CROSSING THE BORDERS OF A MERCHANT CLASS:
Imaging and Representing Elite Status in the
Portraits of the Hong Merchants of Canton

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ABSTRACT

Portraits of hong merchants produced in the latter period of the Canton Trade (1820-1840) portray these merchants in a new manner – one that previously had not been seen in China. These portraits depict Chinese subjects through a pastiche of signs associated with China’s elite, yet the medium of oil painting and the use of perspective, drawn primarily from European artistic traditions, was unusual in Canton and was not in popular use in China as a whole. This study examines portraits of hong merchants executed by a Scottish artist residing in Canton, George Chinnery, as well as his Chinese student, Lamqua, in order to trace a particular form of portraiture that emerged at this time. As I will argue, this type of portraiture evoked the contradictions inherent in the hong merchant’s position, which was situated between Chinese rule and foreign trade, and also gave form to a range of tensions and disparities that existed between the merchants and Chinese mandarin officials, or hoppos.

Along with the exchange of commodities which was central to the merchants trade, there existed a simultaneous cultural exchange which was affected by new media and new forms of knowledge. The introduction of oil painting to China and the circulation of merchant portraits are a case in point. The hong merchant portraits offered a stage for the performance of a carefully constructed and imagined identity that encapsulated a range of desires and aspirations for elite status within China.

Furthermore, these portraits also served as an important mode of exchange with, and for, European viewers. This identity was a performance of status and class both in the imagination of the hong merchant, but also one performed for foreign traders who would see these images. The portraits of the hong merchants thus embody diverse social
dimensions where the subject is embedded within a network of references to class, rank, and demeanour. Using the medium of oil paint, the illusion of the image extended beyond the use of shadow and perspective as the portraits inscribed an identity for the *hong* merchant that was at once elusive and illusive.
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Introduction: The “Contact Zone” of the Canton Coast

Portraits of hong merchants produced in the latter period of the Canton Trade (1820-1840) portray these merchants in a new manner – one that previously had not been seen in China. These portraits depict Chinese subjects through a pastiche of signs associated with China’s elite, yet the medium of oil painting and the use of perspective, drawn primarily from European artistic traditions, was unusual in Canton and was not in popular use in China as a whole. This study examines portraits of hong merchants (Figures 1-5) executed by a Scottish artist residing in Canton, George Chinnery, as well as his Chinese student, Lamqua, in order to trace a particular form of portraiture that emerged at this time. As I will argue, this type of portraiture evoked the contradictions inherent in the hong merchant’s position, which was situated between Chinese rule and foreign trade, and also gave form to a range of tensions and disparities that existed between the merchants and Chinese mandarin officials, or hoppos. The small-sized and portable portraits, when compared to the European models from which they were derived, were a means for the hong merchants to bring a carefully cultivated identity into representation, and in turn to communicate this identity to foreign traders.1 Produced for both Chinese and foreign viewers, these portraits are not easily categorized in terms of the nationality of either artist or sitter. Rather, as I will show they were a form of self-representation that could enable the hong merchants to negotiate and manage the terms of their status within a changing sphere.

The key figures in the Canton Trade were the foreign traders entering Canton, the hong merchants who acted as intermediaries between foreign traders and the governors-general of

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1 The hong merchant portraits averaged 60 x 48 cm as opposed to traditional Grand Manner European portraiture, which could average 240 x 150 cm. See Patrick Conner, George Chinnery, 1774-1852: Artist of India and the China Coast (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: Antique Collectors' Club, 1993), 173. and John Murdoch, Swagger Portrait: Grand Manner Portraiture in Britain from Van Dyke to Augustus John, 1630-1930, (London: Tate Gallery, 1992), 110.
Canton, and the *hoppo* – the Chinese mandarins or officials who were appointed by the emperor as superintendents of customs of Canton.² The *hong* merchant guild, also known as the *cohong*, was formed after an imperial decree that centred China’s foreign trade in Canton in 1759 resulting in the region of Canton becoming the exclusive focus of foreign commerce and the only avenue of trade with China.³ In addition to managing the sales of all imports and exports, *hong* merchants were also required to maintain diplomacy, and more importantly, to minimize contact between foreigners entering China and the *hoppo*. Yet despite the seemingly profitable and powerful position of the *hong* merchant, in practice their position was a difficult one: Chinese mandarins (the *hoppo*) were the cultural and economic elite of China while merchants occupied the lowest order of the Chinese social hierarchy. Society in China had been divided into four distinct classes since the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE). The most respected were the scholar-gentry officials; that is, the mandarins who combined the political power of holding public office with, in many cases, the economic power of land ownership in their home districts. Next was the farmer and peasantry who fed the rest of the population. Then came the artisans, who were viewed as skilled workers who did useful work. Socially situated beneath these categories was the merchant, comprising wholesalers, shippers, and shopkeepers who were viewed as merely trading goods supplied by others. One of the restrictions placed on the merchant class was that they were forbidden to take the imperial examinations and as a result, the merchants were not entitled to wear a badge of rank and could not enter the respectable classes.⁴ Nevertheless, the

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² The essence of the Canton system by which China’s European trade was regulated was hierarchic subordination: first, of the foreign traders to the licensed *hong* merchants. Above the *hong* merchants were the *hoppo* and the governors-general of Canton who issued orders and regulations to the *hong* merchants. See John King Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 10: Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911, Part I* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 163.
⁴ The examination system was an attempt to recruit men on the basis of merit rather than on the basis of family or political connection. Success in the examination system was the basis of social status so that if a man passed the
wealth attained through trade enabled many hong merchants to purchase imperial insignia and to have themselves portrayed as imperial officials in portraits. The kind of status the merchants could achieve then, was attained through representation and imagination, and this conflict between material wealth and the repressed social status of the hong merchant as it was manifested through portraiture provides the focus for this study.

Although there have been a number of studies on the Canton trade, the hong merchant portraits under consideration have not been the topic of any major analysis. Scholarship on the Canton trade has been facilitated by the records, journals, letters, and reports of journeys kept by the captains and merchants aboard the thousands of foreign ships that sailed to China from the 1690s to 1845 and these provide rich primary source material concerning European and American perspectives. Chinese source materials, while less plentiful, are preserved in several collections of Qing dynasty documents, principally the *Qing dai wai jiao shi liao* (Historical Materials Concerning Foreign Relations in the Qing period) and *Shi liao xun kan* (Historical Materials Published Every Ten Days), as well as in the chapter on hong merchants in the *Yue hai guan zhi* (Gazetteer of the Maritime Customs of Guangdong). These collections comprise communications between the central government at provincial examination, his entire family was raised in status to that of scholar gentry, thereby receiving prestige and privilege. See Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China* (New York: Weatherhill, 1976).

Military squares were the only form of imperial insignia available for purchase. Punqua III, for instance, wore the sixth-rank button (opaque white), while his colleague Chi-chin-qua wore a crystal (fifth-rank) button, and even owned a blue button of the fourth rank. He only wore this at home, however, “lest the Mandarins in office should visit him on that account and make use of it as a pretence to squeeze presents from him, naturally supposing that a man could well afford them who had given ten thousand taels of silver for such a distinction.” As quoted in Garrett, *Heaven is High and the Emperor Far Away*, 77.

Paul Van Dyke, introduction to *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), xi.

Beijing and administrative officers in the provinces. The relative sparseness of any material dealing with the *hong* merchants at Canton suggests that in general the central government avoided dealing directly with the Chinese merchants. Rather, the central government appears to have focused on the trade only when conditions at Canton seemed to be precipitating a major crisis, in turn manipulating the merchants only when they were responsible for unrest between locals and foreigners in Canton. In essence, the *hoppos* were the people who most directly exerted authority over the *hong* merchants, and it is this relationship that forms a major point of conflict to be discussed at a later point.⁸

In terms of secondary sources on the Canton Trade, there have been many histories produced on specific aspects of the trade between the years 1690 to 1845. These studies are very diverse in their focuses, but most of them can be separated into three basic categories: First, literature that focuses on one ethnic group or company such as the English, Americans, or Dutch; second, literature that focuses on one specific artifact or commodity such as tea, silk, porcelain, lacquer-ware, or export paintings; and third, literature that focuses on the port of Canton in general.⁹ On the subject of the *hong* merchants, the early major publications have been produced

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⁸ Ibid, 6.
by Ann Bolbach White and Anthony Kuo-Tung Chen. Chen’s study is important because it is based on extensive use of both Chinese and English language sources and focuses on Chinese families rather than on just the hong groups. The family was the economic and decision-making nucleus so by centering the discussion on this unit, the complex inter-connections of households begins to emerge. Chen has also brought out other aspects of the trade that were previously obscured, such as the hong merchants’ involvement in the junk trade and their connections to private traders. Weng Eang Cheong’s analysis of hong merchants is also based on very extensive archival research, and is primarily focused on French and English sources. His study brings out previously unknown aspects of each family such as their relationship with hong merchants through inter-marrying, and the close connections that early merchants had with the regions of Quanzhou, Manila, Batavia, and Amoy. Where Chen’s research focuses primarily on the period after 1760, Cheong’s work on the earlier decades is a significant addition to the research. More recently, Paul Van Dyke has published an important account of the Canton Trade that attempts to reconstruct the day-to-day operations in Canton by focusing on the practices and procedures of the various groups involved in the trade.

The studies outlined above are focused primarily upon the economic system and the resultant problems faced by the hong merchants. In contrast, my analysis attempts to fill a gap concerning the scholarship of the Canton Trade by examining visual representations of hong merchants and the contradictions and aspirations they reveal. From the first iteration of this mode of portraiture in the 1830’s, the compositional format was reproduced with little variation

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10 See Chen, *The Insolvency of the Hong Merchants*; White, “The Hong Merchants of Canton”.
11 The private traders were the merchants who attempted to circumvent the regulations of the Canton system by undercutting the prices established by the hoppos and the hong merchant guild. See Chen, *The Insolvency of the Hong Merchants*, 34.
12 Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton*.
13 Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*. 
in a series of portraits for other hong merchants (Figures 3-5). Despite the possibility of attaining large fortunes, records suggest that a major desire animating the hong merchants at this time was the need for social status and recognition.14 For hong merchants, a prime issue was how to reconcile the riches obtained through trade with the restrictions and exploitations that were attached to their positions.

I propose that hong merchants strategically negotiated their identity by exploiting alternative modes of depiction and visualization that were being introduced to the Canton coast. Portraits are both narrative responses to and creations of social reality and can be manipulated deliberately for fictional ends. Through an exploration of the socio-cultural conditions faced by the hong merchants, I argue that the hong portrait compositional mode, evident in the portraits developed by George Chinnery and his student Lamqua, acts as a stage for the performance of a carefully constructed and imagined identity that encapsulates a range of desires and aspirations for elite status within China and also serves as an important mode of exchange with, and for, European viewers.

As a methodological framework, my analysis draws on the concept of “contact zones” put forth by Mary Louise Pratt, who described the “contact zone” as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.”15 More specifically, this zone is “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict”.16 The “contact zone” is not merely a zone of domination, but also a zone of exchange, even if unequal exchange, which Pratt

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14 See White, *The Hong Merchants of Canton*.
15 Mary Louise Pratt “Arts of the Contact Zone” in *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. Edited by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky (Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s, 2005) 517-529, 519.
describes as "transculturation," whereby "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture."  The concept of "contact zones" seems appropriate to my study, given the flood of foreigners entering Canton in the period in which these portraits of hong merchants were produced. Along with their quest for commodities, these foreigners also brought with them their own cultural background and histories. Pratt’s theorization of the “contact zone” was designed "to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctions, and whose trajectories now intersect." The "contact" perspective "foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination." The "contact" discourse emphasizes how subjects are constituted in, and by, their relations to each other. By using the term "contact," my purpose is to foreground the interactive dimensions of the Canton encounters between Chinese and foreign merchants. The hong merchant portraits, which I will argue serve as visual representations of a “contact zone,” can be considered in this context as a means to comprehend the complex struggles experienced by hong merchants in their quest for social status and recognition.

