

From Commodities to Exhibits: An Analysis of *Shipping in the Pearl River off Canton* and *Shipping in the Pearl River off Honam Island, Canton* in the National Maritime Museum in the UK

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Abstract

This essay focuses on two Chinese export paintings, *Shipping in the Pearl River off Canton* and *Shipping in the Pearl River off Honam Island, Canton*, demonstrating the port views in Canton in the mid-nineteenth century in the National Maritime Museum. On the basis of an iconographic analysis method, and with reference to known similar works, this paper suggests the idea that the two works may come from Youqua's studio, and the former was produced later than 1844. Simultaneously, this paper analyses the historical significance of the works in the dimension of both commodities and exhibits. Based on the exploration of the Chinese export paintings reflecting the East-West trade and Chinese society characteristics in a specific historical period, it also exposes the colonial nature of the work following the perspective of display and proposes the exhibition logic which restores the nature of the work as commodities as a practice of decolonization in the museum.

Keywords: Chinese export painting, the National Maritime Museum, the Canton port, the Thirteen Factories, Youqua

1. Introduction

Artworks and the social milieu of their time typically have a complex and intimate interaction. Since Vasari authored *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550), art historians have been aware of the external social context that influences artworks and the social substance that art reflects. According to Panofsky's iconology, the highest level in the study of art history is the investigation of the factors carried unintentionally by works of art that represent the historical conditions of the time. And the social history of art emerged in the 20th century puts the interrelationship between image and social factors at the center of their research, providing significant theoretical support for the study of art history today. On the flip side, art materials have also turned important visual media for writing history, specifically in the construction of historical narratives in certain types of museums. And the visual information that the artworks carry, and the life course of the artworks as social practice, are both of great value, in understanding of the history that the museums represent.

The National Maritime Museum located in Greenwich has an extensive collection of visual art. In their new gallery, *Traders: The East India Company and Asia*, there are two substantial Chinese export paintings that show the prosperous Canton port in the mid-19th century from two different perspectives. The museum names them "*Shipping in the Pearl River off Canton*"¹ (Figure 1) and "*Shipping in the Pearl River off Honam Island, Canton*"² (Figure 2) respectively, which could display their content directly. The two paintings are in various states of preservation: *Shipping off Honam Island* has no damage that can be seen with naked eye whereas *Shipping off Canton* has cockling throughout, which is especially obvious at the top of the painting, where the colors are shallow.

In the Maritime Museum, paintings depicting marine vehicles are quite prevalent, but what people know about these two paintings is limited: The size of the former is 890 mm × 2055 mm, whereas the size of the latter is 890mm × 2057mm; Both of them are oil paintings created by “Chinese school”, but the exact names of the artists and the exact dates of their creations remain unknown, and the identification of specific contents in the paintings and the study of their historical significance are also inadequate. In order to explore their unresolved concerns, this article will primarily use a social and historical lens. The nature of the artworks will be explored in the first section, followed by an iconographic identification of the specific content represented in the paintings. And then the second part will come up with the ideas regarding their artist and date of creation based on the analysis in the first part and the current studies on similar artworks. Finally, by focusing on the roles the pieces play in the gallery’s narrative and their hidden nature, which has the potential to enrich their function in the context of the exhibition hall, the dimension of interpretation will be introduced to the conversation. This essay’s thorough study is also meant to assist the Maritime Museum in better crafting its narrative, so audiences can comprehend the nature of world trade in the 19th century in a deeper way.



Figure 1. *Shipping in the Pearl River off Canton*, painted by Chinese school. ca.1841-1846.

Source: <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/13265.html>



Figure 2. *Shipping in the Pearl River off Honam Island, Canton*, painted by Chinese school in 19th century.

