Comment on Papers Prepared for the Panel "The Celestial Empire and the Early American Republic, 1748-1844: Old China Trade Documents in the Mid-Atlantic States Region"

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The papers by Doctors Jacques Downs, Murray Rubinstein, and Nancy Davis are written by experienced researchers who have not only surveyed but also utilized the China trade archives they described. In several cases the results of their research have also been published. Because the authors are extraordinarily, perhaps uniquely, qualified to explicate the scope and accessibility of these collections, I will not even attempt to augment those aspects of their papers. Rather, I will discuss some general historical questions that the documentary collections evoke and perhaps can help us resolve.

The Diverse Usefulness of These Documents

All the collections of documents surveyed deal to a greater or lesser extent with Sino-American trade, and these collections may be useful to historians studying trade from varied regional, national, and theoretical perspectives. Some of the documents Professor Rubinstein scrutinized at the New-York Historical Society and New York Public Library would be of primary interest to economic historians of China and of the United States, while other materials at the New York Public Library and at Union Theological Seminary are of principal interest to an historian of Christian missionaries and their contacts with the merchant community. Dr. Davis portrayed collections of public records with economic, diplomatic, and art historical relevance. Professor Downs examined the Caleb Cushing papers, of primary interest to diplomatic, legal, and business historians. He also surveyed the John Richardson Latimer papers that straddle two fields. They deal with commercial questions such as how Benjamin Chew Wilcocks pioneered and developed branches of the United States opium trade to China from both Turkey and India. The Latimer papers also contain detailed pen-and-ink drawings of Chinese-made ladies' hair combs imported into early America. Such artwork can be a resource for the historian of art, taste, and material culture in early America as well as for the purely economic historian.

I will discuss the collections in terms of their usefulness to economic, diplomatic, art, and missionary historians respectively. I have chosen to begin with economic history because this panel focuses on documents pertaining to commerce, and also because, as Professor Downs pointed out over a decade ago in a paper before the American Historical Association, Sino-American trade was the primary nexus out of which Sino-American diplomacy, missionary activity, and even some trends in American taste ultimately evolved.
The Documents' Usefulness to Economic, Commercial, and Maritime Historians

A key question pertaining to trade is the extent to which China's nineteenth-century economy was significantly affected by Chinese involvement in the world economy. Hao Yen-p'ing, in two major books, as well as Robert P. Gardella and Lillian M. Li, have argued that foreign trade played a significant economic role, especially in the coastal regions of China. William Rowe, on the other hand, has argued that China's economic growth up to 1889, specifically in the case of inland Hankow, proceeded "along a course dictated by the internal logic of China's own socioeconomic development." Nearly all the commercial changes mentioned by Rowe can be explained "independent of the arrival of the West." Who is right?

This problem quickly becomes one of defining the component parts of the Chinese economy and then demonstrating how each geographical part did or did not interact with world markets. What can documents written by Americans for other Americans tell about China's economy? Professors Downs and Rubinstein have mentioned some of the largest entrepreneurs on the China coast: Russell, Heard, Olyphant, Dunn, Latimer, Ammidon, Willocks, Low, Hoppin, Cushing, and Carrington. It is possible the archives and especially the account books of these commercial giants may assist in defining "real" commercial impact. One type of economic growth could have been taking place in Hankow and the other Wuhan cities simultaneously with a different form of economic growth in Canton and its outside anchorages.

Further clarification of the role of foreign trade in China's nineteenth-century economic development would come from a clearer understanding of the role of the opium trade. Most scholarly examination of the opium trade, including path-breaking work by Professor Downs, has focused on international commerce and diplomacy. But what role did opium play within the Chinese economy? Jonathan Spence, in a 1975 article, asked about local economic arrangements to distribute prepared opium. What roles were played by special interest groups, such as Canton merchants, Triads, bankers, and Parsee firms? We have some general knowledge about these groups but much more precise information would be helpful. How did the opium trade fit in with Chinese taxation patterns? Apparently, opium served as a substitute for money on the local level and was taxed by the latter part of the Ch'ing dynasty. What role did the opium trade play in the triumph of trading interests over morality, the financing of China's "self-strengthening" program, the collapse of older agricultural ideals, the linkage of 'evil with the foreigner,' and the final shattering of image of the Emperor as paternal protector? Although Spence raised all of these questions in 1975, opium in 1988 remains one of the most understudied and unresolved issues in nineteenth-century Sino-American relations. Again, it is possible that the commercial documents surveyed by Professors Downs and Rubinstein, especially the Latimer and Russell papers, can help us better understand the opium trade and thereby the role of China's foreign trade in its general economic development.

