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Private Enterprise and the China Trade

*Merchants and Markets
in Europe, 1700-1750*

MEIKE VON BRESCIUS

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Private Enterprise and the China Trade

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By

Meike von Brescius



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To my parents



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Introduction: Contextualising the Early China Trade in Europe

When Vasco da Gama sailed around the Cape of Good Hope to reach India in 1497–1498, he had not only discovered a new sea route between Europe and Asia but also opened up a new world of commerce that would shape European consumption, manufacturing, and ultimately industrial production over the following centuries. While goods from the East had reached Europe much earlier via the continental ‘silk roads’, the direct maritime trade of European powers with the East Indies began at the end of the fifteenth century. At first, the Spanish and Portuguese crowns established a monopoly for the lucrative maritime spice trade with the Far East. Soon other powers, including the French, Dutch, and English, aspired to secure a share of the immense profits that the imports of eastern consumer goods promised to any trading nation in Europe.¹ Several European countries organised the commercial exchange through the establishment of East India Companies, first founded by the British in 1600 and followed by the Dutch in 1602 with the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC).² Private merchants were responsible for launching these enterprises, and sought royal protection and national monopolies for all direct trade between their respective states and the whole of Asia.³

In contrast to the trade that developed between the North American colonies and the old-world centres of commerce, chief among them Amsterdam and London, Europe’s maritime trade to the East was arguably more regulated,

1 Bruijn and Gaastra (eds), *Ships, Sailors and Spices*; Flores, ‘The Iberian Empires’; Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*; Das Gupta, *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant*.

2 In what constitutes a vast and diverse field of scholarship, the question of whether joint-stock chartered companies were the most effective and appropriate organisational form to conduct long-distance trade (or not) continues to prompt new scholarship. Carlos and Nicholas, ‘Theory and History’; Pettigrew and Veevers (eds), *The Corporation as a Protagonist*; Roy, *The East India Company*; Mishra, *A Business of State*.

3 Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, p. 10. By contrast, the French Compagnie des Indes Orientales, founded in 1664, was initially launched as a state enterprise during the reign of Louis XIV. For a fine study on the first and subsequent French East India Companies, see Haudrère, *La Compagnie française des Indes*; and idem, ‘The French India Company’. New scholarship on the French trading companies has put more emphasis on French private trade in Asia and smuggling in Europe – see Gottmann, *Global Trade, Smuggling, and the Making of Economic Liberalism*; Kwass, *Contraband*.

exclusive, and hierarchical.⁴ However, the chartered trading Companies succeeded in keeping outsiders from accessing their overseas infrastructure and home markets with only very limited success.⁵ Individual East India Company directors may have sought to defend their national monopolies for trade in Asian goods in public, not least by adopting a uniform mercantilist rhetoric and sometimes through robust intervention. Yet, such national monopolies always remained incomplete and, as this book demonstrates, even deliberately so. One key defect or asset, depending on the viewpoint, of the East India trading Companies, which proliferated in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was that they extended and partially ceded their monopoly privileges to their own employees.⁶ Private trade, a portmanteau term for a large, but also largely invisible commerce of Company employees and their allies in Europe and Asia, both undermined and underpinned Company fortunes.

This book offers original reflections on the phenomenon of private trade by investigating its practices, reach, and impact for the development of European consumer markets and for the overall expansion of the China trade in the first half of the eighteenth century. With a group of influential actors in view, acting as gatekeepers and mobile facilitators for the acquisition and distribution of Chinese goods, this book presents a history of economic life populated by individuals rather than by competing states or empires. The picture that emerges from the scrutiny and comparison of merchant letters, bills, packing lists, and ledgers exposes significant blind spots at the intersection of maritime and landlocked historiographies of commerce. European trade with China, traditionally characterised as the most heavily regulated trade of the Asian trading system, lends itself to a revisionary investigation of informal commerce and Company interests. Indeed, this book shows how competition and collusion within and from outside Company structures played a significant yet underestimated role for the functioning of individual Companies and for the expansion of trade in Asia by revealing the level of networked entrepreneurship in play.⁷

• • •

4 Differences have been overstated; new research crucially points to the many links and key similarities between the Atlantic and Eastern trading worlds, see, for instance, Bowen et al. (eds), *Britain's Oceanic Empire*, esp. introduction.

5 Stern, 'Company, State, and Empire', esp. pp. 132–139.

6 Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*, pp. 1f.

