolor on paper; by George Chinnery
Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwM_1840-45_M381084]*

Chinese artists followed the tradition set by Chinnery and Heine, continuing to paint Macau into the 19th century. Panoramic views from the hills included all the famous landmarks of the city: the Church of St. Paul's facade, the Church of St. Lawrence, the Praya Grande lined with shops, and fleets of ships, Western and Chinese in two bays. The town continued to grow in the 19th century, even though the opening of treaty ports in China took away its special character, and the focus of Western traders turned to Canton, Shanghai, and other large cities.



Macau ca. 1870

A sweeping overview of Macau shows that the quiet town has grown into a built-up city by 1870.

"Panoramic View of Macau from Penha Hill," ca. 1870

Unknown Chinese artist

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwM_1870_AH831]

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Bocca Tigris

Merchant ships began their entry to China at Macau, where they engaged a pilot to take them up the Pearl River to the anchorage at Whampoa. They could not make this perilous journey without Chinese help. Even the smallest foreign ships, of 400 tons, drew 18 feet of water, but the shoals in the Pearl River were shallower than this. Over time, as the ships grew in size, their draught increased to over 20 feet while the river became shallower over time. Only skilled Chinese pilots could calculate the time of the tides, avoid dangerous eddies, and follow the safe channel up the river. Every pilot was registered with the government. First the "outside pilots" guided the ship into Macau, then the registered Macau pilots took the ships upriver.

Journey Up the Pearl River Delta



Macau—Vessels heading for Canton first put in at this crescent shaped beach, the Praya Grande, at the mouth of the Pearl River. Here, they engaged a pilot and secured permission to navigate up the Pearl River.

Bocca Tigris (Tiger's Mouth) is a narrow strait about 40 miles from the mouth of the Pearl River, where the breadth of the river shrinks from an average of 15 miles to two miles; several Chinese defensive forts were placed nearby. Ships stopped here to receive the mandarin's "chop," or seal, before proceeding.





Whampoa anchorage is 10 miles beyond Bocca Tigris and 10–16 miles from Canton. Here the merchants hired a Chinese agent, or comprador, to manage the needs of the ship and crew, and paid the customary taxes and bribes. Since Western sailing ships could not go beyond this area—the water was too shallow—sampans and other small craft ferried goods to Canton.

Canton was the final destination for Western merchants, who could only live there during the four-month trading season. This view shows some of the foreign quarters, called factories or hong.



*These four 1810 paintings on copper form a set. In later versions, Hong Kong replaced the Bocca Tigris view.
China, unknown artist(s)*

[cwM_1810_M20533] [cwBTW_1810a_M20532]
[cwBTW_1810b_M20531] [cwC_1810d_M20530]
Peabody Essex Museum

At Bocca Tigris (named from the Chinese word *humen*, or “tiger’s gate”), a narrow strait about 40 miles from the mouth of the river, two Chinese forts guarded the narrow passage, only two miles wide. The pilots had to show their permits before proceeding farther. They were only allowed to guide trading ships; warships, passenger ships, or ships carrying only bullion were prohibited. Beyond Bocca Tigris, the ships had to be towed by small sampans in order to hold them in the channel. It could take over 50 sampans to tow the largest ships.

Visualizing Bocca Tigris



An honorary salute is exchanged between the Chinese forts and war junks (right), and two English embassy vessels (left), carrying ambassador Lord Macartney as they pass through Bocca Tigris traveling from Canton to Macau in 1794. Smoke emanates from the Lion (far left). The Jackall is next to her.

*“The Forts of Anunghoy Saluting the Lion in the Bocca Tigris,” 1796
by William Alexander*

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwBTW_1796_AH914_BT]



The Bocca Tigris forts turned out to be ineffective defenses against Western ships determined to pass them. In 1816, during a war scare, the British ship Alceste fired at the forts and silenced their guns immediately.

*“Captain Sir Murray Maxwell in H.M. Ship Alceste Fires on the Chinese Fortresses at Bocca Tigris,” 1816
McLeod, artist, Dubourg, engraver*

National Maritime Museum [cwSP_1816_nmm_PAF4865]



In 1834 the British emissary Lord Napier, angered at Chinese official descriptions of him as a “barbarian,” forced his way up the river into Whampoa with two British warships on September 11, 1834. He died in China a month later. This was the opening of armed conflict between the British empire and China.

*“HM Ships Imogene and Andromache passing the Batteries of the Bocca Tigris”
by Thomas Allom*

National Maritime Museum [cwSP_1834_nmm_BT_PU0244]

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At Whampoa, 10 miles beyond Bocca Tigris, all the foreign ships anchored to unload their cargos. Sampans ferried the goods to Canton, 10 to 16 miles farther up the river. This panoramic view of the anchorage from Danes Island includes three famous pagodas used as navigation points and a variety of vessels, from East Indiamen to junks and sampans.

*“Whampoa, from Dane’s Island,” 1800s
by Thomas Allom*

National Maritime Museum [cwBTW_1800s_Wh_PAD0049]



East Indiamen, sampans, and junks at the Whampoa anchorage near Canton in 1835.

*"Whampoa in China," 1835
by William John Huggins*

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwBTW_1835_AH64405_Ship_sc]



The Whampoa anchorage, where the foreigners stayed for months, became one of the primary images of export art. It even appeared on decorative fans such as this one, from the the mid 19th century.

