The New People in Canton - Contextualizing Early American Interests in the China Trade

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ABSTRACT

In 1784, American merchant and soon-to-be United States consul to China—Samuel Shaw—embarked upon a six-month journey to Canton aboard the Empress of China. Backed by the United States Government and fellow capitalists, Shaw's voyage marked the beginning of relations between the newly independent United States and China. This paper will explore the motivations behind Shaw's voyages by analyzing relevant primary documents alongside the context in which they were produced. Central to this paper's arguments are Shaw's journals , which are some of the only surviving documents from the earliest American trade delegations to China. Using these sources, this paper concludes that while trade with China was profitable, the profits involved were negligible in the context of the gruelling journey across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Rather, this paper argues that the voyage to China was driven by a newly independent nation's deeply rooted desire to project its sovereignty to the wider world. In other words, the Empress of China was guided by an ideal that reverberates across American history and popular imagination: independence.

Introduction

On February 22nd, 1784, one year after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, the Empress of China departed New York Harbour for Canton, marking the beginning of the relationship between the United States and China (Shaw and Quincy 1847, 133). In the century that followed, America would become the second-largest importer of Chinese teas and the dominant reseller of tea to European markets (Du 2018, 252). However, while American gains from the China trade are well-documented by historians, the motivations of Samuel Shaw, the first American Consul to Canton, and the United States Government to establish relations with China are less clear. In 1784, well before the completion of the Panama Canal, ships leaving the North American continent sailed across the Atlantic, around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, and through the Indian Ocean to reach Canton (Shaw and Quincy 1847). The Empress of China's journey to Canton took six months and necessitated numerous stops in European colonial territories such as St Jago, the Canary Islands, and Batavia. For the Americans involved in the China trade, this journey occupied significant portions of their lives - Shaw's four voyages to Canton defined the final decade of his life; he died of disease during his return journey to the United States in 1794 (Quincy 1847, 124). Furthermore, the Americans had no guarantee that trade with China would be profitable, given that few American merchants knew anything of the waters beyond the Cape of Good Hope, let alone the economic prospects in Canton (124). Given this context, the drivers of early American voyages to China have remained a topic of scholarly debate. This paper argues that Shaw and the United States Government were invested in the China trade primarily as a means of solidifying the sovereign power and reputation of their newly independent nation. In making this argument, I evaluate the extent to which Shaw's relationships with other European powers, selection of cargo, and written records indicate a broader American sense of purpose rooted in notions of independence and exceptionalism. Further, I reject the alternate argument that this broader sense of purpose was rooted in economic interests by highlighting the relative lack of commercial success that persisted through the final decade of Shaw's life and career. Finally, my argument contributes to the broader body of scholarly literature by taking a clear position on the debate concerning the motivations behind the early China trade. By taking a position on this topic, this paper ultimately aims to enhance understanding of a relatively poorly documented area of early American foreign policy.

Discussion of Sources

In making my argument, I draw on a mix of primary documents and secondary literature.

A majority of the primary documents referenced in this paper were authored by Major Samuel Shaw. While reconstructing the early US-China trade using the writings of one individual has several methodological shortcomings, it is nonetheless necessary in the context of the time period and the scope of this paper. As the first American Consul to Canton, Shaw's letters—some of which are addressed to notable American officials such as John Jay—capture broader American diplomatic and economic interests well. Furthermore, as the supercargo of the only ship to sail to China in 1784, Shaw's accounts are representative of the early American experience in Canton. Finally, Shaw's accounts are significant because they are some of the only surviving documents from early trade voyages to China. Another key source is Thomas Jefferson's letter to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1785 published in academic Henry Cordier's 1989 article. The original document is available in France's Archives des

Affaires Étrangères but has not been digitized. Nevertheless, there are relevant primary documents, including excerpts concerning US-China relations in the Thomas Jefferson Papers and Shaw's diplomatic notes to President George Washington, published in an 1855 collection, which have been omitted. These documents, which are not readily accessible in digital format, were inaccessible given the limited scope of this paper. Nonetheless, I draw on secondary literature that references some of the primary documents that have been omitted.

