

Reorienting American Trade

The Origins of the China Trade and the Development

Of A

National Investment Community

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“Buy low, sell high. Timing is everything.”
--Wong Buck Hung

As colonies became states, merchants had to learn to conduct business in new legal and economic environment. In place of the predictable, stabilizing world defined by Navigation Acts and custom, Americans had to operate within new politically decentralized structures that presented both opportunities and unanticipated obstacles. As they adjusted to the new marketplace of independence, merchants also had to balance changes in British, French, Spanish and Dutch policies against familiar personal relationships and find ways to adapt to new circumstances. Their successes or failures were contingent upon, not surprisingly, the confluence of capital, skill, and, above all else, luck. The China trade illustrated all these traits, but it also demonstrated the exploitation of a set of fortuitous circumstances that established a viable, self-sustaining commerce prior to the end of the Confederation Period. Critical to the origins of that trade and of America's rise within two years to second place among China's western trading partners was the ability of merchants to adapt their resources, knowledge and skill to exploit a small but lucrative niche in the global marketplace.

American ginseng, technically *panax quinquefolia* induced the same physiological effects as its Chinese cousin *panax ginseng*, and provided the commodity that reoriented an existing infrastructure to new commercial adventures. Commenting on his first voyage to Guangzhou, Samuel Shaw, the supercargo of the *Empress of China*, told John Jay that Americans had to develop trade with China. Americans with a growing population would demand more tea. To meet this demand, America had an advantage over its western competitors. “While, therefore,” wrote Shaw in 1785,

The nations of Europe are for the most part obliged to purchase this commodity with ready money, it must be pleasing to an American to know that his country can have it upon easier terms; and that the otherwise useless produce of her mountains and forests will in a considerable degree supply her with this elegant luxury.¹

The post-Revolutionary interest in ginseng was not unprecedented; colonial North Americans had long been familiar its potential value as a cash crop.² Reports on the Chinese variety had appeared in a number of French sources, and knowledge of it had spread to Britain and the colonies by the early eighteenth century. John Bartram and William Byrd reported finding samples near their homes which they forwarded to correspondents in England in the 1730's.³ British Americans like the Chinese believed ginseng had medicinal value. Comparing the American variety to the Chinese, Virginian William Byrd touted its universally healthful effects. "Its virtues," Byrd wrote, "are that it gives an uncommon warmth and vigor to the blood and frisks the spirits beyond any other cordial." Writing to Charles Boyle, Earl of Orrery, Byrd excitedly described the discovery by his nephew of several plants in the mountains near his home: "It recrutes

¹To John Jay, Canton (Guangzhou), January 1787 q.v. in Josiah Quincy (ed.), *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw, The First American Consul at Canton with a Life of the Author* ([Boston, 1847), 350. Excerpts of this letter and its accompanying tables appeared without attribution as "Remarks on the Commerce of America with China." *American Museum*, 7 (March 1790): 126-128.

² William Byrd averred, "the plant is held in high esteem in China, where it sells for its weight in silver." *The Prose Works of William Byrd of Westover: Narratives of a Colonial Virginian*, ed. by Louis B. Wright (Cambridge, MA, 1966) 291.

³ In 1709, a French Jesuit, Jartoux saw Chinese harvesting ginseng in Tartary, present northeast China, collected four samples and speculated in his report to his superiors that the plant might be found in Canada. A fellow Jesuit, Joseph Francis LaFiteau, having read the report, discovered near Quebec a plant that fit Jartoux's description. LaFiteau's discoveries confirmed earlier reports of plant samples that had been classified as belonging to the genus *Araliastrum* and sent to Paris as early as 1700. Knowledge of the samples had passed to William Sherard, the former British consul at Smyrna and by him to the Royal Society as early as 1704 at about the same time, English botanist John Ray mentioned its discovery in Maryland in *Historia Plantarum*. Bartram sent a specimen he cultivated in 1738 to Peter Collinson, a distinguished botanist and member of the Royal Society; Collinson, referred other samples to Hans Sloane, who mistakenly identified the American variety as being the same as the Chinese. Van Jay Symons, *The Chi'ng Ginseng Monopoly* (unpub. Ph.D. thesis; University of Pennsylvania, 1974), 1-2, 21-22. Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 54-55. John H. Appleby, "Ginseng and the Royal Society," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 37 (1982-83): 128.

[sic] the wasted spirits, and repairs a decay'd constitution. In one word, it makes those who take it frequently live to a great age and in very good health.”⁴

Speculation in ginseng began as early as 1721 when French Jesuits reported that Canadian ginseng shipped to China and then cured had passed for native varieties. Carried by supercargoes for the *Compagnie des Indes* on their personal accounts, it could be bought for 3*f*(slightly under 2*s*.) and sold for 180*f* (£5. 16*s*.) in Guangzhou. By 1750, a speculative fever had spread throughout North America. French farmers hired Indians to collect as much as they could to sell in Montreal; Jonathan Edwards, the famous Northampton revivalist minister, complained that Indians harvested ginseng to buy brandy. Between 1747 and 1752 the value of ginseng landed at La Rochelle for transshipment to China increased by over twenty-five times. Similar growth took place in British North America as people like Indian agent William Johnson heard that earlier shipments had sold in the thirty-two to forty shilling per pound range.⁵

By 1751, the market for North American ginseng began to collapse. Having accumulated large surpluses of the root, the *Compagnie* had begun dumping it on the London, Flanders and Spanish markets which in turn began shipping it to China and driving prices down further. Improperly cured roots cast doubt about the overall quality of the North American variety and further dampened demand. At the periphery of the market, Johnson caught up in the speculation paid up to eighty shillings a pound. By early 1752, a saturated or oversold market simply collapsed when London prices plunged

⁴ William Byrd June 18, 1730, *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, 1684-1676* ed. by Marion Tingling , 3 vols. (Charlottesville, VA, 1977), 1:430.

⁵Brian Evans, “Ginseng: Root of Chinese-Canadian Relations,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 66 (1985). 13-16.

to twelve shillings a pound.⁶ Although the North American ginseng bubble had burst, few thought this permanent. *Panax quinquefolia* still sold for 8*f* (slightly under 5 s.) in Canada, and the highest quality Manchurian still went for 500*f* (£15).⁷

While the trade continued at reduced levels, the shipments were routed through London to be sent by the British East India Company (EIC) or transshipped to Nantes to be exported again to China. When the 1780's boom began, Americans were in the midst of adjusting to their exclusion from the mercantilist orbit of the British Empire. The boom in prices lasted long enough for Americans to create sufficient capital to develop a viable, self-sustaining China Trade in a troubled economic time. Although prices dropped over the period, exports soared from 726 to 2,000 piculs between 1784 and 1789, and ginseng helped cash-poor Americans turn dross into silver.⁸

A number of scholars repeat the story that John Ledyard inspired the China trade by suggesting Northwest furs could be sold in China for large profits. A supreme self-promoter, Ledyard tried to sell the scheme in New York, Boston and New London through the publication of his journal in 1783 and allegedly convinced Robert Morris to put together the syndicate to finance the *Empress*. While Ledyard's advocacy of trade with China seems clear enough, awareness of the market for American ginseng was widespread and long-standing. Morris had probably already set into motion his decision to finance the *Empress* before Ledyard began selling the project. The Cabots of Massachusetts had actually sent ships to Gothenburg as early as 1780, and probably knew about the Swedish East India Company's involvement in the China trade. Significantly, Daniel Parker, the principal operating partner of the *Empress* syndicate and Shaw both

⁶ Brian Evans, "Ginseng: Root of Chinese-Canadian Relations," *Canadian Historical Review*, 66 (1985), 16-17.

⁷ Evans, "Ginseng", 18-19.

⁸ A picul is approximately 133 1/3 pounds Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 252, 351..

claim to have heard about ginseng prices from Gothenburg sources in 1782.⁹ Such sharing of knowledge is consistent with the actions of Shaw, Amasa Delano and others involved in early Sino-American commerce as they exchanged courtesies, employment and, presumably information in the course of their interaction with other merchants abroad.¹⁰ Word of ginseng's value spread rapidly to the back country leading Daniel Boone to Kentucky in search of “sang”, and farmers and widows in western Massachusetts exchanging it for tea cups, tools and leather breeches.¹¹

Ginseng prices were high because of disorder in the Chinese domestic market. Originally, the Qing emperor gave the Bannermen, elite troops recruited from their native Manchuria, the monopoly in ginseng rather than pay them. They, in turn, subcontracted the monopoly. After the Qing conquered Han China, and the Bannermen moved to Beijing away from active supervision of their monopoly, their revenues dropped because

⁹Note too that Shaw as late as November 9, 1783 did not believe that he was going to China. To Winthrop Sargent, Jr., West Point, Society Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Jared Sparks, *Memoirs of the Life and Travels of John Ledyard from his Journals and Correspondence* (London, 1828), 177-183. Smith, *Empress of China* 40-421 See also Arthur Power Dudden, *The American Pacific: From the Old China Trade to the Present* (Oxford, 1992), 3-4 and Philip Chadwick Foster Smith “Philadelphia Displays the Flowery Flag,” in Jean Gordon Lee, *Philadelphians and the China Trade, 1784-1844* (Philadelphia, 1984), 25. For the Gothenburg connection, see Robert East, *Business Enterprise in the American Revolutionary Era* (Gloucester, MA, 1964 [1938]), 253 and Smith *Empress of China*, 40-42. Note too, that the first commercial treaty ratified with a foreign power was with Sweden in September 1783. Irene C. Bintz, “Foreign Trade and the Emergence of American Nationalism,” (unpub. PhD thesis, 1989), 273-274.

¹⁰ See for example the descriptions of Shaw on board the French ship *Triton* with which the *Empress* sailed from Batavia (Jakarta) to Whampoa. Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 153-156. Delano in the aftermath of the selling of the *Massachusetts* illustrates the existence of a social network among supercargoes. Sent to Macao by Shaw, he is put up by another company and then hired by the British East India Company., Benjamin Fuller's letters between 1784 and 1789 also illustrate an information network of letters and communication that kept supercargoes and owners aware of prices and information. For Fuller see, the example of the routing of information to L'Orient via the *St. James*, captained by Alexander Cain, June 21, 1784, Benjamin Fuller Letter Book, Collection of Business, Professional and Personal Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. On Delano, see *A Narrative of Voyages and Travel in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* (Boston, 1817), 44-45. For Fuller, see, for example the routing of information to L'Orient by means of *St James*, captained by Alex. Cain), June 21, 1784, Benjamin Fuller Letter Book, Collection of Business, Professional and Personal Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

¹¹ See the entries for Samuel Anibel., Oct. 2, 1783, Elias Dickinson and William Gates, Oct. 4, 1783, Day Book, November 14, 1782 to July 10, 1784, Williams Family Papers, Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Deerfield, MA

of corruption, incompetence or, most likely, a combination of the two. Determined to restore the income of the Bannermen, the Qing set out to reform the distribution system and added to the shortages caused by mismanagement. The arrival of direct shipments of American imports in 1784 coincided with the shortages and offered Chinese cheap replacements. While considered inferior to the native Chinese variety, American ginseng offered immense opportunities especially if issues of quality and processing could be resolved since the domestic product sold at ten times the imported.¹²

Ginseng was critical to American ambitions in China between 1783 and 1788 because it gave its traders a competitive advantage. Although the Chinese preferred to be paid for goods in specie and preferably silver, Americans could pay with an agricultural commodity that grew wild and required only harvesting. Their competitors had to scramble for silver which, when they did so, increased global demand for it. For Britain, the purchase of Chinese export goods was a major drain on silver reserves and a critical factor in the paucity of silver coin. Writing in 1805, David Macpherson noted that although large quantities of silver coin had been minted in England during the reign of George III, virtually none of it remained in circulation because it had been either melted down or exported.¹³ Macpherson estimated the East India Company paid as much as seventy to eighty percent of its Chinese imports with silver.¹⁴ Between 1783 and 87 the

¹² Van Symons, *The Chi'ng Dynasty Ginseng Monopoly*, 21-22; Yen-Ping Hao, "Chinese Teas to America—A Synopsis" in *America's China Trade in Historic Perspective* ed. by Ernest R. May and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 12.