Fan, China, mid 19th century

Peabody Essex Museum [cwOF_1850_E46494]



This painting assembles Chinese maritime stereotypes in an imaginary scene. The boat in the foreground with many oarsmen resembles the “fast crab” boats that smuggled opium along the Chinese coast. Behind it is an official Chinese ship with eyes on the front and a painting on the stern. To the left is a sampan houseboat. Artists often combined the most prominent features of the Whampoa anchorage—such as the nine-story pagoda, the junks, sampans, and Dane’s Island—in views that were not physically accurate but replicated the recognizable symbols of the Canton trade.

*“The Nine-Stage Pagoda at Whampoa Anchorage”
unknown Chinese artist, ca. 1830–50*

[cwBTW_1830-50_Whampoa]

Living at Whampoa, where foreigners resided for several months each year, involved many hardships. The high heat and humidity, a climate to which northern Europeans were not accustomed, weakened many men’s health; typhus and other fevers constantly struck the crews. The foreign cemeteries were sober testimony to these perils, and the lists of ship crews routinely described sailors who fell overboard, died of disease, or were killed by pirates. Charles Toogood Downing described the “Jack-tar,” or common sailor, as “the most improvident creature upon earth, almost a baby as to foresight and prudence.” Unaccustomed to the extremes of hot and cold, and often drunk and poorly nourished, the foreign sailors did not last long in Asia.

In Ralph Paine's *The Old Merchant Marine* Captain Armasa Delano recorded the sad array of fates of his former crew:

John Harris. A slave in Algiers at last accounts.
Roger Dyer. Died and thrown overboard off Cape Horn.
William Williams. Lost overboard off Japan.
James Crowley. Murdered by the Chinese near Macao.
John Johnson. Died on board an English Indiaman.
Seth Stowell. Was drowned at Whampoa in 1790.
Jeremiah Chace. Died with the small-pox at Whampoa in 1791.
Humphrey Chadburn. Shot and died at Whampoa in 1791.
Samuel Tripe. Drowned off Java Head in 1790.
James Stackpole. Murdered by the Chinese.
Nicholas Nicholson. Died with the leprosy at Macao.
William Murphy. Killed by Chinese pirates.
Larry Conner. Killed at sea.



The Christian cemetery for foreigners at Whampoa—there was also a Muslim burial ground—bore testimony to the dangers of living in south China's extreme tropical climate. "In the height of the seasons in 1820s and 1830s, there were often as many as 100 sailing vessels lying at Whampoa for three months or more, awaiting their cargoes of tea. As each ship would have between 50 and 150 people on board, together they formed a large concentration of souls and the death rate was high..." (An East India Company Cemetery, p. 4)

*"View of Foreign Cemetery on Dane's Island," ca. 1840
by Sunqua*

National Maritime Museum [cwPT_1830_morrison_ProtBu45]

At each stage of the voyage up the Pearl River, as the foreigners entered more deeply into Chinese territory, they depended more heavily on officially registered Chinese navigators and merchants. Since pirates also infested the waters, Chinese patrol boats helped defend the trading ships.

Chinese and Western artists delighted in portraying the multitude of Chinese boats of all sizes that dominated life on the rivers and coasts. The riverboats, generally long with flat hulls, contained enough space to hold both cargo and families living on them. Oceangoing junks had traveled the waters of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian ocean ever since the Song dynasty in the 10th century. The colorful "flower boats" moored outside every major city provided music, wine, opium, and women to those who could afford it. Small sampans supported families engaged in a great variety of niche activities—including selling provisions and even raising ducks to sell to the merchants in and around Canton. "Crab boats," with shallow drafts and many oarsmen, could scuttle up the small inlets and deliver opium by eluding the official patrols.

Chinese Boats

Native water life on rivers and seas

Oceangoing junk

"Chinese Junks,"
1850
attributed to
George Chinnery

National Maritime Museum
[cwSP_1850_
nmm_BHC1180]



River boat

Peabody Essex Museum
[cwSP_E8353221]



"Flower Boat With Women"

Peabody Essex Museum
[cwSP_E8354712]



"Chinese Duck Boat"

1810
by Thomas &
William Daniell

National Maritime Museum
[cwSP_1810_
_nmm_PAD0364]



*Crab boat
with house boat in
the background*

[cwBTW_1830-50
_Whampoa]



*The Chinese artist Youqua included an extraordinary variety of boats, buildings,
and landscape details in this panoramic view of Whampoa.*

*“Whampoa,” ca. 1850
by Youqua*

Peabody Essex Museum [cwBTW_1850c_M4478]

As the traders waited impatiently at Whampoa for the Chinese boatmen to prepare their goods for shipment to and from Canton, they could observe Chinese peasants cultivating rice and raising ducks in the fields and ponds around them. Families living on sampans provided the foreigners' daily needs. Observant foreigners at Whampoa could discover many details of Chinese life. Artists clearly portrayed the pagoda, the town along the harbor, and a fantastic array of ships.

Whampoa, as the intermediate way station between the Western colony of Macau and the Chinese city of Canton, brought Westerners in close contact with the local Chinese population. Here the two cultures met in an environment of mutual dependence.

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