The commercial documents Downs and Rubinstein discussed also may have relevance for the study of American history. Rubinstein described papers that may provide a "Diltheyist" view of the China trade, that is to say, a participant's own perspective. Such documents enable us to know not only what procedures of trade were followed by United States merchants but also what life was like for the average trader, captain, and seaman. Such social history considerations are similar to those of Marcus Rediker and Jesse Lemisch, who examined the attitudes and behavior of American merchant seamen. There is clearly much biographical work to be done. Professor Downs was help-
ful in delineating which China trade biographies can and should be written based on the documentary sources available, calling special attention to the need for biographies of Benjamin Chew Wilcocks and Samuel Russell.10

The Documents' Usefulness to Diplomatic Historians

In addition to being useful to commercial historians, the Caleb Cushing Papers inspected by Professor Downs are a major resource on early Sino-American diplomatic contact. Until recent years the study of Sino-American diplomacy up through 1844 was largely the domain of the antiquarian and nautical history buff. Major writers on the topic included Sydney and Marjorie Greenbie, who published their romanticized Gold of Ophir in 1925.11 Tyler Dennett's Americans in East Asia, an excellent business history written shortly after World War I, sought to demonstrate the necessity of American cooperation with "the other powers," especially Europeans, in shaping a stable, peaceful East Asian order. Dennett's history excluded Asian perspectives and non-official contacts.12 In 1983 Michael Hunt's Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1919 elaborated on themes initially raised by Dennett but offered alternative interpretations. According to Hunt, diplomatic negotiation was a mere thread in a vast weave that he labeled "a Sino-American special relationship." This matrix was crafted by "a large and diverse cast of Chinese and Americans, from obscure transpacific travellers to eminent public figures." By the early twentieth century, those protagonists had "bound two countries widely separated by culture and geography into a relationship notable for its breadth, complexity, and instability."13

The Cushing Papers are examples of documents that may help explain this multifaceted relationship. Apparently, Cushing saw himself as more than a diplomat, a linguist, a lawyer or even a commercial advocate. Admittedly, he was a strong friend of the China trade. His kinsman John P. Cushing was head of Perkins and Company. But while Caleb aimed to secure "equal commercial footing" for Americans in the China market alongside the British, he also thought in terms of outstripping rather than equalling his transatlantic rivals. Cushing championed an American ascendancy in East Asian affairs. He saw himself as a catalyst, and based on what Professor Downs has told us about his attitudes on race, perhaps a white supremacist as well. The Commissioner viewed himself as being sent from a rising new center of world civilization to a once vital but now stagnant Asia. His papers contain his poignant comment that "we have become the teachers of our teachers."14 A closer scrutiny of his papers may reveal more about the complexity of Cushing's perception of his mission.

The Documents' Usefulness to Art Historians and to Historians of Material Culture

Let us now move from a consideration of diplomatic to art history as it relates to the China trade. Dr. Davis described a specific genre of China trade documents: cargo manifests and customs records of American vessels bound from China to the port of Philadelphia between 1784 and 1844. Her Ph.D. dissertation is proof positive of what can be done with such records. Dr. Davis elaborated on art historian Carl Crossman's estimate that "an early nineteenth century Boston or Salem dwelling might have had one-tenth to one-fifth of its effects from China."15 Restricting her research to the Philadelphia area and using customs records and cognate documents, Dr. Davis tabulated the importation of thirty-three China trade objects destined for the open market. She differentiated those general sale objects from custom-ordered furniture, textiles,
porcelain, metalwork, and painting, thereby disassociating middle-class purchases from the purchases of a more affluent upper class or a less affluent lower class. She calculated the costs to the middle class of imported items, concluding that the "designs and detailing of Chinese objects provided elegance and refinement previously unaffordable to the American middle and upper-middle class."⁶

