
**“The Most Miserable Hole in the Whole World:”
Western Sailors and the
Whampoa Anchorage, 1770-1850**

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Whampoa: Hidden Spaces, Hidden Classes

After three years of collecting precious but rapidly dwindling sea otter furs from Amerindian trappers and merchants, the crew of the brig *New Hazard* arrived at the Pearl River delta in South China. By 1813, thousands of American sailors repeated this tedious process, often spending years trapped in their floating workplaces. For the crew, arrival in China did not mean leisure, liberty or an opportunity to see Canton, the city nestled at the heart of the American imagination of China. Canton may have been the destination for the trade goods that Euro-American sailors brought with them, but it was not so for the sailors themselves. *New Hazard* and its crew remained at anchor near the village of Whampoa. Far from home and restricted to the anchorage by Chinese policy and the orders of their masters, the sailors remained in the same workplaces that encapsulated their experience of the Pacific Ocean. The beautiful imagery of the ocean, appreciated by American readers of popular fiction and travel accounts, does not accurately reflect how sailors experienced the Pacific.¹ The ship was not only their home but also their cage, and the Pacific looked quite different from the forecastle than from the beaches.²

The isolation of Euro-American sailors, as well as many of the Chinese workers who supported Canton's trading system, at the Whampoa anchorage was not entirely the design of the Canton merchant class. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Euro-American ships could not navigate the shallow Pearl River. According to many who passed through, lived or died there,

¹This imagery is used as the major unit of analysis in much of the scholarship on European empires in the Pacific. See, for example, Matt K. Matsuda, *Empire of Love: Histories of France and the Pacific* (Oxford, 2005).

²Stephen Reynolds, *The Voyage of the New Hazard to the Northwest Coast, Hawaii and China, 1810-1813* (Salem, MA, 1938; reprint, Fairfield, WA, 1970).

Whampoa was a place to be avoided.³ The American tourist Osmond Tiffany thought that while Whampoa had some charm, it was largely a place of poverty and power hierarchies.

The scenery around it is pleasant, several islets are formed in the sinuosities of the stream, which are studded here and there with small villages, each crowded with swarms of population...The meadows that stretch to the edge of the water, are green, luxurious, cultivated, and irrigated with tortuous canals, and bordering one side of the island cluster the wretched huts of the poorest of the population.

He also made a most insightful comment immediately after this conflicted description.

The crews, of course, have but little holiday, and it is necessary that they should be kept steadily at work to debar them from mischief, but the captains while in port have a jolly time of it. They visit and dine with each other, sail boats, amuse themselves with the Chinese, and brag of their ships.”⁴

In these few words, Tiffany identified an important, but often shadowy, truth: the China trade was as much a reflection of class conflict and divergent class experiences as an encounter of “civilizations.”

Whampoa is not absent in the major sources on the China trade. Indeed, harbour logs tell us of the day-to-day labours of crews, and sailors’ journals provide a window into how workers viewed the anchorage. When recounting their “adventures,” elite tourists, merchants and captains often took time to comment on the anchorage. Nonetheless, historical accounts of the China trade ignore or underplay the importance of Whampoa. For most histo-

³Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York, 1998), 92-93, has argued that we can identify the winners and losers of globalization based on the meaning of their movements. The winners move as “tourists,” while the losers out of necessity move as “vagabonds.” Countless other scholars have looked at the social divisions underscored by late twentieth-century globalism. In one powerful example, Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the Mobility of People and Money* (New York, 1998), esp. 153-172, examines the dual economies formed in global cities and the concomitant processes of gentrification and exclusion.

⁴Osmond Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese, or the American’s Sojourn in the Celestial Empire* (Boston, 1849), 130-131.

rians of the China trade, Canton was the centre of activity.⁵ Although Stan Hugill's global history of port life, *Sailortown*, addresses the anchorage directly, he romanticizes Whampoa – and Canton in general – by focusing on the freedom of sailors to enjoy liquor and inexpensive sex. In his words, sailors “drank, sang, gambled, and sexed their way among the kow-towing Orientals.”⁶ This shadowing of Whampoa's history is an unfortunate oversight. Because the merchant elite enjoyed the relative luxury, security and health of Canton, the disappearance of Whampoa from the history of the China trade reflects the focus on the merchant class by many scholars of the mercantile encounter between the West and China. In the words of the historian Daniel Henderson, “even though Whampoa...had been achieved, Canton city itself was the goal.”⁷ By shifting our focus to working people we can examine spaces (such as Whampoa) and unacknowledged power dynamics. World history and the history of global trade needs to be written from the bottom up if we are to understand transnational connections completely. These types of histories not only will reveal hidden spaces, such as Whampoa, but more significantly will shed light on hidden people, their labours and graveyards.

Why has the Whampoa anchorage been largely ignored by historians? It seems odd since contemporary observers, particularly missionaries, who saw Whampoa both as a morally dangerous spot and a home to a captive audience of normally restless sailors, understood the importance of the anchorage and often noted the stark differences between life in the Canton factories and aboard the ships at Whampoa. In the most detailed account of social life in Canton, the historian Jacques M. Downes completely ignores Whampoa and the maritime working class housed there.⁸ For him, the history of the Canton trade is the history of the merchants. Indeed, this perspective runs strongly through the scholarship on the so-called “old” China trade published in the West. There are two related causes of this historiographic distortion. The first is the gap between labour history and the history of trade or world history in general. Despite Karl Marx's identification of an international proletariat, la-

⁵Examples of Canton-centred histories of the China trade include Jacques M. Downes, *The Golden Ghetto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784-1844* (Bethlehem, PA, 1997); Charles Clarkson Stelle, *Americans and the China Opium Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1981); and Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong, 2005).

⁶Stan Hugill, *Sailortown* (London, 1967), 56-57 and 294-296.

⁷Daniel Henderson, *Yankee Ships in China Seas: Adventures of Pioneer Americas in the Troubled Far East* (New York, 1946), 12.

⁸Downes, *Golden Ghetto*.

bour history has largely focused on national or local narratives.⁹ In contrast, historians of trade tend to mirror contemporary global capitalism. This is particularly acute in contemporary writing that tells the stories of merchant companies, commodities, trade networks and the rise of Euro-American hegemony.¹⁰ I am not interested in overturning the findings of historians who have diligently laid the groundwork for global and entangled histories, important correctives to national historiography. Instead, my purpose is to amend our perspective by taking seriously the experiences and values of the international working class. Telling the story of Whampoa allows us to begin to rewrite the history of the China trade to include narratives of labour, power and class.

The Canton trade, by which I mean the subsection of the European China trade restricted to the single port of Canton by Qing regulations, created not only an international capitalist class comprised of merchants from Europe and America but also an international working class.¹¹ The story of the Whampoa anchorage reveals some of the class-based divisions and tensions that emerged in the Canton system – and indeed in the parts of the Pacific engaged in this system as suppliers, supply stops or entrepôts. Of these dual class for-

⁹There are a growing number of exceptions which suggest the potential of labour history on a global scale. See, for example, William M. Adler, *Mollie's Job: A Story of Life and Work on the Global Assembly Line* (New York, 2000); and Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000).

