Transcript of talk and slide presentation:

19th Century Chinese Export Silver – In the Context of the China Maritime Tea and Opium Trades, the City of Glasgow and Canton

by Adrien von Ferscht
It’s extremely challenging to condense over a century into 10 minutes, but if you want to strap yourselves in, we’ll give it a go.
Canton, early part of the 19th century - an over-crowded hyper busy port on the Pearl River; Glasgow, Broomielaw early part of the 19th century - a mirror image but on the Clyde.

But here were two cities that had far more in common than simply the busy-ness of their ports. Canton [modern day Guangzhou] was the only port where foreign merchants were allowed to set foot on Chinese soil and as such was the China-side point of entry and exit for what we now know as the China Trade.

Glasgow very much one of the few British ports that benefitted from the China Trade, sometimes even rivalling the East India Dock in London. But Glasgow had two further reasons why the China Trade was so significant in the history its merchant trading. Of all nationalities that were active in the China Trade phenomenon, the Scots were by far in the majority, with more Scottish merchants actually based in Canton than any other. The main cargoes of the China trade were tea and opium and it took clipper ships to bring them in the fastest possible time from China to Britain. More clipper ships were built on the Clyde than any other British shipyard and even more than New York - the most enduring in all senses of the word being Cutty Sark, built at the Scott and Linton yard in Dumbarton in 1869.

Scots were also by far in the majority in all ranks of the East India Company, which by default dominated the early years of the China Trade.

But firstly, what exactly was the China Trade period? The Canton System of trade was created by the Imperial Court in Peking in 1757 as a means to control trade with foreign merchants, or so it saw. It was a system that was to stay in place until 1842 when it was forced to be dismantled as a condition of Britain in the Treaty of Nanking after China had lost the first Opium War. All foreign trade coming into China was confined to Canton and foreign traders entering the city were subject to a series of strict regulations which included being confined to a small stretch of land fronting the Pearl River known as the Thirteen Factories -
factories being used in the context of a base for agents or intermediaries or, in the case of the Chinese Hong merchants, guild. Like all things Chinese at the time, it was a highly complex construct that became more complex as time went by.

By the 17th century, both Canton and Glasgow had highly sophisticated systems of guilds for the various merchants, trades and craftsmen. In Canton, the Qing government had become more open to “foreign trade” – the Portuguese based in nearby Macau, the Spanish from the Philippines, Arabs from the Near and Middle East and Jews, Muslims and Parsis from India had all become established in the landscape when the English and French began to trade with the onset of the Canton System. These were soon followed by the Ostend General India Company, the Dutch East India Company, the Danish Asiatic Company and the Swedish East India Company that was heavily constituted by Scots Jacobites’ business houses – the “refugee” supporters of the House of Stuart. In Glasgow, the eventual de-silting of the River Clyde allowed larger ocean-going ships to dock further up river and the historic Broomielaw ferry point [named after the Brumelaw Croft, a stretch of land running along the north bank of the Clyde] was transformed into a bustling dockside quay and it, too, was a cosmopolitan cityscape of people striving to make their way and their fortune.

Both Canton and Glasgow served as ports for both the entry of goods from overseas as well as goods being exported, with both being dependent on particular imports without which the entire economy of each city would collapse. In Canton it was spice goods, opium, cotton and silver bullion, while in Glasgow the city had a virtual monopoly on the tobacco and sugar imports from the West Indies and Americas. Glasgow was also to be one of the largest receivers of tea from China as well as opium, which we must remember was considered as a necessary medicinal drug that superseded the importation of dried rhubarb in terms of necessity which also came in vast quantities from China – neither being regulated in any way at the time and both being over-consumed through a lack of understanding and pure obsession.
The ties with the cities did not end there though. While the Scots Jacobite connection with Canton has been mentioned, Scottish merchants from Scotland were at the forefront of the “foreign” trade within the Canton System, many of whom were permanently based in the small area allocated to foreign merchants outside of the walled city at Canton – an area not dissimilar in size and location to Broomielaw.