Dr. Davis’s paper and dissertation posed questions as broad as what were price fluctuations on imported goods and as specific as what were the methods of packing and containerization in the China trade. She suggests additional questions that might profitably be researched: What types of China trade products were favored by the American lower classes, as opposed to products favored by the middle and upper classes? Which consignees favored which types of objects? How did Philadelphia’s China imports over a ten-year period compare with those of New York, Boston, or Charleston? To what extent were "open market" China trade objects reexported to the United States from Europe and the West Indies? How does the volume of reexports compare with the volume of objects imported directly into Philadelphia from China? To what extent were China trade products part of the coastal trade? Was there a correlation between a ship's tonnage and its choice of cargo? How did the length of time for a Canton-to-Philadelphia voyage vary over a period of years and for what reasons? She also described cognate collections of documents, particularly State Department Consular Records and the Canton periodical press, that may additionally assist the researcher in resolving China trade questions.

Missionary Records and the Old China Trade

Finally we move from the art and material culture of the China trade to the relationship of American Protestant missionaries with the trade. Professor Rubinstein argued in his paper, as he has done elsewhere, that missionary records can broaden our understanding of far more than the history of religion.⁷ Such documents can be "a lens through which one can see new things in China and in the complex relationship between China and the West."⁸ Individual and collective biographies, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts, "permit us to see American and European merchants in Canton through different eyes."⁹ Professor Rubinstein asked how missionaries regarded the merchants with whom they often traveled to China and for whom they served as pastors and spiritual counselors. How did these two types of protagonists interact in Sino-American relations? Did they, for example, work hand-in-hand towards furthering a common brand of imperialism or did they have different imperialisms as their objectives?¹⁰ The questions Rubinstein posed are significant because any additional appraisal of China trade merchants from non-mercantile sources will broaden our perspective on traders over and beyond what can be derived from purely commercial and diplomatic documents. Rubinstein has not answered his questions, so we can look forward to the answers in future publications by this prolific scholar.

Conclusion

I will conclude by mentioning one final protagonist in the field of Sino-American relations. I would like to thank and congratulate Frank Joseph Shulman for organizing what has become an annual feature at the Mid-Atlantic conference of the Association for Asian Studies. This panel on archival and library resources on East Asia in the Mid-Atlantic region is Frank’s twelfth. Hopefully, the three comprehensive papers from this
panel, like those from many of Frank's earlier panels, will quickly find their way to large scholarly audiences.\(^{21}\) In addition to publication of these articles in specialized journals, I hope that the leadership of the Mid-Atlantic conference will soon see fit to emulate what the Southeast conference of the Association for Asian Studies did in 1985: publish extensive volumes of bibliographical essays delivered at its regional meetings.\(^{22}\) Here, too, we are indebted to Frank Shulman. As editor Kenneth W. Berger wrote in the introduction to one of the Southeastern regional volumes, "beginning in 1982, borrowing a concept introduced by Frank Joseph Shulman for the Mid-Atlantic Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, panels were presented which dealt with particular collections in the region covered by the Southeast Conference."\(^{23}\) I would add my personal judgment that much bibliographical and general scholarly growth, at West Georgia College and elsewhere, stateside and overseas, is a direct product of Frank's generosity, inspiration, and indefatigable effort, for which he is again to be commended.

NOTES


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While no Samuel Russell biography has yet been written, the Connecticut River Museum in Essex, Connecticut, has mounted a special exhibit about this key figure in Sino-American commerce. The exhibition "Connecticut Yankee in the Celestial Empire: Samuel Russell and the China Trade" opened October 28, 1988 and will remain on view through March 1989, Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For additional information call (203) 767-8269.

Sydney and Marjorie Greenbie, Gold of Ophir; or, the Lure That Made America (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1925).


Rubinstein, "Olyphant's," pp. 8, 11.

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