¹³ Although the minting of silver coin in 1787 was the largest it had been since the early 18th century, aside from a few collectors of *scarce coin*, the term for collectors' items, and that used as chips for card games, there was simply no silver coin in circulation "The greatest part must have been exported, or melted down, as it is otherwise impossible to account for such a sum of money totally disappearing." *Annals of Commerce, Fisheries and Manufacturing* . . . 4 vols. (London, 1805): 135. Amasa Delano noted the premium on silver relative to gold: "Silver is higher valued than gold, according to our rate of valuation, and is not so plenty with them [the Chinese]. *A Narrative of Voyages*, 418.

¹⁴ Earl H. Pritchard, *The Crucial Years of Early Anglo-Chinese Relations, 1750-1800* (New York, 1970), Appendix IX, 399. On profits on Chinese exports, see appendix VIII, 388.

Company had an especially difficult time finding sufficient cash. Needing money to expand the China trade, the East India Company asked the government to be allowed to convert drawback credits—that is, rebates for dutied goods that had been re-exported out of the country—into cash. Permitting the immediate sale of the debentures allowed the Company immediate access to cash, hitherto “laying dead” and give it the liquidity to reinvest and expand trade. But the solution added to demand—and not so coincidentally reduced earnings because of the discounting of the debentures while adding to upward pressures on silver prices. In the four-year period 1786-1790—coincidentally the most accurate figures available—the Company averaged silver payments to the Chinese of nearly 1.85 million *taels* (£444,000).¹⁵

The premium placed on silver hurt other Europeans trading with China as well. Their search for alternatives to silver illustrated the tenuousness of their competitive positions. Shaw noted that by 1785 the advantages the Portuguese had in Macao could not compensate for their needing to use of credit. Because Macao was technically within China, the Portuguese were exempt from some duties, but without bullion payments, reported Shaw, “the commerce of this nation with China would undoubtedly fail.”¹⁶ With little domestic consumption of tea, Sweden, France and Denmark depended upon smuggling it into England to underwrite the costs of their Chinese imports, but they had no goods the Chinese wanted other than silver. Louis XVI had tried to revive the

¹⁵The English, French and Americans valued the *tael* at 0.72 Spanish milled dollars which made it equal to about 5 shillings. The profits, when earned, of the East India Company were usually derived from its trade with India, *Three Reports of the Select Committee Appointed by the Court of Directors on the Export Trade* (London, 1793), 33-34 and Earl H. Pritchard, *The Crucial Years of Early Anglo-Chinese Relations, 1750-1800* (New York, 1970), Appendix IX, 399. Paul A. van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong, 2005), xii. On profits on Chinese exports, see appendix VIII, 388. On the accounting changes, see Macpherson, *Annals of Commerce*, 4: 23.

¹⁶Spain had less difficulty with procuring silver, however its Asian trade centered around Manila. *The Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 230-231

Compagnie des Indes by sponsoring one voyage to China in 1783 and subsidizing a single ship the next year; however, the specie needs were immense. The 1783 voyage of the *Triton* carried approximately three million *livres* in specie (about £130,000 or \$390,000) because, as Shaw pointed out, the French “ships depend chiefly for their return cargoes on the specie they bring from Europe.” In 1788, the French sent one ship with \$200,000 in specie. In spite of these commitments, Shaw concluded that the French did not expect that their Far East trade could become self-sustaining.¹⁷

The size of British trade volume with Asia and domestic politics also aggravated its problems of paying for Chinese imports. The British East India’s attempts to increase its profits off the China trade had the effect of increasing the costs of tea and narrowing profit margins for everyone. In 1784, Britain and the EIC wanted to eliminate smuggled tea and increase tax revenues. Their solution was not surprising: reduce the duties and provide alternative sources of cheap tea. To do this, however, meant that the Company would have to increase its volume of tea to absorb the additional demand and find the silver to pay for it. To prevent the Swedes, Dutch and Danes from expanding their markets after the commutation of the tea duties, the Company had to increase its imports and decided to accumulate year’s reserve. In 1785, the Company provided its ships with over £700,000 (\$2,100,000) in bullion for the purchase of the additional tea.¹⁸ The

¹⁷ The exchange rate is based upon 1792 figures found in M. Brunel, “Memoir of the China Trade,” in Abbé Rothen, *A Voyage to Madagascar and the East Indies* (London, 1792) 421-422. Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw* 170-171, 230, 251; [anon.] “Advantages of Opening a Trade to Japan,” *American Museum*, 9 (April 1791): 187. Wartime exigencies also damaged France’s maritime commerce by drawing skilled manpower away from overseas mercantile endeavors. MacPherson, *Annals of Commerce, Fisheries and Manufacturing*, 4: 9, 55.

¹⁸ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 228, 298. William Barton wrote in 1786 that the EIC was shipping silver to China in order to buy gold. While this tends to contradict the perspective that silver was high relative to the value of other goods, it also may underscore that globally gold was undervalued relative to other commodities. *The True Interest of the United States and Particularly of Pennsylvania Considered with Respect to the Advantages Resulting from State Paper-Money* (Philadelphia, 1786), 3. For the suggestion that gold was undervalued globally see Benjamin Fuller to David Parris, Philadelphia, July 7, 1786, Benjamin Fuller Letter Book,.

decision to drive smugglers out of their market had an ironic consequences; as prices for tea fell, demand for it rose and created more need for silver not only to pay for the increased amounts of tea, but to meet rising prices for it. Surprisingly, the decrease in English tea prices did not drive the Swedes and Danes out of the China trade. Because they specialized in more expensive green and hyson teas—presumably to take advantage of higher yields to offset the risks of smuggling—they began exporting them to Russia.¹⁹

Even the Dutch with their extensive commercial empire struggled with inadequate supplies of bullion. The Dutch East India Company's (VOC) shipping capacity exceeded the needs of its domestic market and depended upon sales in England to sustain what was, in retrospect, a failing enterprise. Between 1783 and 1786, the VOC averaged silver exports of fl1,073,607; the next three years, 1787-1789, it averaged fl2,070,000. The strain of accumulating silver drove the VOC to flood the Guangzhou market with tin and pepper and to encourage private traders to use their ships to offset the costs of its tea exports to the Netherlands. Even with these extensive bullion imports, Shaw recognized that the VOC had “labored under great disadvantages owing to their not sending from Europe a sufficiency of specie; their company having depended too far upon remittances to be made from India to Europe through the medium of their treasury.” In the short-term, the surge in consumption forced the VOC to seek more silver to sustain its operations; in the long-, it drove VOC out of the tea business by 1795.²⁰

¹⁹ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 299.

²⁰Yong Liu, *The Dutch East India Company's Tea Trade with China, 1757-1781* (Leiden, 2007) 151-52, Appendix I, 177. Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 299. There were obvious risks of loss. In 1790 a typhoon struck near Guangzhou and sank a Dutch ship carrying three to four hundred thousand dollars in specie. Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, 39. James C. Riley, *International Government Finance and the Amsterdam Capital Market, 1740-1815* (Cambridge, 1980), 178-79, Alice Clare Carter, “Dutch Foreign Investment, 1738-1800,” *Economica*, 20 n.s.(1953):337. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 148.

The preference for silver also adversely affected prices of barter goods and specie equivalents like bills of exchange. If offered barter, the Chinese assessed the goods duties and then discounted their values ten percent. Silver, on the other hand, entered duty-free, and prices were discounted twenty percent for cash. Domestic political pressures on the EIC and VOC also cut profits by requiring the export of lead and woolen cloth the latter of which sold poorly and frequently at below cost with credit to marginal or failing merchants.²¹ While the Dutch and the English would have preferred to use bills of exchange to finance their trade, their use also raised the costs of business because the Chinese discounted them anywhere from twenty to twenty-five percent and at the same time raised prices a *tael* per picul (6s 4d or slightly more than \$1 per 133 1/3 lbs) when buying provisions.²²

With remittances Europeans, especially the English, competed against themselves and enhanced the ability of *hong* merchants to exact penalties for their use. Personal trading was a common occurrence. For the EIC, private accounts were considered a prerequisite, and as the largest company, it had the largest volume of private accounts. The custom of the EIC was to designate a proportion of a ship's cargo capacity to its own needs and then release the balance to its employees. On their private trading accounts, EIC captains received as much as sixty tons of cargo space with other officers receiving proportionate amounts. These private accounts exacted higher costs, increased risk and lowered yields for all bills and notes. Because of the costs and inconvenience of specie,

²¹ In 1786 and 1787, credits for lead and woolens to hong merchants were 1,271,284 (\$914,604 or £304,868) and 1,352,272 (\$973,636 or £324,545) taels respectively. Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton*, 278-79

²² Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 300, 343. This also does not account for the additional transaction costs involved with the shipment of specie. Pelatiah Webster indicates that this was a fairly standard discount rate. He estimated that the costs of freight and insurance associated with the transportation of specie to America during the Revolution lowered its value by twenty percent. *Sixth Essay on Free Trade and Finance* (Philadelphia, 1783), 24.

private traders used bills to buy goods, recycle their investments and, most importantly, transfer assets back home. The most time consuming part of the process was to funnel the bills through the EIC because this was subject to the Company's elephantine bureaucracy. Other European East Indies companies did not permit the same repatriation process, but because the prohibition of loans was largely not enforced, other European officers also extended their merchants credit. The more expeditious and higher yielding process of repatriating assets was to route bills of exchange through the Chinese merchant or *hong* by loaning him money at around twenty to twenty-five percent interest and expect repayment through remittances drawn on European merchant houses.²³

