

## **The China Trade and the Mystery of the First Chinese in the United States** **By Philip Chin**

2015 marks the 230<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first known Chinese to enter the United States as well as the start of direct international trading between the United States and China. Four Chinese sailors landed in Baltimore, Maryland on August 9, 1785 aboard the Pallas, the first American ship to sail goods from Guangzhou in Southern China to Baltimore. They followed in the wake of the Empress of China, the first American ship to trade with China that had sailed from New York to Guangzhou, with a cargo of 2,600 animal skins, fine camel cloth, cotton, and a few barrels of pepper, and 30 tons of American ginseng. They'd arrived back in New York on May 11, 1785 with a cargo of tea, nankeen, tableware, silk, and spice, after a trip of 14 months, 24 days. [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1750\\_us.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1750_us.htm)

To put 1785 into perspective, this was just four years after the American victory at Yorktown, Virginia and just two years after the Treaty of Paris that ended the American Revolutionary War and led to full international recognition of the United States as an independent country. The financial foundation of the American Republic was intimately tied into the history of China in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Before the American Revolution, direct trade had been severely limited by the British government that wanted all international trade to go through England first to make it easier for them to tax it as well as to give advantages to British industries. The British Parliament granted a trade monopoly to the British East India Company to facilitate this task. This restriction on trade as well as the taxes had been among the primary causes of the American Revolution, leading memorably among other things to East India Company tea from China being dumped into Boston Harbor. Trading had been completely disrupted by the Royal Navy's blockade of American shipping during the Revolutionary War. With peace finally agreed in 1783, the United States was just now fully entering into direct international trade with China.

Captain John O'Donnell, the owner of the Pallas, got married and retired from his life at sea after sixteen years of service with the British East India Company in India and China. He sold the ship and its cargo of goods and left his crew stranded. Captain O'Donnell, with his new wife, bought about 2,000 acres on the Baltimore waterfront, where he built an extravagant "oriental" mansion and named it "Canton," the old style name for Guangzhou. Canton is now the name of the historic neighborhood that grew around the mansion.

Among the stranded crew members were four Chinese and thirty-two others that were described as "lascars" a generic European term for sailors originating east of the Cape of Good Hope, generally from what is now India.

A gentleman farmer of Virginia, wrote to a friend from his Revolutionary War days, Lieutenant Colonel Tench Tilghman, who lived in Maryland, about the sale of the cargo of the Pallas.

Mount Vernon 17th Augt 1785

Dear Sir,

The Baltimore Advertiser of the 12th Instt announces the arrival of a Ship at that Port, immediately from China—and by an advertisement in the same Paper, I perceive that the Cargo is to be sold by public vendue, on the first of Octr next.

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You will readily perceive, My dear Sir my purchasing, or not, depends entirely upon the prices. If *great bargains* are to be had, I would supply myself agreeably to the list. If the prices do not fall *below* a cheap *retail* Sale, I would decline them altogether, or take such articles only (if cheaper than common) as are marked in the Margin of the Invoice.

- A Sett of the best Nankin Table China
- Ditto—best Evening China Cups & Saucers
- \*A Set of *large* blue & White China
- Dishes—say half a dozn—more or less
- \*1 Dozn *small* bowls—blue & White.
- \*6 Wash hand Guglets & Basons
- 6 large Mugs—or 3 Mugs & 3 Jugs.
- A Quartr Chest, *best* Hyson Tea.
- A Leagure [Leaguer] of Battavia Arrack if a Leagure is not large
- \*About 13 yds of good bla: Paduasoy
- \*A ps. of fine Muslin—plain
- \*1 ps. of Silk Handkerchiefs
- 12 ps. of the best Nankeens.
- 18 ps. of the Second quality—or
- coursest kind—for Servants. Go: Washington.