Source: <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/13266.html>

2. Understanding the Objects in the Context of Creation and Circulation

2.1 “Chinese Painting” or “Foreign Painting”: A Special Kind of Commodity

Since Chinese export painting is a type of by-product of a unique historical period when there were regular trade exchanges between China and the West, it is vital to evaluate the features of Chinese export painting in order to comprehend the nature of these two paintings. Chinese export painting was produced and offered for sale as a souvenir to western tourists in the Harbor cities from the 18th to early 20th century, particularly at Canton, which served as the country’s sole trading port from 1757 until the end of the Opium War in 1842. Thus, it was not regarded solely as artwork at that time, and now most paintings have been collected in Western countries where maritime trade was carried out very often. At least hundreds of painters were employed in this field in Canton, according to records kept by American missionary Samuel Wells Williams (Clunas, 1984)³, indicating that there was a sizable market for it. To increase productivity and respond to different levels of market demand in order to gain more profit, various art studios appeared at that time. The host of the studio was typically an artist who controlled the artistic style and was in charge of producing significant works, while skilled assistants were in charge of copying or creating specific works, and other painters just drew simple pictures mechanically (Jiang,

2007), therefore, customers could be provided with goods at different prices. These artworks also varied in media and subjects, such as oil paintings, watercolours, gouaches, reverse paintings on glass with subjects about the economy, government, military, education, mansions and gardens, culture and amusements, transportation, portrait, etc. (Lo, Andrew et al., 2011). The oil paintings demonstrating transportation at the port were very popular because they can be seen as a vivid record of the merchants' working experience and living environment in China, and the artist's depiction was consistent with traditional concepts in western painting, making it simple for westerners to accept. In fact, in order to cater to the taste of western customers, most Chinese export paintings are the results of the combination between western painting techniques, forms, materials and certain tradition of Chinese painting. The artist's use of scattered points perspective, which is often utilized in Chinese landscape paintings, allows for a clearer representation of the buildings and boats along the river. Simultaneously, the work also incorporates a single-point perspective as well as chiaroscuro of Western painting, making the work closer to realism in the sense of Western art. Therefore, despite the fact that these paintings were produced as commodities rather than works of pure art, and the artists were not recognized by mainstream, the value of these paintings created in a specific historical period cannot be ignored by art history.

2.2 Identifying and Analyzing the Architectures and Watercrafts: Trade, Transportation and People's Life in the 19th Century

For speculating on the fundamental details of their creation and further comprehending the significance and value of them, it is imperative to identify the locations and items shown in these two paintings. According to the map of Canton, it could be identified that *Shipping off Canton* shows the scenes from Shamian area (Figure 3), Thirteen Factories (广州十三行, Figure 4), Dutch Folly Fort (Figure 5) to Dongshui Fort in Big Shatou area (Figure 6), and the city landmarks, Light Tower, Flower Tower and Zhenhai Tower (Figure 7, from left to right), have also been also included⁴. Among these places, the Thirteen Factories is the most significant location of the times. It was a foreign trade organization formed by the Qing government who recruited local merchants and allowed them to control the business with foreigners on merchant ships, so it was a semi-official and semi-private body with monopoly power. All nations that wanted to make extensive trade with China had to rent houses from Chinese merchants in the Thirteen Factories; these homes were typically two or three storeys in height and built in a western architectural style. According to the national flags in the painting and the plans of that time, it is not difficult to identify the specific factories inside this area. Additionally, there are two famous commercial streets nearby Spanish Factory and American Factory respectively where international merchants can buy the things they require, including Chinese export paintings, since most art studios were located here.

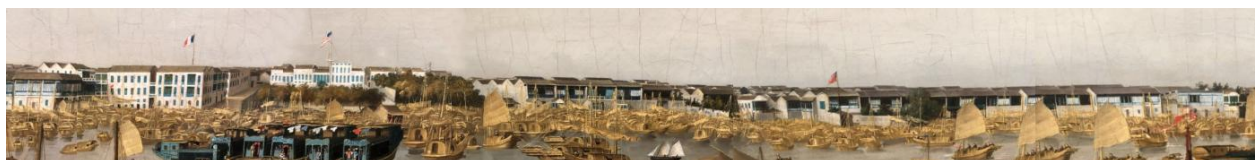




Figure 3-7. Shamian area, Thirteen Factories, Dutch Folly Fort, Dongshui Fort, Light Tower, Flower Tower and Zhenhai Tower, from *Shipping off Canton*, was taken by author.