7 Antunes and Polónia (eds), *Beyond Empires*; Nierstrasz, *Rivalry of Trade in Tea and Textiles*.

From the early seventeenth century, Europe's East India Companies increasingly strove to establish direct trade with China. Seeking to replace the Portuguese, who had settled in Macao, on the fringes of the middle kingdom, the Dutch VOC tried to secure access to this South Chinese port in an ultimately unsuccessful attack in 1622. The English Company, in contrast, aspired to gain a foothold on the South China coast by more peaceful means.⁸ However, their attempts to establish a regular trade and presence in China proved futile until the late seventeenth century, when Canton emerged as the most open and flexible port for foreigners. Initially, the representatives of each foreign ship had to negotiate their terms separately with Chinese officials and merchants. This process required tact, diplomacy, and flexibility on both sides.⁹ Only after 1700 did Europeans begin a more systematic, yearly trade with the Middle Kingdom via Canton, which eventually became the only trading place open to foreigners.

Yet, during the first decades of the eighteenth century, the precise mechanisms, rules, and conventions that defined the later characteristics of the famous 'Canton system' were still incipient.¹⁰ What thus unfolded was a period of experimentation and familiarisation with the opportunities and limits of trade with China – in both Asia *and* Europe. Crucially, this phase of experimentation was shaped not only by the larger Companies, such as the English East India Company (EIC), although the latter certainly became the dominant player in the long run.¹¹ On the contrary, in the first decades of the eighteenth century, a number of smaller, rival Companies founded in different European states were leaving their imprint on the landscape of Sino-European commerce.¹² Some were there to stay, others disappeared under political pressure. But all of these new Companies were populated by an important if little-studied group of actors who will stand at the heart of this book: British interlopers – renegades, political refugees, speculators, and transients from all walks of life.

8 Souza, *The Survival of Empire*, p. 21; on the parallel development of the Manila-based trade between the Americas and China, see Tremml-Werner, *Spain, China, and Japan in Manila*.

9 On the early days of Sino-European trade in Canton, see Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, esp. p. 8; Cheong, 'The Age of Suqua', pp. 217–218.

10 Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton*, p. 65.

11 The Dutch first sought to engage in direct trade with China, yet ultimately opted to have the Chinese bring their goods (such as tea) to their base in Batavia until direct trade through Canton was resumed in 1729; see Liu, *The Dutch East India Company's Tea Trade with China*, p. 3.

12 'Between 1719 and 1820 the tea trade increased by a factor of 23', and the small Companies that specialised in the China trade played an important role in the process. See Müller, 'Interloper', p. 83.

This book traces the commercial careers and informal activities of these British interlopers within the smaller East India Companies to explore the development and expansion of markets for Chinese export wares in Britain and continental Europe during the period from 1700 to c. 1750. While the fledgling trading conventions and encounters of European traders with Chinese officials and hong merchants in Canton have been thoroughly studied in important works,¹³ this book provides the first extensive study on the European context of the early China trade. So far, we lack a detailed account of the encounter between Company and private-trade mechanisms and practices, and of the multilateral networks that linked the European importers of Chinese consumer goods to individual consumers and to the world of wholesale and retail trade more broadly. Particular emphasis is given in this work to re-evaluating the crucial significance of *private-trade* activities in the development of Chinese markets in northwestern Europe; indeed, I provide a revisionary understanding of the complex – and by no means only antagonistic – interplay between private and Company trade with China.

The approach taken resonates with recent scholarship in Company studies, global microhistory, and the new business history as this study explores patterns and characteristics of a trading system from the perspective of the individual trader.¹⁴ By looking at a group of British-born China traders who were employed by multiple Companies over the course of their career, vital cross-Company phenomena and connections come to the fore. The reader will discover the opportunities and incongruities of an expanding trade from the perspective of those who moved back and forth between Europe and China, between Britain and the continent, and between land and the sea. By studying the ‘amphibious worlds’¹⁵ and business portfolios of British interlopers, the work details how private trade changed the European geographies of trade and pushed for the integration of markets. This, in turn, laid the foundation for the spectacular growth in trade that set in towards the middle decades of

13 Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*; Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao*; Van Dyke and Mok, *Images of the Canton Factories*; Hanser, *Mr Smith Goes to China*; Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton*; Hellman, *This House is not a Home*; on Sino-European encounters more broadly, see Wills Jr. (ed.), *China and Maritime Europe*.

14 See the call for a deep empirical engagement with non-corporate forms of business organisation in Gelderblom and Trivellato, ‘The Business History of the Preindustrial World’; see also Trivellato’s influential article ‘Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory?’. Company studies already profit a great deal from the new interest in merchant networks and family history. See, for instance, Hanser, *Mr Smith Goes to China*; Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks*; Finn and Smith (eds), *East India Company at Home*.

15 Lemire, ‘“Men of the World”’, p. 290.

the eighteenth century. As a key contribution, the study shows how informal commerce in all shapes and sizes underpinned the building of markets and helped to test and implement key practices in the China trade – especially in the areas of finance, purchase, Company auctions, and wholesale distribution. Interlopers who formed an experienced and mobile workforce played a paramount role in this story.