Chapter one of this study explores the socio-political situation in Canton in order to identify the coast as a “contact zone.” I examine the structure of the Canton trade and the ways in which hong merchants acted as cultural translators between foreign traders and mandarin officials, or hoppos, in China. The “contact zone” and the resultant cultural encounters allowed new forms of knowledge and new conceptions of the world to emerge, and the merchant portraits, as I will argue, exemplify some of these exchanges. From the use of the “contact zone”

17 Ibid, 6.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid, 6-7.
discourse, I also draw upon Homi Bhabha's use of "third space" in order to further highlight the interactive and productive dimensions of the hong merchant portraits. Homi Bhabha terms the mobile zone of interaction as the "third space" which is marked by "hybridity." The concept of "third space" represents the act of encounter which is always in a fluid state since it is always in a state of becoming and hence, cannot be fixed into any stable final formulation.\(^\text{20}\) According to Bhabha, recognition of the existence of a "third space" "may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity."\(^\text{21}\) Through retrieving the "third space" from its invisible status, Bhabha notes, we can find "those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this 'third space,' we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves."\(^\text{22}\) As Bhabha points out, meaningful cultural engagement of any kind can result only through processual acts that are realized in spatial practices. As China never entered into full colonial relations with Britain, I use the concept of "contact zones" to open up and consider the ways in which Chinese hong merchants and the artists who portrayed them negotiated and incorporated foreign ideas into the Chinese tradition in order to invent a new visual language, which I situate within a hybrid "third space."

Chapter two extends the analysis of Canton as a "contact zone" to discuss the meeting of British and Chinese portrait traditions. The clash of these artistic traditions is a significant aspect of the hong portraits produced by Chinnery and Lamqua, indeed the visual form of the hong portraits is crucial to understanding the tensions inherent in the hong merchants' social aspirations. Finally Chapter three moves to a close analysis of the images themselves. The portraits of hong merchants will emerge as visual representations of the cultural struggles and


\(^{21}\) Ibid, 209.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
desires of hong merchants. Rather than being products of colonial domination, the concept of the “contact zone” allows the portraits to be considered as a case of productive meeting and collaboration. The “contact zone” offered for hong merchants an alternative view of their place in the world, and these possibilities were enacted through imagination and in representation in the portraits themselves. The amalgam of Chinese symbols of status in these portraits, rendered by means of European artistic techniques – such as the unusual use in China of the medium of oil paint – situates the images as examples of individual actors can be seen to trafficking in specific cultural signs in order to negotiate meanings that operate between and across different cultural arenas.
Chapter 1: Merchants and Mandarins: The Politics and Tensions of the Canton System

The portraits of hong merchants are representations and claims for status. Hong merchants were able to use visual imagery as a means to disrupt the Chinese social order and the Canton system by actively manufacturing an identity that incorporated a template of Western social status – the Grand Manner portrait tradition which will be discussed later. Through such portraits, hong merchants such as Mowqua and Howqua (Figures 1, 2) were able to make claims about their social position by displaying their cultivated wealth as well as knowledge about the Canton coast and beyond. Before discussing the details of the paintings, it is necessary to discuss both the socio-political system of the Canton system, and the ways in which hong merchants occupied the “contact zone,” in order to understand the restrictions and frustrations of hong merchants.

International trade in Canton began in 1517 with the arrival of the first Portuguese ship captained by Fernao Peres de Andrade. The Chinese reluctantly opened their ports to Portuguese trade while desiring no contact with the red-haired strangers called fan kwae or “barbaric devils.” Eventually Portuguese sailors established direct trading relationships with sympathetic Chinese rulers along the coast. In exchange for helping the Chinese repel coastal pirates, the Portuguese were allowed to build a small settlement on the island of Macao in 1557. From that

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23 Garrett, *Heaven is High and the Emperor Far Away*, 73.
24 Pirate ships proliferated between China and Japan, and the Portuguese were granted an outpost in Macao as a reward. The Portuguese controlled the colony for four centuries and was handed back to China in 1999. Ibid.
location they conducted limited commerce in tea and spices, but the Portuguese were often subject to the regulations of powerful Cantonese mandarins.\textsuperscript{25}

In the years following the arrival of the Portuguese, other nations sent ships to China in search of trade. The English East India Company, established in 1600, and the Dutch East India Company, established in 1602, created their own trading relationships with India, China, and the islands of the East Indies. At first, pepper, cloves, and cinnamon were the main attractions of trade, but as the seventeenth-century progressed, merchants sought new commodities, particularly tea.

By the early eighteenth-century, British ships regularly traded with merchants in the cities of Canton and Amoy (Xiamen).\textsuperscript{26} The craze for “exotic” Chinese goods such as lacquerwares, silks, herbs, and porcelains was on the rise. Tea, above all commodities, made Western trade with China imperative. The Dutch and English had been interested in establishing trade with China since their arrival in the early seventeenth-century and both nations extended great efforts in trying to establish a base on the South China Coast as the Portuguese had done in Macau, though with little success.\textsuperscript{27} Despite this, foreign trade with China continued to expand in the 1680s, in concert with the Chinese junk trade.\textsuperscript{28} As far as foreigners were concerned, they had to renegotiate the terms of the trade with the arrival of each new ship. By the late 1690s, some regularity began to emerge in the way that foreign trade was conducted as the English and

\textsuperscript{25}Amanda E. Lange, \textit{Chinese Export Art at Historic Deerfield} (Deerfield, MA., Historic Deerfield, Inc., 2005),12.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid,16.
\textsuperscript{27}The Dutch managed to conduct trade with China via Taiwan after 1624, but then lost that base to Zheng Chenggong in 1662. The Dutch tried to open up trade directly with China over the next two decades, but in the end decided to let the Chinese bring the goods to them in Batavia aboard Chinese junks instead. See Paul Van Dyke “The Anglo-Dutch Fleet of Defense (1620-1622): Prelude to the Dutch Occupation of Taiwan” in \textit{Around and About Formosa: Essays in Honour of Professor Tsao Yung-ho}, Leonard Bluss ed. (Taipei: Tsao Yung-ho Foundation for Culture and Education, 2003) 61-81.
French both managed to carry on a limited commerce in ports along China's southern coast including Canton and Amoy.\(^{29}\)

Even before the imperial decree that centred foreign trade exclusively in Canton, during the early years of the eighteenth-century, Canton had already emerged as one of the most regular and flexible places to negotiate business. While trade was far from being "free" and consistent from one year to the next, the terms that could be agreed upon in Canton were almost always more beneficial than what foreigners could find in any other Chinese port.\(^{30}\) For the Chinese, an administrative system needed to be in place so that Chinese officials could be confident in trading with foreigners. Unlike any other port in China, Canton had the unique experience of one hundred and fifty years of trade with the Portuguese in Macau, and the Canton authorities drew heavily upon this knowledge for their trade policies.\(^{31}\) The governors-general and *hoppos* in Canton knew that commerce could be carried on effectively and the concerns of Beijing could be met if foreigners were restricted to a small geographic area.\(^{32}\) If all Chinese merchants trading with foreigners were closely monitored and controlled, then *hoppos* could keep a tight rein on the exchanges. Stopping the flow of daily provisions to foreigners and hindering them from leaving whenever they wanted were powerful tools of persuasion that could be employed to settle any disputes that arose. The need for daily rations and fear of laying over a season due to insufficient time to load merchandise put great pressure on foreign traders to reach a compromise. These factors and policies had worked effectively in controlling the Portuguese trade in Macau, and in

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\(^{29}\) Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 4.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Ibid, 7.

\(^{32}\) Ibid, 8.
the early years of the eighteenth-century, were employed to control the foreign trade in Canton as well.\footnote{K.C. Fok has one of the most extensive studies on the origins of the Canton System. He has traced the basic elements of the structure back to Ming times in what he refers to as the “Macau Formula”. K.C. Fok “The Macao Formula” A Study of Chinese Management of Westerners from the Mid-Sixteenth Century to the Opium War Period.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1978.}

When foreigners first arrived in China, they stopped in Macau where they would open negotiations for trade. However, since Macau was under the control of Canton, foreigners could not simply enter and trade as they pleased. There was also another much more attractive reason for centering trade in Canton instead of Macau: the Chinese authorities in Macau had less control over foreign traders because there was nothing to prevent them from leaving when they wished. This was because the large foreign ships with their deep drafts could not come into the shallow waters of Macau so they had to anchor in the outer harbour known as “Macau Roads”\footnote{Ibid, 9.} (Figure 6) This mooring was located east of Cabrite Point on Taipa Island, and gave foreigners easy access to the open sea. Thus, unlike Canton, which required the assistance of a Chinese pilot to guide foreign ships to and from their moorings, there was nothing to prevent foreign ships anchored in “Macau Roads” from sailing away whenever they pleased. The travel route to Canton, which required ships to navigate upriver, thus represented another means for Chinese officials to control and monitor foreigners.\footnote{Although there were times when the Chinese authorities considered making Macau the centre of foreign trade, the impracticality of transshipping all the merchandise up and down the river via lighters (sampans) and the many reservations that the Portuguese Senate had about a massive influx of foreigners coming to Macau insured that such thoughts were never realized. Van Dyke, The Canton Trade, 8.}

In the early decades of the Canton Trade, the initial negotiations concerning trading particulars were carried out at Macau, and from there, after obtaining a chop, or permission, the ships moved upriver to Whampoa (Huangpu). Whampoa was a good, safe anchorage that provided protection against the typhoons in the South China Sea (Figure 7). Furthermore, the
harbour had nothing of significance that foreigners could damage or threaten as it was out of
sight and out of gun-range of Canton. As long as foreign ships were restricted to Whampoa, they
were at a safe distance from both the local provincial centre of government and the central
political administration in Beijing. After arriving at Whampoa, the captain of the trading vessel
contracted with a comprador, a supplier of provisions, for his ship while in China. The hoppo, or
chief customs collector then made a ceremonial visit to the ship to take its measurements. To
determine the duty assessed on the ship, the hoppo’s attendants measured both its length and
breadth.36 At this time the hoppo, who received his appointment from the Emperor himself, and
took rank with the first officers of the province, also traditionally received cumshaw or
presents.37 Only after this ceremony of measurement had been completed could the ship’s cargo
then be off-loaded. The captain and other senior crew then traveled to Canton by sampan (a flat-
bottomed boat), a voyage of about twelve miles. At Canton, the captain would select a hong
merchant who would act as agent for the sale of the inbound cargo, supply teas, assess duties on
all cargo sold and purchased, and be responsible for the foreign vessel while at anchor. After
selecting a hong merchant, a linguist would be chosen who instructed the merchant in all the
formalities of the business, such as the shipping, delivery, receipt, and landing of their goods.
Exchanges between Westerners and the Chinese were conducted in Pidgin English, a business
language composed of Chinese, English, and Portuguese words.38