Foster Rhea Dulles' The Old China Trade, published in 1930, is an important source due to its detailed account and analysis of early US-China commercial relations. While Dulles' book is a dated source, it is frequently referenced, alongside Shaw's personal journals, in most contemporary works on the early China trade. The other secondary works referenced in this paper are Kendall Johnson's 2011 book on early American-Chinese relations and Dan Du's 2018 paper on the early Chinese-American tea trade (Johnson 2011; Du 2018). Given that the secondary literature also relies extensively on Shaw's journals as a central source of information, this paper accordingly draws on his journals to contextualize the primary documents. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that both Jefferson's letter and Shaw's journals were published posthumously by other individuals. While the contents of their works remain the same, the contexts in which they were published are different. With the exception of Quincy's memoir, I draw primarily from the primary literature and limit my engagement with the implications of their posthumous publication.

Samuel Shaw's Letters to European Delegates in Canton

The underlying desire of the Americans at Canton to present a distinct national identity is evident in their written records. From St. Jago to Canton, Americans such as Shaw were often found touting the strengths of their new country. As American traders spoke English, one of Shaw's primary concerns in 1784 was that Chinese merchants would mistake them for British traders. As such, before departing New York, the newly formed Continental Congress provided the Empress of China with a declaration communicating the independent sovereignty of the United States (Johnson 2011, 37-38). Even with a document from the Continental Congress, Major Samuel Shaw and his companion, Thomas Randall, made a request to Phillipe Vieillard, the French Consul to Canton, "to announce to the Chinese that [the Americans] are the subjects of a free, independent, and sovereign power" (Shaw and Quincy 1847, 193). Specifically referring to the British, Shaw also asked Vieillard to clarify that they were "not connected with Great Britain, nor owing allegiance to her, or any other power on earth, but to the authority of the United States alone" (193). The desire to be recognized as an independent nation, demonstrated through Shaw's letters, illustrates the anxiety of early Americans in China.

Additionally, Shaw's letter to Vieillard highlights the important role Shaw's relationship with other European powers played in promoting America as a new nation. Along Shaw's voyage across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, he forged close ties with the Portuguese, the Dutch, and most importantly, the French (132). These connections symbolize the efforts of a new nation to build relationships with the most powerful nations in the world. Shaw's relationship-building efforts are also insightful in that they excluded, to any meaningful extent, ties with the British. If the goal had been anything but reinforcing the image of American independence, then Shaw and his crew should have prioritized partnerships with the British, who

owned the vast majority of the ships and factories in Canton. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Shaw's crew never had any conflicts with the British.

In fact, Shaw remarked that the British at Canton were "perfectly polite and agreeable," despite tensions from the Revolutionary War looming over their interaction (Shaw and Quincy 1847, 164). Perhaps unexpectedly, the British merchants in Canton even hinted at a possible alliance with America that would "bid defiance to all the world" (164). Nevertheless, the Americans never took up the British offer. Irrespective of their relationship with the British, the Americans at Canton were noticeably closest to the French. Shaw's specific request to Vieillard is evidence of this close relationship (Cordier 1898, 4). Beyond asking the French to announce their status as a new nation, Shaw's company stayed with their French counterparts and sailed into Canton harbour alongside ships bearing France's tricolour flag (Shaw and Quincy 1847, 193). In addition to a close historical relationship, America's partnership with France in China can be explained by the desire to present as a new English-speaking nation distinct from the British. The pursuit of new nation-to-nation relations is further highlighted in Thomas Jefferson's note to Charles Gravier, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs. In his note, Jefferson, the United States Minister to France, thanks the French for their support throughout America's first voyage to Canton and reiterates the importance of personal relationships as a means of strengthening nation-to-nation relationships (163-67). The connection between Shaw's journey and the work of Thomas Jefferson in Paris illustrates the importance of the Empress of China's voyage in American nation-building efforts and suggests that this early period of US-China relations was driven by more than economic interests.