¹⁰For examples of these trends, see John Keay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (London, 1991; new ed., London, 1993); C. Lestock Reid, *Commerce and Conquest: The Story of the Honourable East India Company* (London, 1947; reprint, Port Washington, NY, 1971); Marguerite Eyer Wilbur, *The East India Company and the British East Empire in the Far East* (Stanford, 1945; reprint, New York, 1970); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, 2000); R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, NY, 1997); Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985); and Martin Booth, *Opium: A History* (New York, 1996).

¹¹Not all European trade with China between 1760 and 1842 was limited to the Canton delta. Russians, for example, maintained a vibrant and profitable overland trade, and significant extra-legal trade also took place along the Chinese coast. Although the Canton system was not monolithic, it was the single most important port for Euro-American mercantile activities before the Opium War. Raisa V. Makarova, *Russians on the Pacific, 1743-1799* (Kingston, ON, 1975). I borrow the term “international capitalist class” from Arif Dirlik, *Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO, 2007), 167. See also Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Malden, MA, 2000).

mations, the easiest to observe empirically is the transnational capitalist class. Merchant letters, published accounts and journals reveal the economic ties between Euro-American merchants and Chinese *compradors*, as well as the extent of social and cultural exchange. When the niece of an American merchant in Canton, Harriet Low, attended the opera in Macao she was participating in this growing transnational elite culture.¹² In 1819, Bryant Parrott Tilden attended an elaborate dinner party hosted by a Chinese *comprador* but attended by elite merchants from several nations. During this party, the *comprador* and Hong merchant Paunkerqua tried to learn what he could about American and European society.¹³ These social events solidified business relationships and continued a process of cultural exchange which would eventually facilitate the development of an elite class consciousness in Chinese port cities. Activities such as those that Tilden and Low enjoyed took place in spaces set apart from the city of Canton for the use of these elite residents. They almost completely excluded participation by Euro-American maritime workers and the general Chinese population. The walls and gates of the factories protected the international merchant class from the tensions and conflicts that shaped much of life along the South China coast.¹⁴

The maritime working class that populated Whampoa reflected the entangled world of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Every place touched by European global capitalism contributed to this maritime workforce. The diversity reflected in Herman Melville's *Pequod* was also seen in Whampoa. New England shipping and whaling relied heavily on an international labour pool. On *Pequod*, Daggoo and Tashtego represented Amerindian and African-American seamen, but other crew members came from Italy, England, Ireland, Spain, Denmark and Portugal, all nations with an important maritime history whose people had a familiarity with the sea. There were also representatives from China and Africa.¹⁵ Melville was not simply using a transnational crew for literary symbolism; he was accurately describing the reality on board

¹²Katharine Hillard (ed.), *My Mother's Journal: A Young Lady's Diary of Five Years Spent in Manila, Macao, and the Cape of Good Hope from 1829-1834* (Boston, 1900).

¹³Lawrence Waters Jenkins (ed.), *Bryant Parrott Tilden of Salem at a Chinese Dinner Party, Canton 1819* (Princeton, 1944), 9.

¹⁴Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China, 1839-1861* (Berkeley, 1966; reprint, Berkeley, 1997).

¹⁵See Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or The Whale* (New York, 1851), chapter 40; and C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (New York, 1953; reprint, 2nd rev. ed., Hanover, NH, 2001), 16-33.

American merchant and whaling vessels. As a sailor, Melville knew that ships were a place where the boundaries between nations were blurred. Between 1806 and 1811, *Amethyst* made a voyage to the Pacific Northwest, the Philippines and China. The author of a journal described the transnational character of the crew. When *Amethyst* set out from Boston, its crew included an Indian from the Northwest coast, an “old Negro” and white Americans from several New England states.¹⁶ Richard Henry Dana, on *Pilgrim*, identified English, Swedish and German sailors. In California, Dana transferred to another ship on a return voyage and found it just as diverse:

Next to [the sailmaker] in age and experience, and, of course, in standing in the watch, was an Englishman named Harris...Then came two or three Americans, who had been the common run of European and South American voyages, and one who had been in a “spouter,” and, of course, had all the whaling stories to himself. Last of all was a broad-backed, thick-headed, Cape Cod boy...The other watch was composed of about the same number. A tall, fine-looking Frenchman, with coal-black whiskers and curly hair, a first-rate seaman, named John...Then came two Americans...a German, an English lad...and two Boston boys...The carpenter, sometimes mustered in the starboard watch, and was an old sea dog, a Swede by birth and accounted the best helmsmen in the ship. This was our ship’s company, besides cook and steward, who were blacks.¹⁷

To this motley crew we should add South Asian and Pacific Islander labourers who worked on British East India and American shipping. Like the merchant ship itself, the Whampoa anchorage was a space in which these people’s histories became entangled through common experiences.

Unlike their elite counterparts in Canton, the sailors at Whampoa lacked the financial means or the cultural and social power to cultivate a common culture through means that would be easily observed in the historical record. The incorporation of previously neglected spaces into the story will help to unveil their experiences. Euro-American maritime workers did not see the benefit of creating and sustaining social networks in the same way the merchants did. Their – and in this we can include the thousands of poor working

¹⁶Peabody Essex Museum (PEM), Phillips Library (PL), *Amethyst*, Journal, 1806-1811.

¹⁷Richard Henry Dana, Jr., *Two Years before the Mast* (New York, 1840; reprint, New York, 2000), 30-34. The quote is from 167.

Chinese whom the Euro-American sailors encountered – goals were the acquisition of a small piece of the profitable China trade. To do this they often surrendered authority to tyrannical employers and shipmasters but occasionally resorted to extra-legal means and resistance.

Function, Operation, and Character of the Whampoa Anchorage

Observers commonly described Whampoa as an unpleasant place. In a letter to his brother, one American sailor called it “the most miserable hole in the whole world.”¹⁸ In 1807, William Baldwin, a physician observing the medical condition of the anchorage, emphasized the extent of disease and death brought on by poor conditions, neighbouring marshes and mosquitoes.¹⁹ According to an 1838 description by the English tourist C. Toogood Downing, “[i]t is a wretched, struggling place, and does not even derive importance from its vicinity to so numerous and rich an assemblage of vessels from the most powerful nations on the face of the globe.”²⁰ Osmond Tiffany joked that the Chinese doctors who “boarded” Euro-American ships after they arrived “thrive on the general squalor of Whampoa.”²¹ Unlike many others travelling on the Pearl River, the American sailor Burr R.S. Kellogg did not think Canton was impressive, but neither did he have much positive to say about the anchorage, which was simply a place he worked before returning to his home.²² His experience was not atypical in that for seamen Whampoa was not a location to observe and document but merely a workplace. This is clearly shown in Stephen Reynolds’ description of the daily life of the crew of *New Hazard*. He does not describe the setting in any detail, as tourists often did. Rather, he described work, suggesting that he had precious little time to explore or comment on his surroundings. In a 9 January 1813 entry Reynolds wrote: “Overhauling rigging; taking out sandalwood. Morning, sent down main-topmast and

¹⁸Massachusetts Historical Society, Chauncey Fitch Papers, Chauncey Fitch to brother, 3 October 1839.