George Washington, Letter to Colonel Tench Tilghman, 17 August 1785,  
<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-03-02-0174>

George Washington, just four years away from becoming the first President of the United States in 1789, was like many American shoppers today. He couldn't resist looking for low-cost Chinese bargains. With two exceptions, all the products that Washington wanted were Chinese. Those exceptions were; arrack, an alcohol made in Southeast Asia, in this case from the Dutch colony of Batavia, now the city of Jakarta, Indonesia; muslin was a cloth made in India.

Hyson tea is a green tea that comes from China's Anhui Province. Paduasoy is a type of Chinese silk cloth. Nankeen is a type of yellow cotton cloth, originally from Nanjing, that was often used for making trousers during the American colonial period.

In his reply of August 25, 1785, Colonel Tilghman responded positively to Washington's letter and promised to look into purchasing the requested goods. He also added, "The Crew of this Ship are all Natives of India—most of them from the Coasts of Malabar and Coromandel, and are much of the Countenance and Complexion of your old Groom Wormely—There are four Chinese on Board, who are exactly the Indians of North America, in Colour, Feature—Hair and every external Mark.

Tench Tilghman, Letter to George Washington, 25 August 1785  
<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-03-02-0189>

George Washington's interest in foreign trade led him at some point to meet in person with Captain O'Donnell in 1785, then again at a later date to talk about American trade with China and India. President Washington was extremely interested in establishing further American trade links with China. In 1790, Captain O'Donnell wrote to President Washington, with an amusing gift that showed Washington was like some fashionable Americans of today,

O'Donnell presents his most respectful Compts to the President of the United States—intreats his Acceptance of the accompanying Indian Apparatus for Smoaking called “a

Hooka" which He took the Liberty to mention to Him, when He had the Honor to visit Him sometime since at New York.

The Bearer will shew the President's Servant it's use, and the Manner of preparing the Tobacco for Smoaking.

John O'Donnell, Letter to George Washington, 9 September 1790

<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0197>

It was no accident that during Washington's first presidential administration, by 1790, "... it was estimated that trade with China accounted for about one seventh of US imported goods. By 1792, the value of the American trade with China had surpassed that of Holland, France and Denmark, and was second only to Great Britain..."

<http://foundingfathersandchina.blogspot.com/2013/01/in-order-to-obtain-first-hand-knowledge.html>

America's international trade policy was simple in the early days of the republic. We wanted more of it, but couldn't easily get it on our own. The early United States had little economic or military influence and received very little consideration from other nations of the world. The only way the United States could function in the international system was by acting in the wake of the major European powers opening markets for them. China was a closed market system which only allowed limited opportunities for foreigners to trade there under very strict conditions.

Before the age of currency exchanges and international letters of credit like we have today, the primary method of international trade was by the exchange of precious metals such as gold or silver and goods. The insatiable demand of Europeans and Americans for Chinese silk, tea, porcelain, and the nankeen cloth that George Washington was so eager to buy, had led to a serious silver deficit in the Western world as that was the only currency that China would accept. To give readers an idea of the scale of this trade, ... "From the mid-17th Century around 28 million kilograms of silver was imported to China." This was mainly silver from European countries and their colonies. China would rarely buy anything from the West in return. [http://h2g2.com/edited\\_entry/A21388322](http://h2g2.com/edited_entry/A21388322) They certainly showed little interest in buying the products made in the West or in buying raw commodities that might have led to a more balanced trade.

In 1792, a British diplomatic delegation, led by Lord George Macartney, went to meet with the Qianlong Emperor in Jehol, the Qing summer palace outside of Beijing, now known as Chengde, to press for more trade and to open full diplomatic relations.

The British wanted trade opened up from just the single port of Guangzhou to which to which all foreigners had been restricted by Emperor Qialong in 1757 to limit barbarian influence in China. Any foreigner that stepped a single foot outside the area could expect to be expelled from China at best or executed at worst. This was considered quite onerous by Americans and Europeans alike. The British asked for a small island near Hangzhou to establish another unarmed trading post where warehouses could be built and trading ships provisioned and repaired. They also asked for the expansion of merchant territory they'd been granted near Macao as part of the Guangzhou concession to build more houses. They wanted permission to open an embassy in Beijing. They also wanted to be free to propagate Christianity across China through missionaries.