Economic Pursuits and Ideas of Independence

To the United States government, the existence of an American trade route to China mattered more than the volume of trade along the route. While the individuals who travelled the route were undoubtedly driven by profits, government support was rooted in the desire to reinforce American independence. Just as Shaw and his company made numerous efforts to differentiate themselves from the British along their voyage, the United States government wanted to reduce dependence on British imports and assert its sovereignty in the world. Visions of the US-China trade as an instrument to assert independence originated well before the 1783 Treaty of Paris. In 1770, Benjamin Franklin, writing in "The Colonist's Advocate," circulated ideas of establishing independent trade with China as a means to circumvent British economic and political power over the colonies (Du 2018, 152-53). More than a decade later, the same ideas resurfaced as The Empress of China departed New York. Shaw's inaugural journey, according to Dulles, targeted the English monopoly on Chinese teas and aimed to secure a supply of tea from China to the United States that would be free from British duties (Dulles 1930, 4-5). This purpose is captured in the official record through Shaw's letter to John Jay, the United States Secretary of Foreign Affairs, where Shaw articulates his desire to build a trading relationship with China "under advantages equal if not superior to those enjoyed by any other national whatever" (Shaw 1785). Just three years after Shaw concluded his first voyage to China, Jay echoed these sentiments in the Federalist Papers, where he writes of the need to subvert the monopolies of European powers in China and India in such a way that "enables [America] to partake in advantages which they had in a manner monopolized, and as [America] thereby supply [itself]

with commodities which [it] used to purchase from them" (Jay 1788). In other words, Shaw was not in China solely to further America's economic prosperity, but rather to secure an independent supply chain. One important avenue through which the newly constituted nation could demonstrate its sovereignty was through the tea trade, which was becoming increasingly significant in the late eighteenth century.

With the English presence in Canton increasing in the late 1780s, the market for tea in Europe became increasingly dominated by Great Britain's trade ships (Shaw and Quincy 1847, 229). At the same time, the rising demand for luxury Chinese goods in the Western world made reliance on British ships for tea increasingly hard for Americans to accept. Shaw, newly appointed American Consul to Canton, articulates the benefit of establishing an independent trade with China in his second journal. Having established a trade partnership with the Chinese for tea in exchange for ginseng and furs, he writes, that "it must be pleasing for an American to know that his country can have it upon easier terms; that the otherwise useless produce of her mountains and forests will in a

considerable degree supply her with this elegant luxury." (229). For Shaw to secure this supply, he leveraged the United States' abundance of ginseng. While this herbal root had been identified as a potential catalyst for US-China trade decades before the Empress of China set sail for Canton, it never lived up to the expectations of those who compared it to silver and gold (Johnson 2011, 43). Staunch advocates for the China trade suggested that the Chinese would have a nearly endless demand for ginseng but the reality, exemplified by Shaw's unsuccessful voyage aboard the Massachusetts, refuted these ideals (41).

Rather than bringing ginseng to China as a means of fueling American demand for tea, it is more likely that Shaw used ginseng as a tool to establish the United States as an important and worthy trading partner in Canton. With the British East India Company having a vast network of trading posts in the Indian Ocean, it was nearly impossible for America to beat the British when it came to common goods. Therefore, the success of a new China trade depended on ginseng being valuable enough to capture Chinese interest. The relatively low economic gains from the early China trade, highlighted by Shaw's various voyages, reinforce the notion that the root's value was not in its profit but rather in its role as a catalyst for an independent supply chain. Nonetheless, there was an additional element to it in its symbolic value. Ginseng was a key strategic good during early US-China relations and symbolized the unique value of American goods. Standing out as a distinctly American good, the herb highlighted the United States' efforts to secure an independent supply chain. Though Samuel Shaw, an experienced merchant, frequently praised the economic potential of the China trade, records of US-China commerce during the late eighteenth century suggest a different reality. As the newest nation to trade with China, America would have to compete against the European trading delegations that have been present in Canton since 1516 (Dulles 1930, 31). As seen in Figure 1, the flags of numerous European nations were already flying in Canton by the time Shaw first arrived in 1785. While the sizes of the respective European delegations in Canton fluctuated over the years, the British Empire, a nation which had only a year ago been in conflict with the United States, dominated trade flows. When the Empress of China arrived in Canton in 1785, 17 out of 35 European ships were British (Shaw and Quincy 1847, 182). Even in 1789, five years after US-China trade had begun, Samuel Shaw observed the presence of 21 British vessels out of 32 European ships (Shaw and Quincy 1847, 296). In addition to the sheer difference in fleet