¹⁹William Baldwin, *A Short Practical Narrative of the Diseases which Prevalled among the American Seamen, at Whampoa in China in the Year 1805* (Philadelphia, 1807).

²⁰C. Toogood Downing, *The Fan-Qui in China, in 1836-7* (3 vols., London, 1838; reprint, Dublin, 1972), I, 75-76.

²¹Tiffany, *Canton Chinese*, 133-134.

²²Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Burr R.S. Kellogg Papers, Journal (Kellogg, Journal), 20 March-1 April 1844.

found it was rotten about the hounds – one pair of shroud gone; setting taut fore rigging.”²³

Formal transactions did not take place at the anchorage; they all occurred in the factories in Canton. Merchant activities could take months depending on how long it took for the tea – the major commodity Europeans and Americans came to China to acquire – to be processed and the terms negotiated. Although it was not the prime location of commerce, Whampoa was still an important part of the trade from the perspective of the Chinese state for two major reasons. For one, the government stationed customs agents there to inspect cargoes for illicit opium and to ensure that tariffs were paid before the ships departed. Other government agents lived and worked at Whampoa, including linguists, clerks and various servants of officials.²⁴ The second reason Whampoa was important from the perspective of the state was that it prevented the streets of Canton from being overrun by foreign sailors. During busy periods in the 1830s, thousands of sailors could be working at Whampoa. The factories in Canton could not house this number even if sailors were welcome. Much of Qing policy toward foreign merchants was based on the idea that precautions should be taken to prevent, as much as possible, contact between Chinese subjects and foreigners. The Qing formed the *Cohong*, the guild of Chinese merchants which maintained the trade monopoly to ensure that all trade went through a small group of highly specialized Chinese merchants. The infamous regulations, including laws against women living in Canton and bans on even day-to-day commercial exchanges between merchants and lower-class Chinese, served to keep the foreign merchants in an economic bubble – or a velvet prison, depending on the point of view.²⁵ It would have been even more difficult to maintain these regulations without causing conflicts if foreign sailors were able to visit Canton with impunity. Certainly they did visit Canton from time to time, but it was either during carefully rationed “liberty days” or in direct service to merchants and shipmasters. By keeping sailors in Whampoa for most of the time, it was easier for the Chinese state and the merchant elite at Canton to sustain the fantasy that the regulations worked.

The presence of the imperial state was dwarfed by the countless Chinese workers who used the presence of a large population of captive and often bored sailors to grab a meagre share of the profits from the trade. Both Tiffany

²³Reynolds, *Voyage of the New Hazard*, 123.

²⁴Downing, *Fan-Qui in China*, I, 85-102.

²⁵For good introductions to the *Cohong*, see Weng Eang Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton: Chinese Merchants in Sino-Western Trade* (Richmond, UK, 1997); and Frederic Wakeman, Jr., “The Canton Trade and the Opium War,” in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *Cambridge History of China, Volume 10: Late Ch’ing, 1800-1911*, Part I, 163.

and Downing provided clear pictures of these workers. Many serviced the immediate needs of sailors as doctors, washerwomen and tailors. Some – especially the washerwomen – worked out of small boats. By the late eighteenth century, the Canton delta was an overpopulated region shaped by acute divisions of wealth.²⁶ These societal partitions forced many to make their living on small boats as transport workers, prostitutes, fishermen or providers of other services. Others turned to piracy. Most observers stressed the river boat population, which probably numbered in the tens of thousands. As part of the same economic system, Whampoa shared the river with this population. In addition to the boat-based service workers, several small shops on the island catered to sailors. Predominate among them were liquor stores, which not only shaped the history of the anchorage but also contributed to the imagined division of the Pearl River between the sober and professional Canton factories and the peripheral, illicit and intoxicated anchorage.²⁷

In spite of its reputation as a backwater, Whampoa was geographically part of two larger systems: the Pearl River delta and the burgeoning Pacific world system. Both of these larger units contained hidden spaces that are easily missed if we examine the China trade from the top down by centring on the Canton esplanade and little else. Whampoa is a long island that is part of the Pearl River delta. Also included in the delta are various important locations that supported or depended on the trade taking place in the factories at Canton. At the southern edge of the delta, looking out on the Gulf of Canton, are Macao and Hong Kong, the centres of East Asian trade for two very different merchant empires, the Portuguese and the British. Macao served the Canton system by being the home of the wives and daughters of foreign merchants. It was also a place merchants could live after the trading season ended. Hong Kong was an important island for commerce, including illicit trade, even before it became a British possession. Between these two points is the small island of Lintin, famous as the centre of opium traffic. Compared to these outlying regions, Whampoa was quite close to Canton, situated a mere fifteen miles downriver. Across the river from Whampoa was French Island, which can be considered part of the anchorage and the place where sailors buried their dead colleagues for a significant fee. In a sense, these various islands and coastal locations formed an elaborate division of labour, tied together by the toil of countless transport workers from a dozen societies.

Whampoa was also a globally connected space that entangled histories across the Pacific and the world. While given enough time and resources we could trace how each ship connected Whampoa to the larger world, let us take

²⁶Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley, 2003).

²⁷Downing, *Fan-Qui in China*, II, 214.

just one admittedly broad example. The sea otter fur trade helped bring Americans into the China trade and fuelled the Euro-American presence in the North Pacific. The earliest Europeans to engage in this industry were Russian fur traders who settled along the eastern coast of Eurasia and conquered northern Pacific islands to seize sea otter furs. By the 1780s Spain, England, France and the United States sought to trade for sea otters and depended on the enthusiastic participation of Amerindians who swapped furs for manufactured goods. Since these merchant voyages could take many months, Hawaii emerged as an important transpacific supply point. Over time, Hawaiian workers, known to Euro-Americans as *kanakas*, served on merchant ships in large numbers. From Hawaii they sailed to the Canton delta, where sea otter pelts were highly valued for elite clothing. A similar global mapping can be done with the opium and tea trades. One important result of these economic relationships was that Whampoa became a temporary repository for a transnational working class.

Class Divisions: South China Coast and the Merchant Ship

The Canton system was sustained by class-based hierarchies. This division was the product of the intersection of two existing hierarchical societies: the South China coast and the Euro-American merchant ship. Instead of replacing class divisions with national or cultural loyalties, trade at Canton reorganized these classes internationally. Specifically, the Euro-American and Chinese elites became the ruling class of the Canton system while depending on the new multinational working class.