What *Shipping off Honam Island* depicts are not as famous as those in *Shipping off Canton*, which primarily includes Honam village (Figure 8), lower-cost store houses (Figure 9), Red Fort (Figure 10) and Macao Fort (Figure 11). Foreign merchants were absolutely prohibited from residing outside of the Thirteen Factories at the time. On Honam Island, they are only permitted to visit the garden and Hai Tong Monastery three times every month (Hunter, 2009). A lot of western merchant traders have written about how much they enjoy the countryside of Hoham Island, so acquiring this artwork is undoubtedly a lovely way to relive their time spent there.

Additionally, the port is home to a larger number of watercraft that represent trade, transit, and daily life. On the whole, the watercrafts could be divided into three types as per their functions: One for economy, such as Red boat (Figure 12); one for politics, such as Fast crab boat (Figure 12); and one for amusement, such as Flower boat (boats for prostitutes, Figure 14). Although unique, Flower boats appear frequently in paintings. There are typically inside chambers and tea-sipping areas in the outer halls. Also, the ship is often without sails, but beautifully decorated (Jin, 2012). Due to commercial prosperity, the Caton port developed into a hotspot for the wealthy, making Flower boat a popular consuming place. Additionally, opium was also popular among those who enjoyed seeking decadence's pleasure, as evidence by the man smoking a pipe in the painting (Figure 15). Thus, apart from the prosperity of trade and the development of transportation, the artists also demonstrate to us the abnormal phenomenon in the lives of ordinary people at that time, which eventually led to two wars in its name and disaster for countless families. This particularity, together with the system of frontier defense depicted by the forts in the paintings, also subtly illustrates the gloom ingrained in modernity.



Figure 8-15. Village, Stored houses, Red Fort, Macao Fort, Red boat, Fast crab boat, Flower boat, Man and woman on the Flower boat. from *Shipping off Honam Island*

3. Speculation about Artist and Date of Creation

3.1 Youqua(煜呱)'s Studio as a Possible Answer

The analysis of the historical background, type as well as production mode of Chinese export paintings, and the identification of the content in the paintings, makes it easier to figure out the basic information regarding artist and date of creation. As was already indicated, in order to create a type of popular souvenir to make profits, the artists' pursuit of originality inevitably became less important, therefore, studios usually designed their painting templates to save time and cost. Although the paintings in the Maritime Museum are artistic, there are also other similar artworks, such as the one stored in Guangdong Museum (Figure 16) and the one sold by M. S. Rau (Figure 17). Apart from color which might be influenced by light as well as the methods of conservation, they are almost identical to the research objects. Moreover, considering that different studios hardly shared the same template, as well as the painting styles of *Shipping off Canton* and *Shipping off Honam Island* are quite similar, the idea that these works had been all created in the same studio (maybe by different painters) is acceptable.



Figure 16. *Picture of General View on Guangzhou City*, painted by Youqua. ca.1845

Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/259116024_650077



Figure 17. *A View of Henan (Honam)*, painted by Chinese school. ca. 1840

Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/chinese-school-a-view-of-henan-honam>

The *Picture of General View on Guangzhou City* in the Guangdong Museum's collection is regarded as Youqua's creation because it bears his signature on the back. At the time, most of the names of the painters who owned the studios ended in "qua" (𨾏), and current research proposes that this was the dialectal pronunciation of "guan" (官, which means "officer"). The Chinese merchants with whom foreign traders dealt were primarily called "qua", as they frequently received government support by donating money to buy official positions, and for the convenience of foreign customers, the painters of export paintings used the same form of address, although they had no official background (Jiang, 2007). We don't know Youqua's real name, but he is one of the hosts of the export painting studio that we are familiar with today. If it is acceptable that the works in Maritime Museum come from the similar studio as the one in Guangdong Museum, the speculation about the artist of the research object can also rely on the authenticity of the signature. At first, apart from artistic production, art studio was also the main place for selling export painting, which made it hard to forge a signature when people bought the painting for the first time. Second, the traits of this picture match with historical accounts concerning Youqua, claims scholar Fang Bai (2009) at the Guangdong Museum: According to *Views of the Pearl River Delta*, Youqua liked to create large paintings depicting harbour, and he was especially good at drawing watercrafts and buildings; Besides, Hongkong scholar Baoxin Ding mentions in *Chinese Export Painting in the Late Qing Dynasty* that Youqua liked to paint sky and ocean in violet blue, as well as utilize white to emphasize people and seawater. To some extent, this picture and the paintings in the Maritime Museum share these characteristics, thus it is plausible to assume that the targeted paintings were made in Youqua's studio.