To understand the particular geographical setup of this study, it is important to note that in the aftermath of the Acts of Union between England and Scotland in 1707, the epicentre of British interloping activities moved to the European continent.¹⁶ Britons who did not find favour with the EIC increasingly sought other alliances across the English Channel.¹⁷ These interlopers, who included a large number of Jacobite refugees from Ireland and Scotland, as well as English Catholics and other marginalised groups, were soon collaborating with merchants and financiers in France, Spain and the Low Countries and further afield to pursue their overseas interests. To be sure, going East was then only one of many viable options for enterprising Britons to participate in overseas trade.¹⁸ However, during the period from the 1710s and early 1740s, China in particular attracted a significant number of border-crossers. These individuals moved relatively seamlessly between the worlds of interloping and high finance, shipping, and share-trading.¹⁹ This opportunity-seeking across political and geographical boundaries led to numerous transnational alliances and enterprises for Europe's trade with China.²⁰ During the war of the Spanish succession (1701–1714), private merchants based at St-Malo (including Irish nationals) bought licences from the official, but heavily indebted French

16 After a period of conflict, the New Company merged with the old East India Company to form the entity that is best known today, the Honourable East India Company (EIC). Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, vol. 1, pp. 16of.; the Darien Company, or The Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies, did not actually manage to send any ships to the East Indies.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

18 On the entanglements of Scots with the world of colonial plantations and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, see Hancock, *Citizens of the World*; on British interest abroad, see Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies*; on British sailors participating in global trade and consumer cultures, see Lemire, 'Men of the World'. British subjects also formed large trading communities throughout European centres of maritime commerce; for the Iberian Peninsula, see Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust*, esp. pp. 33–40.

19 Share-trading and interloping as connected practices have received little attention to date. For an exception, see Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*.

20 On the deployment of a 'transnational' perspective in early modern Europe, prior to the formation of modern nation states, see Krieger, '“Transnationalität” in vornationaler Zeit?'; see also Hofmeyr in Bayly et al., 'AHR Conversation', p. 1444.

Company in order to conduct trade in the East.²¹ Two other players appeared on the scene in 1730 and 1731 respectively: the Danish and Swedish East India Companies. Both were long-lived enterprises that grew out of private transnational initiatives.²² Indeed, such chartered Companies typically emerged out of private trading schemes of European and British merchants and were given royal protection only retrospectively. This was the case, for instance, with the Ostend Company, founded in 1722, whose merchants had been sending ships to China yearly since 1717.²³

Each of those Companies has attracted significant scholarly and popular scrutiny in the past. Over recent years, however, there has been a remarkable growth in publications that seek to fit those Companies into new frameworks and global narratives.²⁴ An interest in the Companies' relationship to the central state under whose protection they were respectively formed; their own state-like quality and demeanour; and the concrete practices of empire-building at home and abroad inform this recent outburst of works on the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English trading ventures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁵ While not the only new line of enquiry, one of the most convincing attempts at stripping away some of the traditional attributes of chartered Companies as national players in a mercantilist system of overseas monopolies comes from authors with a background in the political economy of early modern states rather than in business history.²⁶ William A. Pettigrew and David Veevers have recently argued that overseas trading Companies should no longer be understood in a predominantly national framework – nor, indeed, as entirely distinct and competing enterprises that followed 'separate developmental trajectories in different cities, regions, and oceanic basins'.²⁷ Likewise, it is that old obsession of European scholars with

21 Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, vol. 1, p. 166.

22 Already during the 1720s, a long list of foreign projectors had approached the Swedish monarch with similarly ambitious schemes, yet without gaining his final approval. See Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, pp. 36–39; Müller, 'Interloper', esp. pp. 74–81; Diller, *Die Dänen in Indien, Südostasien und China*, pp. 116–118. The Danish Asiatic Company had existed in different incarnations since the seventeenth century. Glamann, 'The Danish Asiatic Company'.

23 Parmentier, 'The Private East India Venture from Ostend'.

24 Antunes, 'Free Agents and Formal Institutions'; Stern, *The Company-State*; Erickson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*; Phillips and Sharman, *Outsourcing Empire*; Heijmans, *The Agency of Empire*.

25 Antunes, 'From Binary Narratives to Diversified Tales'.

26 Pettigrew and Veevers (eds), *The Corporation as a Protagonist*; Stern, 'History and Historiography of the English East India Company'.

27 Pettigrew and Veevers, 'Introduction', in idem (eds), *The Corporation as a Protagonist*, p. 12.

the overseas trading 'corporation's exclusive, monopolistic veneer' that new interpretations seek to overcome, either by dismissing it as the Companies' own 'mercantilist posturing in print',²⁸ or by pointing to the talk of monopolies as merely an economic promise or ideal that remained 'imperfect' in reality.²⁹

While this study, too, is critical of the national 'container' models in which the Companies tended to be locked and analysed, it is *not* concerned with patterns and practices of empire-building or indeed with the history of the trading corporation as an institutional and legal, global type. Rather, it intervenes in the discussion by analysing the informal networks and trading activities of British-born China traders who represented different and changing East India Companies during their careers. I prove not only that there were close links between the managing elites of the different East India Companies, but that these informal networks also profoundly affected the running of the China trade in the first half of the eighteenth century in general and the development of European markets for Chinese goods in particular.