This did two bad things. First, it increased the numbers of bills in circulation and debased their values. Second, the yields entailed risk not manifested until coincidentally the arrival of the Americans. Loans went to younger, less capitalized hong merchants who were unable or unwilling to forward payment, and they were prohibited under Chinese law. Between 1768 and 1774, John Crichton, an Englishman and former employee of the EIC, held bonds paying twenty percent interest on a number of Chinese merchants. When three of the hong failed to make payments, Crichton sought relief through official channels for himself and another group of English investors. Promised ten percent of any sums that might be recovered, Sir Edward Vernon, the commander of the British fleet in India, sent the frigate *Seahorse* to negotiate with Chinese officials to obtain redress from the three houses in default. Although the Emperor had barred loans by Europeans to Chinese in 1760—punishable by forfeiture of the loan and banishment

²³Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 172-173, 300. On the problems of the *Hong* merchants and the competitive sources of alternative remittances and other examples of hong bankruptcies, see Weng Eang Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton: Chinese Merchants in Sino-Western Trade* (Richmond, Surrey UK, 1997), 81-86, 261-264, and 271-279, and Ann Bolbach White, "The Hong Merchants of Canton" unpub. PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1967, 66 and Yong Liu, *The Dutch East India Company's Tea Trade*, 151-52.

of the debtor—the decree had not been enforced, but the growing instability of the hong structure had inclined the Chinese to do so by the eighties. With the intercession of Captain Panton of the *Seahorse*, the Emperor reconsidered and dictated a settlement that required the payment of all loans secured before 1760 at their face value with twelve percent interest and of ones made after, at half their values without any interest. The payments would be spread over a ten year period and financed by a tax on imports. Because the other European private traders as a matter of company policy forbade loans to Chinese, they were foreclosed from the settlement,²⁴ and they were subject to the tax that paid for it. This, according to Shaw, “was no small aggravation to the Dutch, Danes, Swedes and French, that their trade bears a portion of the tax for this dividend. . . yet they did not dare avow their claims.”²⁵

Soaring demand for tea allowed the Chinese to raise prices. In 1782, total imports of tea into England amounted to over 14.2 million pounds, only 6.9 of which was from the EIC or its employee accounts. The Swedish East India and Danish Asiatic Companies smuggled in the remainder. British imports for 1787, shipped in 1786, amounted to 20.6 million pounds, a figure consistent with Shaw’s estimates that the Company had shipped 15 million pounds in just five months of the year. For the 1787-1788 season, British imports of tea exceeded 22 million. For their parts, the remaining Europeans as a group suffered little. Swedish and Danish imports dropped from 7 to slightly under 4 million pounds, but the Dutch, who had not registered any shipments the year before, brought the total European contribution to over 10 million pounds. The

²⁴Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 306-314. A previous episode involving a senior surgeon of the British East India Company, Abraham Leslie, did not turn out as well. Leslie occupied a building owned by his defaulting debtor and vowed to use the rents to discharge the obligations. The *Hoppo*, the chief customs official, had intervened in an earlier claim, but this time Leslie went too far. He was arrested and imprisoned in Macao for two years. Upon his release, the Company sent him to Calcutta. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 98.

²⁵ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 314.

Swedes and the Dutch, Shaw noted, “have not realized any inconvenience . . . especially as a large part of their fine teas were sold last year at an advanced price for the Russian consumption.”²⁶ But the demand, Shaw estimated, increased 1788 prices by forty percent over 1784 prices. “The Chinese,” wrote Shaw to John Jay, then Secretary for Foreign Affairs, “hardly know *how much* to ask for it; and should the rage for purchasing continue another year, it is not improbable that its price may be doubled.”²⁷

Having left the British Empire, the former colonies lost the subsidies of invisible earnings—imperial expenditures, indirect payments and private credit—that financed Americans’ adverse balance of payments, and, for a brief moment in 1783-84, they continued to spend more than they earned.²⁸ Ginseng, however, was a highly fungible specie equivalent that quickly made Americans an important participant in the China Trade. In the 1786 season, the English shipped nearly two-thirds of the ginseng imported into China; the French followed with nearly twenty percent while Americans provided less than ten percent. The remainder was spread among the Dutch, Swedes, Danes, and Prussians. Because, however, *panax quinquefolia* is native to North America, European shippers simply could not continue to compete with Americans. Crops had to be harvested the previous fall, shipped to Europe and then transshipped to China to arrive around late fall early winter. For this to happen, given the vagaries of weather and sales cycle, the timing of shipments had to be virtually perfect. Opportunity and transaction

²⁶ While the Dutch are not recorded as having imported any tea in 1782, the year before, they sent nearly five million pounds and nearly 6 million in 1787. Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 171, 298-99. Macpherson, *Annals of Commerce*, 4: 337.

²⁷ To Jay, Guangzhou, Dec. 21, 1787, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 252, 353

²⁸ Tightness in specie and the money supply had become evident in Philadelphia as early as March 19, 1784. Nalborough Frazier, Philadelphia to Ellis & Co., Nalborough Frazier Letter Book, New York Public Library, New York.

charges, storage and spoilage rates from improper curing added significantly to the cost basis.²⁹

The experience of Williams & Upham of Deerfield, Massachusetts and Charles Sigourney illustrated the disadvantages of using the customary English network. Sigourney though French, was Williams & Upham's Boston factor who connected the partnership to London. In October and early November 1783, farmers brought small amounts of ginseng to John Williams at his Deerfield store. Williams paid between a shilling and ten pence a pound: most purchases were small, generally between three to five pounds rising occasionally five to thirteen and on rare occasions to between thirty and thirty-five pounds. These last purchases were probably from small wholesalers or agents of relatives and neighbors. Thinking prices in China were between 6s. 6d. and as much as £10 a pound, Williams forwarded the shipments to Sigourney for sale. In response, Sigourney warned Williams that prices were not as high as he expected because southerners were shipping far greater amounts of ginseng to Europe than ever before, and he was "convinced that your [sic] will sell for much less sum than you expect."³⁰

For Williams & Upham, the selling price was less of a problem than the cost basis of their ginseng. They were also late. After the Treaty of Paris, goods had to be shipped to Britain, in British bottoms, thereby raising freight rates, and subjected to duties non-existent when Massachusetts was part of the Empire. Sigourney's ability to sell the ginseng is a tribute to his connections, determination and effectiveness as an agent;

²⁹ Ginseng is grown from Maine to Alabama and as far west as Minnesota, Wisconsin and Kentucky. H.C. Harrison *et al.*, "Ginseng", *Alternative Field Crop Manual* (January 26, 2000)

<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/afcm/ginseng.html>, 17. On previous shipments from North America to London, see Jonathan Goldstein, *Philadelphia and the China Trade, 1682-1846: Commercial, Cultural and Attitudinal Effects* (University Park, 1998), 54, Quincy, *The Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 249.

³⁰ Sigourney to Williams and Upham, Boston, March 1, 1784, and Boston, July 31, 1784, Williams Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 6, Historic Deerfield Memorial Library, Deerfield, MA.

however, even he could not get it sold until March 1, 1784, and the remittances were tied up until July because of the inadequacy of the proceeds. Circumstances surrounding the sale indicated the declining yield of their venture. Curing the ginseng for shipment shrank the original 2,000 pounds to 700; the partners then had to pay 2s. 8d per pound for freight and insurance and £10 for drying and shipping which meant having to sell the ginseng for over 14 s a pound to cover minimum costs.³¹

Like Daniel Parker & Company, the purchasing agent for the *Empress*, Williams & Upham had shipments ready to leave in February, but their additional transportation leg delayed shipment and added to interest and opportunity costs. Being the first to return to the United States meant a quicker and potentially greater return on investment: teas were fresher and goods were available for the fall harvest. One would also have first access to the ginseng harvests.³² To meet this schedule, ships had to leave in February or March to arrive in *Guangzhou* in August or early September and have sufficient time to sell cargoes, refit, re-supply and purchase return cargoes. Mid-November was also when the first teas arrived. To reach the United States by July or August, one would have to leave *Guangzhou* in February or March after which shifts in winds could cause extensive delays and exposed ships to bad weather and dangerous conditions. Seasonal trade winds and weather made sailing through the islands of Indonesia and towards the Cape of Good Hope any later difficult. Leaving in April or later could leave a ship becalmed for an entire month in *Whampoa*; trying to sail south through the Sunda Straits in May or June

³¹ In calculating the cost basis, the freight and insurance charges were estimated for 700 pounds. Using the 2000 pound figure would have increased the cost basis even further. Absent from these are fixed costs for duties, port fees and commissions. See the entries beginning Sept. 13, 1783. Williams and Upham, Day Book, Nov. 2, 1782-July 10, 1784, Williams Family Papers. Joseph Taylor to John Williams, New York, May 1785, Williams Family Papers, Box 4, Folder 7.

³² Liu, *The Dutch East India Company's Tea Trade with China* 5. On the cycles of the ginseng harvest, see Williams Day Book,

exposed ships to adverse winds, squalls and treacherous currents. Late departures also complicated approaches to the Cape of Good Hope and northeastern American cities³³

Even the *Empress's* partners were pressed for time. In September 1783, Parker hired Turnbull, Marmie & Company who sent Robert Johnston to comb Pennsylvania and Virginia in search of ginseng. Parker wrote to his partner John Holker that higher prices were justified because their ginseng would arrive months before any Europeans. Parker believed the higher prices were clearly justified since he had heard that prices had been as high as \$15 (£5) a pound in 1781 and \$3 in 1782. Johnston's task was still not easy. While he had more time than Williams & Upham, he was dealing with far larger

³³MacPherson, *Annals of Commerce*, 415-19. James R. Gibson, *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785-1841* (Seattle, 1992), 50. Prevailing trades between April and October in the Indian Ocean blow northwesterly towards Malaysia and are reversed in November to March. In the Northern Hemisphere, this process is reversed. Sailing through the Indonesian Archipelago is extremely complicated because it lies in the Inter-tropical Convergence Zone and at the confluence of a series of islands, seas, shelves and deep trenches, the combination of which can subject a ship to shifting winds or dead calm and tricky currents. Leaving between April and October, ships returning home would be sailing into adverse winds generally blowing northwest. The numerous islands and currents in the Indonesian Archipelago complicate these wind patterns and add complicated currents. November and March, the wind patterns are reversed because of the shift of the earth's tilt and the sun's heating of the southern hemisphere. Leaving in late winter means friendlier if lighter winds that blow south easterly. Delano also cautioned against the currents at Mozambique, approaching the Cape of Good Hope from north of South latitude 23° (because the winds blew northwesterly by then), and keeping to the west of Bermuda., For a 1802 description of the operation of winds in this area of the world see *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, 415-416. To be in New York, Boston or Philadelphia in time for the fall harvest, one had to take advantage the shifting wind patterns and changing seasons in two different hemispheres. Leaving North America in February, ships could follow the northeasterly trades until the Cape Verde Islands, pass through the northeast and southeast trades to below the equator to 25° South latitude where the winds will blow generally northeasterly towards Africa and the Cape of Good Hope. From the Cape, the ship had to drop south to avoid the trades that blow northwesterly and use the variable winds of the "Horse Latitudes", below 30° to 35° South, move north at between East 70° and 75° to pick up the prevailing trades that blew from the southeast. Arriving in Guangzhou by fall, the ships could sell their cargoes, refit and load and leave by February to catch the southeasterly winds towards the Horse Latitudes; take advantage of the shifts to onshore, northwesterly winds towards the Cape, then head towards St. Helena or Ascension, pick up the southeast trades at latitude 20° and cross the equator between 25° and 35°, stay to the east of Bermuda and pick up the Gulf Stream and onshore winds. Fredrick Molineaux to William Constable, New York, June 19, 1785, Constable-Pierrepont Papers, New York Public Library, New York. Also see,, Jediah Morse, *The American Universal Geography or a View of the Present State of Empires Kingdoms, States, and Republics in the Known World*. . . 4th ed.(Boston, 1802),I: 64-65. Note that this description of the trades is not in earlier editions of Morse (I am especially grateful to Jeff Kaja, of the University of Michigan for bringing this reference to my attention). For a chart of prevailing winds in that part of the globe, see *Encyclopedia Britannica: World Atlas*, (London, 1952), plate 24.