Qing prosperity is well-known to historians of China, and world historians have been taking steps to incorporate this important fact into their analyses of the rise of European hegemony and to help contextualize the contemporary rise of China.²⁸ This economic prosperity was not shared equally, and not all Chinese played a role in this vital market economy. Nowhere was this clearer than along the southeast coast of China, a prosperous area that was moulded by inequality. Despite occasional government restrictions on foreign trade – especially in the early Ming period after Zheng He’s voyages – South China had been a maritime society for centuries. Chinese merchants established communities throughout Southeast Asia, helped support the Spanish Manila galleon trade and supplemented the coastal population’s diet with extensive fishing.

Arriving foreign merchants noticed the large number of Chinese on the streets of Canton. To observers these people appeared “idle,” but in fact

²⁸Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley, 1999); Lynne A. Struve (ed.), *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); and Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*.

they were members of Canton's expanding working class and depended on the wealth produced by the Canton system for part of their livelihood. As Downing described the scene, there was a host of vagabonds, pirates, thieves and burglars who preyed on the China trade in different ways. As Robert J. Anthony has shown, the growth of China's population during the eighteenth century had a profound impact on the labour market along the South China coast. While the population of China doubled, the numbers in the Canton delta increased by four-fold. Feeding and employing this growing population became a problem for the Chinese state, which left hundreds of thousands without land or agricultural work. Anthony also shows that the growing prosperity of the coastal region led to a widening gap between the rich and poor in the area.²⁹ The sea could be a safety valve for some, but not for all. Begging was a common practice for those who suffered from physical disability or illness. Many saw foreigners as a source of income and congregated near shops frequented by foreigners. In the early nineteenth century, Canton had more beggars than any other city in China and had hundreds of impoverished organized begging rings which pooled their earnings.³⁰ As a writer in the *Canton Register* put it,

[t]he cold season in Canton is fatal to members of these poor homeless wretches, who swarm the streets by day, and by night retire to some corner to sleep [where many die]...In one instance, the miserable object was observed for more than half a day, exposed to the sun, in a dying state unnoticed by the numerous passers-by.³¹

Euro-American merchants would not have had to look far to find examples of similar inequality in their own societies. In a period when the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville was impressed with the US due to its general "equality of condition,"³² the American merchant fleet was hierarchical, often tyrannical and had power relations that resembled plantations much more than a democratic capitalist workplace. Conditions were arguably worse on British and East India Company shipping.³³ Herman Melville explained the tendency of masters to assert their power through violence as a reflection of

²⁹Anthony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, 72 and 81.

³⁰Downing, *Fan-Qui in China*, II, 237-240.

³¹*Canton Register*, 24 January 1833.

³²Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols., Paris, 1835-1840; reprint, New York, 1969), I, 9.

³³Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 143-173.

the division between the worker's skills and self-confidence and the master's authority:

Now, as you well know, it is not seldom the case in this conventional world of ours – watery or otherwise; that when a person placed in command over his fellow-man finds one of them to be very significantly his superior in general pride of manhood, straightway against that man he conceives an unconquerable dislike and bitterness; and if he have a chance he will pull down and pulverize that subaltern's tower, and make a little heap of dust of it.³⁴

According to Richard Henry Dana, who worked on a merchant ship along the Pacific coast during the height of the Canton system, “[t]he captain...is lord paramount. He stands no watch, comes and goes when he pleases, is accountable to no one, and must be obeyed in everything.”³⁵ Maritime law reflected this by giving masters absolute authority to punish crew (often without legal restraint), hire and fine seamen, pay taxes and tariffs and even to discharge sailors as long as they were compensated.³⁶ In theory, the master's power was not shared, although in practice he often used officers to implement his will. The hierarchy and labour regime of the merchant ship did not disappear at Whampoa any more than the inequalities of Chinese society were washed away at the first sight of Euro-American ships. These social divisions were symbiotic and shaped the encounter between Qing China and the “West.”

Labour Regime at Whampoa

It is common in maritime historiography to see the ship as a space of limited options, hierarchies and brutality, while viewing the port as a place where sailors could enjoy social freedom, the opportunity to spend their wages and to escape the labour regime of the ship.³⁷ This was most likely true for ports in the Atlantic world. But Pacific ports, particularly in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, often lacked institutions to support sailors. More to the point, when ships stopped on the northwest coast of the Americas, Hawaii or

³⁴Melville, *Moby Dick*, chapter 54.

³⁵Dana, *Two Years before the Mast*, 9.

³⁶Richard Henry Dana, Jr., *The Seaman's Friend, Containing a Treatise on Practical Seamanship* (Boston, 1851; reprint, Delmar, NY, 1979), 192.

³⁷Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2004).

Canton, the work and the voyage were not yet over. Some leisure could be seized by sailors in a variety of ways. Liberty days, granted by masters, gave sailors time to enjoy some of the freedom to which they were accustomed in Atlantic ports. Flight was possible, but since sailors needed to work their way back home, the best they could hope for was to transfer allegiance from one master to another. The overwhelming fact is that in the Pacific there was no "liberty on the waterfront." Rather, sailors experienced the continuation of the labour regime of the sea. As sailors' narratives from the Whampoa anchorage suggest, the primary aspect of life there was work. John Nicol, a Scottish sailor, has presented a rare but vivid description of how Western sailors interacted with the Chinese on an economic level at Whampoa. Had it not been for the inventor and bookmaker John Howell, the story of John Nicol would have been lost. In 1822 Howell observed the homeless, illiterate Nicol in Edinburgh. Howell had a long-term interest in publishing the histories of British soldiers and was fascinated by Nicol's crisp memory of his experiences. He therefore set out to record and publish his account.³⁸ What Nicol, through Howell's efforts, produced was one of the most unromantic, direct and honest narratives during this golden age of sea narratives and fiction.

Nicol joined the crew of *King George* in 1785 and served until 1788. He participated in one of the earliest British voyages to the North Pacific after the return of the third and final Cook voyage. Like many other merchant ships in this period, *King George* stopped in Nootka Sound to acquire sea otter furs for sale in China. In addition to sea otters, however, Nicol, on the advice of an experienced "comrade who had been in China," harvested as much ginseng as he could without drawing the attention of other sailors or officers. His intention was to sell ginseng in China illicitly.³⁹ Such illegal trade by Western seamen was a common practice.⁴⁰

Like many other sailors, Nicol's first experience with the Chinese involved a dual shock. From a distance he was struck by "the immense number of buildings that extended as far as the eye could reach, their fantastic shapes and gaudy colours, their trees and flowers so like their paintings, and the myriads of floating vessels, and above all the fanciful dresses and gaudy colours of their clothes." As Nicol developed a clearer view of the reality of life in a nineteenth-century Chinese port city, he became distressed by the

³⁸Tim Flannery (ed.), *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner* (New York, 1997), 2-4.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 97-98.

⁴⁰Given that early trade was based on the flooding of China with narcotics and the extraction of tea and bullion, the characterization of the underground economy in Canton as "illegal" is suspect. Yet from the sailors' perspective, involvement in the underground economy risked pecuniary penalties and was therefore considered illicit.