size, American trading ships often struggled to offload all their cargo. In 1790, on Shaw's third voyage to Canton aboard the Massachusetts, he had been so unsuccessful at disposing of his cargo in both Batavia and Canton that he ultimately sold the ship itself to the Danish East India Company in order to profit from the voyage (Dulles 1930, 33-34). Consequently, early American ships sailing to Canton were often small vessels with young crews (26-49). Even the Empress of China, which had successfully offloaded all of its cargo, only returned to New York with a profit of 25 percent, a meagre gain considering the high risks involved in such an exploratory journey (26). In the context of mediocre and subpar trading outcomes throughout the early US-China trade, Shaw's optimism for the economic potential of the US-China trade is questionable. While the United States would eventually establish a significant trading relationship with China, it would not occur during Shaw's lifetime. This lack of economic momentum in the early US-China trade further cements that inaugural trade voyages to China were concerned more with establishing the image of an independent America in the world. Therefore, it is more probable that Shaw's rhetoric, more prominent in his public writings than in his private journals, was merely a strategy to entice more American merchants to make the journey to Canton. Regardless, Shaw's public image, defined posthumously by Josiah Quincy's publication of his journals in 1840, exemplifies the extent to which America's search for national identity defined the early years of independence.

Samuel Shaw in Josiah Quincy's Memoir

In 1840, Josiah Quincy III, the 15th president of Harvard University, published a collection of Major Samuel Shaw's journals accompanied by a memoir of Shaw's life. Josiah Quincy, presenting Samuel Shaw as a sort of nationally representative figure, highlights the nation-building narratives present during the early trade with China. From the beginning of the memoir, Quincy connects Shaw's role as the top American diplomat to Canton and his past as a Revolutionary War veteran (Quincy 1847, v). According to Quincy's portrayal of Shaw, the very act of voyaging to China was a demonstration of American political sovereignty (Johnson 2011, 37). Though Quincy's portrayal of Shaw's motivations and experiences is considered to be, to some extent, exaggerated, it nonetheless captures the sentiments that guided American interests throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (51-52). Furthermore, despite Shaw's numerous anxieties over his ability to succeed in Canton, he contributed to nation-building narratives in his own way. Beyond advancing American diplomatic and commercial interests, Shaw searched for other means of asserting American distinctiveness. Shaw's journals detail his efforts to commission a piece of Chinese porcelain to commemorate the Society of Cincinnati, of which he was a founder (36). The Society of Cincinnati, an organization for Continental Army veterans that included figures such as George Washington, was closely tied to an American identity stemming from the Revolutionary War (54). While Shaw ultimately failed to find an artist skilled enough to satisfy his demands in Canton, his efforts to create an object symbolizing America's newfound relationship with China highlight the extent to which the need to present an American distinctiveness shaped the actions of Americans, such as Shaw, in the 1780s. This symbolism, combined with Quincy's portrayal of Shaw, reinforces the notion that the projection of American sovereignty and independence was an important driver of foreign relations during early trade with China.

Conclusion

From his first voyage on the Empress of China to his final voyage home aboard the Washington, Major Samuel Shaw was driven by his nation's need to build a national image and reputation. Furthermore, as the representative of the United States at Canton, Shaw's sense of purpose exemplifies the broader national search for identity that defined late eighteenth-century America. Despite the mild economic gains resulting from US-China trade, the American government supported the continued pursuit of trade with China as a means of declaring its status as an independent nation to the world. These motivations bring to light the extent to which the question of "What is America?" influenced United States government policy. From Boston to Canton, citizens of the United States answered, through action, this question of nationhood. More than a century after the Empress of China left New York, the trading relationship that Shaw and his company initiated with the Chinese would become one of the United States' most important economic ties. In 2022, the value of the US-China trade totalled over USD 750 billion, the highest of all American trading partners (U.S. Trade Rep. 2024). Well after the deaths of Samuel Shaw and the Founding Fathers, their struggle for nationhood defined and continues to define America and its relationship with the world.

Figure 1. Foreign Factories in Guangzhou, ca. 1784-1785. Gouache on silk, 43.5 x 71cm. From Hong Kong Museum of Art, https://hk.art.museum/en/web/ma/collections/china-trade-art.html.

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