This, then, is the first monograph on the European end of the China trade written from the perspective of a group of individual traders, and hence not from the vantage point of a specific company. Apart from the work of Conrad Gill in 1961 and the more recent studies of Hanna Hodacs and Leos Müller and the author's own 2016 doctoral thesis, the literature on the different East India Companies remains largely silent about the key role that individual Company employees who moved between Asia and Europe played in the development of increasingly integrated European markets for Chinese imports such as tea, porcelain, and silks in the early 1700s.³⁰ It offers significant new insights into the European trading conditions that Company merchants and mariners developed in order to profit from the direct trade with Canton. By dwelling on the transnational European context of the China trade as my chosen unit of analysis, I move away from the traditional Company literature with its emphasis on national interests and political concerns.

This book breaks new ground with its focus on the early and formative period of the China trade. The existing body of literature that does address private enterprise in the Canton trade has, to date, by and large focused on the latter part of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries: the entrance of the Americans into the China trade, the political implications of the opium trade between Bengal and China, the twilight of the EIC monopoly, and the

28 Ibid., p. 11.

29 Nierstrasz, *Rivalry in Trade for Tea and Textiles*, pp. 20f.

30 von Brescius, 'Private Enterprise and the China Trade'; Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*; Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North*; Hodacs and Müller, 'Chests, Tubs, and Lots of Tea'.

ways in which the ideology of 'free trade' became a matter of national importance and, ultimately, a *casus belli*.³¹ By tracing the transnational informal networks of British-born China traders in Europe, this work uncovers the many and often hidden mechanisms by means of which money, goods, and information were entering and leaving the circuit of trade with China and were transferred between the Companies. A history of British interlopers and their extended connections also sheds light on certain places on the map that have received little or no attention from Company historians so far. These, however, were of vital importance for the organisation of private trade during the first half of the eighteenth century, as is particularly demonstrated for the case of Cadiz, the silver city of Europe.

Against preconceived ideas, I portray these interloping China traders not merely as collective importers of foreign luxuries, but as independent merchants ingeniously operating within European commercial arenas. Their commitment to East India goods, I demonstrate, covered a range of activities: wholesale buying and selling, brokering, smuggling, and the fulfilment of special commissions for sedentary merchants and individual consumers alike. In the realm of finance, private traders acted as money lenders, traded in bills, and organised provisions and bullion for outward journeys to China for themselves as well as for friends and colleagues in other Companies. In other words, private trade encompassed a large range of activities that took place outside Asia, yet which were linked to Canton, as Company servants enjoyed direct access to goods and commercial information in that port. This book, then, brings the figure of the interloper squarely into the story of British commercial expansion.³² Yet, it does so by revealing the unforeseen consequences that the quest for private trade had for the creation of a pan-European trading realm for Chinese goods.

Working on Sino-European private trade means working with scattered and largely unsystematic data. The art of reading and contextualising fragments

31 A classic is Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China*. For more recent studies on the entry of the Americans, see Fichter, *So Great a Profit*; Sturm-Lind, *Actors of Globalization*. For a few recent exceptions, see Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao*; Van Dyke and Schopp (eds), *The Private Side of the Canton Trade*; Hellman, *This House is not a Home*, although the latter's strength lies not in its treatment of business, but rather the social aspects of life in Canton and Macao.

32 There are alternatives to the notion of the interloper in the recent literature. Its usage, though, seems primarily geared towards understanding informal networks as an element of empire-building overseas. See, especially, Antunes 'Free Agents and Formal Institutions'; the concept has been taken up by several contributors in Polónia and Antunes (eds), *Mechanisms of Global Empire Building*.

is particularly well developed in the literature on overseas trading networks and merchant practices. The field is made up of a community of scholars with global interests and imaginaries who have developed a sophisticated apparatus of concepts and approaches that this study can build on and with which its findings can be compared.³³ The book's narrative and insights emerge to no small degree from the correspondence and business papers of individual Scottish-born traders and those larger networks of business partners, clients, colleagues, and kin with whom they corresponded frequently, and in many cases over decades. Through an intimate understanding of the trading activities of people such as Charles Irvine of Drum (1693–1771) and Colin Campbell of Moy (1686–1757), Scots who were key figures in the development of the Swedish East India Company (SEIC) and its trade in China, we get a good sense of how this particular Company was run, but also and perhaps more importantly, we can see the full spectrum of activities and motivations that governed formal and informal commercial practices across the Companies.³⁴

In what follows, I first introduce the main commercial actors of my study, the Canton supercargoes, both in their official role as Company servants and as private entrepreneurs, by critically discussing their place in the existing body of literature. I then move on to address the areas and research questions to which this book directly contributes by discussing the concepts and historiographical developments that have informed my analysis. I then return to the figure of the supercargo and situate them in a larger setting of interloping activities by discussing the cross-company and cross-border phenomena and practices that lie at the heart of this work. Finally, my source base is presented, along with a short overview of the contents of each chapter.