“quantity of individual misery” the people suffered.⁴¹ In fact, the many people eager to provide services to Western sailors reflected both the commercial energy of Canton and the competitive desperation born out of poverty.⁴²

Nicol’s experiences suggest a practical economic connection between Chinese port residents and sailors. The crew of *King George* remained in Whampoa for six months and had a steady need for a variety of services. During such extended periods, official regulation that restricted the access of Westerners to the city could not be enforced. One Chinese barber whom Nicol befriended by the name of Tommy Linn offered to shave the entire crew daily for “half a dollar from each man.” He was also skilled in treating venereal diseases acquired at “Loblob Creek.” In exchange for “the broken meat or what rice [the sailors] left at mess,” Chinese women came daily to wash the clothes of the crew. The workers who serviced the seamen had a command of English. Even the beggars who cried out in pidgin “*Kamscha me lillo rice*” developed techniques to take advantage of the “feelings of seamen.” The crew received a two-month portion of their pay for the voyage in order to buy goods. While these transactions were often overseen by local Chinese officials, Nicol recorded how easy it was to get anything they desired. Tommy Linn eagerly agreed to purchase anything in the city for the sailors. Even Nicol’s dog, Neptune, had a role in commerce. After catching rats, Neptune laid them next to Nicol’s tent where the Chinese would exchange them for vegetables. In addition, Nicol found an eager buyer for his ginseng.⁴³

The crew of *King George* did not spend the entire six months in China enjoying the services and goods of a Chinese port city. Like their Chinese counterparts, they had duties to fulfil. One of Nicol’s jobs was to manufacture candles for the return voyage. Chinese workers were also deeply involved in these essential tasks. Nicol oversaw a group of Chinese who made (and stole) the candles. When Nicol worked on repairs and the packing of tea, he was always surrounded by Chinese workers.⁴⁴

Before we accept a strictly materialistic characterization of Chinese seaports, it is important to identify how these close economic ties led to meaningful personal bonds. In one incident, Nicol saved a Chinese boy who fell into the water. To repay his debt, the boy’s father invited Nicol for dinner. Furthermore, during his stay Nicol “dined in different houses.” When he returned to China on later voyages, he reconnected with his “Chinese friends.” Very

⁴¹Flannery (ed.), *Life and Adventures of John Nicol*, 103.

⁴²The best account of poverty in late Qing Guangdong is Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, 54-81.

⁴³Flannery (ed.), *Life and Adventures of John Nicol*, 98 and 103-108.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 104-105.

striking in Nicol's account is the authentic sympathy he developed for the Chinese and eventually his awareness of class divisions in South China. Nicol saw the Chinese workers as victims of the oppression of the "mandarins." As he reported, mandarins stole from the beggars and "collect[ed] the revenue and tyrannise[d]...the poor Chinese," making them suffer through the enforcement of regulations and even taking advantage of their religious ceremonies. Although Nicol travelled around the world twice, he concluded that the Chinese were "the most oppressed people" he had encountered. Conversely, some Chinese felt sympathy for the misfortunes of English naval seamen and "wept like children" for a group of mutineers who suffered a horrible flogging.⁴⁵

Recent scholarship by New Left historians has taken a fresh look at violence in the maritime world, perhaps seen most clearly in the actions of pirates in the Atlantic and the South China Sea. These historians have argued that piracy was not simply misdirected violence but rather a response in kind to the violence of the state (in the case of China) or capitalist accumulation (in the Atlantic). From this perspective, violence at sea or in port was inflicted by one class on another. This was only possible if a class consciousness had developed that superseded national and racial loyalties. As Marcus Rediker put it, "the seamen who roamed the empire's port towns, especially in America, were English *and* American, as well as West Indian, African, and even Indian. The social and cultural practices of these men...were quite similar."⁴⁶ Nicol provided a stunning example of the development of class loyalties that transcended national identities. Nicol did not spark a class rebellion, but he did cooperate with Chinese workers in many different ways. They shared news, folk treatments, food, money, stories and labour. The most concentrated cooperation came in their efforts to subvert the customs process to facilitate the underground trade in furs, ginseng and whatever other goods sailors were innovative enough to smuggle on merchantmen. This is not to say that national identities had no importance. Modern readers of Nicol's narrative will be struck by his memory of the national character of almost every individual he mentions. Rather, we can conclude that in Nicol's case national identity coexisted with, but did not deter, the creation of class-based loyalties.

Reynolds and the disaffected crew of *New Hazard* stayed at the Whampoa anchorage between December 1812 and April 1813. This long stay was due in part to the tedious nature of commercial exchange but also to the vast quantity of work required of the crew. Much of the labour on merchant

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 107-109, 131 and 158.

⁴⁶Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 143-173; and Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge, 1987; reprint, Cambridge, 2003), 297.

vessels involved an endless fight against decay. *New Hazard* arrived at the anchorage after two years at sea and required a complete overhaul. With the exception of the occasional liberty day, Reynolds' work focused on the difficult task of repairing sails, replacing rigging, varnishing, painting and various other "small jobs." In late January the crew began to load tea.⁴⁷ Burr Kellogg's narrative reflected a slightly different experience but one that was still largely defined by a labour regime. Not being required to overhaul their ship completely, and staying in Whampoa for a much shorter period, the crew of *Horatio* functioned as stevedores, unloading the various goods they brought with them and loading tea.⁴⁸

Nicol's and Reynolds' narratives suggest the importance of harbour labour to sustaining the ship on the return voyage. Kellogg's narrative shows the intensity of stevedoring that many sailors faced. Masters transferred the labour regime of the ship to the Whampoa anchorage and kept sailors locked into a routine which limited the potential for them to experience China outside of a very narrow window. Later in this essay I will show how a power regime accompanied the labour regime of the ship. But first I will explore other aspects of life at the Whampoa anchorage.

Life at Whampoa: Disease

Life on the ship was far from healthy. Sailors who did not die from falling overboard (a quite common risk) commonly succumbed to a variety of diseases, including smallpox, scurvy, venereal disease and various tropical maladies. While it is hard to say that Whampoa was more disease-ridden than the ship at sea, there is evidence that much of what made it such an unfortunate place for sailors was the high death rate caused by disease. The graveyard for foreign sailors on French Island provides clear evidence of these deaths.

In 1805, the physician William Baldwin spent time in Canton studying the diseases that affected American sailors at the anchorage. He also explored the various treatments available to sailors. His ship "experienced but little sickness on the voyage," but the sailors arrived at Whampoa during an epidemic. According to Baldwin, "[t]here was at this time more or less sickness on board of all, or most of the ships [eight vessels at the time of his visit], and my friend Dr. John Martin of the *Ganges* informed me, that it was then becoming more sickly, and that several deaths had already occurred." The disease (Baldwin gave no definitive diagnosis in his report) caused chills, nausea, vomiting, "purging of bile," pain, "oppression of the praecordia," head and body aches and eventually death. Baldwin identified five major causes of dis-

⁴⁷Reynolds, *Voyage of the New Hazard*, 117-140, *passim*.

