

Hong Bowl – Canton from the Pearl River

By Pia Rampal

This porcelain bowl, decorated in enamel colours, is replete with history and stories of Canton (Guangzhou) around the year 1785. Look closely and you will see a wrap-around view of Canton from the Pearl River. In the river are Chinese boats that would have ferried foreign merchants and goods to and from the anchorage point 12 miles away in Whampoa. Along the riverfront are elegant buildings, some with classical European façades. These buildings are called *hongs* and according to the Peabody Essex Museum catalogue, *Treasures of Chinese Export Ceramics*, this word comes from both *I-kuang*, which translates as ‘barbarian houses’, and *hang* the Cantonese word for company or business. The Europeans also called these buildings ‘factories’ from an old English word ‘factor’, which means commercial agent. Nothing was manufactured in these *hongs*; they served as residences-cum-offices for foreign merchants. It was from these buildings that the most desired luxuries of tea, silk and porcelain journeyed west.

There is a fascinating article about Canton and its role in the China trade as part of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s *Visualizing Cultures* series. Peter C Perdue writes, “We call the trading system that lasted from 1700 to 1842 on China’s south coast the ‘Canton system’ because of this city’s dominance. Guangzhou (which Europeans call Canton), an ancient city and one of the largest in South China, had flourished as an administrative and trading centre for over 1,000 years before the Westerners arrived. Arab and Persian traders had lived in its foreign quarters under the Tang dynasty since the 8th century.”

In the 18th century, by Qing imperial edict, all foreign trade was restricted to Canton. The Qing were happy to support trade as long as it remained under tight control.

The 13 *Hong* quarter stretched for about 1,000 feet along the riverfront outside the city walls. It was strictly isolated from the rest of Canton and the only unsupervised activity was walks along the promenade. Contact with the Chinese was mainly through the *hoppo* or superintendent of customs and the *co hongs*, a special guild of merchants who had a monopoly over the trade with foreigners. Despite these restrictions, Westerners were fascinated by their ‘profitable ghetto’ and looked out over rooftops to get a glimpse of hidden China.

We see distinctive European national flags on tall flagstaffs – a global marketplace. However, the *hongs* were not always



Hong bowl. Image courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

as grand. In 1743, a fire burnt down over 150 houses in this area, including simple box-like *hongs*. From around 1760, permission was given to alter the façade of the *hongs* with elaborate, classical western façades as long as the interiors retained their simple Cantonese layout. *Hongs* were rented for the trading season. The Danish *hong* was at the west end followed by the Spanish, French, American, Imperial (Austrian), Swedish, English and Dutch. The Americans were the last to have a *hong*, around 1788. Our bowl does not have an American flag because it was made earlier.

While many *hongs* had narrow frontages, each stretched to a depth of over 500 feet. Similar to shophouses in Singapore, *hongs* comprised a group of two to three-storey structures connected train fashion with courtyards in-between. If you look even closer you will see European and Chinese figures (only men, by imperial decree). If only they could talk of the rivalry for trade and life in the *hongs*.

This scene symbolised success to merchants and was painted by Chinese and Western artists. Souvenirs on hand-painted scrolls, ivory, lacquer and porcelain were commissioned and taken home. Today, if you visit Guangzhou there is no trace of the *hongs* as they were burnt down on 13 December 1856. However, the spirit of the *hongs* and enterprise lives on.

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