amounts of the root. Beginning at 3 sh. 9d, he found he had to raise prices. Declining an offer of 300 pounds at 5s., he found 8,000 pounds at 4s.6d.³⁴

One of Johnston's problems was the demand for specie. "I am distressed for want of Cash," he wrote Turnbull, Marmie & Co. but he occasionally could not get it. "Mr. Pringle has been so obliging as to borrow Money for me, for which he has been this day denied."³⁵ Still, because of the custom of the country, much of the cost of the ginseng was paid with book debt or goods already in merchants' stores. For farmers in the countryside, the harvesting of ginseng, as Shaw had put it, was as good as finding cash in the ground: "The ginseng of America. . . might perhaps be rendered as beneficial to her citizens as her mines of silver and gold have been to the rest of mankind."³⁶ Small amounts of the root taken to the local store were used to satisfy indebtedness or buy the occasional luxury good like the wine glass, pen knife, snuff, candlestick and sundry goods that Thomas Gates bought from John Williams in exchange for his twenty-three pounds of ginseng, and he still had a balance on his account. Williams, although the venture proved ultimately unprofitable to him, had a commodity that turned inventory into cash and settled accounts in London.³⁷

The *Empress of China* sailed in February, 1784 and arrived in September. Parker and Shaw's expectations of high prices foundered upon the problem of oversupply caused partly by their own cargo and by European ships that had arrived a month earlier. Still the *Empress* was able to buy its return cargo with 58,000 tons of ginseng, \$17,000 (£5,800) in specie and turn a profit of about \$37,000 or a thirty-one percent return. A

³⁴ Quoted in Philip Chadwick Foster Smith, *The Empress of China* (Philadelphia, 1984), 40-42.

³⁵ Smith, *The Empress of China*, 42.

³⁶ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 351.

³⁷ Note that Williams had two advantages: he profited off both the ginseng he bought and the goods he sold. See John Williams Daybook for September 13, 1783.

Swedish supercargo noted the immediate impact of the Americans' arrival: "Many things that formerly yielded a large profit will. . . do so no more; for instance ginseng, such a quantity has been brought by an American ship *Empress of China*, as has reduced the price lower than it has been for many years."³⁸

Despite falling prices, Shaw and Randall managed to sell the ginseng for five dollars a pound (£1 12s 8d). While less than he expected when leaving New York, it was still an excellent price. Parker had told Robert Morris that his contacts in Gothenburg the previous September had told him that the going price was eight dollars a pound (£2 12 s 8d). The *Harriet*, a sloop, attempted to preempt Parker and company and sailed out of Hingham with 9,000 lbs of ginseng. Estimates of its profits were wildly exaggerated: one South Carolina newspaper thought it earned £150,000. Stopping at the Cape of Good Hope, the *Harriet* sold its cargo to officers of the EIC for their personal accounts. Under these conditions had it sold for top prices in China, the *Harriet* probably did not get much more than Shaw and Randall. When adding estimated inspection and shipping costs of 5s. 6d, and costs of purchase (estimated at 4s). *Empress's* costs at about 9s 6d a pound were about 4s. 6d below those of Williams and Upham.³⁹

While also subject to duties, taxes and bribes like other westerners, Americans fell into interstices in the Chinese regulatory structures that added to their competitiveness. Entrance payments into *Whampoa* were around \$4,000; each ship was required to hire a linguist at one hundred fifty *taels* (\$108 or £36), a *comprador* to secure provisions and other necessities at another one hundred to one hundred fifty *taels* and engage a *fiador* or

³⁸ Q.v. A. Owen Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle: The Presence of China in the American Enlightenment* (Detroit, 1993), 109

³⁹ Evans, "Ginseng". Shaw reported prices in 1788 as anywhere from \$100-200 per picul (133 1/3 lbs) with possible increases of twenty to thirty dollars over the course of the season. On the relative costs of shipping and inspection and the returns for the *Harriet*, see Smith, *Empress of China*, 22, 42, 155. Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 218, 252. See also, Nuxoll, *Papers of Robert Morris*, 8:98.

principal merchant. There were other incidental fees, a required \$200 for a *banksall*, a temporary, purpose built building constructed of mats, straw and bamboo that served as a central office or depot for each ship. Because, however, Americans were private traders, initially had no permanent factory and had shallow-drafted ships, they were not subject to the same fees. For example, they frequently did not require the sampans needed to tow them around sand bars and navigate the upper reaches of the Pearl River. Also, they had, with ginseng and silver, fewer imports subject to duties and did not have to hire as many “money boats” the means for ferrying the silver into port, and when they did, they paid at a lower rate.⁴⁰

Americans were also less subject to these fee increases because Chinese officials tended to tolerate illegal trading by smaller ships. The toleration of Americans’ illicit trade may have occurred because of the Canton system’s focus on large ships or because the bribery and graft provided larger incomes to the various low-level hong officials. The *hoppo* could relegate less important officials to the supervision of Americans who generated less direct, official income, used fewer services and thus gave fewer or smaller bribes that could work their way up the higher levels of administrators. While Americans did not completely escape official supervision, they would still need pilots and linguists, who provided the links to the black market. More maneuverable and capable of anchoring close to shore, Americans had easier direct access to provisions that could circumvent the monopoly. Since neither ginseng nor silver was subject to duty, only half the transaction, the selling of supplies, was technically illegal, and since the black market

⁴⁰ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 174-176, 348. Comprador fees varied with countries, the English paid most; and the Dutch and Danes, slightly less. Generally the fees were consistent over time. In addition to official fees, linguists received commissions and all workers expected a gratuity that could be as much as a month’s salary. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 40-41, 63-64, 104 and 118.

was growing, American smuggling as early as 1785 was, for the Chinese, a relatively victimless crime.⁴¹

The rise of a black market in the provisions trade was connected to declining incomes for the hong and their employees. Fees had been constant from the earliest days of the co-hong, and many hong merchants were teetering on the edge of insolvency by the 1780's. To compensate for the static revenues, the *Hoppo*, the chief customs official, learned to add surcharges, graft or padded prices. Prices for provisions controlled by the co-hong had provided one means of raising incomes for the Chinese. John Rickman as early as 1780 had noted that Chinese provisions had become very dear when compared to other ports. Also, the *Hoppo* began to raise fees. In 1785, the Danes complained that the piloting fees from Macao to Guangzhou cost \$600, an increase of \$128 over the previous year; the following year, the British East India Company grumbled about not being able to hire a *comprador* for less than \$300. Black market graft and bribery provided quicker, more flexible responses to the problem of static tax revenues and declining incomes. The *comprador* began to collect in essence a head tax for every laborer hired by westerners as well as one on the wages of Chinese who shipped out on foreign ships. Not surprisingly linguists and low-level *hoppomen*, the low-level custom collectors to supplement their incomes became the conduits for access to black market provisions.⁴²

Fees and fixed overhead especially undermined the competitiveness of smaller national companies like the Danes, Swedes and French. The governing European model

⁴¹Fredrick Molineaux to William Constable, New York, June 19, 1785; Jacques M. Downs, "The Golden Gheto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy," (unpub. PhD thesis, Lehigh University, 1990)108-110

⁴² Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 82-83.

of the East Asian trade was the government chartered monopoly that relied upon large bulk carriers. The chartered companies established permanent factories or offices in Guangzhou, but smaller European nations did not have sufficiently large, protected domestic markets or make enough voyages to justify their overhead. The Chinese also seem to have penalized the smaller European traders. The Swedish East India and Danish Asiatic Companies had the largest vessels visiting Guangzhou and paid 50 and 100 percent respectively more in linguist fees than the Dutch or English. Fees could be also be quirky: although Belgium's Ostende General India Company had smaller ships than the VOC, it still paid higher fees.⁴³ Despite the termination of the *Compagne des Indes* in 1761, and the absence of regular trade especially after the loss of Pondicherry during the Seven Years War and then again during the Revolution, the French maintained a luxurious factory on a separate island and paid its resident factor £6000 per year.⁴⁴ .

Ironically, the very size of the British and Dutch East India Companies also meant surrendering the ginseng market to the Americans. Because the Dutch and the British had geographically distant and dispersed colonial possessions in Asia, larger ships provided the economies of scale that moved large volume of goods around the region and to and from Europe. Shaw initially thought the Dutch were particularly competitive because their large empire operated, “under equal, if not superior advantages of those of any other people.”⁴⁵ Protected monopolies led to expensive overhead in the construction of large, lavish ships. Infamous for its expensive ships and the salaries bestowed upon its captains, the EIC had many of the same incentives towards large bulk carriers. Raw

⁴³ Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 82-83.

⁴⁴ See also for example the size and elegance of the Danish captain's cabin, his maintenance of a band and extensive wine cellar. Samuel W. Woodhouse, “Log and Journal of the Ship *United States* on a Voyage to China in 1784,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 55 (1931), 246-47, and Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 162, 344.

⁴⁵ To John Jay, Guangzhou, January 1787, q. v. Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 343. 299.

cotton shipped from India to be woven into nankeens and returned helped boost demand for cargo space. Domestic politics added to incentives for the construction of large bulk carriers because the Company was forced to export lead and woolen cloth to dump on Chinese market to satisfy the demands of British manufacturers. With relative limited demand for goods other than tea, Company trade with China in the two decades before 1784 remained relatively stable, but the trade in goods other than tea was being undertaken by private trade which, as it expanded, added to pressures for surplus capacity.⁴⁶

In contrast to the benefits of large Asian commercial operations like the EIC and VOC, Americans' cost advantages led to their capture of the ginseng market in China and, with it, an significant share of Chinese exports. In 1786, Americans were responsible for slightly over seven percent of ginseng imports and ranked fifth among traders; the British accounted for nearly seventy percent; the French, thirteen with the Dutch a distant fourth. A year later, Shaw estimated that Americans were responsible for 900 of the 1800 piculs imported; and the year following that, 1788, when ginseng imports had risen to 2,000 piculs, American ships were responsible for 1,290 of them; the British, for the remaining 710. Even there the trade had shifted significantly; only 200 piculs were imported by the East India Company, the remainder was on individual accounts. They had also become China's second leading western trading partner.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Pritchard, *Early Years of Anglo-Chinese Relations*, 142-143. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 148. Because of protectionist legislation and of the balance between workers' incomes and costs of cloth, there was little demand for nankeens in Britain well into the nineteenth century. Mary B. Rose, *Firms, Networks and Business Values: The British and American Cotton Industries since 1750* (Cambridge, 2000), 31-32.