In Canton, the two most successful and most influential merchants were William Jardine and James Matheson, both of whom were Scots and whose eventual founding of Jardine Matheson still exists today and is still dominated by the Keswick family. The reasons why the Scots were so successful at hands-on trading at Canton are numerous, but the main reason is their ability to understand the complex and totally foreign mindsets of the Chinese hong merchants and to have sufficient flexibility of mind to be pragmatic.

As previously mentioned, the main cargoes of the China Trade were tea and opium, but there were numerous additional peripheral trades and the clipper ships were especially ideal for carrying them as well as often presenting a situation where the goods from those trades had what was effectively a free ride.

Here we see a cross section of a typical tea clipper. The construction of the ship allowed for the lower grades of tea to be loaded towards the bottom, with the high grade merchandise at the top. But what is also evident is the ample ballast space. Given the average clipper ship was capable of carrying 40,000 chests of tea, the amount of ballast space was therefore considerable and much of the peripheral trade merchandise - silk, silver, lacquerware etc., were stowed here. There was also a system of “private trade” that was allocated to each crew member of a ship - the allowance varying according to rank. So crew members augmented their salaries often with highly lucrative special orders from merchants and retailers back home. This system was common across the board of ships plying the China Trade route.

Applying these facts into the context of Chinese Export Silver, we are talking of a huge amount of “ballast space” on ships of which a significant proportion was taken up with silver. We know that across China there was a network of silver workshops that probably numbered over 10,000 and in addition there were the
retail silversmiths, many of whom commissioned the silver items and many of whom were owned or co-owned by hong merchants, foreign merchants or a complicated partnership that could even include the wily compradores. The sea captains and even crew members optimised the time they were forced to wait in Canton for favourable trade winds to return with cargo were known to have created lucrative relationships with some of the retail silversmiths in Old and New China Streets in Canton where the drinking establishments that were a favourite haunt of sailors were also situated. Some of the ships would be plying the Canton-Glasgow route and captains and crew could place special orders with specific silversmiths in Canton on behalf of private clients in Glasgow – a welcome supplementary source of income for the sailors.

The tea trade became a very Glasgow-centric trade. Tea warehouses and wholesale tea and sugar merchants sprang up in the area around the Broomielaw. Here [below] we see the tea warehouse of J & A Ferguson on the corner of Trongate and New Wynd, circa 1872, but the building had been built in 1827 by the tea and sugar merchant William McEwan, Sons & Co who occupied the premises until 1855, selling it on to Fergusons. In the first quarter of the 19th century, over 100 tea merchants are recorded as existing in the relatively small area of Glasgow between Broomielaw quay and the ancient High Street/Trongate areas.
Thomas Lipton was born in the Gorbals in 1850, an area diagonally opposite the Broomielaw quay on the south side of the Clyde. The Liptons, a family of Irish immigrants from County Fermanagh, had already established a grocery store on Crown Street in the Gorbals. Thomas worked in the store where he learned the trade and in 1876, having spent 5 years in America, he returned to Glasgow and opened his first store on Stobcross Street. By 1882 he had shops in four Scottish cities and Leeds. By 1890 he was opening a new shop every week. He soon had over 300 shops and was a multi-millionaire. In 1880 Lipton invested in the stockyards in Omaha, Nebraska; that original investment was reinvested in creating the Lipton tea brand in America which was targeted at the hitherto untapped poor working class market. Today, Lipton is a global brand and even sold in China.
At the time the Lipton family was establishing their original Gorbals grocery store, George Edward, a Glasgow silversmith, had opened his first retail shop and workshop, George Edward & Sons, in 1838.
In 1874 a branch was opened in London by the Mansion House at No. 19 Poultry. George Edward developed a fascination with the “oriental” style and while there is no recorded evidence of his ever having travelled to China, his fascination grew to an obsession which could only have been fuelled by seeing wares sea captains and crew brought to Glasgow from Canton.
By the time the renamed Edward & Sons had relocated to new, much grander premises at 92 Buchanan Street in Glasgow, the retail silversmith held a regular stock of Chinese Export Silver, in particular from the Canton and Hong Kong retail silversmith Wang Hing, as well as other items of silver and wares from China, Japan and Burma. By now, Edward & Sons were holders of a royal warrant to both Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales, as we can see over the two entrance doors to the retail premises.
In 1888 Glasgow hosted the International Exhibition of Science, Art and Industry in an ambitious conglomeration of purpose-built buildings in the West End of Glasgow at Kelvingrove Park. All of the buildings were intended to be temporary and earned the nickname “Baghdad.”