1 Commercial Polymaths: Supercargoes and Interlopers in the China Trade

The success of the smaller 'interloping' East India Companies in the first half of the eighteenth century was to a great extent due to their ability to absorb

33 Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean*; idem, 'Social Capital'; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*; Hanser, *Mr Smith Goes to China*; Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*.

34 On the Irvine-Rose family network, interloping and issues of social reproduction, see Hanna Hodacs, 'Keeping It in the Family', pp. 567–595; Catterall, 'The Worlds of John Rose', pp. 67–94.

capital and expertise from their more mature competitors.³⁵ Investors from St-Malo, the Low Countries, the German-speaking states, Sweden, and Denmark entered the China trade at a critical moment. They formed state-protected Companies that could offer employment and unique financial prospects to a highly skilled and experienced workforce from Britain, France, and Holland, who were willing to trade under a foreign flag. The significant migration of merchants and mariners (as interlopers) between the Companies created lasting and powerful connections between those corporations, while those connections were often established at a personal, rather than an official, level.

I focus in particular on a group of maritime traders with special status and authority in the China trade. More than any other long-distance trade at the time, the China trade relied on mobile agents called ‘supercargoes’³⁶ who accompanied the Company ships and their cargoes from Europe to China and back.³⁷ In contrast to the Company factors appointed to the trading outposts in other parts of Asia who remained at their station often for years in a row, supercargoes, often members of the commercial elite in Europe, were committed to a particular ship or fleet: they were business *travellers*.

The management of Company affairs in China lay in the hands of these supercargoes. This chiefly involved the buying and selling of merchandise on behalf of the employing Company. Even though supercargoes were furnished with fairly detailed instructions about the kinds of products the Company managers hoped they would purchase in China on their behalf, the realities of trade gave them a great deal of freedom to disregard such recommendations. As long as their decisions were deemed to be in the interest of their employers in Europe, supercargoes enjoyed the greatest esteem.³⁸ Supercargoes were also endowed with special privileges to engage in private trade.³⁹ Pre-1750, they mostly invested in Asian goods for the European market. In the second half

35 In the literature, the smaller companies are sometimes characterised as interlopers, a convention that echoes contemporary parlance in pamphlets and legislation put into circulation by the older and more powerful Companies in England, the Netherlands, and France. Müller, ‘Interloper’; Parmentier, ‘The Private East India Ventures’; Glamann, ‘The Danish Asiatic Company’; Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North*; see also Gottmann and Stern (eds), *Journal of World History*, Special Issue: Crossing Companies.

36 Supercargoes is a historical term that came into use at some point in the late seventeenth century but was probably not generally understood outside Euro-Asian trading circles. Malachy Postlethwayt devoted a longer section to the term to explain its context and meaning in his widely read *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*.

37 Dermigny, *La Chine et l’Occident*, vol. 1, pp. 359–364.

38 This point is developed more fully in von Brescius, ‘Worlds Apart?’.

39 For the context of the EIC, see Pritchard, ‘Private Trade’, p. 120.

of the century, in contrast, when supercargoes were expected to stay on the South China coast for years and, in some instances, for decades in the employ of a Company, their entrepreneurial focus changed. As has been noted by historians of private trade, supercargoes then increasingly developed their stakes in the intra-Asian trade and left the private trade to Europe to the commanders of the Company ships.⁴⁰

To be sure, not all British interlopers within the smaller East India Companies managed to be appointed to the privileged position of supercargo; some remained assistants, while others were working as navigating officers or in inferior stations within the Company hierarchy.⁴¹ Yet, a critical number of these mobile fortune-seekers sailing under foreign flag ultimately reached this key position on board, often owing to their previous commercial experience and expertise in other trading Companies. While the concept of commercial interlopers is more easily grasped, the status and duties of a supercargo in Canton require a more thorough explanation and historiographic critique.