⁴⁷ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 249, [anon. but probably Shaw], "Remarks on the Commerce of America with China," *American Museum*, 7 (March 1790), 128. Note the cargoes of the *Perseverance* (Sept. 2, 1785) and *Grange* (Nov. 11, 1785) contained several casks of ginseng being sent to London (Philadelphia Customs House Registry, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia and that Philadelphia exported 265 casks and 89 barrels of ginseng to Europe and England in 1788. "Exports from

Ginseng's trade characteristics fit into an existing transportation infrastructure that was underutilized after the war. American colonial shipping had excelled in niches that required smaller, faster vessels that were more flexible and efficient in turnaround time to ship fresh food to the West Indies and Nova Scotia, smuggle molasses into North America and trade with ports with shallow harbors. These ships depended upon speed and shallow drafts for their profitability and not upon amortizing costs over bulk cargo capacities. The War for Independence encouraged these design characteristics.

Capturing merchant ships while outrunning British ships-of-the-line necessitated vessels that could be sailed with relatively few men but having space for gun and prize crews and lucrative, high-yield cargoes.⁴⁸ Shut out of the West Indies and the remaining British North American colonies, these ships could not compete in the carrying trade after commodity prices had dropped by thirty percent. Benjamin Fuller of Philadelphia advised his West Indies trading partners that that prices for loaf sugar could not be sold profitably because freight rates were set at twelve and a half percent of the value of the goods and were "a Freight, few or no Goods can bear."⁴⁹

Because the Canton system had grown up to regulate the European chartered companies, it was designed to handle their large, deep-drafted bulk carriers. Initially the Chinese had considered using Macao as the monopoly for its Western trade; however, it

the Port of Philadelphia," *American Museum*, 7 (April, 1790): 188. Glen & Buckens sold the owners *Experiment* 2 casks of ginseng that netted approximately 100 lbs. each of ginseng and David Holly sold them two barrels that netted approximately 70 lbs each. Based on these estimated weights, the 1788 exports to Britain from Philadelphia would have equaled 245 piculs.

⁴⁸Paul Fontenoy, "Ginseng, Otter Skins and Sandalwood: The Connundrum of China Trade," *Northern Mariner* 7 (1997): 1-2, Herbert C. Bell, "The West India Trade before the American Revolution," *American Historical Review* 22(1917):280-281, Benjamin Woods Labaree, *Patriots and Partisans; The Merchants of Newburyport* (New York, 1975 [1962]), 58-60 and Richard Buel, Jr., *In Irons: Britain's Naval Supremacy and the American Revolutionary Economy* (New Haven, 1998), 104-111.

⁴⁹ Philadelphia, June 21, 1784, Benjamin Fuller Letter Book, HSP, Winifred Barr Rothenberg, *From Market-Places to a Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1785-1850* (Chicago, 1992)109, and Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (New York, 1987)264.

would have required extensive use of lighters and sampans, loading and unloading of cargoes and the employment of large numbers of junks and sampans on constant patrol to police the activities of the western ships. Guangzhou had a more suitable harbor for the larger ships and made their regulation simpler and cheaper.⁵⁰ Americans' use of smaller, faster, ships with superior sailing qualities compensated for their inexperience and enabled them to be more responsive to market conditions. A Swedish observer looking at the American merchant fleet in Guangzhou noted that the ships "were so admirably constructed that they sail better than many ships of war. . . [and] the captains of some them at Canton . . . have made the voyages from thence to America and back again in ten months."⁵¹

The design of the *Empress* and the purchase of recycled frigates for the China trade demonstrated the preference for speed over size. Two of the three other ships considered for the China adventure, the *Columbia* and the *Bourbon* were former Continental frigates. Modeled after the *Bellisarius*, reportedly the fastest ship in the Royal Navy, John Peck's *Empress* demonstrated the emphasis Americans in the China Trade placed on speed. At somewhere between 360 and 400 tons burthen, the *Empress* also represented the latest improvements in speed and maintenance with her copper sheathing.⁵² The Continental Navy's main combat ship, the frigate was the equivalent of a fourth or fifth ranked ship in the Royal Navy as compared to first and second rate ships that carried two to three times the armament.. In contrast to the ponderous multi-decked

⁵⁰ Van Dyke *The Canton Trade*, 5-7.

⁵¹ Q. v. in Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *History of Early Relations between the United States and China, 1784-1844* (New Haven, 1917) 10n.

⁵² American-built, the *Bellisarius*, captured by the British when becalmed, represented war-time technology adapted to a new venture. Joshua Humphreys, an investor in another East Indies venture with Morris and the designer of the innovative *Constitution*-class frigates that would comprise America's first post-independence navy, was so impressed with the design he copied it into his commonplace book. Smith *Empress of China*, 25-29.

ships-of-the-line, the frigate was shallow drafted but combined range with speed and maneuverability. In the case of the Continental Navy, the construction of these fast ships made a virtue of necessity. Lacking the resources to construct first-rates, the frigate in the American Navy provided a more formal, official version of the privateer.⁵³

While Bostonians built their ships for speed, Philadelphians looked for larger, elegant ships, but even these, were generally smaller than European company ships.⁵⁴ Large ships with their economies of scale tempted early China traders. John Swift, the purser of the *Empress*, told his father that she was too small and that if his brother were to engage in a China voyage, he should find a larger ship of seven to eight hundred tons.⁵⁵ But fast, large ships did not generate sufficient returns on capital. In 1787, Robert Morris bought the *Alliance* at 700 tons. Constructed in 1777 by the same builder of the *Massachusetts*, the *Alliance* had been designed as a frigate for the Continental Navy. She had fought, with not much distinction, at the battle of John Paul Jones's *Bonhomme Richard* and the *Serapis*. Badly damaged in a number of engagements, she was sold to Morris at war's end and converted to civilian use. About twice the size of *Empress*, she was also a record-setting sailor. Although she left Philadelphia on June 13, she entered Whampoa Reach in December to the astonishment of the other China traders and was

⁵³ The Royal Navy rated ships by the number of guns they carried. British and American Revolutionary era frigates carried 28-38 guns (generally cannon capable of firing a 24 or 32 pound ball) while first rates carried over 74. The *Bourbon* was launched in mid-summer 1783 and was thus unavailable, and the *Comte de Artois* was a larger French ship. Humphreys's interest in the *Bellisarius* led to the development of a new design for American frigates in 1799, a larger more heavily gunned ship capable under some circumstances of overpowering a British first or second-rate but having the same speed and quickness. Still smaller than first-rates, these frigates were of about 1000 tons burthen. Nathan Miller, *Sea of Glory: A Naval History of the American Revolution* (Charleston, SC, 1974), 53-54; Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the United States Navy* (New York, 2006), 47-51.

⁵⁴ Smith characterized Philadelphians as building for elegance and noted in the nineteenth century, Philadelphians had fewer ships than Boston in the China trade, but a higher percentage of trade volume as measured by tonnage. Smith, "Philadelphia Displays the Flowery Flag," 27-28.

⁵⁵ John White Swift, Canton, to John Swift, Philadelphia, Dec. 3, 1784, Hildeburn Papers, Box 2, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

able to salvage the season. Thomas Read, the *Alliance's* captain, took a longer, but faster route to China. Instead of sailing through New Holland, present-day Indonesia, he went south around Australia, through the straits between it and Tasmania and then north along its east coast northeasterly to Guangzhou.⁵⁶ While the *Alliance* returned to Philadelphia with over \$122,000 in cargo barely staving off a bankruptcy demand on Morris, she was apparently commercially unusable; abandoned, she was allowed to rot away.⁵⁷

When Americans tried to construct large volume cargo vessels specifically for the early China trade, they found the size ill-suited to their purposes. In 1789, Shaw and Randall sought volume and built the *Massachusetts* at 800 tons along the lines of East India Company ships. Praised for the elegance of its design, it was constructed of poorly seasoned wood. The star-struck ship left for Batavia on March 25, 1790. Fifteen of its sixty-four-man crew died either en route or at Guangzhou, four were murdered in Algiers and one contracted leprosy. Rapid construction and inexperience with a large ship in subtropical heat led to disastrous losses. Spars and masts consigned to cargo were floated to the ship caked with ice and mud and then loaded in the holds that were closed and sealed with caulk. When the holds were opened, the crew discovered beef had spoiled terribly, boiling out of barrels of rotted hoops and staves. Air in the lower hold was “so

⁵⁶Outward Bound Registry, Sept. 1, 1787-Dec. 29, 1787, Philadelphia Custom House. Read's voyage probably took him into an area known as the “Horse Latitudes,” between 30° and 35° South and, which are notorious for weak winds but ones diminished by their distance from the African landmass; he would then have been able to avoid the contrary winds rounding the Cape and the difficulties of an Indonesian passage. Sailing to Australia from the west, he would have picked up the Western Wind drift along its South Coast and used the onshore winds up the east coast, tacking northwards until he found the Pacific South West Equatorial Current to the north and then sailing west to Guangzhou., Macpherson, *Annals of Commerce*, 4:176. *Encyclopedia Britannica: World Atlas*, (London, 1952), plate 24.

⁵⁷William Hackett was the builder, Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, 20-22. Goldstein, *Philadelphia and the China Trade*, 33-34, Philip Chadwick Foster Smith “America Displays the Flowery Flag, in Jean Gordon Lee, *Philadelphians and the China Trade: 1784-1844* (Philadelphia, 1984), 28. Abraham Ritter lists her at 724 tons, *Philadelphia and Her Merchants* (Philadelphia, 1860), 88n. For the naval career of the *Alliance* see <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/a7/alliance-i.htm>.

corrupt that a lighted candle was put out by it as nearly as soon as by water” and “the inside of the ship was covered with a blue mould more than half an inch thick.” To make matters worse, Randall’s personal finances required selling the cargo immediately into a difficult market. In response to the first offer from the Danes, Shaw sold the ship.⁵⁸

Ships immediately following the *Empress* were smaller than her 360 tons. Paul van Dyke calculated that between 1799 and 1802, the sixty-six American ships that landed in Guangzhou averaged 305 tons burthen. In contrast, during the same period, the fifty-four EIC ships averaged over a thousand tons each. This preference reflected lessons learned by the 1785 voyage of the *Experiment*. A reported “swift sailor”, *Experiment* was an eighty-four ton sloop that plied the waters of Hudson and followed the *Empress* to China the next year. Manned by the captain, two officers, seven men and two boys, she loaded her ginseng in Albany and sailed directly to China pausing only for supplies and water; the voyage cost £25,855 to outfit the ship but yielded a profit of about £10,529—nearly forty percent profit with about a third less of the capitalization of the *Empress*.⁵⁹

The *Grand Turk* at 564 tons was the exception that proved the rule against large ships. Originally designed as a privateer, it had a relatively small crew of around thirty less than half of the 800 ton *Massachusetts* and twelve fewer than *Empress*. The *Turk*

⁵⁸ Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, 20-23. Tyler Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia: A Critical Study of United States’ Policy in the Far East in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1963[orig. pub. 1922], 12-17. Foster Rhea Dulles, *The Old China Trade* (Boston, 1930), 33. Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 131-32.