36 According to historian Jacques Downs, the total cost of entering and leaving Canton came to be about $3000-
$4000 per ship – among the most expensive port charges in the world at the time. Jacques M. Downs, The Golden
37 The tradition of receiving gifts stems from the Chinese traditional tributary system in which foreigners who
encountered China would acknowledge the cultural superiority of China over the foreign “barbarians.” This tributary
system served as the medium for Chinese international relations and diplomacy. See J.K. Fairbank, S.Y Teng, “On
38 Linguists were hired to supervise the off-loading of cargo in Canton and the purchase of return cargo. Being a
government interpreter, the linguist would speak Mandarin to the Hoppo, Cantonese to the merchants, and Pidgin
English (a mix of Chinese, English, and Portuguese) to the foreigners. Bookshops near the factories sold a small
Unlike many other Chinese seaports, Canton was an inland river port, which gave it additional advantages that helped the *hoppo* at Canton monitor the trade: after ships entered Canton, foreigners depended on the Chinese for all of their daily provisions, on Chinese pilots to navigate the waterways, and on Chinese linguists to mediate the daily transactions.\(^{39}\) By controlling all of the Chinese who were in contact with foreigners, the *hoppo* in Canton literally had a stranglehold on the trade. All of these control mechanisms, combined with the special relationship and close proximity of Macau, transformed Canton into a unique trading environment that was unlike any other. As a result, the way that trade was conducted in Canton was, in many ways, very different from what occurred in other Chinese ports. Because the Canton system was so heavily dependent on the special geographical, topographical, and hydrographical qualities of the Pearl River Delta and on the special relationship with Macau, it was a system that could not be duplicated elsewhere. The “contact zone” of Canton was thus carefully calculated and designed to control the increasing commerce on the Canton coast while simultaneously drawing upon the traditional Chinese tributary system of foreign trade.

Significantly, the Canton system allowed the Emperor to avoid direct contact with foreigners, as it was the mandarins—that is, the *hoppo*—who reported on the state of business as it gradually developed in Canton. Messengers, riding relays of fast horses, took a month to carry their missives from Canton to Beijing, more than 1,800 kilometers away. There the Emperor would consult with the Grand Council, and his orders would then be returned to Canton.

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\(^{39}\) In the early years of the trade, many of these lower-level Chinese linguists came from Macau where they had learned enough Portuguese to communicate with foreigners to carry out their duties. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 6.
However, as the workings of this system depended on the accuracy of the hoppos's reports, misunderstandings were not uncommon. In practice, Canton functioned as its own society, with the hoppos – mandarin officials – as the social and political authority and the hong merchants as the business administrators. Collectively the hong merchants were called the cohong, or sometimes the shisan hang (十三行). Foreign trade was officially in the hands of these hong merchants, who were nominated by the hoppo and approved by the emperor. They were responsible for dues on all exports and imports and alone dealt with the hoppo’s department. Each hong member transacted business on his individual account, but all the members, jointly, acted as custodians for the local government overseeing everything that related to the residence and welfare of foreigners. If changes were to be made in the requirements of duty payments, the hong were the medium of communication. They were also expected to subsidize losses that foreigners might otherwise suffer due to the bankruptcy of any one of the hong merchants in the collective. Towards such a contingency they levied a special tax, in addition to the regular duties, on certain imports and exports which went by the name of “hong tax.”

Another important task of the hong merchants was to guarantee the behaviour of the foreign traders while in Canton. This was another mechanism designed to minimize foreign contact in China in addition to the labyrinthine requirements associated with passage into Canton. Thus, in an effort to prevent foreigners from establishing a permanent trading colony at

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40 Garrett, Heaven is High, 75.
41 The name shisan hang was not synonymous with the cohong of Canton. The shisan hang was simply the collective name for a group of Cantonese merchants involved in foreign trade. During the Ming dynasty, these merchants were called both shisan hang (十三届) and sanshiliu hang (三十六行), or thirty-six hongs, but it is unlikely that either of these numerals indicated the actual number of merchants involved. See White, “The Hong Merchants of Canton”, 17.
42 Hunter, Bits of Old China, 218.
43 The detailed list of rules were that: 1) All vessels of war are prohibited from entering the Bogue. Vessels of war acting as convoy to merchantmen must anchor outside at Sea till their merchant ships are ready to depart, and then sail away with them. 2) Neither women, guns, spears, nor arms of any kind can be brought to the Factories. 3) All river-pilots and ships’ Compradores must be registered at the office of the ‘Tung-Che’ at Macao. That officer will
Canton, the Chinese authorities required all women to remain at Macao until the merchant ship returned. Life in Canton for foreigners was confined to a twelve-acre section of the city’s waterfront where they lived and worked in their trading establishments. The places of business were the thirteen two-storey factories, or hongs, with warehouse space on the ground floor and accommodation above. These factories were built on a portion of land about two hundred metres outside the city walls to the southwest and so were not considered part of the city of Canton itself (Figures 7-9).

That Canton, one of the furthest points from the capital, was selected as the site of foreign commerce may also have been affected by the fact that trade was not highly regarded in Chinese society. Trade, in fact, was despised and its practitioners were scorned for reasons that were clearly set forth since the Han dynasty by statesman Chao Cuo:

Also furnish each one of them with a licence, or badge, which must be worn around the waist. He must produce it whenever called for. All other boatmen and people must not have communication with foreigners, unless under the immediate control of the ships' Compradores; and should smuggling take place, the Compradore of the ship engaged will be punished. 4) Each Factor is restricted for its service to 8 Chinese (irrespective of the number of its occupants), say 2 porters, 4 water-carriers, 1 person to take care of goods ('godown coolie'), and 1 ma-chen (intended for the foreign word 'merchant'), who originally performed all the duties of the “House Compradore”, as he is styled to-day. 5) Prohibits foreigners from rowing about the river in their own boats for ‘pleasure’. On the 8th, 18th, and 28th days of the moon they may take the air, as fixed by the Government in the 21st year of Kea-King (1819). All ships’ boats passing the Custom-houses on the river must be detained and examined, to guard against guns, swords, or firearms being furtively carried in them. On the 8th, 18th, and 28th days of the moon these foreign barbarians may visit the Flower Gardens and the Honam Joss-House, but not in droves of over ten at one time. When they have ‘refreshed’ they must return to the Factories, not to be allowed to pass the night ‘out’, or collect together to carouse. Should they do so, then, when the next ‘holiday’ comes, they shall not be permitted to go. If the ten should presume to enter villages, public places, or bazaars, punishment will be inflicted upon Linguist who accompanies them. 6) Foreigners are not allowed to present petitions. If they anything to represent, it must be done through the Hong merchants. 7) Hong merchants are not to owe debts to foreigners. Smuggling goods to and from the city is prohibited. 8) Foreign ships arriving with merchandise must not loiter about outside the river; they must come direct to Whampoa. They must not rove about the bays at pleasure and sell to rascally natives goods subject to duty, that these may smuggle them, and thereby defraud His Celestial Majesty’s revenue.” Ibid, 17-18.

The site was surrounded by the Pearl River to the south, a creek to the east, and a narrow street 340 metres away to the west. Within this area, thirteen sites were marked out, ranging from 15 to 45 metres wide. By reclaiming land from the surrounding Chinese shops and dwellings, the area was eventually enlarged to a depth of 150 metres. The hong merchants leased the factories to the different nationalities, some properties being named after the foreign nations doing business in Canton, others after the hong merchants themselves. By the early nineteenth century, as they stood facing the river, from west to east, the Danish factory was first, separated by New China Street from a row of three factories. These were the Spanish factory, the French factory, and the Chungqua’s factory, used by a hong merchant. See Garrett, Heaven is High, 77.
"...Though their men neither plow nor weed, though their women neither tend silkworms nor spin, yet their clothes are brightly patterned and coloured, and they eat only choice grain and meat. They have none of the hardships of the farmer, yet their gain is ten to one hundredfold. With their wealth they may consort with nobles, and their power exceeds the authority of government officials. They use their profits to overthrow others." 45

For centuries, the debasement of the merchant class was reflected in legal restrictions, among which the most important were sumptuary laws and the law forbidding merchants, throughout much of Chinese history, from taking the civil service examinations in order to enter the respectable class. 46 Thus, while trade with its attendant taxes, duties, and gratuities proved very lucrative for the Empire by bringing in large amounts of silver currency, the hong merchant suffered social repression, especially by the “respectable” hoppo officials. The hoppo had direct jurisdiction over all customs revenue, and were thus able to exploit the hong merchants for extra tax money. The hoppos, who were sent from the Imperial Household to serve one to three year terms, began in the early years of the eighteenth century to earn a reputation for dishonesty. Their tax on goods was labeled a customs duty, but it was actually a fee taken from the hong merchants by the customs officials as payment for permission to monopolize individual ships’ cargoes. 47 If administrative coffers and budgets were insufficient to meet the needs at hand, the hong merchant houses were among the first places the authorities went looking for money. The hoppos had a window into the gross incomes of every merchant through the records of the import and export duties they paid. These figures gave them a rough idea of what each merchant might be capable of “contributing.” When either the Emperor or top officials in Canton were in need of a special contribution – during times of famine or flood, the construction or repair of a fort along the river or the financing of a military campaign – hong merchants could expect to be summoned before the hoppo. The hoppos had significant leverage over the merchants, each of whom

46 White, “The Hong Merchants of Canton”, 8.
needed their approval to do business. If a hoppo was dissatisfied with a merchant’s performance, he might be denied the right to trade, or perhaps only be allowed to trade with small ships, thereby reducing his potential to make a profit and meet financial obligations. The practice of turning to the wealthiest hong merchant as the intermediary between the Europeans and the officials became formalized after 1782.48 An order of seniority then emerged below the chief hong merchant which became a veritable order of succession to the dreaded post but which also served as the order according to which the most lucrative contracts were allocated. Despite the seemingly lucrative financial profits, the senior merchant became such a target of the hoppo’s rage and extortion that, in the last forty years of the hong history, the wealthy senior hongs tried in vain to avoid the honour.49

Although the economic plight of the hong merchant has been closely examined in several studies, their socio-cultural context has received less scholarship, but can prove serve as a useful guide to assessing the hong portraits.50 In this respect, recent scholarship has discussed the general increase in merchant power and social mobility during the Ming and Qing periods.51

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48 Ibid.
49 An attempt to solve the problem of covering the costs of unexpected gifts and extractions was the establishment of a group account known as the “consoo fund”. Official extractions and presents were then paid for from this consoo account. Sometimes past debts of failed merchants and port fees and duties that were in arrears were also settled out of this treasury. This policy helped to build some security and more predictability into the merchants’ trade, because it was charged to all of them and was a fixed amount that could be calculated and worked into prices and budgets. The problem of the consoo fund, however, was that the hoppo became gradually more dependant on it. They came to see it as a source that could be tapped whenever funds were needed, which meant that it was not long before the demands outweighed the supply and there were not enough funds available. This forced the hoppo and governors general back to the old practice of looking for “contributions”.
50 See Chen, The Insolvency of the Chinese Hong Merchants; Van Dyke, The Canton Trade; and Cheong, The Hong Merchants of Canton.
51 Chan has shown that this traditional divide was not as rigid as once imagined. He notes that through a succession of dynasties the legal restrictions against merchants were gradually relaxed until there were hardly any real ones left by Ming and Qing times. The Ming statute of 1394 banned dukes, marquises, earls, and officials of the fourth rank and above, as well as their families and servants, from conducting business. This implies that noblemen and officials below those ranks were permitted to own businesses or invest in trade. Moreover, lands, offices, and conspicuous consumption were no longer prohibited in the merchant family. During the Qing, some merchant groups even received special privileges. The salt monopoly merchants, for example, were given extra quotas for the enrollment of their sons at government schools, and a disproportionately large number of their sons consequently gained the coveted chin-shih degree. Wellington K. K. Chan, Merchants, Mandarins, and Modern Enterprise in Late
Wellington Chan argues that during the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese merchants in general enjoyed a real rise in social status. However, this was not a top-down approach of imperial exhortations or ministerial directives affirming the need to do away with the social barriers between officials and merchants. As Benjamin Schwartz has observed, "The prejudice against any revaluation of the merchant and his presumed ethos was still bone-deep and grounded solidly on both the class interest and the deepest convictions of the literati."