Supercargoes, despite their power and influence, have not attracted much scholarly treatment over the last decades.⁴² They are often mentioned in passing in the China trade literature and in studies on Chinese export wares, but rarely form the subject of independent enquiry.⁴³ To my knowledge, there exists only a single, short monograph about a British supercargo/captain active in the period of this study, Conrad Gill's *Merchants and Mariners*. This pioneering work concentrated on Thomas Hall, a British interloper in the Ostend Company who returned to England and became one of the chief ship's husbands for the EIC. Published in 1961, it exposed the various strands of private business in which Hall was engaged at the time of his employment in the merchant fleet of the EIC and Ostend Companies, acting as a ship-owner,

40 This pattern in trade only changed when one company after another required their supercargoes to stay in or around Canton for longer periods of time in the 1750s. On the expanding trade between India and China in the 1760s onwards, see Hanser, *Mr Smith Goes to China*, esp. the introduction. In the English East India Company, the private trade of supercargoes in goods was curtailed earlier according to Earl H. Pritchard. See idem., 'Private Trade', p. 120.

41 Supercargoes who came to a position to influence Company appointments, Colin Campbell and Charles Irvine among them, provided lower-level positions and negotiated privileges for a long list of kinsmen and the offspring of business partners. See Chapter 1 in this book.

42 Most of the more recent engagements build on Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company*.

43 Supercargoes as commercial actors, figure, for instance, in Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*, as well as in the oeuvre of Paul A. Van Dyke, for instance, in idem, *The Canton Trade*.

speculator, re-exporter, and tea merchant. Gill successfully brought together the worlds of the seafaring community with those of sedentary merchants. While I agree with Gill's argument that both worlds were intertwined, this book differs in both focus and frame of analysis. Instead of attempting to write the biography of a single merchant, I am concerned with linking the loosely connected lives of British interlopers to larger commercial developments of the time. In particular, the reappraisal and contextualisation of informal cross-company networks will take centre stage.

In terms of family background, trading activities, and privileges within the Company trading system, China supercargoes were closely connected to another group of maritime traders who were active in the Euro-Asian trade: the commanders of East India ships. These have received a great deal more attention from scholars in the past.⁴⁴ As men-on-the-move, supercargoes and commanders encountered similar trading opportunities in Asia and Europe and both groups made ample use of their private-trade privileges on board Company ships. Taken together, the majority of the private-trade goods on board Company ships were transported from China to Europe and vice versa on account of these two elite groups of maritime traders, sometimes in partnership.⁴⁵ A recent study of English Company commanders has shown that members of this 'small maritime aristocracy' acted as entrepreneurs and vital connectors in expanding markets in Britain and Asia.⁴⁶ H. V. Bowen's work was path breaking. He presented 'the first detailed reconstruction and analysis of the extensive private activities conducted by the commanders of [English] East Indiamen'.⁴⁷ Although Bowen's study focused on a later period and was mostly concerned with EIC commanders who serviced the routes between Britain and various trading posts on the Indian subcontinent, his study provides ample opportunities for comparisons with the privileged place of the supercargoes in the China trade before 1760.

This book takes up Bowen's innovative methods – notably the matching of private and Company records to go beyond merely repeating Company regulations to discover actual trading practices. Yet it also advances his insights into

44 A proliferation of studies focusing on commanders has appeared in recent years, including Sutton, *The East India Company's Maritime Service*; Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit'; Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*; Bruijn, *Commanders of Dutch East India Ships*. There is a tendency, especially in the English historiography on the China trade, to see commanders and supercargoes as essentially antagonistic players. This assessment goes back to the now outdated Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company*.

45 For examples of such partnerships, see Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 19.

46 Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit', p. 45.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 50; for the English context, see also the earlier work of Sutton, *Lords of the East*.

a different period and geographical domain. I include commanders and supercargoes within the same framework of British private-trade activities and pay more careful attention to the links between both groups. This book also puts greater focus on the transnational geographies of trade that China traders were operating in. While Bowen brought the worlds of Company commanders into view, the objective here is to shed light on the private-trade activities of the unquestioned leaders of the *early* China trade: Company supercargoes.

Since little systematic research on this influential group of traders exists, it is salient to delve deeper into the tasks of supercargoes. A position exclusively restricted to male merchants, they represented a 'curious mix between commission agent, entrepreneur and diplomat'.⁴⁸ The formal role and responsibilities of a supercargo were remarkably similar in all European East India Companies active in China during the first half of the eighteenth century. In order to gain a position of such importance and authority in the first place, candidates had to demonstrate their literacy, multilingualism, and a high degree of cultural sensibility on the one hand, as well as outstanding commercial skills, organisational capabilities, and a sense of leadership on the other.⁴⁹ In the period covered by this study, novices entered the trade as writers or assistants of a specific supercargo, an experience that allowed them to study commercial conventions, to prove their diligence in keeping the books (protocols, commercial diaries and ledgers), and in writing or copying letters on behalf of their superiors.⁵⁰ Only after several trips to Asia could one hope to be given full responsibility as a supercargo – which also entailed receiving the considerable privileges that went with that position.⁵¹ The role's extraordinary rights and privileges were a key reason why merchant mariners sought ever-new opportunities and appointments as supercargoes in different East India Companies – since the number of these plum positions was small in each and every corporation.