It was here that Edward & Sons chose to exhibit, with an emphasis on Chinese Export Silver and Japanese silver. Edward & Sons regularly stocked Wang Hing items in both London and Glasgow, and it seems right to assume the goods arrived via Glasgow since they all carried an additional Edward & Sons Glasgow hallmark. Edward & Sons also used hallmarks registered in Chester and Birmingham, but never in conjunction with Wang Hing pieces.
This Chinese Export Silver reticulated large shallow dish by Wang Hing carries the Glasgow hallmark of Edward & Sons [George Edward & David Edward] with the date mark for 1900. It is also a slightly unusual mark for Wang Hing, even though Chinese Export Silver marks normally lacked any semblance of uniformity. Where one would normally expect to see the number stamp 90, which was Wang Hing’s almost constant purity level, here we have the rather strange number 96 stamped.
Edward & Sons was the only retail silversmith outside of China to regularly offer Chinese silver over a period of over 30 years and, most importantly, to always import it legally as the addition of a Glasgow assay mark shows. But what is particularly interesting is that we can see the Wang Hing silver mark denotes a silver purity of 96%. This not only puts it above the Sterling benchmark but it is a purity level Wang Hing never officially used - only silver destined for Glasgow was this marked. Given the main source of silver in China came from melted trade dollars from various countries, the average silver purity of such coins would have been around 92%. We should also remember that in the 1400-year history of Chinese silver making, China never had an assay system and still doesn't.

Two months ago I carried out analysis of over 200 items of Chinese Export Silver in Beijing using X-ray fluorescent analysis. While silver bearing the Wang Hing mark fared better than most in terms of consistency of purity, some Wang Hing pieces analysed between 90-92% purity. The Glasgow assay office had the lowest purity benchmark of any British assay office, albeit above the sterling level. But the flow of a considerable amount of silver from China to Edwards over what is a not inconsiderable period of time puts a question mark over the credibility of the Glasgow assay office. As in Canton, the private arrangements at the Glasgow docks were not as straight forward as they might have been - as, in fact, were the London and Liverpool docks.

The high relief work of this bowl is again by Wang Hing and is also an interesting item inasmuch as it has been used as a Scottish presentation piece. Carrying an inscription around the base plinth “GOOD COMPANIONS OF BALNACRAIG”, the bowl also carried the Glasgow mark of Edward & Sons dated for 1898.
The China Trade was the end result of a highly complex series of commercial transacting that was carried out by merchants from various countries that took advantage of political situations that were in the main created by crises promulgated by trade imbalances. It was fuelled by a combination of entrepreneurialism, greed and personal relationship and it operated almost exclusively underneath the radar of the Imperial Court and the individual governments of each participating merchant nation.
The trade in the more peripheral Chinese goods could never have existed without the existence of the two main exports; tea and opium.

Although opium was not a specifically Chinese commodity, most of it passed through Canton en route for the West. Both tea and opium were used to obsessive levels – by 1897, in Britain some 80 million cups of tea were drunk each day and Laudanum was widely used as a non-prescription drug or as the main element of patented drugs until the early 20th century!