Rather, the wealthier *hong* merchants began to live and perform in the manner of the educated, leisured class. The Confucian-inflected desires of the *hong* merchants are suggested through the purchase of official ranks and titles and following the usual Chinese pattern, they invested their money in land, and then constructed sumptuous homes. Their aim was not to invest their money in the building of commercial empires, but to attain the markers and status of China’s ruling class. Most merchants were able to purchase at least one title for themselves; many purchased several, sometimes obtaining them in the names of their children. Such degrees provided the *hong* merchants with a level of respectability as well as some financial security. If a degree-holding merchant were charged with a fault, such as the accumulation of debt, he could appeal for leniency from the *hoppo* or Emperor on the basis that he was a degree-holder. The degree itself could also be surrendered as part of the punishment. If the merchant managed to

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52 Wellington K. K. Chan, *Merchants, Mandarins, and Modern Enterprise in Late Ch’ing China*, 65.


54 From the group of forty-nine individuals who at varying times were the heads of *hong* merchant firms, twenty-six are definitely known to have purchased official rank and title. White, “The Hong Merchants of Canton”, 150.

55 Ibid.
recover from the financial penalties of failure and restore his reputation, he could then try to purchase another degree to hedge against other unexpected reversals.56

Mowqua (Figure 1) and Howqua (Figure 2), two of the wealthiest hong merchants during the later era of the Canton Trade, both received peacock feathers (hua lìng 花翎), which were a special reward for public service, and this merit was noted to have been more precious to the merchants than any money that could have been paid for its purchase.57 Despite being barred from truly entering elite society, Chinese social values still motivated the merchants to attain, even on a lowly scale, official prestige. The most basic evidence of this merchant aspiration is found in the translation of their Pidgin English “qua” suffix, which in Chinese was guan (官), a term of civility or respect, and literally means “official.”58

Another aspect of the title guan or “official” which the hong merchants bore as part of their names is that to be an official in traditional China – or even a kind of semi-official, as were hong merchants – meant strenuous involvement in the Chinese system of taking responsibility for all problems. This was a hierarchical system where people at the lower ranks received the brunt of the blame whenever troubles arose. The hong merchants’ position as the scapegoat is perhaps the best known of all their functions as they bore the responsibility for the conduct of all the foreigners at Canton. Despite being afforded some aspects of mobility and credibility, most hong merchants had an extremely difficult time in the trade – as even foreigners noted the low status of the merchant in the Chinese social order. William Hunter writes in 1825, “The

56 Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 100.
occupation of a ‘merchant’ in China is looked down upon by wealthy land proprietors, by the
literati, and by those who have risen to official rank through their own talents.”

Nevertheless, for hong merchants, foreign trade brought with it new types of enterprises,
new socio-economic values, and a new environment for work in the treaty ports, in turn affecting
a new sense of importance about their place in society. While the common interest of
maximizing profits bound the foreign merchant and his Chinese counterpart, no such empathy
existed with the hoppo who made a point of having as little to do with the “barbarian”
merchants as possible. In fact, in terms of the trading encounters with China, the mandarin and
merchant became arch-adversaries. The mandarin rose to high public office within China’s
bureaucracy by steeping himself in the classics and mastering the skills of calligraphist, painter,
and poet. Through the examination system, he graduated from gentleman, to scholar, to revered
member of the literati, and eventually reaching a position of unassailable authority in Canton.
This was an identity that hong merchants could never attain. For foreign and Chinese merchant
groups, the hoppo epitomized the hypocrisy of Chinese officialdom. It comes as little surprise,
then, that one of the demands from foreign traders to the Chinese government was that they were
to gain the freedom to choose their merchants, linguists, compradors, pilots and the factories they
rented for the season without the hoppo’s intervention.

The mutual identification between foreign and Chinese merchant may have been
facilitated by the fact that traditional China was not the only society with strong biases against
the merchant class. Joseph Jiang has examined the records of Egypt, Rome, Greece, Medieval
Europe, China, seventeenth-century New England, eighteenth-century England, and nineteenth-

59 Hunter, The Fan Kwae in Canton, 23.
60 Trea Wiltshire, Encounters with China: Merchants, Missionaries and Mandarins (Hong Kong: FormAsia. 1995),
16.
61 Garrett, Heaven is High, 75.
century France. He maintains that all of these societies held their merchants in low esteem and restricted their legal and political rights. Jiang notes that these civilizations were or had been agrarian societies, and their respective rulers generally relied upon their rural population for revenue and political stability. Even for those societies that had gone through the early stages of industrialization, Jiang argues that the social effects of an agrarian past remained powerful. As such, the merchant's mobility and reception to foreign ideas and his interaction with a variety of social groups always undermined social regulation. Thus, not only were merchants despised because of what was seen as their parasitic nature; they were also distrusted because of their threat to the established social order.

This negative attitude towards the merchant class was mutually applicable to both foreign and Chinese merchants. Significantly, both European and Chinese merchants attempted to transcend their positions, as will be elaborated in the following chapters, through visual representation. Given that foreigners were free to choose a hong merchant for business transactions, competition between Chinese merchants to procure contracts with the largest ships for maximum profit was intense. In order to win the most profitable contracts, it was crucial that Chinese merchants conveyed an image of a trustworthy and respectable figure. It is within this charged context that the hong merchant portraits, which drew upon signs of respectability and honour that foreigners would easily recognize, represented one way that the two merchant groups could forge a space of common understanding through the "contact zone."

Chapter 2: "Contact" in Paint: The British Grand Manner for a Chinese Subject

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Portraiture as an art involves implicit conceptions of the self as well as explicit theories of portrayal and expression. These in turn are inflected by encounters between painter and subject and between portrait and viewers. All of these elements are present within both Chinese and Western portrait traditions as the underlying concept of portraits depicting likenesses of identifiable individuals – whether captured, constructed, imagined, or projected – functions for both cultures. The making of the portrait implies, in most cases, the willing agreement and cooperation of the subject. The act of coming into representation is thus already the result of some preexisting motivations that may involve a variety of social interactions or cultural ambitions. As the portraits under consideration are produced by the Scotsman George Chinnery and the Chinese artist Lamqua, it is necessary to discuss the artistic traditions that these artists were working within before analyzing the particular ways in which these traditions meet in the “contact zone” and find a hybrid visual form in the portraits of the hong merchants.

In his study on Chinese portraiture, Richard Vinograd suggests, “We may be justified in speaking not of one art or tradition of portraiture but of several portraiture[s], a diversity reflected in the variety of terms applied to portraiture in China.”\(^{63}\) Vinograd’s methodological approach viewed the portrait as an event, that is, as an “active situation of encounter between artist and subject with reverberations and effects sometimes discernible in the portrait image and associated texts and paralleled by the active probing of the portrait by contemporary and later viewers.”\(^{64}\) Tracing both the encounter that Vinograd flags in his study and its resonance within the image itself will be used as a springboard to enter the particular case of the hong merchant portraits.


\(^{64}\) Ibid.
In addition, viewing the Canton coast as a “contact zone” opens up the possibility of situating the portraits as a visual manifestation of what theorist Homi Bhabha terms a “third space”. Similar to the concept of the “contact zone,” a “third space” allows a theoretical perspective that accepts difference without eliding or normalizing the differential structure of ideologies in conflict; it allows us to envisage social developments enhanced by difference. A “third space” in Bhabha’s conception, however, can also be read as a zone of mediation and activity that seeks to subvert, Bhabha writes:

“The act of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot “in itself” be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation.”

A “third space” then is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibilities. Bhabha uses a “third space” and hybridity as a counter-position to what he considers the simplistic ideas of late-twentieth century multiculturalism and cultural diversity. Bhabha’s formulation of “third space” and hybridity thus allows new forms of cultural meaning and production to emerge which blur the limitations of existing boundaries and calls into question established categorizations of culture and identity. In the context of this study, I use “hybridity” to discuss the “in-betweeness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” in order to support my contention that the identity of the hong merchants was not formulated singularly from a Chinese or European viewpoint, but was necessarily a heterogeneous, conflicted amalgam. To understand the social forces at play in the portraits, it is thus necessary to analyze the portrait traditions and

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65 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 36.
associations that are present in the images in relation to the social milieu of the Canton coast discussed in the previous chapter.

Chinese portraiture is bound up with a complex set of cultural conditions, including conceptions of individuality and personhood, the functions and significance of pictorial imagery, and the role and status of the artist, and these differ markedly from circumstances in the West. In general, Chinese culture stressed the role of the individual as a link in a familial lineage or as a member of a class or professional community. With this cultural outlook as a background, Chinese portraits that involve assertions of self or contested identities, such as the hong portraits, are especially rare and illuminating.

Richard Vinograd distinguishes three general types of Chinese portraiture: effigy, event, and emblem. Vinograd groups the formal ancestral or monastic portraits in China that placed a stylistic emphasis on vivid and individuated pictorial presence under the effigy category. The great majority of Chinese portraits were ancestral or commemorative images. They participated in the general cultural valuation and specific ritual observances of ancestor veneration, which should be seen as part of their meaning. Such portraits were linked to a matrix of social practices including ritual veneration of the past and the promotion of cultural paragons; they were often images of the dead intended for the living. Memorial portraits included ancestor portraits and the special categories of Chan Buddhist abbot portraits and imperial portraits. The images from these categories of memorial portraiture combined stereotype and individuation, with costumes, poses, accoutrements, and demeanour characterized by a marked formality and the faces

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68 Ibid, 10.
69 Chan abbot portraits served as a vivid visual, nearly iconic reminder of the presence of a revered teacher after master and disciple were separated by death or distance. Zen portraits often show the abbot in formal religious costume and seated in a chair emblematic of authority, and their status as pictorial relics implies that the ritual and symbolism of Chan monastic performance should have infiltrated their significance. Imperial portraits performed the function of documenting the ancestral lineage of figures in a virtual state cult of the imperial family. Ibid, 5.
rendered with heightened verism. This combination corresponds to the conceptual status of memorial portraits as manifesting links to lineages often outweighed assertions of individual identities. The conventional elements in Chinese portraiture reveal their status as constructions of role and identity, rather than mere documentations of appearance. Formal Chinese portraits appeared in a context in which the role of the individual was severely constrained: They were primarily about social roles in the family or the state rather than a celebration of individual fame.70