3.2 1844 as the Earliest Time Node for "Shipping off Canton"

Analyzing the features of architectures of the buildings represented in the paintings can help to determine the date *Shipping off Canton* was created. Bai describes in her article that there had been no garden in front of American Factory before 1840, while the Dongshui Fort was destroyed after 1847 as a new church was developed in the same year, thus, 1840 to 1847 is a range of plausible years for the creation of this painting, and that's probably the reason why Guangdong Museum marks the date as "around 1845". It might be the similar reason why Maritime Museum marks the date as "around 1840" and "ca.1841-1846" on the label and the official website respectively, but there are also other evidences to further confirm the time frame. Firstly, the painting

must have been completed after 1842, when Canton was no longer the only trading port in China following the signing of the Treaty of Nanking, as the plan created by William Thornton Bate (Figure 18) demonstrated that additional industries were established after 1842 close to the American Garden. It would be better if this significant information can be mentioned on the label. Moreover, a painting created in 1842 shows that American garden was surrounded by wooden palisade (Figure 19), while stone appears on the left side in *Shipping off Canton* (Figure 20). According to the historical record, it was until 5th August 1844 when the new rules to protect American in Canton were released that they were allowed to build stone walls around their garden (Jiang, 2013). Thus, the earliest date for this work can therefore be determined to be 1844, and the latest, assuming the studio changed the template on time, should be before 1847.