⁵⁹ Stewart & Jones, New York, to Shirley, Ranger & Co., April 23, 1787, Stewart & Jones Letter Book, Stewart & Jones, Letters, Accounts and Bills, 1786-1799, New York Historical Society, New York, Balance Sheet for the *Enterprise*, Miscellaneous Ship Manuscripts, NYHS. Quincy, *The Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 118; The *Asia* (1784) and the *United States* (1787) were rated at 290 and 200 tons respectively, Samuel W. Woodhouse, “Log and Journal of the Ship *United States* on a Voyage to China in 1784,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 55 (1931), 226. Goldstein, “The China Trade from Philadelphia,” 62-73. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 104-108. Note that the use of the term “boy” refers to the rank held on ship. While a “boy” might actually be a young man or boy, it was also the designation for someone who occupied the lowest skill level on board ship.

was unable to fill its cargo with ginseng and needed to carry other goods that could be converted into the cash needed to buy Chinese exports for the return. Its captain, Jonathan Ingersoll, using the model of the *Harriet*, intended to carry foodstuffs, rum, cheeses, salt provisions, chocolate, loaf sugar and butter to Cape Town, sell them to inbound ships for cash and then use the proceeds with his cargo of ginseng to buy Bohea. Unfortunately, the *Harriet's* experience was a fluke, probably made possible because she carried only four and one-half tons of ginseng and had serendipitous timing: her cargo of ginseng was bought not by the various national company ships but by private traders outbound to China. Ingersoll also did not know his market. Continental ships did not break bulk inbound—that is, split their cargoes before landing at their destinations. As a result, he earned little cash and arrived in Guangzhou when the market for ginseng was down. In contrast to Shaw's five dollars a pound, Ingersoll got about sixty-seven cents. His good news was that he received twenty percent more than if he had used silver. The owner of the *Turk*, Elias Haskett Derby of Salem redirected the ship to more profitable uses in Mauritius and India much like an East Indiaman, enlisted smaller ships for use in the China trade and, ultimately in the process, accumulated one of America's first great fortunes.⁶⁰

Although drawn to the China trade for tea, Americans quickly discovered that the most profitable items lay in luxuries made affordable by cheap Chinese labor. For the 1786 voyage of the *Canton*, Benjamin Fuller instructed Thomas Truxton to limit his purchases of tea to one-third of his cargo. Only half of that, less two half chests of

⁶⁰Ingersoll, Shaw believed could have still rescued the profitability of his voyage had he been willing to use his tea then to buy slaves off of Guniea and transport them to the West Indies. Ingersoll, however, told Shaw, he “would rather sink the whole capital employed than directly or indirectly be concerned in so infamous a traffic. Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 209. Dennett, *Americans in East Asia*, 9, 12.

Suchong, were to be Bohea, the least expensive variety of tea; and the remainder was to be “in different kinds of hyson and green teas of fine qualities.” Truxton was then told to allocate a sixth of the cargo to flowers, pepper, nankeens, taffetas—“black and stripe (none white on any acct. [sic])”—and the remainder, half his cargo was to be china. Truxton was to buy less than the best china: for every 100 sets of cups and saucers, he was to buy a set number of different sized bowls and eight each of tea pots, sugar dishes with covers and creamers. Fuller enclosed a cup to use as an example of the size Truxton should buy because it was held “most in esteem here [Philadelphia] at present.”⁶¹ Robert Morris told George Harrison, the supercargo of the 1787 voyage of *Alliance*, to use bills of exchange drawn on Paris, Amsterdam and London to buy cheap tea while saving his silver and ginseng for the items with higher profit margins “for Porcelain, fine Teas, Nankeens and Silks.”⁶²

Like their counterparts in the British and Dutch East India companies Shaw, Randall and the *Empress's* captain John Green, were allowed to trade on their private accounts and, this trade, while marginal in terms of size and capitalization, demonstrated opportunities for high returns and the creation of investment capital. Shaw and Randall bought so much cargo on their personal accounts that Randall had to stay an additional year to ship their goods, estimated to be worth \$55,000 to New York.⁶³ Some of the goods were clearly intended for conspicuous consumption. There was, for example, the custom-made silver tea chest that Green bought from Suhopp the silversmith for \$85 and the lacquer ware box embossed with an IG—perhaps a monogrammed souvenir for

⁶¹ Fuller to Truxton, Philadelphia, December 31, 1785, Benjamin Fuller Letter Book, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia., 163

⁶² Q.v., Lee, *Philadelphians and the China Trade*, 63.

⁶³ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 218.

himself— purchased from Chongqua for \$29.23. More significantly, someone ordered a 101 piece gilt edged dinnerware service with monogram to be delivered for the October, 1787 wedding of Robert and Phoebe Waln of Philadelphia. Less obvious of an upper class purchase was the 170 blue and white chinaware set with the initials IW and NI marked onto each piece for which Green paid \$53.25.⁶⁴

Green's other purchases, like Fuller's directive to Truxton illustrated a broader market for China goods. On October 28, 1784, he bought forty-eight pairs of satin breeches for fifty dollars; on November 13, a lacquered box for almost \$19. For the next six weeks, he bought lots of fans, bulk purchases of china, silk, sundry "chow chow" items including a special gift box with a glass painting for Mrs. Morris. The kind of items Green purchased reflected items which had high mark-ups and appealed to those with aspirations of gentility. By his second voyage two years later, Green had learned to focus his purchases for affordable luxuries more carefully: he ordered twenty pairs of satin shoes in different colors, but 100 pairs of black satin breeches. For those about to redecorate homes, he bought fifty green bamboo blinds (at forty-four cents each) and six Chinese glass paintings (\$54 for the lot). Included among these purchases were modest, but custom, orders for Mistresses Wilkinson and Bunner who bought, respectively, a tea set and a set of mother-of-pearl counters. Including six toothbrushes for himself, Green paid five dollars.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ While the monogram for the Green purchase suggests it may have been a custom order, frequently a specific merchant would have the monograms placed on the reverse as a form of brand labeling. The Waln collection is significant because the provenance is clearly established and much of the set remains in the family. Lee, *Philadelphians and the China Trade*, 122; Oct. 26, 1783, John Green, Receipt Book, Rare Book and Manuscript Center, Van Pelt-Dietrich Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

⁶⁵ While in his first voyage, he bought satin and leather breeches, he bought large amounts of silks, umbrellas, fans see especially Aug. 31, Sept. 5, 1786. Green, Receipt Book. By the early nineteenth century, Chinese glass paintings that used American motifs were quite common. It is not clear whether

Fuller's bulk china order, Green's purchases and the \$1300 he spent on 2500 pieces of nankeens indicate a market for affordable luxuries among humbler households. Notwithstanding Shaw's insistence on the basic need for tea, the real profits in China goods, as Green illustrated, were in items more suited to middling and humble households. If the above blue and white china set for IN & WI was not a custom order, then it represented still a lower step in affordable luxury below that destined for the Walns. The alternative is the possibility this a bulk order intended for middling families below the level of the Walns but with aspirations of gentility. Later, some merchants would order china for a broader market with marks that indicated the importer Green also bought ten sets of china for \$48 and two for five dollars on November 14 that also indicate a middling level market.⁶⁶ The humblest of china purchase illustrated the kind possibly bought by people like Elihu Hask. On September 12, 1783, Hask bought four cups and saucers for which he paid the equivalent of about a dollar with the ginseng he sold to John Williams.⁶⁷ On December 18, 1784, Green bought two tubs of china bowls, for which he paid \$19 and twenty-four short sets of china consisting of 389 pieces with 154 cattles of sago, a powdery starch. Packed in cheap sago, straw or, on occasion, bean sprouts, bulk china was relegated to the ballast.⁶⁸ Morris's instructions to Harrison to buy nankeens and Green's \$870 purchase of 1500 pieces also indicated goods intended for the

these paintings used European or American motifs. See, Carl L. Crossman, "China Trade Paintings in Glass," *Antiques*, 19 (1969): 376-382.

⁶⁶Sept. 12, 1786, Green, Receipt Book,

⁶⁷October, 1, 1783, Williams Day Book

⁶⁸Dec. 18, 1784, and Aug. 13, 1786, Green Receipt Book. The description of blue and white could also refer to the designs that became the generic Nanking and Canton export porcelains. The use of porcelain for ballast contrasts with the more customary use of salt, rice, brick or granite. See for example the loading of tea sets and cups in Lee, *Philadelphians and the China Trade*, 63-64. Note for example regarding the profitability of salt as ballast in "Lord Sheffield's Observations on the Commerce of the United States of America," *American Museum*, 9 (March 1791): 132 [123] and Benjamin fuller's suggestion to Ash & Snowden that they put the *Don Unzaga* into ballast with coffee beans. Philadelphia, May 15, 1785, Benjamin Fuller, Letter Book, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

less affluent.⁶⁹ Because of the transportation costs and the absence of a domestic textile industry, nankeens had a market in America they did not have in Britain. Later, American textile mills would be able to produce cloth at much cheaper prices and reduce the market for nankeens in the American marketplace.⁷⁰

Because the trade was so new to Americans, they needed to be sufficiently innovative to deal with the risks that attended new ventures in unfamiliar ground and generate sufficient capital to protect them from unforeseen trouble. Put together by Daniel Parker and Company, the syndicate that financed the *Empress* consisted of men who had come to know each other during the Revolution. Success in the venture, however, depended upon a series of competing claims on resources at difficult economic times. Known to Robert Morris in his official capacity as the Secretary of Finance, Parker, a wartime victualing contractor for New York, was, in fact from Massachusetts.⁷¹ An acquaintance of Morris and other investors from New York and Philadelphia, Parker took a half interest in the ship and subcontracted portions to William Duer, a New York distiller, war supply contractor and speculator and his partner John Holker, a Frenchman who had come to New York to make his fortune as an agent for the French Navy. The remaining half interest went to Morris. Initially, Duer had agreed to be the supercargo;

⁶⁹ Lee, *Philadelphians and the China Trade*, 63, Green, Receipt Book, Sept. 14, 1786. On the adaptations of domestic industries to the sense of fashion inspired by Chinese goods, see Ellen Paul Denker, *After the Chinese Taste: China's Influence in America, 1730-1930* (Salem, 1985).

⁷⁰ According to Mary Rose, the American textile industry's success depended upon a combination of mechanical productivity and transportation costs. The American textile mills supplied a large domestic market with lower grade cloth. For a while these factors compensated for low labor costs, but by the twentieth century areas with far lower labor costs mechanized, frequently with more modern and efficient machines than Americans and eliminated the cost differentials. Adding tariffs or quotas and moving textile mills to low wage Southern states delayed the inevitable. *Firms, Networks and Business Values*.