The delegation failed to fulfill any of these goals, although from their description the emperor received them affably enough in Jehol but relations turned chilly after returning to receive the advice of his advisers in Beijing. Certainly the gifts that the embassy brought for the emperor failed to impress the Chinese; among other things coarse British cloth, Irish topin, and the finest British carpets that simply didn't compare to Chinese textiles. Even the mechanical clocks that the British brought were regarded as little more than toys.

<http://ebook.lib.hku.hk/CTWE/B36599578/>

There were fundamental differences in how each side viewed the world. The British by this time expected to be treated at least as equals by all powers if not superiors. China by reason of its long history viewed itself as the center of the world to which barbarian tribes had offered tribute and submission to from time immemorial. This was a view of the world that the British Empire would assume for themselves a hundred years later when the "sun never set" on the British Empire. There was not enough mutual understanding or willingness to try to understand each other. Emperor Qianlong sent a personal missive to King George III addressing each of the points, some of which are listed below. It closed with the traditional ending of all missives from the Chinese Emperor to his subjects in China, "Tremblingly obey and show no negligence!" The reaction in London to this high-handed rejection can be imagined but it probably wasn't just of astonishment at the tone.

Yesterday your Ambassador petitioned my Ministers to memorialize me regarding your trade with China, but his proposal is not consistent with our dynastic usage and cannot be entertained. Hitherto, all European nations, including your own country's barbarian merchants, have carried on their trade with our Celestial Empire at Canton. Such has been the procedure for many years, although our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There was therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. But as the tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favor, that foreign honges [groups of merchants] should be established at Canton, so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence. But your Ambassador has now put forward new requests which completely fail to recognize the Throne's principle to "treat strangers from afar with indulgence," and to exercise a pacifying control over barbarian tribes, the world over. Moreover, our dynasty, swaying the myriad races of the globe, extends the same benevolence towards all. Your England is not the only nation trading at Canton. If other nations, following your bad example, wrongfully importune my ear with further impossible requests, how will it be possible for me to treat them with easy indulgence?

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...England is not the only barbarian land which wishes to establish ... trade with our Empire: supposing that other nations were all to imitate your evil example and beseech me to present them each and all with a site for trading purposes, how could I possibly comply? This also is a flagrant infringement of the usage of my Empire and cannot possibly be entertained.

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...The distinction between Chinese and barbarian is most strict, and your Ambassador's request that barbarians shall be given full liberty to disseminate their religion is utterly unreasonable.

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It may be, O King, that the above proposals have been wantonly made by your Ambassador on his own responsibility, or peradventure you yourself are ignorant of our dynastic regulations and had no intention of transgressing them when you expressed these wild ideas and hopes.... If, after the receipt of this explicit decree, you lightly give ear to the representations of your subordinates and allow your barbarian merchants to proceed to Chêkiang and Tientsin [two Chinese port cities], with the object of landing and trading there, the ordinances of my Celestial Empire are strict in the extreme, and the local officials, both civil and military, are bound reverently to obey the law of the land. Should your vessels touch the shore, your merchants will assuredly never be permitted to land or to reside there, but will be subject to instant expulsion. In that event your barbarian merchants will have had a long journey for nothing. Do not say that you were not warned in due time! Tremblingly obey and show no negligence! A special mandate!

<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/2c/texts/1792QianlongLetterGeorgeIII.htm>

The British government gave up on any further official missions to open up China to the West. They left it up to private business to discover what the Chinese would pay silver for. Soon enough, by 1817, the British East India Company, discovered that the Chinese would pay silver for opium, grown by the East India Company plantations in India as a monopoly. The drug had been illegal in China since 1729 due to recognition of its addictive properties. The American merchants soon joined in on the trade as well, shipping Turkish and Persian opium to China. Many a great East Coast fortune of America's most prominent families was built partly by the illegal drug trade.