⁴⁸Kellogg, Journal, 20 March-1 April 1844.

ease, connecting the illnesses to the new environment the sailors experienced. The causes he listed were the new diet, new water source, exposure to the sun, sleeping on deck and "excess in eating or drinking."⁴⁹ In fact, a more likely cause was the poor conditions, the close quarters in which sailors were confined during the long stay at Whampoa, overpopulation and a nearby marsh. Baldwin observed – and supported – the treatment of local doctors, which was based on blood letting.

Not long after Baldwin left, a smallpox outbreak erupted at Whampoa that "proved fatal to several."⁵⁰ This experience awakened him to the underdeveloped state of medicine for sailors in foreign ports, such as Whampoa. Sailors used local doctors – whose treatments were often less effective than Baldwin's bloodletting – because they had few options. Even in the 1820s and 1830s, when missionaries such as Peter Parker established hospitals for the Chinese, they did not treat sailors. In a letter to the *Sailor's Magazine and Naval Journal* in 1832, E.C. Bridgeman, a preacher, discussed his arrival at the Whampoa anchorage and told his audience (the American Seamen's Friends Society) that he was immediately set to work officiating at the burial of American sailors who had died from disease.⁵¹ It is not possible with the sources at hand to estimate how many deaths took place at Whampoa during the Canton trading system, so the graveyards will need to be the testament. W.W. Wood, famous for writing a detailed commercial guide for Anglo-American merchants in China, published an account of South China in 1830 where, between descriptions of the plant life on the islands of the delta, he tipped his hat to the dead before moving on to issues that he apparently found more interesting.

The hills of Dane's Island are covered by a growth of pine trees, and the valleys are highly cultivated. In many places the high grounds and hill sides are terraced for the purpose of agriculture. The graves of English sailors, Lascars, etc. are mostly on this Island, and are here to be seen some very large and costly Chinese tombs, which are much visited by strangers...Here [French Island] are to be seen the tombs of such gentlemen as have died at Canton, or at Whampoa, constructed like our own, and bearing suitable inscriptions. Some very old Danish and Dutch tombs are also here, and

⁴⁹Baldwin, *Short Practical Narrative*, 7, 9 and 10.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 20.

⁵¹*Sailor's Magazine and Naval Journal*, April 1832, 237-239.

the graves of American sailors...The cultivation of the land is similar to that of the neighboring islands.⁵²

As Wood inadvertently suggested, the sailors' bodies became part of the landscape at Whampoa and the surrounding islands. Although absent from the historical record, it was the labours of these young men that ensured the success of the Euro-American China trade and, perhaps, Euro-American empires in the Pacific.

The British attempted to establish a floating hospital in 1836. According to a report in the *Chinese Repository*, a digest journal for missionaries in China, a committee of merchants believed that the establishment of a proper hospital at Whampoa was their "first and principle objective." The disease which struck well-trained and able sailors "in their prime of life" during the summer and fall was both a burden to their economic interests and a moral burden for defenders of the trade.⁵³ The British were able to gather the funds to support a ship that would remain at Whampoa and function as a hospital with a permanent staff. By 1839, not long before a crisis over the opium trade brought China and Great Britain to war, the floating hospital experiment ended due to Chinese resistance.

The story of disease at the Whampoa anchorage cannot be dislodged from the larger story of class-based exclusion. Disease threatened the lives of sailors at Whampoa. In contrast, disease did not affect in the same way the gated community of merchants at Canton, who lived in better conditions and had regular access to physicians. Sailors could not enter the neighbouring Chinese village despite the fact that the relative prosperity of this place was due to their purchases. Neither were they welcomed in Canton by the merchant elite or the Chinese state. Missionaries often deduced that drink caused the rapid spread of disease at Whampoa. Even if it were true that widespread drunkenness led to a lowered constitution, drunkenness was a reflection of poor conditions and limited opportunities.

Maintaining the Canton System: Drink, Power and the Limits of Isolation

No matter what sources we examine, it is clear that sailors drank plenty at the Whampoa anchorage. There is nothing new about the observation that sailors often spent their wages on temporary pleasures.⁵⁴ I am not interested in

⁵²W. W. Wood, *Sketches of China* (Philadelphia, 1830), 49-51.

⁵³*Chinese Repository*, October 1836, 275.

⁵⁴This is Huggill's main concern in *Sailortown*, and it often leads him to forget that ports were also workplaces for both sailors and the providers of these pleasures.

whether drink was a form of resistance or the reasons why reformers were obsessed with sailors' drunkenness.⁵⁵ Rather, I want to study the conflict over drink as a reflection of the hierarchical power arrangements that sustained the Canton system by physically separating the ruling elite from working people. Although out of sight most of the time, sailors were a concern for the elite participants in the China trade. It was not enough to keep them at work; their behaviour also had to be controlled.

William Hunter provided the most apt description of the infamous "liberty day" in his *Bits of Old China*. According to Hunter, "liberty day" came only "after everything was made shipshape and Bristol fashion." It was a rare event, taking place only once during a sailor's stay at Whampoa. In Kellogg's account, the sailors were divided into two groups, each with their own liberty day.⁵⁶ According to Hunter, a trip to Canton took the form of an explosion of passions and lack of restraint by dozens of cooped-up sailors. Chinese merchants, selling souvenirs and, more importantly, vast quantities of rice liquor, took advantage of the sailors' boredom. Merchants designed their shops with a mind to attracting sailors.

They sold trashy things which took the fancy of Jack [British sailors], but according to their signboards, their specialty was various compounds of strong liquor. One sign bore the name of "Old Jemmy Good Tom," and under it "First Chop Rum," whose component parts no chemical analysis could possibly determine. On another, Tom Birdman' offered No. 1 brandy, while a third recommended his "Hard-a-Port."

Drinking turned into friendly banter and promises of friendship and camaraderie between sailors and the Chinese. Cheating and stealing led to a riot and the rapid closure of the festivities. The sailors, again impoverished and inebriated, stumbled back to their boats, where an officer waited to bring them back to the ship. Finally, they would "stagger forward to the forecandle" and reminisce about their experiences, largely in terms of the quantity of liquor consumed.⁵⁷

Hunter's narrative tells us a few important things about liberty day. It was an isolated event, a brief respite from their normal lives of relative isola-

⁵⁵Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 6-11; Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Manhood Lost: Fallen Drunkards and Redeeming Women in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Baltimore, 2003); and W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, 1979), 187-222.

⁵⁶Kellogg, Journal, 28-29 March 1844.

⁵⁷William C. Hunter, *Bits of Old China* (London, 1885; reprint, Boston, 2001), 3-7.

tion and labour. We also learn that despite its seeming disorderly outcome, “liberty day” was a highly organized and controlled event. Officers on ships decided when sailors could go to Canton. When they arrived, merchants who specialized in catering to them were readily available at Hog’s Lane, Canton’s shopping district for foreigners. Officers were never far from the action and were prepared to return sailors to their ships at the end of the night. Although cathartic, it was far from liberating.