The second category of Chinese portraiture pointed to by Vinograd includes images in which the motives and circumstances surrounding the portrait are discernible as the artist and sitter are drawn into an intimacy with the image. Vinograd typifies this style of portraiture as the "portrait event."71 These were portraits of and for the living and could be the occasion for assertions of a cultural persona, for critical dialogues between artist and subject, or for questioning social roles. At times, such portraits served actively to mask or to confuse identification or even to undermine the conceptual foundations of portraiture. While this type of portraiture constitutes a minority in Chinese portraiture, I argue that the portraits of *hong* merchants represent a particular instance of this style. Indeed, I suggest that the representations of *hong* merchants, beyond being a "portrait event," also take up elements of what Vinograd calls the "emblematic portrait."72

Emblematic portraits are described as images that are "oriented to the contemporary social and cultural milieu of the sitter that embody a complex personhood, comprising aspects of temperament, role, and behaviour."73 Emblematic portraits were explicitly concerned with issues

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid, 11.
of interpretation and convention. The viewer of the emblematic portrait is "encouraged to observe the subject in varied and informal situations and to seize characteristic attitudes and features as revelatory devices," and in the Chinese case, emblematic portraits seem to have been "based not so much on an intuition of spirit as on an awareness of conventions and types, part of an explicitly public rhetoric or presentation." The limitations seen in the mask — like visages associated with the effigy portrait — are here turned to effect an awareness of the gulf between public and private persona. The recipients of Chinese informal portraits were customarily part of the private or personal world of the sitter — friends or cultural associates. The motivations for surrounding the sitter with public emblems of status, interests, and talents may have been a reaffirmation of group affiliation. In addition, there were usually more or less explicit claims to culturally valued possessions — of talent and taste, good breeding, or character — that made the emblematic portrait the site of active cultural or social assertions rather than a simple reflection of appearance and identity. Viewed in this way, as the site of active public claims, the emblematic portrait could become personalized in a fashion quite distinct from the individuating or identifying function commonly ascribed to portraiture. Such portraits could be an effective vehicle for the intrusion of personal ambitions and aspirations into the world of visual art.

Where the effigy portrait asserted a unified self, the emblematic portrait hosts a corporal personhood and embodies diverse social dimensions. Significantly, emblematic portraits are directed forthrightly to an audience, whose expectations and responses are called into play from the outset. A useful comparison to the hong portraits would be an image like the anonymous Portrait of the Painter Ni Zan from the fourteenth-century, in which the artist is portrayed as an actor set on the stage of his own painting style (Figure 10). Ni Zan is surrounded by emblems indicative of his interests and personality that are entirely performative and not by objects

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74 Ibid, 12.
alluding to an “invisible interpretive structure.”75 Hong portraits are equally performative, with each individual merchant portrayed in a seated position with his material possessions proudly portrayed, while the “invisible interpretive structure,” as I will elaborate at a later point, is the framework of British conventions of portraiture, in particular the convention of the late eighteenth-century Grand Manner style.

It is evident that the hong merchant portraits embody aspects of traditional Chinese portraiture, and when compared with the British portrait tradition introduced by the British-trained artist George Chinnery, the productive collaborations effected by the “contact zone” are illuminated. The first portraits of the hong merchants by Chinnery that employ impasto oil paint and an illusionistic perspective would obviously not have been drawn from the Chinese portrait tradition. Rather, it is the Grand Manner portraiture that Chinnery impressed upon Chinese artists such as Lamqua that allowed a new vocabulary of representation for hong merchants. It is this European painting tradition, when executed by a Chinese artist, that demonstrates a new hybrid visual language evoking the “contact zone” that was part of the Canton system.

George Chinnery was born in London in 1774 and was a prolific artist. In 1791, he first exhibited a miniature portrait in the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy at Somerset House.76 The following year Chinnery exhibited three portrait miniatures, and shortly after on July 6, 1792, Chinnery enrolled in the Royal Academy School. In 1825, he left for Macau and Canton, where he would stay until his death in 1852.77 An important influence on Chinnery’s artistic career was the mode of portraiture promoted by the President of the Royal Academy, Sir

75 This “invisible interpretive structure” is a network of references that are codified and understood. In the Chinese portrait case, effigy portraits would contain this structure. Ibid, 5. See also James Cahill, Hills Beyond a River: Chinese Painting of the Yuan Dynasty: 1279-1368 (New York: Weatherhill, 1976), 114-116.
76 Chinnery married at the age of twenty-one and went to live in Ireland, his wife’s home, but returned to London in 1802, and that same year left for India without his wife and children. Chinnery brought his wife and family to India in 1818, but by 1823, bothered by debt and his wife, he left for Serampore and then finally traveled to Macau and Canton. See Conner, George Chinnery, 25.
77 Ibid.
Joshua Reynolds. Reynolds promoted the Grand Manner style in portraiture, and it was this mode of portraiture that was brought to Canton, and to hong merchants in particular, as a template of British elite status. Even though Reynolds died five months before Chinnery was admitted to the Academy, Chinnery would certainly have known his lectures in their printed form, the landmark *Discourses on Art*, which as a full series was first published in 1797.78 Reynolds’ influence upon Chinnery’s painting theory can be gleaned from a correspondence between Chinnery and one of his students in Calcutta. While instructing his pupil Maria Browne, Chinnery referred her to Reynolds’ lectures, and several of his remarks to her make it clear that the *Discourses* were not only familiar to him, but also indicate that Chinnery used Reynolds’ theories to teach and practice.79 As Richard Ormond has noted, Chinnery, like Reynolds, advised the portrait painter to “follow ‘general forms’ characteristic of a class, rather than individual idiosyncrasies; and while a close study of nature is necessary, it is not sufficient, for the artist must view the subject with a ‘poet’s eye’.”80 Moreover, the artist was to be prepared to depart from nature in order to achieve a masterly effect. “Nothing can be well done from nature that is not equally done without it – colouring most particularly.”81 On the theory of colour, Chinnery once again borrowed from Reynolds' *Discourses*. In a letter on June 5, 1813, Chinnery sketches a diagram to illustrate his theory of the radiation of colours, in which “things get lower, duller, cooler & weaker” as one moves from yellow to orange, red, violet, and purple. A portrait head that is painted in warm colours will appear to stand out, if the background is painted in colours that are progressively cooler as the artist moves away from the head.82 Here Chinnery

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78 Ibid.
80 Ibid, 137.
81 Ibid, 135.
82 Ibid, 130-2.
follows Reynolds, who, taking the great Venetian artists as his model, had recommended the use of “warm” reds and yellows for the principle, illuminated subject, set against a background of “cool” blues, greens, and greys. Furthermore, Chinnery notes that the pursuit of likeness is liable to lead an aspiring painter astray. Rather, “It is air, Grace, & something not very describable, wh.[ich] makes pictures.” More specifically, “If a ball is represented perfectly round, it will look vulgar; one must consult that feeling and Conception of Picture which regulates the Painter’s Eye. Nature is not a picture altho’ [sic] picture is Nature.” This is once again a theme of Discourses, in which Reynolds had insisted that “a mere copier of nature can never produce any thing great; can never raise and enlarge the conceptions...” and that the grace and the likeness of a portrait lay more in the “general air” than in “the exact similitude of every feature.”

This affinity with the art theory of Sir Joshua Reynolds is highly significant, as Reynolds’ articulation of Grand Manner in portraiture has a particular resonance when viewed in relation to the hong portraits. The Grand Manner is an English term for the highest style of art in academic theory given currency by Reynolds and extensively discussed in his Discourses on Art. Reynolds argued that painters should not slavishly copy nature but seek a generalized and ideal form. This “gives what is called the Grand Style to Invention, to Composition, to Expression, and even to Colouring and Drapery.” The development of the Grand Manner portrait can be traced back to the early seventeenth-century, the period often referred to as the “Baroque,” when portraiture acquired new dramatic force as artists such as Rubens and Van Dyck developed

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84 Ormond, “Chinnery and his pupil”, 162.
85 Ibid, 184-5.
86 Reynolds, Discourses on Art, 27.
87 Ibid, 100.
allegories, settings, poses, and viewpoints that served to make their subjects more imposing. In Europe and America in the subsequent decades, a heightened, more formal style was expected for official portraiture, and significantly as well, for private portraits of persons laying claim to elite status. During the third quarter of the eighteenth-century, Reynolds carried these expectations further, developing and codifying the concept of portraiture in the Grand Manner. It was a self-conscious portraiture that drew upon Western art historical traditions, particularly those of the Italian High Renaissance and the Seicento. From such classic works the trained painter took the most elevated manner, varied poses, and classical conceits, in effect joining portraiture with the richer, more active, and colorful realm of history painting.

Reynolds' theory advanced an idea of the greatest importance for any painter interested in aligning himself with the Grand Manner: the authority of certain masterpieces created in classical antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Baroque was to be re-evoked in modern representation. Specific works and certain artists were recommended as constituting the highest artistic achievement, and the student was therefore encouraged to study pieces such as the Apollo Belvedere, the Venus de’ Medici and the Laocoon, and the paintings by later masters such as Raphael, Michelangelo, Corregio, the Carraci, and Poussin, among others. The issue of the heightened refinement in painting – an abstraction and improvement upon nature – was to take precedence, and this was translated by Reynolds into portraiture. One of the richest sources for Grand Manner imagery is the full-length, life-sized portrait, a format that seemed to call for an expanded representation. The full-length portrait appears to have been reserved briefly in the

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89 The category of history painting was considered as the most elevated and significant realm of painting. See Wayne Craven, “The Grand Manner in Early Nineteenth-Century American Painting: Borrowings from Antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Baroque” American Art Journal 11:2 (Apr. 1979): 4-43. 7
90 ibid.
Renaissance for royal or at least noble patrons, and it retained some sense of the court, even when in general use.\textsuperscript{91} Certain attributes such as a colossal column behind or beside the subject, palatial backgrounds, and imaginary parks, were used at will, even if highly inappropriate for the sitter’s actual social position. A need for the most impressive image possible was felt at all levels of society, and court practices set the model.\textsuperscript{92}

It was this portrait style – resonant with a European heritage – that Chinnery would take to Canton where he would become one of the most influential painters in the region. Chinnery’s student - and later rival - Lamqua would also take up the Grand Manner style as a convention for the portraits of hong merchants. Although the particular biography for Lamqua is scattered and contradictory in some accounts, it is generally agreed that the Chinese artist worked and lived with Chinnery in the 1820s, and that Chinnery’s apprentice would become the most prominent of the Chinese painters working in the English manner.\textsuperscript{93} Furthermore, a portrait of Chinnery produced by Lamqua sometime in the early nineteenth-century illustrates the apprentice’s work before he had fully mastered the style typified by Chinnery and which would characterize his work after his training (Figure 11). This style of painting, clearly not under Chinnery’s influence as it lacks the dramatic lighting effects and colour characteristic of his work, suggests that Lamqua was a capable painter, and more importantly, that he made an active decision to transform his style in response to contact with Chinnery’s work.

After studying with Chinnery, Lamqua opened his own studio which was situated in New China Street, a shopping area for the foreign merchants in Canton. On the ground floor Lamqua

\textsuperscript{91} ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} ibid, 9.
\textsuperscript{93} Lamqua, Chinese name Guan Qiaochang, would possibly the third generation of a family of painters for the western market; the first being Spoilum (Ch. Guan Zuolin) and the second Lamqua (Ch. Guan Zuolin). Therefore, it is possible Lam Qua is the grandson of the prominent artist Spoilum. See Crossman, \textit{The Decorative Arts of the China Trade}, 73.
displayed finished pictures for sale (Figure 12). Above was a workshop where eight to ten painters worked in various capacities: some made copies of Western prints in oils or watercolours, others painted miniatures on ivory, while others produced brightly coloured mandarin figures, landscapes, boats or birds on pith paper. On the third level, above the workshop, was the studio of Lamqua himself, a small room lit by a skylight (Figure 13).  