Laudanum, unlike the opium that was smoked in China, was a tincture that was approximately 10% opium that was mixed with rhubarb dried root and other ingredients such as nutmeg. Dried rhubarb root was almost exclusively a Chinese commodity, exported in vast quantities for over a century to Britain and the rest of Europe and to Russia. It was so readily available that itinerant sellers plied the streets of British cities in the 19th century. We also have to remember that the opium trade existed as a direct result of the size of the tea trade. Great wealth was accumulated which in turn and in part fuelled the need for the peripheral trade items.
Opiums most infamous use in Victorian Britain was as infants' quietener. Children were often given Godfrey's Cordial (also called Mother's Friend) or one of numerous similar remedies available at the time, consisting of opium, water, treacle, to keep them quiet.

Such potions had pernicious effects and resulted in numerous deaths and severe illnesses of babies and children - it retailed over the counter for ten pence or could be bought by the penny dose. It was recommended for colic, diarrhea, vomiting, hiccups, pleurisy, rheumatism, catarrhs, and cough. Twenty or twenty-five drops of laudanum could be bought for a penny. Raw opium was often sold in pills or sticks. On average, a chemist of the day sold in the region of 200b weight annually of opium while market traders could sell an entire gallon of laudanum mixture each day. By 1860, some 90,000 lbs of opium was coming through Glasgow annually for use in the medicinal drug trade.

The Chinese Imperial Court believed that the British were addicted to rhubarb. A rather amusing letter was written by the infamous Chinese Commissioner Lin Tse Hsu to Queen Victoria prior to the first Opium War breaking out in 1839, the translation of which was never transmitted to her. It reads:

I have heard that the smoking of opium is very strictly forbidden by your country; that is because the harm caused by opium is clearly understood. Since it is not permitted to do harm to your own country, then even less should you let it be passed on to the harm of other countries – how much less to China! Of all that China exports to foreign countries, there is not a single thing which is not beneficial to people: they are of benefit when eaten, or of benefit when used, or of benefit when
resold: all are beneficial... Take tea and rhubarb, for example; the foreign countries cannot get along for a single day without them. If China cuts off these benefits with no sympathy for those who are to suffer, then what can the barbarians rely upon to keep themselves alive?

The Scottish merchant company who dominated the opium trade to Britain, much of it by way of Glasgow, was Jardine Matheson. The scale of the opium trade to what were known as “private merchants” escalated after the 1833 Act of Parliament ended the East India Company monopoly - an act that was vigorously supported by William Jardine and the Glasgow merchant Finlay Kirkman. This resulted in yet another Scot, Lord Napier, being appointed the first Trade Commissioner.

James Matheson, it should be said, was not reticent about his connections with the opium trade. The gateposts at his residence, Ardross House were adorned with representations of poppies. A later owner of the house had these sensibly altered to resemble pomegranates.

James Finlay & Co of Gallowgate, Glasgow - was not far behind Jardine Matheson when it came to Opium imports into Glasgow. Headed by Kirkman Finlay who had helped bring down the East India Company monopoly, had also been Lord Provost of Glasgow, a member of Parliament and a director of the Bank of Scotland and is immortalised by having a statue in the Merchants’ House in George Square.
The China Trade, in the latter half of the 19th century seemed like an unstoppable juggernaut. The Canton Cohong merchants were a tightly operating fraternity, but they could not operate optimally without the collusion with the foreign merchants. Equally, the Scottish merchants were operating as a tight cartel and this like-mindedness of the Scots and the Chinese worked not only on the same mindset wavelength but also as a well-oiled intuitive machine. The merchant forces behind Glasgow as a city in the 19th century had so many similarities to the organised chaos that was Canton. The reason is hard to pinpoint – it may have been that both were geographically remote from the seat of governmental power; that in conjunction with the clannish second nature of both the Scots and the Chinese made for an insuppressible force. What is certain, however, is that much of the reality of trade conducted under the heading of the China Trade was dubious, to say the least, much of which has been conveniently blurred by historical accounts.

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