The Euro-American elite in Canton had a great fear of the extent of drink among sailors. For missionaries this was simply an extension of the attitudes of the American Seamen’s Friends Society and temperance reformers at home. For merchants and captains, the desire to eliminate drink shaped the larger question of how to control and isolate labour. In 1830, David Abeel argued for the need for a permanent “meeting house” for worship because “here sailors are permitted to enjoy liberty on Sabbath afternoons, and as liquor of the most maddening effects is attainable, the consequences can be conceived.”⁵⁸ Two years later, E.C. Bridgeman reported that:

I never saw so frightful on exhibition of the effects of spirituous liquors. He had drank freely of the liquor here commonly called *samshu*. Like the man with the dumb spirit, he fell to the ground and wallowed, foaming, and gnashing with his teeth. But the sailor was not dumb. When the paroxysms came on, he appeared like one on the agonies of death. He saw, or rather, he said he saw, ten thousands furies around him, and he howled as if the pains of hell had got hold upon him.⁵⁹

This hyperbole is not uncommon in the rhetoric of temperance or the American Seamen’s Friends Society, which took as one of its major goals the imposition of temperance on sailors. More interesting perhaps is that merchants and masters adopted some of the same attitudes toward drink and attempted to stamp out alcohol at Whampoa. On 25 December 1812, while the crew of *New Hazard* was working on refitting and rebuilding the ship, the first mate made a point of banning the consumption of liquor for the day. This led to a scuffle between a sailor named Jack and the officers, who responded to Jack’s insubordination (at some point Jack struck the second mate) by threatening to transfer him to a naval ship. The very next day, Nye, the captain, gave permission to the first mate to “flog any one and then put them in irons” if the

⁵⁸ *Sailor’s Magazine and Naval Journal*, October 1830.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, April 1832, 238.

sailor “did anything contrary to his liking.”⁶⁰ These events on *New Hazard* involved the threatened and actual application of brute force to punish alcohol consumption and any attempt by the crew to achieve some “liberty on the waterfront.” In 1876, the China trade merchant Robert B. Forbes published his *Personal Reminiscences* in which he recalled, in stunning detail, an event of almost sixty years earlier. As a teenager, Forbes worked on ships in the China trade. While he was in Canton during one of these voyages, drink caused a mutiny. That he held onto this event so strongly for many decades is not surprising considering his paternalistic attitude toward sailors.⁶¹ The sailors were up late drinking and had become “very noisy and abusive...and [sang] songs of questionable morality.” The mate, a man named Stetson, “ordered the lights out.” But instead of complying, the sailors told Stetson to go “to the place of departed spirits.” Forbes took the time to defend Stetson’s kindness as a mate but observed that “here was an occasion for the exercise of his authority, – the crew drunk, openly defying the mates.” It was liquor that sparked this crisis in authority on his ship. The situation worsened when the sailors demanded that Stetson be discharged. In response the officers, with help from a neighbouring vessel, flushed out the forecabin and rounded up the “ringleaders” of the resistance. They were flogged on the deck.⁶²

In both of these events, drink led to disobedience and a crisis of authority that could only be resolved by the use of brute force. The root of this problem was that Whampoa never successfully imposed total isolation on the sailors. In 1850, an American consul to China suggested that an institution that could keep a much closer eye on the sailors be established at Whampoa:

There is now no jail or place where American seamen can be lodged for safe keeping, and in case of difficulties, which are constantly occurring, the only place of confinement is on board ships...I would therefore suggest that authority be given to this Consulate to hire a chop boat or other suitable place for a prison.⁶³

⁶⁰Reynolds, *Voyage of the New Hazard*, 118-120.

⁶¹Nowhere is this paternalism clearer than in his *An Appeal to Merchants and Ship Owners on the Subject of Seamen* (Boston, 1854), 14. He argued that just as a father needs the power to restrain children, a shipmaster requires the “power to inflict summary punishment.”

⁶²Robert B. Forbes, *Personal Reminiscences* (Boston, 1876), 43.

⁶³Quoted in Eldon Griffin, *Clippers and Consuls: American Consular and Commercial Relations with Eastern Asia, 1845-1860* (Ann Arbor, 1938), 153.

Perhaps the isolation of sailors that the residents of the gated community of Canton required could only be achieved through a prison ship.

The foreign resident merchants, as well as the masters, maintained a degree of fear of foreign sailors, particularly those who were not under the direct authority of a ship. In January 1832, the *Canton Register* published a warning to its readers about two “young men” who had arrived in Canton from Mexico, where they were involved in some credit fraud. After fleeing they came to Manila and finally to Canton. The author of the warning, who was personally affected by the crime, believed it was his duty to let the people know about these two sailors and their “bad character.”⁶⁴ He also feared that sailors would create broader civil unrest in the streets of Canton. It was easy to blame riots on undisciplined sailors who provoked Chinese vagabonds. This was the case in one “scuffle” that led to some injuries but, more seriously, forced the Hong merchants and linguists to set aside their important work in order to settle the dispute.⁶⁵

“Liberty day” was not the only time sailors could expect to encounter the Chinese. Chinese workers flocked to the anchorage for many of the same reasons they crowded the river and streets around the Canton factories: foreign sailors were a market for their goods and services. A popular 1856 commercial guide to China by S. Wells Williams documents the regulations of trade and the practices at the port; it also gives information on some stores and the commodities available for purchase. The guide only mentions sailors once. Wells informed his readers that “sailors coming to Whampoa are very much exposed to the enticements of low Chinese, who hold out to them every temptation to drunkenness.” He explained how they came up alongside the ship selling liquor as well as “chinaware, pictures, shoes and other articles which the latter is in their habit of buying.” Williams proceeded to blame most of the crime and the disruptions of official commerce on this unofficial trade among workers. He suggested that merchants and masters should suppress this underground economy with force and increase oversight of the sailors.⁶⁶ Like Nicol, many American sailors interacted with the Chinese through the exchange of commodities.

Downing described in detail a particular commercial square in Canton that catered to foreigners. This small court behind the factories was known as Hog’s Lane. Downing compared it to Gin Alley because of its energy and

⁶⁴*Canton Register*, 16 January 1832.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 16 January and 3 November 1832.

⁶⁶S. Wells Williams, *Chinese Commercial Guide: Consisting of a Collection of Details and Regulations Respecting Foreign Trade with China* (4th ed., Canton, 1856). This was a revision of Morrison’s guide adapted to reflect changed policies since the Opium War.