The Chinese "War on Drugs" proved to be as much of a costly failure as every such war on addictive substances has so far proven to be. Despite the efforts of the Qing government addiction became widespread as well as official corruption. The attempt to repress the trade by striking at foreign merchants led to war with Britain in the First Opium War (1839-1842). Later there were attempts by Britain and other European powers, such as France, to divide China into colonies. This was resisted by the United States and rival European powers. None of the Europeans wanted to allow another European power to be strengthened, possibly at their expense, and they had military and financial powers that the others were bound to respect. The territorial concessions forced upon China were then comparatively limited. The United States, without much economic power or influence in world affairs by 1842, favored what they called an "Open Door Policy" to prevent American merchants from being cut out of China entirely, as would have happened in a colonized and closed China. The China trade was just too valuable and important for the American economy just as it is becoming today.

What changed between 1793 when Britain was roughly equal in power and economic might with China to 1842 when Britain proved to be overwhelmingly superior? The clue could have been seen in the gifts the British gave to the Chinese in 1793. The cloth and clock parts were made by machines driven by watermills. Soon, those watermills were driven by steam engines, as were the factories that made guns cheaper and faster than any pre-industrial society could make them. The Industrial Revolution meant that the pace of industrial innovation and replacement gave the British a decisive edge in both technology and production fifty years after the failure of the Macartney embassy. The first ocean-going iron warship of the East India Company, the *Nemesis*, destroyed and forced the surrender of much of the Chinese fleet in Southern China. China was forced to give up Hong Kong as a British colony and pay tons of silver as compensation for the war and for destroying the opium of the European merchants, the first of many humiliations that would pile up over the next century.

While it is fascinating to see the great sweep of history and trade and tragedy that swept the globe let's return to our concern about the minor players at the beginning of these great changes. What happened to the Chinese and Indian sailors stranded in the United States by Captain O'Donnell's sudden retirement? Not only were these the first Chinese documented in the United States as a country, but possibly also the first Indian Hindus and/or Indian Muslims as well.

The next we hear of the sailors is the response at the end of 1785 to a petition submitted to the Continental Congress asking for the money to help transport them to China.

Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789  
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 30, 1785.  
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Congress assembled. Present as before.

The committee [consisting of Mr. Rufus King, Mr. William Samuel Johnson and Mr. Nathan Danel to whom was referred the instruction of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania to their Delegates in Congress, on

the subject of Sic Keesar and other natives of India and China praying for a support while within the U. S. and a passage at the public Expence to China report--

That from the facts stated by the memorialists it would be inexpedient for Congress to comply with their request.

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:10:./temp/~ammem\\_rRDG::](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:10:./temp/~ammem_rRDG::)

Given the chronic inability of the Continental Congress to pay for much of anything under the Articles of Confederation, it probably isn't a surprise that the request was turned down. One of the major reforms of the United States Constitution of 1789 was giving the United States Congress the power to tax, rather than just relying on goodness of less than generous state governments to voluntarily contribute money to the central government.

This leaves us with several historical mysteries that readers might answer.

What was the ultimate fate of these sailors?

What happened to them between the time they landed in Baltimore in August 1785 and the refusal of the Continental Congress to help them in December 1785?

Why were these sailors still in the United States at the end of December 1785? Couldn't they have signed aboard to crew a ship going back to Asia?

What inspired them to petition the Continental Congress for money?

Why were the Continental Congress delegates of Pennsylvania petitioning on their behalf on instructions from their state government? Why wasn't Maryland involved, the state where the sailors had originally landed?

Sic Keesar, the only name mentioned in the Continental Congress entry, doesn't resemble any known Chinese name. Who was he?

What documents exist in the Pennsylvania state archives regarding this exchange with the Continental Congress? What records exist about the Pennsylvania petition in the archives of the Continental Congress? Do those papers include more personal details about the sailors?

The challenge is there for someone with the resources and time to take up and discover. Somewhere in an archive covering August 1785 to December 1785 are some answers.

3/11/15