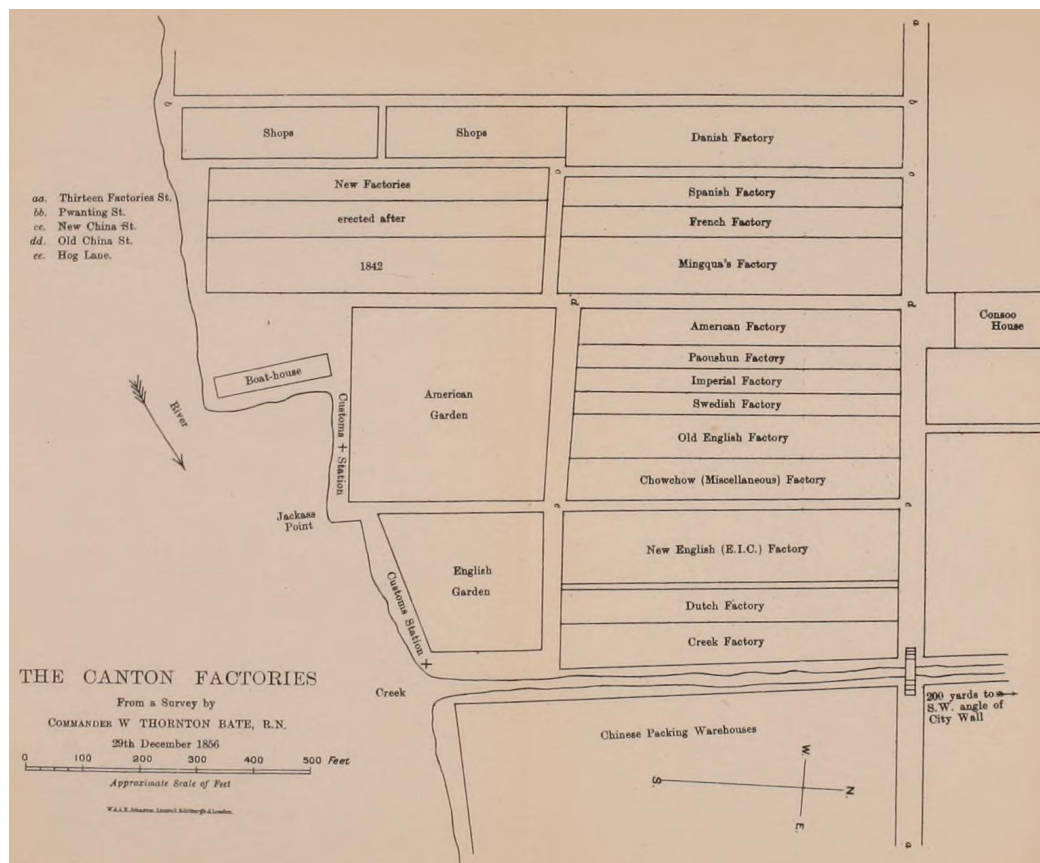


Figure 18. The Canton Factories, made by William Thornton Bate in 1856.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plan_of_Canton_Factories.jpg



Figure 19. *The Factories Shortly after the "Eastern" Fire of December 1842*, painted by Lamqua or studio. In Conner, P. (2009) *The Hongs of Canton: Western Merchants in South China 1700-1900, As Seen in Chinese Export Paintings*. London: English Art Books.



Figure 20. Shamian area, American garden with stone wall on the left, from *Shipping off Canton*, taken by author.

It is challenging to determine when *Shipping off Honam Island* was created because the architectural on Homan Island are not well-known. Nevertheless, since its artistic style is similar with that of *Shipping off Canton*, it is reasonable to speculate that the dates of their creation will not vary too much. Also, if this painting was painted in Youqua's studio, it must have been completed after 1840, when Youqua began offering his works for sale in Canton.

4. Narrative and Context: Interpreting Paintings in the Traders Gallery

The interpretation of the meaning that these two paintings produce cannot be divorced from the museum context once they have been turned from merchandise to exhibits. The Traders gallery mainly demonstrates the history of English East India Company, taking time, nation as well as type of commodity as clues. In the section illustrating its trade with China in the 19th century, these two paintings are displayed on the wall. It is clear that the current way of display primarily focuses on the content of the paintings: The port view could be seen as windows, through which we could understand how trade happened and why the commodities in the showcases can appear in front of us; The Red Ensign's wave serves as a clear reminder of the Sino-British commerce theme; Many objects in the showcases also appear in the paintings, such as the model of pagoda and varying types of watercraft, making it easier for audiences to understand other independent exhibits as well.



Figure 21. The exhibition space. 2020, taken by author.

Nevertheless, the issue with the logic of the display is just reflected in the fact that the works only serve as visual windows of history in the narrative construction of the museum. In the gallery, the two sides of *Shipping off Canton* are “China’s Trade Route” as well as “China’s Maritime World”, which construct the narrative from the angle of China itself, rather than Western countries. Also, the same goes for the left side of *Shipping off Honam Island*. It seems that the perspective created in this section complies with that of the works since they were created by Chinese artists. However, as was already mentioned, these paintings were largely produced in accordance with traditional Western painting, rather than the free will of the artists, and as a result, these painters are not well-liked in China’s mainstream art scene. However, this kind of nature of the works is hidden in the labels, concealing the dominant Western perspective in the exhibition logic ultimately. Thus, whether the audience can understand the artworks from this post-colonial perspective depends to some extent on whether the nature of the works as commodities could be revealed, since the artworks themselves are not only like a camera, which records history as a bystander, their production and circulation are also part of history itself. Also, at the same time, the museum’s decolonization practice would allow visitors to acquire a deeper understanding of the particular historical as well as artistic significance of the “Chinese School”, which cannot be separated from the economic and political context behind it.

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¹ Hereafter referred to as *Shipping off Canton*.

² Hereafter referred to as *Shipping off Honam Island*.

³ Williams also said three thousand Chinese painters were employed in Canton in 1848, which is the reason why “at least” is used here.

⁴ According to Bai Fang’s study on *Picture of General View on Guangzhou City* collected in Guangdong Museum in China in 2009.

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