⁷¹ Parker and Company had contracts for supplying for New York and New Jersey as well as New England and obtained one in 1783 for transporting troops from Charleston, South Carolina to Maryland and Virginia. "Memorandum of an Agreement with Daniel Parker and Company, Philadelphia, May 16, 1783. E. M. Nuxoll ed. al., eds. *The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1783*, vol. 8. *May 5-December 31, 1783* (Pittsburg: Univ. of Pitts. Press, 1995): 8:78-79.

but because he had had difficulties previously with Parker and perhaps sensed Parker's problems, he declined—also perhaps feigning illness to avoid committing resources to the project. In Duer's place, Parker recruited Shaw whom he kept on tenterhooks from September to late December, 1783.⁷²

By the time the *Empress* weighed anchor, the volatility of the post-war economy had placed Parker in difficult financial circumstances. The imminent peace treaty had stretched his resources extremely thin. Like the merchants and speculators in Western Massachusetts, the transition from wartime inflation to peace time deflation created special hardships for those who could or would not move to more liquid positions.⁷³ As a wartime victualing contractor, there was a great temptation to put as many of one's transactions on credit as possible and profit on both the commissions and currency depreciation, but even prior to the discussions of peace, Parker had had difficulty meeting his contracts. With his credit among merchants exhausted and Morris's bills from Congress problematic, he wrote ones on his partner John Holker who, as agent for the French Marine, purportedly had assets backed by *livres*. When news of the peace came, Parker saw his way to redeem his notes with sterling payments from Guy Carleton, British commandant of New York, by becoming the chief victualer for the British Army in New York. While the specie payments were crucial to his economic survival, Parker

⁷² Samuel Shaw to Winthrop Sargent Jr., West Point, Nov. 9, 1783. Shaw to Sargent, New York, dec. 24, 1783 Shaw Letters, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 134, Clarence Ver Steeg, "Financing and Outfitting the First Trip to China," *Pacific Historical Review*, 22 (1953). Smith, *Empress of China*, 44-45, 61, and Robert F. Jones, *The King of the Alley*, "William Duer, Politician, Entrepreneur, and Speculator, 1768-1799 (Philadelphia, 1992), 97-100 disagree over Duer's exclusion from the position of supercargo. "Editor's Appendix," in *The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784: May 5-December 31, 1783*, 8: 864.

⁷³Jonathan M. Chu, "Debt and Taxes: Public Finance and Private Economic Behavior in Post-Revolutionary Massachusetts," *Entrepreneurs: The Boston Business Community, 1700-1850.*, Massachusetts Historical Society Studies in American History and Culture, no. 4, ed. Conrad Wright and Kathryn Viens, (Boston, 1997).

had bought at the peak of the market, and, as it happened, so had Holker who was also overextended.⁷⁴

Johnston's earlier difficulties in buying the ship's ginseng in cash reflected Parker's problematic cash situation in summer 1783. The cash for the *Empress* was the last item to be collected, and Parker and Morris waited until the last possible moment hoping to raise it with bills and advances. Duer's withdrawal from the venture turned Parker back to Holker for more funds. "I must pray you to take some Arrangements on this Business as all the Funds I have (and More) is absorbed."⁷⁵ To meet demands for cash elsewhere, Parker diverted \$2300 from the *Empress's* accounts, telling Shaw it should not concern him because while the bills of lading could not be changed, Parker would adjust his personal accounts to show "the necessary entry in his books so that justice should be done to the other owners and I [Shaw] become harmless from any consequences that might ensue." Admitted he had been taken in by Parker, Shaw wrote his friend Winthrop Sargent, Jr., that Parker had "something in his manner that lulled suspicion to sleep" and that he had never considered requiring a receipt to indicate the diversion of funds.⁷⁶

Shaw was not alone. Parker had written drafts on the partnership and on Holker that he could not cover. That summer Parker began to look for the means to liquidate his investment in the *Empress* asking Holker if it might be possible to sell their shares for

⁷⁴ Nuxol, *The Papers of Robert Morris*, 8: 158-159. on Holker's difficulties, see Nalboro Frazier, Philadelphia, to William Price & Co., London, Mar. 11, 1785, Nalboro Frazier Letter Book, New York Public Library. Peter Van Schaak was a loyalist from Massachusetts who moved to New York during the British occupation. In September, he warned Theodore Sedgewick, the primary food contractor for Massachusetts, that the British evacuation was imminent and that Sedgewick should try to sell grain before the news was more widely known and the prices dropped. Van Schaak to Sedgewick, New York, 5 September 1783, Sedgewick Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass., Box 1, Vol. A.

⁷⁵ Parker to Holker, New York, Dec. 13, 1783, Nuxol, *The Papers of Robert Morris*, 8:871.

⁷⁶ November 10, 1785, New York, Shaw Letter, HSP.

\$100,000 or resorting to a process called bottomry, of mortgaging their share of the vessel and cargo for a thirty percent premium. Holker also was concerned about the calling of his notes and the damage done to his reputation and their value. While less desperate than Parker, Holker asked an English friend to help him raise cash. He asked the friend to contact his agents in Paris and explore using a sixth interest in the ship to obtain an additional ten to twelve months of credit if the bottomry contract could not be obtained. If neither of these alternatives were possible, Holker asked for something that would extend the due dates on his notes another six months to give him sufficient breathing room to have his bills be accepted without protest.⁷⁷ Even before the *Empress* made landfall at Guangzhou, Parker had fled for the continent to escape his creditors. Holker's creditors also found their bills in default⁷⁸ and put the ship's cargo into bankruptcy. While the venture turned a profit, its cargo would be tied up in litigation until 1792. Duer in a series of transactions had transferred his interest to Holker who, even with the return on the *Empress* was unable to recover his losses. While Morris ultimately received his share of the proceeds, Shaw remained unpaid until twenty-one months before he died in 1794.⁷⁹

Although frustrated in the returns from the *Empress*, Shaw had not done badly. He and Randall had procured \$55,000 worth of goods which they arranged to ship back separately in 1785, he had sufficient capital to survive financial disaster with the abortive

⁷⁷ See Parker to Holker, June, 16, 1784 q.v. in Smith, *Empress of China*, 116-118. "the money borrowed in bottomry, even at a premo of 30 pr. cent." One reading of the language suggests an interest rate of 30%; but an alternative reading more consistent with the singular nature of maritime insurance and of it limitation to a specific "bottom" on a specific voyage would argue for a premium of 30%.

⁷⁸ Narlbor Frazier, Philadelphia to Elias & Co., London, April 24, 1784 and Frazier to Thomas Dickason, London, May 21, Nov. 18, 1784, Frazier Letter Book.

⁷⁹ Shaw to Winthrop Sargent, Jr., New York, Nov. 10, 1785, Philadelphia January 26, 1786, Shaw's Letters, Society Collections, HSP on Shaw's tactics in getting his commission from the venture. On the litigation, see Smith, *Empress of China*, 235-239, on Shaw's settlement, Robert F. Jones, "The King of the Alley," *William Duer, Politician, Entrepreneur, and Speculator, 1768-1799* (Philadelphia, 1992), 97-100.

Massachusetts venture; and he had essentially become America's first China hand. His connections to Henry Knox and the growing commerce with China combined to get him appointed the first consul to China. While a non-paying position, it combined to give him access to emerging investors in Boston and Philadelphia. When his friend Winthrop Sargent of Boston suggested he was interested in an "India or Chinese adventure," Shaw responded from Guangzhou by asking if he wanted to become a part-owner in ship Randall was bringing back in 1787. "I am persuaded we can give gentlemen from there such assurances as will readily induce them to be concerned in the business. . . . Nothing would afford me more sincere pleasure than to meet you here, with a prospect—nay certainty of bettering your fortunes."⁸⁰

Americans seemed generally unaware of the impact of the restoration of the Chinese domestic production of ginseng. American direct trade had begun to flood the market; the *Empress* alone brought ginseng equal to half the previous year's imports and its apparent success led to more shipments. Observing the growth of ginseng imports, Shaw remained confident that the rise in supply would be accompanied by a rise in demand. On his second voyage, Shaw noted that total American shipments of ginseng had more than doubled, from 440 piculs to over 900, and "sales have not been materially affected by it; and it is probable there will always be a sufficient demand for the article to make it valuable."⁸¹

⁸⁰ January 12, 1787, Society Collections, HSP.

⁸¹ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 351. A picul is equal to 133.3 pounds. Paul Fontenoy estimates the amount of ginseng imports shown below. Shaw's estimates for 1784 equals 58,652, roughly the thirty tons upon which historians seem to agree. The figure for 1786 does not seem to agree with Fontenoy's figures since 900 piculs equals 119,970 lbs.

Table 1
US Ginseng Imports

1784	1785	1786	1787	1788	1789	1790
60,000	0	45,232	0	141,996	273,993	53,199

Despite Americans comparative advantages, the profits from whole trade proved ephemeral. As ginseng's value in China declined, direct trade created a surplus of tea in America. John Swift complained that he could not sell the tea he had purchased in China and Benjamin Fuller commented on the unsold chests of tea at the end of the fall season.⁸² Ginseng's value had been its capacity to convert an agricultural commodity into a specie equivalent and into goods that teased cash out of Americans. This ability rested upon its high value and low bulk. For a brief moment, ginseng acted better than specie by holding its value long enough to create capital and finance a viable infrastructure for continued trade. Even when specie commanded a four to five percent premium in America and prices for ginseng were beginning to sag, traders could still profit by increasing the volume of shipments and their profits made at home and in Europe.⁸³

Because, however, ginseng was an agricultural commodity, its prices were more elastic than silver and it could not sustain the trade it had initiated. Despite Shaw's optimism, prices for ginseng declined once the Emperor reformed the domestic distribution network. With the increases in duties and fees, the price of imported dropped to slightly less than thirty-one cents a pound.⁸⁴ The problems for ginseng began when the prices dropped below fee and transaction costs or demand declined and prevented the purchase of goods for home. Samuel Ward, the supercargo of the *Washington* got a surprising \$65 a picul for a bad batch in 1788 but he only sold 140 of his 400 piculs and

"Ginseng, Otterskins and Sandalwood," 5-6.

⁸²John White Swift, New York to John Swift, Philadelphia, June 1, 13, 1785, Hildeburn Ms., Box 3; , Benjamin Fuller, Philadelphia, to Thomas Barker, L'Orient, Nov. 6, 1784.

⁸³ On the premiums for specie and remittances, see Stewart and Jones, New York to Malcolm Ross, Sept. 5, 1787, Stewart & Jones Letter Book.