According to one source, Lamqua would offer to paint his sitters either in the “English fashion” for £10 or the “China fashion” for £8, but unfortunately none of his portraits in the “Chinese fashion” can be identified today. After Lamqua set up his studio, he copied Chinnery’s work and a reference by Robert Bennet Forbes indicates that he sat for a portrait by Chinnery and then sent it to Lamqua for copying.

Lamqua’s increasing popularity as a painter in the “English fashion” strained the relationship between teacher and student, and Lamqua and Chinnery would later have a falling out which led to a considerable rivalry in Canton. A significant note by “Old Nick”, a French traveler, on the Chinnery-Lamqua relationship and the reasons for its final dissolution, establishes quite conclusively the tension behind the later bitterness between them. After the description of Lamqua’s studio, “Old Nick” comments:

“There are a certain number of studies borrowed from Chinnery by his student though Chinnery maintains he neither loaned them nor gave nor sold them. Between these two men exists a rivalry that is all the more likely due to the fact that they lived together. To hear Chinnery talk, Lam Qua is a subaltern, a wretchedly bad painter whose sole merit comes from having stolen from him some models and methods. To hear Lamqua talk, he was the favourite student, the assistant to the English painter [does this imply there were other Chinese students in the studio?]. Chinnery, whose talent is far superior to that of Lam Qua, asks 50 to 100 piastres [Portuguese currency] for the same portrait that the native artists make for 15 to 20; and because his are cheaper, untutored people frequently prefer to give their business to Lam Qua. Whence the hatred.”

94 Conner, *George Chinnery*, 263.
97 As quoted in Crossman, *The China Trade*, 76.
Far more than a copyist or a “wretchedly bad painter”, however, Lamqua was the most celebrated Chinese painter in the “English style” in Canton. Over his door was a sign which read, “Lam Qua, English and Chinese Painter”. The _hong_ merchant portraits were the works that gained Lamqua his reputation and his acceptance into the prestigious Royal Academy in London in 1835 and 1845. However, Lamqua would never become regarded as purely a “Western” artist. As one contemporary of his comments, "Talented though he is...[he] could never entirely eliminate his Chinese mannerisms." His works, the critic continues, "almost without exception speak of Western art with a strong Cantonese accent." What this reference to a “Cantonese accent” points out is the great extent to which Lamqua’s identity as a Chinese painter of western-style portraiture figured in his paintings’ reception by western audiences. Thus, while the residues of “Chineseness” enlivens the portraits produced by Lamqua beyond a mere slavish copy of Chinnery’s style and work, it also represents the active appropriation of a mode which is blended with Lamqua’s own artistic heritage. The following chapter turns to a detailed analysis of the portraits themselves to discuss the ways in which both a hybrid space and the “contact zone” between the two cultures finds its pictorial representation in the space of the canvas.

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98 Ibid, 77.
99 Ibid, 80.
Chapter 3: The Merchants’ Masquerade: Reading the Hong Merchant Portraits

Along with the exchange of commodities which was central to the merchants trade, there existed a simultaneous cultural exchange which was affected by new media and new forms of knowledge. The introduction of oil painting to China and the circulation of merchant portraits are a case in point. The hong merchant portraits offered a stage for the performance of a carefully constructed and imagined identity that encapsulated a range of desires and aspirations for elite status within China. Furthermore, these portraits served as an important mode of exchange with, and for, European viewers. The hong merchants were situated in the “contact zone,” a space that was in-between Chinese and Western traditions. As such, they occupied a fluid space of meaning where identity was in constant flux and could not easily be fixed.

Since the hong merchants could not take the imperial examinations and held no official position in the government, they were not entitled to wear a badge of rank and the corresponding hat button. Nevertheless, the wealth attained through the trade enabled many merchants to purchase this insignia and to be portrayed in imperial robes. For example, the merchant Mowqua received his fourth-rank status in recognition of his financial contributions, however, his title was taken away when he was discovered to have bribed local officials to install a tablet commemorating his dead father in the Temple of Worthies – a place of honour for which his late father, being of lowly birth, was not qualified.\textsuperscript{101} This incident demonstrates the importance of the hong merchants’ attaining status for themselves and their families, but also indicates the precarious nature of the merchant their position. Merchants would rarely wear their purchased robes in public, as such an ostentatious display of wealth would invite further exploitations by the hoppo or mandarin. Thus, the portraits of hong merchants offer insight into the complex

\textsuperscript{101} Conner, George Chinnery, 167.
cultural struggles and also indicate that for the hong merchants a prime issue was how to reconcile the riches obtained through trade with the restrictions and exploitations that were attached to their position. The popularity of this portrait style among the merchants suggests that the portraits could function as a performance of identity as the presentation of the self in this codified manner allowed the merchants to forge a form of collective identity, one where the aspirations of the merchant position could be communicated. The repeated commissions of this portrait type by a variety of hong merchants suggest that there existed an understanding of this image as one of status, and it is this mutual understanding that had the potential to elevate the merchants – at least in representation – to an elite class (Figures 1-5). Thus, although the hong merchants were in direct competition with one another, this portrait convention was one way that a merchant could signify his equally high status among his rivals, while also communicating this status to foreign traders.

The hong merchant portraits can be seen as an attempt to articulate an imagined identity and the importance of this carefully cultivated representation can be gleaned from the logs of traders who transacted on the Canton coast. A remarkable feature of hong merchants as described by foreign merchants was the way that they were perceived to be different from the rest of the Chinese population in Canton. Indeed, while hong merchants were derided by the hoppo, Western traders saw in them a completely different image. While “thieves,” “cheats”, and “sharpers” greeted foreign traders in Canton, hong merchants were generally regarded as men of upstanding character. In 1784, Samuel Shaw wrote: “The merchants of the cohoang [sic] are as respectable a set of men as are commonly found in other parts of the world...They are intelligent, exact accountants, punctual to their engagements, and, though not the worse for

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102 A portrait of Howqua produced by Chinnery is known to have been commissioned by W.H. Chicheley Plowden, the President of the Committee of the East India Company in Canton. ibid, 177.

103 Wiltshire, Encounters with China, 16.
being well looked after, value themselves much upon maintaining a fair character.” Another memoir notes, “As a body of merchants we found them able and reliable in their dealings, faithful to their contracts, and large-minded. The monopoly they enjoyed could not have been in the hands of a more able, liberal or genial class of men.” A likely reason for such consistently favourable reviews from foreigners is that hong merchants carefully cultivated an image of honesty and sophistication, and the hong portraits were one method of communicating this identity.

While the commissioning of the hong portraits might initially seem only to be incidental with the arrival of Chinnery, the representational scheme utilizing the Grand Manner for a Chinese subject was clearly one that was sought after as both Chinnery and Lamqua repeated the Grand Manner pictorial format for a series of other hong merchants (Figures 2-5). For a Chinese merchant seeking social status, this style of portraiture thus seems to have represented a readymade convention that could signal acquisition of a higher class ranking. When these conventions were translated for a Chinese subject, the small size of the hong portraits is significant. While the traditional Grand Manner portrait was large-scale, that is, life-sized, this would not have been practical for the hong merchants for several reasons. First, the portraits were rarely displayed at their hong factories for fear of inviting further taxation from the hoppos for such an ostentatious display of wealth. Second, and even more important, the small size of the merchant portraits was crucial as the images were gifted to foreign merchants, who would often take these portraits back to their home countries. The advantage of this translation in

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104 Ibid.
106 The hong merchant portraits averaged 60 x 48 cm as opposed to traditional Grand Manner portraiture, which could average 240 x 150 cm. See footnote 1.
107 In addition to the Howqua portrait commissioned by W.H. Chicheley Plowden, the President of the Committee of the East India Company in Canton, both Patrick Conner and Carl Crossman speculate that many more were
size was that the portrait still carried with it the prestige of the sitter; thus for the foreign trader, the portrait would be a legible, as well as a transportable, image of elite status.

The small-sized merchant portraits thus served to not only imagine an identity for the hong merchant, but also to communicate this manufactured image to foreigners, presenting the hong merchants as cultural elites in line with the contemporary accounts noted above by foreign traders. The traffic in this image seems to be centred on the hong merchant and foreign trader. The fact that the portraits were small scale, portable, and even known to have been commissioned by the foreign traders suggest that the portraits were likely to only have been seen by the hong merchant and the foreign viewer, making the portraits important vehicles in the transmission of this “Chinese” identity. Indeed, this constructed image operates beyond social imagination into the practical world of business relations as an amicable and trusting relationship between the hong merchant and foreign trader was necessary to procure the best financial deals for both merchant and trader. This constructed identity thus becomes a social reality in Canton and beyond, as the image of the Chinese merchant travels in the imagination of the Western trader. Despite never truly attaining a rise in social status, the impression that the hong merchants made upon foreign traders can be seen as a testament to the power of the portrait in the communication of this imagined identity.

The two most prominent hong merchants in the latter era of the trade were Howqua and Mowqua (Figures 1, 2). While the Wu (Howqua) family was renowned as painters, poets, and sponsors of literary publications, Mowqua is remembered as an amiable character and an accomplished eater.\textsuperscript{108} His father, known also as Mowqua, was a hong merchant who rose from commissioned and taken overseas. Furthermore, the prominence of the Howqua figure was most likely facilitated by the numerous images that the Western world would see of the hong merchants. See Conner, \textit{George Chinnery}, 177 and Crossman, \textit{The Decorative Arts of the China Trade}, 73.\textsuperscript{108} Conner, \textit{George Chinnery}, 174.
humble origins to being regarded as among the richest of the cohong in the first decade of the nineteenth century. From his father’s death in 1812 until 1835, Mowqua was officially regarded as the second chief merchant, after Howqua, in the cohong. Two early portraits of these men by George Chinnery offer subtle hints at their personality, which Mowqua would later attempt to transcend through his later portraits executed by Lamqua. The differences between Howqua and Mowqua are reproduced in Chinnery’s portrait of the two men (Figures 2, 3). Each is surrounded by Chinese symbols of status; however, beyond Howqua are seen potted plants and shrubs, possibly an allusion to his famous gardens, while Mowqua is supplied with the more mundane accessory of a fishbowl. A more striking difference between the portraits lies in the sitters’ postures. The weighty figure of Mowqua leans backward in a relaxed, almost sprawling fashion, while Howqua sits upright, a man whose “person and looks bespoke that his great wealth had not been accumulated without proportionate anxiety.”¹⁰⁹ Perhaps it was after seeing and comparing his portrait to Howqua’s that Mowqua would decide to have another much more extravagant portrait produced by Lamqua (Figure 1).

The initial portrait of Howqua produced by Chinnery thus represents a prototype of what can be termed the “hong portrait style” which, when compared to subsequent portraits by Lamqua, demonstrates the cultural translations taking place through the various painted incarnations of hong merchants. Both the pose and lighting of the Howqua portrait are at odds with traditional notions of Chinese portraiture as one leg is swung over the other almost at right angles to the head, which turns three-quarter face on to the spectator (Figure 2). It is noticeable that in the versions painted by Lamqua, the pose more closely resembles the full-frontal approach typical of Chinese ancestor portraits and these versions also reduce or abandon the dramatic chiaroscuro of Chinnery’s painting. In Chinnery’s portrait, in contrast, the figure is

fully three-quarters in a shadow, while the face and upper body of Howqua are theatrically spotlighted (Figure 2).