“depravity.” Here sailors, as they passed by, could purchase porcelain, pictures, trinkets and, most importantly, alcohol, which was the primary purpose of many of the shops in Hog’s Lane. Shopkeepers eager to take advantage of sailors used English lettering on the signs and would adopt English names. There were some more wholesome establishments than those devoted to selling adulterated liquors, but “coffee-shops and eating-houses are frequented by the more steady seamen upon their first arrival but they usually finish the day by adjourning to the *samshu* shop.”⁶⁷

The underground economy involved more than the exchange of wages in return for souvenirs and liquor. Sailors sometimes smuggled commodities out of the ship to the Chinese in the Whampoa area. While opium smuggling was rampant by the 1830s, much of it had a degree of legitimacy because of its importance to the larger trade. In contrast, smuggling by American sailors was a serious crime in the eyes of the shipmasters. During the early years of the American China trade, when sea otter furs were so important, illicit trade was an easy way for sailors to supplement their wages. Since pelts were sold in China for hundreds of dollars, the temptation to hide or steal pelts was great. On 28 October 1791, John Bartlett, a sailor who arrived in the Pacific on *Massachusetts* but later moved to a Portuguese ship and eventually served on *Lady Washington*, which was still in the Pacific from its 1787 voyage, arrived in Canton. He wrote in his journal that “at 9 A M Got under way to Run Down to Larks Bay to Smuggle our Skins.” He was fortunate to have smuggled his wares so early because later that day the master sent the sailors onto a boat to prevent them from “taking Any Skins out of the Vessel.”⁶⁸ Sailors enjoyed telling stories of smuggling, and China was a place where the practice held great potential. Charles Nordhoff’s mentor George told a story about his battle with Chinese officials as they tried to prevent his crew from smuggling.⁶⁹ Smuggling had been an important part of maritime economies in the West for centuries. In the eighteenth century, entire communities were founded and sustained on the smuggling activities of sailors. Individual smuggling of goods, often stolen from the ships in which they served, was an extension of this economy and an important part of some sailors’ income. Rediker discovered that this activity was “nearly universal” in the eighteenth century and even developed into an agreement between sailors and masters.⁷⁰

⁶⁷Downing, *Fan-Qui in China*, II, 211-214.

⁶⁸PEM, PL, John Bartlett, Journal, 28 October 1791.

⁶⁹Charles Nordhoff, *The Merchant Vessel: A Sailor Boy’s Voyages to See the World* (Cincinnati, 1856; reprint, New York, 1982), 120-129.

⁷⁰Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 72-73 and 129-131.

Like the crews of merchant ships which broke out of the Canton system to try their luck in other port towns, smaller groups sometimes wandered into Canton from unknown areas, which suggests that they were involved in illicit trade. In 1830, the *Canton Register* reported an incident in which two sailors were arrested by a Chinese official and brought to Canton. They claimed they were the last surviving members of *Lucy*, which was wrecked off the Japanese coast, and were picked up by an American ship and abandoned on the coast of China. Their story was not believed by either the Chinese or the British in Canton because they failed to provide any concrete information about the ship. According to the article, this incident was one of several cases in which Western sailors found their way into the Chinese hinterland under suspicious circumstances. It seems unlikely that they joined with Chinese pirates, which is the possible explanation given by the author of the *Canton Register* article. More likely, they were attempting to engage in their own trade with the Chinese outside of the Canton system.⁷¹

As the weaknesses of the Canton system of exclusion and isolation became clearer, the gated community looked inward and tried to strengthen its boundaries. The question of the streets of Canton was one of the central issues in Sino-American negotiations in the aftermath of the Opium War which produced the 1844 Treaty of Wanghia. In addition to the major provisions of the settlement, such as the number of treaty ports, the legal jurisdiction of foreign law and the right of individuals to move was a growing concern about the "intrusion of vagabonds" on the streets of Canton. Many of the provisions of the Treaty of Wanghia, if vigorously enforced, would have made Canton one of the most regulated spaces in the world. The Americans and Chinese agreed to eight points concerning the streets of Canton. First, resident foreigners could build walls "forty cubits high" around their homes. Second, "the old wooden fence shall be changed, and a strong wall erected...to avoid the Chinese, in passing and repassing, looking through the fence, causing disturbances and quarrels." Third, on some other streets foreigners were permitted to erect walls "covered with sheet iron." Fourth, sentries could be posted to prevent peddlers and other "idlers" and "bandits" from entering the proximity of the factories. Fifth, the Chinese were to provide soldiers to prevent disagreements from disrupting the peace. Sixth, the street in front of the factories could be closed on the Sabbath. Seventh, no shops would be allowed to sell liquor to foreigners. Finally, the streets will be "kept pure and clean." The enforcement of these regulations was a major concern to Peter Parker, who after the Opium War became one of the primary American diplomats in China. In a letter he complained of the larger number of "idlers" clogging the streets around the

⁷¹ *Canton Register*, 1 June 1830.

factories, causing the loss of property and physical danger to the residents.⁷² The concern over cleaning the streets of filth and unwanted people suggests a growing consciousness by the Americans living in Canton that they were surrounded by countless working-class people whom they feared and scorned. It also shows, however, the ultimate failure of the community that the international capitalist class tried to create in Canton. By the 1840s, the Guangdong economy had expanded due in part to the tea and opium trades, but it had not grown rapidly enough to accommodate the delta's growing population and social unease. The American response reflected in the Treaty of Wanghai was to build taller walls, reinforce them with iron, sweep the streets clean and hide within their own community. In a sense, they learned to accept the regulated life the Chinese imposed on them under the Canton system at the very moment that military victory ensured their increased freedom of movement.

Conclusions

World history often reflects the values of contemporary global capitalism. Scholarship on global trade contains the danger of thrusting current elitist views on the world of the past. If world history is to have any liberating potential (indeed, liberation from the history of the nation state is one of the major ideological agendas of world history), it needs to present the past as a lived experience. Telling the story of the Whampoa anchorage is to interpret world history from below. It would be impossible to make visible the lives and labours of these workers through the traditional top-down narratives of the China trade or world history.

The workers associated with Euro-American imperial history have been silent in the historiography. We know a great deal about imperial ideologies, the racial consciousness of the conquerors and imperial policy. Indeed, our knowledge of the working of these empires has expanded greatly in recent years.⁷³ Post-colonial studies have similarly done a great deal to expand our knowledge of conquered peoples, their attitudes toward conquest and the

⁷²Jules Davids (ed.), *American Diplomatic and Public Papers: The United States and China: Series I: The Treaty System and the Taiping Rebellion, 1842-1860* (21 vols., Wilmington, DE, 1973), III, 10-11 and 52.

⁷³For recent studies of the United States empire, see Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); and Ann Laura Stoler (ed.), *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC, 2006).

strategies they adopted to cope with colonial life.⁷⁴ Due to the shadowing of the class dimensions of imperial history, the attitudes of working people from Europe and the US who helped build merchant (and later formal) empires in the nineteenth century have been engulfed by those of the colonizers. The Whampoa anchorage shows, at the very least, that working people associated with the Euro-Americans had a very different experience than that of the ruling class. Historians seeking the full picture of Euro-American influence abroad should consider how labour histories intersected with imperial and entangled histories.

⁷⁴See especially Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940* (Princeton, 1989); and Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr., *Clash of Spirits: The History of Power and Sugar Planter Hegemony on a Visayan Island* (Honolulu, 1998).