Patronage networks were key for aspiring supercargoes seeking one of the few lucrative positions on the ships bound for China. As contemporary analysts knew, there was simply no admission into the China trade without the

48 Berg et al., 'Private Trade and Monopoly Structures', p. 134.

49 Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 31.

50 The diverse trading interests and aspects of training of eighteenth-century overseas merchants, which also pertain to the China traders considered here, are discussed in Price, 'What Did Merchants Do?.'

51 On the privileges granted in the EIC, see Pritchard, 'Private Trade'. For the Swedish Company, see Christian Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*.

benefaction of a powerful Company director.⁵² This was, of course, not only true for the China trade, but for the East Indies trade as a whole.⁵³ Company careers were forged through the strategic use of letters of introduction, presents, bribes, marital alliances, and blood ties in addition to considerations of character, experience, and education.⁵⁴ Supercargoes were no exception to the rule. Their careers were also responsive to familial responsibilities and unfolded within networks based on kinship and regional, ethnic and political ties. The former structured and sometimes set limits to their entrepreneurial activities. Although the focus of the study is on uncovering the trading patterns and practices of China supercargoes as private entrepreneurs in Europe, family and friendship ties played a hugely important role for interlopers and will figure accordingly. Indeed, their social ties profoundly shaped the outlook and commercial activities of individual merchants in the China trade.⁵⁵

For the Canton trade in particular, merchants had to work as part of a team, as important decisions were taken together by all the supercargoes of the same Company who were present in China at the same time. As formal representatives of the Company directors at home, supercargoes placed orders with Chinese wholesale merchants, local craftsmen, and shopkeepers. They supervised product development and quality control and also ensured the fragile cargoes were appropriately packaged and stored to reach Europe in good condition after seven to nine months at sea – on the longest of all oceanic trade routes known at the time.

The demands placed on the supercargoes were considerable: ‘besides having [the] complete mental equipment of the banker, the supercargoes had to know the quality of goods’ deemed suitable for consumption in Europe. H. B. Morse (1855–1934), customs commissioner and eminent chronicler of China’s foreign relations, first analysed the role of supercargoes in the early China trade in detail.⁵⁶ As he noted, they had to know the exact worth of various

52 Geronimo de Uztaiz, a well-informed economic thinker from Spain, writing about the conditions in the VOC in the mid-eighteenth century, stated that ‘the generality of the [Company servants] are relations, or allied to, and often creatures of the directors’ – a statement that holds true for the other Companies, too. Uztaiz, *The Theory and Practice of Commerce*, vol. 1, p. 188.

53 Bowen, *The Business of Empire*, esp. pp. 121–123. For a detailed treatment of the importance of the EIC patronage system for the Scottish elite from the 1720s onwards, see McGilvary, *East India Patronage*.

54 This was still true for late eighteenth century, as Margot Finn has shown in two seminal articles. See Finn, ‘Colonial Gifts’; Finn, ‘Anglo-Indian Lives’, p. 52.

55 The importance of family ties and obligations figures prominently in the literature on British imperialism in India. See, e.g., Finn, ‘Anglo-Indian Lives’, p. 52.

56 Fairbank et al., *H. B. Morse*.

raw silks or tea types offered to them down to the shilling; ‘whether the weft of woven silks should have the same strength as the warp; whether China root was better white, or tinted pink; whether vermilion at 42 taels or quicksilver at 42 taels was the better purchase’.⁵⁷ In other words, extremely detailed commodity knowledge was necessary to constantly calculate and balance Chinese offers against European demands.⁵⁸ In making their decisions, supercargoes also had to reckon with the potential competition of European producers. Italian manufacturers produced, for instance, raw silks in large quantities. If offered (too) cheaply at an acceptable quality, the imported Chinese raw silks could easily become unprofitable for the Companies.⁵⁹

Having an eye for the marketability and novelty of a particular design or product from the kilns of Jingdezhen or the Canton painting studios was a key advantage in the highly competitive fashion market in Europe. One important element of the China trade was indeed its focus on the decorative arts, both for sartorial use and interior decoration.⁶⁰ Taste, a concept so powerfully propagated and debated by eighteenth-century writers and self-proclaimed connoisseurs, was therefore something supercargoes had to exercise by translating it into their commercial decisions. This applied, for instance, when they had to choose the colour combinations for silk bedspreads and petticoats or the type of heel for an order of embroidered shoes in Canton. Decisions about fashions of that kind were linked to product innovation, but they were also prone to high risks. Fashions were – as they are today – partly unpredictable and partly the outcome of deliberate variations on a successful design.⁶¹

57 Morse, ‘The Supercargo in the China Trade’, p. 202.

58 The supercargoes usually received musters from various merchants in Canton for the goods needed, which allowed them to compare the quality and price of the goods. See, for the use of musters and patterns, BL, 10R/G/12/33, ‘Diary and Consultation Book of George Arbuthnot, Whichcott Turner, ... a standing Council for the management of affairs in China anno 1732’, pp. 25–37.