In addition to the style of the portraits, an important fact is that individuated portraiture was reserved for those of high status in China, and was not created nor displayed lightly.\footnote{Vinograd, \textit{Boundaries of the Self}, 177.} For Mowqua and other \textit{hong} merchants to be portraitized in the first place would not only signify their claim to high status, but the act of having a portrait painted itself resisted expectations dictated by the traditional social hierarchy. The irony is that these portraits could not be seen by the cultural elites that \textit{hong} merchants aspired to emulate since, as stated above, the \textit{hong} merchants rarely displayed their wealth to the mandarin officials. Furthermore, the unorthodox representation of the small-scale portraits in oil paint with their references to the European-derived Grand Manner may not even have been legible to the Chinese eye. Indeed even if the portraits had been recognized, the images clearly do not adhere to standard Chinese conventions of respectability. It follows, then, that the reference to the Grand Manner portrait was for both the \textit{hong} merchant himself and for the foreign trader to whom the images were gifted. Acting as a type of calling card, the portraits simultaneously signaled the \textit{hong} merchant's elite status and ensured his dignity and trustworthiness – an important aspect as foreign merchants were free to choose amongst \textit{hong} merchants for business transactions.

In order to effectively elucidate the \textit{hong} merchants' claimed position, the representation of space in the portraits is critical. The portrait space is only hinted at by the Chinnery portraits, and is more fully explicated by the Chinese artist Lamqua, who presumably had a much more thorough understanding of Chinese symbols of status and culture. Henri Lefebvre's theory of space is a useful tool in examining the \textit{hong} portraits as he argues that space has a complex
character and enters social relations at all levels. Henri Lefebvre’s conceptions of space as perceived, conceived, and lived are all present and central in the portraits of the hong merchants. Lefebvre writes, “Space is at once a physical environment that can be perceived; a semiotic abstraction that informs both how ordinary people negotiate space and the space of corporations…and finally, a medium through which the body lives out its life in interaction with other bodies.”

Lefebvre’s theory of space attempts to tie together the physical, the mental, and the social. In addition to these three manifestations of space, Lefebvre outlines another set of distinctions that amplifies the first: space is simultaneously a spatial practice (an externalized, material environment), a representation of space (a conceptual model used to direct practice), and a space of representation (the lived social relation of users to the environment). The hong portrait thus becomes a portrait of the social economy of particular bodies and spaces that constituted this moment in the history of Canton. The portraits construct and refer to social identity, not only by reference to the figurative image of a merchant, but by the conceptual linking of social markers and ordered spaces with their own particular associations.

In the portrait of Mowqua by Lamqua (Figure 1), the merchant, who is dressed in his robe marking his fourth-rank status, is surrounded by objects that give insight into his position and personality. Thus the image displays a mandarin’s cap with the corresponding blue hat button, fine porcelain and furniture, a spittoon, and a hanging lantern. To these elements is added the European convention of a classically derived column, which as previously discussed, was a

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112 Ibid., 38.
113 Ibid, 39.
frequent element in Grand Manner portraiture that alluded simultaneously to a Greco-Roman cultural heritage and elite social status.\textsuperscript{114}

The other objects represented in the portrait must also have been carefully chosen, as they make significant references to the person of Mowqua. For example, the flowers portrayed in the painting make reference to traditional Chinese symbols. Thus, the flower pot beside the column holds peonies, an indigenous flower and symbol of wealth and status with the densely packed petals evoking affluence and prosperity.\textsuperscript{115} Furthermore, in the arrangement on the table next to Mowqua are a collection of porcelains, jades, and a small bouquet of flowers, which includes a hibiscus blossom, which again is a symbol of honor and riches.\textsuperscript{116} Both of these flowers also represent the Spring and Summer seasons, which was particularly appropriate in the merchant portrait as Spring and Summer were the trading season in Canton.\textsuperscript{117} The hanging poem to the left of Mowqua reads in part “I am alone, drifting in a world that I cannot understand, but cannot escape from.”\textsuperscript{118} The poem thus calls up themes of loneliness and displeasure, which in this case has a two-fold significance. Not only is Mowqua forced into a difficult career from which retirement was not an option, but these sentiments are also classic themes for the literati, who were the cultural elites of China. Despite the impossibility of ever reaching the literati class, this allusion to their poetics represents another component in this masquerade of elite status.

In a different context, art historian Nancy Munn has argued that “since a spatial field extends from the actor, it can also be understood as culturally defined... stretching out from the

\textsuperscript{114} See page 34.
\textsuperscript{116} The hibiscus receives these attributes from a pun on its Chinese name, \textit{fu rong hua}, where \textit{fu} means “riches” and \textit{rong} means fame. See Fang Jing Pei, \textit{Symbols and Rebuses in Chinese Art: Figures, Bugs, Beasts, and Flowers} (Berkeley and Toronto: Ten Speed Press, 2004), 87.
\textsuperscript{117} Fang Jing Pei, \textit{Symbols and Rebuses in Chinese Art: Figures, Bugs, Beasts, and Flowers}, 87 and 120.
\textsuperscript{118} The poem is partially obscured, but translates roughly into “For twenty years, I have been drifting in a world that I do not understand, and though I see others leave, I do not have the chance to do so.”
body in a particular stance or action at a given locale...The bodily core of the actor’s spatial field stretches out to become one with, to construct, the space of [symbolic] importance.”\(^{119}\) The objects around Mowqua are thus an extension of Mowqua himself and form a calculated expression of his identity and personality. Architectural historian Anthony Vidler writing of the architectural uncanny notes that the “contours, boundaries, and geographies [of space] are called upon to stand in for all the contested realms of identity...and are likewise assumed to stand for, and identify, the sites of such struggle.”\(^{120}\) In other words, the choices made in represented space serve to delineate the ambiguity of the interior, and in turn, a strategically ambiguous identity.

In the portrait under discussion, the European column – jarring in terms of Chinese conventions – stands behind the seated Mowqua, which immediately situates the space as not wholly Chinese. Although visually convincing at first glance, the **hong** factories were never decorated as lavishly as the viewer is led to believe.\(^{121}\) Rather, the image displays to the viewer only the spaces that were desired to be depicted: a Chinese space with the display of indigenous objects and symbols of wealth is, from a Chinese perspective, jarringly juxtaposed with an exterior space which opens up from the European column onto a view of the Canton port. While the scale of the column is visually impressive, its massive size suggests that it would be more appropriately associated with large-scale public architecture – or the European country villa of a member of the landed gentry – rather than the domicile of a private individual in China as the portrait would lead viewers to believe.\(^{122}\) It is precisely this juxtaposition that highlights the “contact zone” of Canton and Britain in the image as the portrait melds both Chinese and

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\(^{119}\) Nancy Munn, “Excluded Spaces: The Figure in the Australian Aboriginal Landscape,” *Critical Inquiry.* 22:3 (Spring, 1996): 446-65, 454.


\(^{122}\) The use of the column is a standard convention in European portraiture in the Grand Manner. See Murdoch, *Swagger Portrait*, 110.
European references to elite status and wealth. Mowqua’s space, and in turn Mowqua himself, are thus transformed beyond the artistic traditions of both China and Britain, as a new hybrid space and identity is forged through the hong portraits.

A useful comparison between the hong merchant portraits would be a British portrait executed in the Grand Manner style in 1740 by the artist William Hogarth of Captain Coram (Figure 14). Coram was a shipbuilder, and had operated in America as well as England. Like many men who amassed a fortune in trade or business he spent it on charitable works – a typically Protestant pattern. The composition of the portrait of Captain Coram is akin to the hong merchant portraits. Coram sits at a table with a massive column behind and the attributes of Coram’s trade and attainments are grouped around him. Coram’s hand is represented holding the seal of the Royal Charter incorporating the Foundling Hospital which he endowed, and at his feet a globe depicts the “Western or Atlantick Ocean,” an allusion to his activities as shipbuilder in both American and Britain. Beyond the column is a broad expanse of sea that is not, however, the “real” sea: the column and curtain define the limits of the portrayed space, and the panorama is merely a backdrop which is simultaneously an illusion while also an allusion to the source of Coram’s wealth. The portrait of Mowqua closely resembles Hogarth’s portrait as both images include the large column with an illusionistic waterscape in the far background. Mowqua is thus represented with visual clues to his personhood in a manner that would have likely been legible to European viewers. More importantly, the Grand Manner style effectively linked Mowqua to the respectable landed status of social elites in Europe. Although other portraits of the hong merchants produced by Chinnery, and even others by Lamqua, lack the attention to detail found in the Mowqua portrait, the schema of Mowqua’s portrait is maintained as the

123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
conventions of the interior column and Chinese symbols such as the flowers and porcelains are still evident (Figures 2-5). Though the other portraits of the merchants demonstrate a more abstracted depiction of this scene, the visual language in terms of composition and representation of objects are so similar that a standard convention must have been desired. As Mowqua was one of the richest hong merchants at this period and was evidently very conscious of sloughing off his low birth-rank, the fact that his portrait was much more elaborated in terms of displays of wealth than his contemporaries should not be a surprise. Furthermore, the popularity of this portrait convention among other hong merchants does suggest a mutual identification with the status conveyed by the image. The exchange that takes place with the portrait exceeds the circumscribed bounds of the image and its carefully articulated stage-set. Rather the portrait opens onto a politics of representation in which the historical human becomes part of a process through which knowledge is claimed and the social and physical environment is shaped.
Conclusion: Beyond the Boundaries of the Portrait: The Hong Merchant Identity and Global Flows

For a period in history where hong merchants were in charge of the trade in name, yet experiencing increasing financial difficulties, portraiture could act as one way of inscribing the self into a legacy of wealth and status, albeit imagined, as the Canton system and social structure slowly deteriorated. In the eighteenth century, hoppos who supported and implemented the indirect management of foreigners through hong merchants did not seek the acculturation of “barbarians” but rather focused on the regulation of their behaviour while in port. Problems arising from social contact were thus pre-empted by restricting movement and confining the outsiders in the foreign quarter in a single port. However, the cohong simply could not overcome the intense corruption on the Canton coast. The years from 1815 to 1830 were particularly dangerous for the cohong and for its function as a monopoly group as the monopolists’ privilege was slowly being eroded by traders outside of the hong group – that is, by the “outside merchants” – or “shopmen,” as they were called. The trade with shopmen had been technically illegal since the mid-eighteenth century and in 1817, there was a crackdown on the shopmen, who were again ordered to cease trade with the foreigners. The shopmen, however, were able to continue their trade by working under the name of the hong merchant firms, and in some cases, became part of the hong merchant’s firms. In most cases, the hong merchants merely covered for these outsiders, shipping their merchandise through the hong and marking it with a hong stamp. This system of trade seems counter-productive for the hong merchants, however an examination of the correspondences with foreigners reveals that the hong

125 White, “The Hong Merchants of Canton”, 110.
126 Ibid.
127 For more on the trade operated by shopmen, see ibid, 110-112.
merchants working under this system were the ones in strained financial circumstances. They therefore permitted themselves to be used by shopmen for whatever small amounts of money they could gain. The wealthier merchants, such as Howqua and Mowqua, never meddled with this outside business, but they would still suffer the consequences of this bleeding out of trade money.