⁸⁴ Van Symons, The Chi'ng Dynasty Ginseng Monopoly, 22n and Fontenoy, "Ginseng, Otterskins, and Sandalwood," 6.

the proceeds with \$15,000 were not enough to fill his ship, and he returned partly in ballast. An even more devastating experience was that of Jonathan Mifflin of the *Asia*. Mifflin's experience confused Shaw. He portrayed himself as having done better than Ward in selling his ginseng at a posted price of \$120 per picul; however, it was not clear whether it had sold for \$120 and been levied \$60 in fees or his return cargo had been exchanged at \$70 per picul for the 400 picul shipment was subsidized with additional \$40,000. What was clear was that Mifflin's hong Houqua had had to sell the ginseng at a loss of \$80.⁸⁵ Thomas Hansyard Perkins, the young Boston supercargo working for Elias Hasket Derby, found it virtually impossible to sell the *Astrea's* 73,000 pounds of ginseng. There were four Derby ships in Guangzhou at the time, and Perkins and his fellow supercargoes had to sell two and use the proceeds to fill the holds of the remaining two.⁸⁶

As ginseng's value in China declined, direct trade created a surplus of tea in America and impaired the other side of the equation of capital formation. Despite the celebration of its adventure, *Empress* contributed to a glut in Bohea. The sales of the *Empress's* cargo, lagged. John Swift complained that he could not sell the tea he had purchased in China. Nalboro Frazier complained about the dullness of the market and the stocks of tea accumulating on merchant shelves with more expected to arrive. To sell his stocks, Frazier offered payments in six months and found few takers. His Philadelphia

⁸⁵ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 301,304.

⁸⁶ Carl Seaburg and Stanley Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T.H. Perkins, 1764-1854* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 5.

colleague, Benjamin Fuller complained about the prices of Bohea and expressed the hope that “the Glutt . . . will be consumed by the Spring or next Summer.”⁸⁷

When Americans rushed to outfit new adventures to China, they operated on the basis of market information that was, at best, a year old. Hurrying to take part in a boom already fading, Americans continued to ship large quantities of ginseng to the Chinese who turned their noses at what they saw as an inferior product. Some had argued for more mixed cargoes from the start, John Swift, purser of the *Empress*, wrote to his father, “We brought too much ginseng” adding that “a little wine and a great many Dollars with some Tar &c make the best cargo.”⁸⁸

Still ginseng had provided Americans with an initial burst of liquidity. They had been able to transform a useless produce into cash that created its own cycle of capital formation, and more importantly at this stage of its economic development, a commodity that turned into silver. Still, Americans could not escape their dependence upon low-bulk, high-value commodities as substitutes for specie. Between September and November of 1783, Nalboro Frazier discerned the rapid turn around in the availability of cash. On September 5, 1783, trying to attract the business of the London firm of Fredrick, William, Geyer & Co., Frazier wrote confidently that money to buy goods was readily available. “That which is in demand,” he promised, “is a Cash Article.” In the immediate post-war rush of deferred spending, Frazier’s accumulation of specie by October 3 enabled him to forward his partner William Price & Co., 21,850 Dutch guilders and £1000 sterling. Seven weeks later, November 27, the market had clearly

⁸⁷ Frazier to Thomas Dickason, London, May 21, 1784, Frazier Letter Book; Fuller, Philadelphia, to Thomas Barclay, L’Orient, Nov. 6, 1784; Fuller Letter Book. John White Swift, New York to John Swift, Philadelphia, June 1, 13, 1785, Hildeburn Ms., Box 3.

⁸⁸ Canton, Dec. 3, 1784, Hildeburn Papers, Box 2,

turned for Frazier. Reporting to William Price that the fall sales had been completed, Frazier cautioned his partner that the returns would not be as great because of the delays in payment and his need to extend credit to move the goods because “money is not so easily Commanded now as it was a few months ago which is the only Cause.”⁸⁹

The American response was not to cease trading, but to find a substitute to use in its developing infrastructure. In this regard, the voyage of the *Empress* also indicated the subtle way in which the China Trade would evolve. John Ledyard, soldier-of-fortune, adventurer, huckster and, perhaps, even con-man, had trumpeted the opportunities of the fur trade in 1783 sufficiently strongly to pique Morris’s interest.⁹⁰ While Morris decided to finance a single China venture, Ledyard’s self-promotion mirrored others’ determination to develop an alternative route to China and married it to the exploitation of the sea otter.⁹¹ As the market for ginseng deteriorated, Americans turned to fur. While Perkins was trying to sell his ginseng, an English ship, the *Iphigenia* and the American *Columbia* arrived with sea otter pelts bought for trinkets from Indians in the Pacific Northwest that sold for as much as seventy dollars each in China. Three years before the voyage of the *Empress*, John Jacob Astor had been interested in shipping furs directly from the Pacific Northwest. Seeing that the EIC’s monopoly barred the old British Northwest Company from direct access to China, Astor looked into finding direct access for his furs through a western river system connecting the Atlantic to the Pacific, a commonplace theory seemingly confirmed by Cooke’s explorations and spread in America by Ledyard. Because the pattern for the collection and sale of ginseng by

⁸⁹ Frazier Letter Book.

⁹⁰ Wright, “Merchants and Mandarins,” 26. Ver Steeg, “Financing the First Ship to China,” 6-7. See Ledyard to his father Isaac, Philadelphia, [ca. July 1783] in *Morris Papers*, 8: 858, 866. See also Bill Gifford, *Ledyard: In Search of the First American Explorer* (Orlando, 2007), 125-148.

⁹¹ John Ledyard, *A Journal of Captain Cook’s Last Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* (Hartford, CT, 1783), 166.

Indians paralleled that of furs, the structure of his business drew Astor's and others attention to the Pacific Northwest.⁹²

The incorporation of the Pacific Northwest into thoughts on the China trade was a rational extension of American global trade. The demise of the Atlantic whale fisheries had led to its spread into the central and northern Pacific and familiarization with the passage around Cape Horn. Like the winter departures for the Cape of Good Hope, fall departures for Cape Horn took advantage of the seasonal shifts in wind and weather across the Equator. Leaving Boston in November, a ship could follow the same northeasterly trades to the Cape Verde Islands taken by China and European cargoes. The Cape Horn-bound ship instead sailed westward to drop down to about 2° N to find a south-southeast wind, and staying east of Long. 23° pass to the west of the Falklands and sail south to Cape Horn. After Cape Horn, one could pick up a northerly current and off-shore winds that carried one to just above the Equator where westerly winds could take the ship to Hawai'i, or, because the transition of seasons, pick up onshore winds for the voyage to the Northwest. Such a ship would arrive in the Northwest in spring when Native Americans would be gravitating to their Spring encampments and began the sea otter harvest. When Indians began moving inland in summer to follow the salmon run, ships could sail on the northeasterly trades for an easy three week sail to Hawai'i. After refitting and re-supplying, the ships could pick up the northeast trades to China and arrive in Guangzhou in fall, the perfect moment to market furs and for the arrival of the tea harvests.⁹³

⁹²Seaburg, *Perkins*, 54-55 and Fontenoy, "Ginseng, Otterskins, and Sandalwood," 8.

⁹³ See the instructions of Bryant & Sturgis to James Harris, Captain of the *Lasca*, July 17, 1820 q.v. in *Otter Skins, Boston Ships and China Goods*, 37-50. Note that the sail to Cape Horn generally follows the customary passage towards the Cape Verde Islands but swings slightly (2°-3° westward), takes advantage of

As profitability in furs became difficult, Americans stumbled across another low-bulk but high-profit commodity for China, sandalwood. War with Russia led the Chinese to prohibit imports because of a suspicion that the furs were Russian in origin. In addition, Americans missed the high prices of the 80's at the very moment in which the compradors were increasing their fees. Cooke's explorations had not only brought Americans to the Pacific for fur, they opened up new possibilities for the discovery of useful commodities. His discovery of Hawai'i encouraged whalers to go to the central Pacific and Hawai'i particularly in search of the far more valuable sperm whales. In the course of refitting in the Hawai'ian Islands, they discovered sandalwood, a scented wood used in fragrances and expensive furniture and highly desired by the Chinese. Despite the collapse in ginseng and the prohibitions against the importation of furs, sandalwood helped sustain the China trade and create a sufficient degree of capital liquidity for a struggling American economy.⁹⁴

Sandalwood, like ginseng, proved an elusive as basis for trade with China. While sandalwood shipments persisted into the nineteenth century, the native Hawai'ians quickly denuded the forests. Initially successful voyages promised much but ultimately delivered little. The resulting incentive to evade the new fees and the black market led to an institutionalization of illicit trade and led to still another commodity that would come to dominate illicit trade with China. As early as 1785, Americans were importing small amounts of opium into China. Although not the first to introduce opium to China, the

drops down towards the Equator between 23° and 29° longitude to find the SSE trades towards South America, but staying clear of the onshore winds (the lee shore) off Brazil. Once around Cape Horn, one can pick up westerly winds and currents until picking up trades around Long. 125° that lead almost directly to Hawai'i. See Shaw's comment on the arrival of the *Eleonara*. Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 250.

⁹⁴ As well as finance the transition of the native Polynesian economy. The Chinese name for Hawai'i, is translated as "Sandalwood Mountain." Fontenoy, "Ginseng, Otterskins, and Sandalwood," 10-11. LaTourette, *Early Relations between the United States and China*, 35,40.

suitability of American ships to illegal trade meant the beginning of a prohibited trade with no risk of loss. Fredrick Molineaux, clerk aboard the *Empress* searching for an adventure in 1785 explained to William Constable how he could have the first ship in Guangzhou for the season and what that would do for the returns on any ship he captained. While, he offered, this plan would produce no advantages in the regular trade, his ship would be able “to smuggle her opium & some ginseng & glass all of which is done every year to great advantage & at no risque [sic].”⁹⁵

Shaw’s experiences in China and Asia illustrated a reorientation of the network of American trade and commerce within three years. His reports to John Jay, Secretary for Foreign Affairs under the Confederation demonstrated an understanding of the long term impact ginseng had in redirecting an infrastructure into new lines of global trade. Despite the ephemeral profits of the early China trade, Shaw and his fellow adventurers understood the implications of the opportunities that had been created, but they needed to be adept, flexible, ambitious and lucky. The creation of viable trade ventures in China depended upon the critical understanding of the interrelationships of global commodities, markets and trade networks and the ability to shift from one adventure to the next. The shifts among ginseng, furs and opium, among Bohea, hyson, porcelain and nankeens, required weighing opportunity costs against profits in rice, wheat, loaf sugar, tobacco, and West Indian Rum, and arbitraging values of Spanish milled dollars, *Johannes*, sterling, livres and guilders. Shaw was aware that the China Trade alone would not be the sole engine driving capital formation; rather, as he wrote Jay in 1787, “A profit

⁹⁵ June 6, 1785, Constable Pierrepoint Papers, Box 1. Evans, “Ginseng,” 22 and Fontenoy, “Ginseng, Otterskins and Sandlewood,” 13. Jacques M. Downs, “The Golden Gheto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy,” (unpub. PhD thesis, Lehigh University, 1990) 108-110

sometimes [can] be made on merchandise carried from Batavia to Canton. No doubt, similar advantages might result to the Americans in circuitous voyages to China, by the coast of Malabar and Coromandel, and through the Straits of Malacca.”⁹⁶ To Nalboro Frazier, William Constable, Elias Haskett Derby and even John Williams of Deerfield, Massachusetts, this was old news.

⁹⁶ Quincy, *Journal of Samuel Shaw*, 352.