Thus, with the increase of illicit trade with the shopmen, the Canton system was increasingly circumvented. The second wave of merchants, labeled “free merchants”, went on the offensive against Chinese regulations. As Michael Greenberg notes: “Armed with the theoretical knowledge of Adam Smith and his followers that a restrictive commercial system was irrational and ingenious, they formed a compact body, which found allies...to lead the frontal attack on the Canton system.” The initial successes of the Canton system merely camouflaged the corruption that was pulling the system apart. Because smuggling complimented the legal trade in tea, hoppos tended to tolerate it rather than stop it. It was more lucrative for hoppos to maintain revenues flowing into Beijing as well as their own pockets than to maintain strict codes and regulations. As a result, corruption continued to siphon more funds away from state and local coffers, which weakened the administrative apparatus.

In addition, hong merchants were also victims of the opium conflict. In 1821, the emperor sent Juan Yuan, a governor-general, to implement the campaign against opium in Canton. One of the methods he chose was to make an example of the chief hong merchant, Howqua. He noted that, “Among the hong merchants, Howqua is the chief. He has special responsibilities;

128 Ibid, 111.
129 Ibid.
130 The shopmen were one way that foreign traders were able to circumvent and undermine the established Canton system. In this way, the trade began to disintegrate internally and the hong merchants were helpless to further assaults by foreigners upon they system. Ibid.
132 Ibid.
the merchants of all nations are well acquainted with him. Now he is a conniver, as are all his colleagues. This is certainly despicable."\textsuperscript{133} As a result, Juan requested an imperial edict removing Howqua’s rank until the end of the opium crisis.\textsuperscript{134} During the early 1830s, as opium trading and silver smuggling intensified, the Canton officials were adamant that it was the duty of hong merchants to resolve these problems. The officials themselves may have been impotent in dealing with this traffic, or secretly profiting from it, yet they continued to issue directives ordering that smuggling operations be stopped.\textsuperscript{135} When Imperial Commissioner Lin arrived in Canton in 1839 to deal with the Opium conflict, hong merchants were scapegoated as the source of the problem: they were responsible for securing the compliance of foreigners with Chinese regulations, or suffer punishment. He repeatedly threatened hong merchants with death and the loss of all their property if they did not force foreigners to accede to his demands.\textsuperscript{136} Lin jailed several hong merchants and put Yung Yukuang of the Anchang hong out of business because several outside merchants had secretly traded with the foreigners under cover of his hong. In explaining this move, Lin charged that hong merchants had traded with the foreigners for so long that they had become like them in some ways and had established many secret connections with them and Lin scathingly applied the Confucian epithet “qian-shang” (奸商), or “treacherous merchants” to them.\textsuperscript{137} These “treacherous merchants” could bring no good to their society because their primary loyalty was to their own businesses.\textsuperscript{138} This comment is also revealing in

\textsuperscript{133} As quoted in White, “The Hong Merchants of Canton”, 129.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, 130.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid, 139.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid, 144.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid, 145.
\textsuperscript{138} In many ways, Lin was correct in his assessment. In order to be a successful hong merchant, one had to participate in a system which the commissioner deemed entirely corrupt. The hong merchants may not have directly smuggled opium, but the whole structure of their business enterprises demanded that they have a close relationship with foreign opium interests. The careers of Howqua and Mowqua demonstrate this system clearly. Until Mowqua’s death in 1835, his hong sold goods to Magniac and Company, a leading British Opium firm and to Hormuzjee Dorabjee, a Bombay opium dealer. Mowqua would have been unable to survive commercially had it not
that hong merchants were aligned with the character of foreign traders. From the perspective of the commissioner, hong merchants were not only on the bottom order of traditional society, but were now considered a threat against Chinese society at large. Thus, in the eyes of the Chinese, hong merchants were not respectable Chinese men, but were foreign subversive figures within society.

In conjunction with this crisis, the coastal defense administration was also having difficulties in terms of recognizing, analyzing, or responding to the social and economic changes that were taking place in Europe, North America, or other places in Asia. The control mechanisms and coastal defense networks became strained and less efficient as the combination of inner decay and outside pressure gradually ate away at the system until it could no longer sustain itself. At the same time, the large East India Companies were losing their hold on how foreigners conducted trade in Canton. By 1834, all of the large monopolistic companies had ceased sending ships to China with the result that the interests of private traders emerged as the dominant voice. The final blow came when foreigners gained control over the Pearl River with the arrival of the steamship in 1830. Steam power undermined the mechanisms upon which the Canton system was controlled, and thus effectively shifted the balance of power away from hoppo officials into foreign hands. With private interests more united and in control, and aided by the steamship, private traders were able to force the changes that they had long wanted to make. Once foreigners undermined the heart of the Canton system by overcoming the natural constraints of the Pearl River with the steamship, the system could not respond quickly enough.
or extensively enough to counteract that change and it collapsed.

I would thus suggest that the portraits of Howqua and Mowqua which have been the focus of this study and which were produced at this moment of crisis served as a means for hong merchants to recuperate their social image, if only for themselves and for those with whom they traded. As has been traced out through the course of this study, hong merchants were viewed by foreigners as different to the rest of the Chinese population. J. McLeod, a surgeon of Lord Amherst’s Embassy, wrote in 1816, “The traveler has also the advantage of viewing them as connected with Europeans, and of noticing their brightest efforts of imitative genius [emphasis mine].”

It is evidence of the important role of the hong portraits, of which Chinnery’s portrait of Howqua is an example, that this image of Howqua was exhibited at the Royal Academy of London in 1831. The significance of hong merchants to foreign trade is further attested to when after Howqua’s death in 1843, an American clipper was named in his honour and a valedictory poem was composed by an American trading associate. In addition, the retired China trader Nathan Dunn displayed a life-sized clay figure of Howqua in the “Chinese Museum” set up in Philadelphia and also a wax effigy of his was for many years on view at Madame Tussaud’s in London. Indeed, in the 1870 catalogue of Madame Tussaud’s, Howqua appeared between the Duke of Wellington and George Washington, and was said to have been “greatly distinguished among hong merchants for his exceedingly cheerful disposition and for his great attachment to the English nation.” For Westerners, this image of Howqua represented

145 Conner, *George Chinnet y*, 175.
146 Ibid.
not merely an elegant Chinese dignitary in his picturesque robes and insignia, but also an individual who embodied those qualities of traditional culture, business acumen, courtesy and diplomacy which Europeans had for centuries attributed to the Chinese people as a whole. This Western conception of China contained a large measure of fantasy and it did not long survive the disillusioning experience of the Opium Wars with their attendant propaganda, however, the image of Howqua served as a reassuring sign that the stereotype of the benevolent, sophisticated Chinese was not entirely misconceived.

The portraits of the *hong* merchants then complicate any attempt at a simplistic reading within Western Orientalist paradigms. The merchants actively participated and cultivated this new image both for themselves and for a foreign audience. Two major points emerge from my analysis: the first is that the "contact zone" of the Canton coast afforded *hong* merchants a unique opportunity to forge their own social identity, albeit in imagination and representation. Arjun Appadurai writes, "The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order." The second point is to be found in the Appadurai's concept of ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes, which he offers as a framework for examining the "new global cultural economy as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models." These various "scapes" suggest an alternative spatial rendering of the present, one that is not "fixed" as a typical landscape might be, but which is characterized by zones that are various, disjunctive, amorphous, and flowing. These are the "building blocks," Appadurai suggests, of contemporary imagined worlds. If the imagination is associated with the individual and with agency, then "the individual actor is the last locus of this

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149 Ibid, 32.
perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer."\textsuperscript{150} As Appadurai notes, these various "scapes" are not "objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors."\textsuperscript{151} Although Appadurai is writing on modern society, his ideas are still useful in examining the place of the hong portraits on the Canton coast during the nineteenth century. The influx of foreign merchants brought new ideas, new modes of articulation, and new ways of imagining the place of self in the world, which can be seen as an early case of the increasingly rapid pace and complexities of modern global interactions. Indeed, reference to the concept of Appadurai's "scapes" unlocks a perspective that helps us understand the ways in which the portraits of the merchants were made possible by transnational trade and the flow of artistic and cultural ideas. The new visual vocabulary first introduced by George Chinnery, and later taken up by Lamqua, offered an alternative mode of representation for the merchant that could be used to articulate a new identity; one that was not European, but was also not quite Chinese. This alternative mode of representation was effected by the "contact zone" on the Canton coast, and hong merchants, as significant actors in this transcultural exchange, became active subjects in the creation of an alternative definition of "Chinese" for not only themselves, but also in the minds of foreign traders. Lamqua's portrayal allowed the space of the portrait to expand on Mowqua's carefully cultivated identity. This identity was both a masquerade and a performance of status and class both in the imagination of the hong merchant and foreign traders who would see these images. The portraits of hong merchants thus embody diverse social

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid, 33.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
dimensions where the subject is embedded within a network of references to class, rank, and demeanour. From the use of the British Grand Manner with its European references for a Chinese subject, and then the references to the *hong* merchant mode of portraiture by other merchants, the *hong* portraits manufactured and occupied a space that could be the most effective vehicle for the affirmation of the merchants' personal ambitions and aspirations into a world that denied their claims for status. Using the medium of oil paint, the illusion of the image extended beyond the use of shadow and perspective as the portraits inscribed an identity for the *hong* merchant that was at once elusive and illusive.
Figures
Figure 1:

Lamqua
The Hong Merchant Mowqua
Oil on canvas
c1840s
63.5 x 48.3 cm
Collection of the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem.
Figure 2:

George Chinnery

*Portrait of Howqua*

80 x 65 cm

Oil on canvas

Collection of Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation.
Figure 3:

George Chinnery
*Portrait of Mowqua*
Oil on canvas
80 x 65 cm
Collection of Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation.
Figure 4:

Lamqua
*Portrait of Tenqua*
c. 1840s
Oil on canvas
63.5 x 48.3 cm
Collection of the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem.
Figure 5:

Anonymous
*Portrait of Hong Merchant*
c1840s
Collection of The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited
Figure 6: Map of Canton coast

Image taken from:
Van Dyke, Paul A. *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005. Use of image courtesy of Hong Kong University Press.
Figure 7:

Attributed to Youqua

*The Whampoa Anchorage*

c1850

Oil on canvas

41.4 x 73 cm

Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

This painting depicts the anchorage at Whampoa (Huangpu) Reach, with mud docks in the middle ground. Dane's Island is shown in the foreground and the Huangpu Pagoda can be seen in the distance.
Figure 8:

Attributed to Lamqua.

_The Hongs at Canton._

Oil on canvas.

1830-35.

45.8 x 58.4 cm.

Collection of Peabody Essex Museum of Salem.
Figure 9:

William Daniell
*The Early View of the Guangzhou Factories*
Oil on canvas.
1805-1806
90.5 x 126.8 cm.
Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art.
Anonymous.
*Portrait of the Painter Ni Zan*
Horizontal scroll, ink and color on paper
Yuan dynasty (1279-1368).
28.2 x 60.9 cm
Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan
Figure 11:

Lamqua
*George Chinnery*
Oil on canvas
1820s
Size unknown
Private collection
Figure 12:

Anonymous
Polly the Hat Maker’s Shop – China St New – Beside the Spanish Hong and Lamqua the Painter’s shop
C1830
Gouache on paper
28 x 37 cm
Collection of the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem.
Figure 13:

Engraving after Auguste Borget
*Lamqua in his Canton studio*
Published in *La Chine Ouverte*, 1845.
Figure 14:

William Hogarth
_Captain Coram_
1740
Oil on canvas
239 x 147.5 cm
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