59 BL, 10R/E/3/105, ‘Orders and Instructions given by the Court Directors of the East India Company ... to Mess Nathanael Torriano, etc. 10th of Dec 1731’, Instruction 91, p. 189.

60 The most extensive body of literature available about the early China trade focuses on the objects of trade from an art historical or curatorial perspective. Among others, see Jourdain and Jenyns, *Chinese Export Art*; Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*; Wappenschmidt, *Chinesische Tapeten für Europa*; Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*; and most recently, de Bruijn et al., *Chinese Wallpaper in National Trust Houses*.

61 There is a vast body of literature that deals with the early modern fashion industry and the ways in which Asian products were incorporated, imitated, transformed, marketed, displayed, and consumed in Europe. Key publications in this field include Berg, ‘In Pursuit of Luxury’; Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*; Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets*; Coquery, *Tenir boutique à Paris*; Riello, ‘The Indian Apprenticeship’; Lemire, *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures*.

Like other overseas traders in Asia, supercargoes also had to navigate the complexities of cross-cultural commerce as well as the conventions of increasingly sophisticated procedures to record and represent business transactions in early modern Europe.⁶² Fluctuating prices and exchange rates, the peculiar bookkeeping system of their employing Company, endless calculations, and the many different currencies that changed hands in Europe and Asia made their work laborious and prone to costly mistakes. For assistance in these matters, supercargoes made ample use of the professional literature available to them at the time, which would accompany these commercial polymaths on their voyages. In fact, quite a number of these men were avid readers who pursued pastimes that were in line with the ideal of the gentleman scholar in the eighteenth century. Supercargoes, for instance, shared a widespread interest with commanders of East Indiamen in navigation and astronomy. As educated members of the commercial elite, they displayed a host of genteel interests, including French literature, but also history, politics and the study of nature. China supercargoes, as a group, were thus as unusually educated for their time as they are invisible in the literature on early modern commerce today.⁶³

2 Trading Conditions in Canton

An added complexity of the supercargoes' dealings in Canton sprang from the fact that they had to operate in constantly changing trading conditions. In the period of this study, the 'Canton system' was far from established and monolithic. On the contrary, it was constantly altered according to the (at times conflicting) interests of Chinese officials in Canton and at the imperial court in Beijing, Chinese wholesale merchants (hong merchants), and foreign traders present in the city.⁶⁴ This meant that first-time European supercargoes, and those who had left China and returned after a few years, had to face and cope with a bewildering range of ever-changing regulations. When taken together, these could produce – within the span of only a few years – in the words of the English supercargo

62 Gervais et al. (eds), *Merchants and Profit*.

63 While the intellectual interests of supercargoes, for instance, in Chinese natural history, culture, and politics, do not form a central part of the present work, it should be noted that this dimension of their mobile lives has received welcome attention. See Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China*.

64 For the most detailed analysis of these different interests and the ways in which they impacted on policies such as the formation and eventual dissolution of the Co-hong (guild system) in Canton from 1760 to 1771, see Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao*.

and multiple times Canton-trader Samuel Blount, 'such a total alteration in the transacting business at this Place [Canton], that I am almost in my present circumstances as great a stranger as if I had never been in it'.⁶⁵

In their role as merchants and diplomats, newly arrived supercargoes had to quickly familiarise themselves with recent regulatory shifts and novel legal restrictions – and the ways to circumvent them.⁶⁶ Usually, returning supercargoes would inform the next group of merchants expected to arrive at Canton about the state of operations and everything that was necessary for the newcomers. Sometimes, however, the routine exchange of letters and instructions failed, which caused great trouble for the newly arrived supercargoes. Yet, the latter did not simply have to accept those novel legal restrictions. They needed, rather, the diplomatic skills and contacts to collaborate with other European merchants in the city to join forces and oppose any Chinese discrimination deemed unacceptable. (Supercargoes often did not understand the background of new regulations; time and again, they simply assumed it was detrimental to their interest, even when this was not the case.)⁶⁷ They thus tried to renegotiate trade restrictions as a pan-European force – and at times successfully. Indeed, the English East India Company directors repeatedly reminded their supercargoes of the importance of remaining cordial with their colleagues who were working for other Companies in the light of their own weakness in negotiating effectively with the Chinese. At one point, the directors bluntly informed a group of EIC employed supercargoes that:

Though we expect you do all you can in a Mercantile way to disappoint both French, Dutch and Dane, you must always consider, we are in amity and alliance with them here (at Canton), and therefore you must act so warily as not to give public offence or occasion any embroil between you, that may bring yourselves into trouble and us into expense.⁶⁸

Such words of caution were wholly unnecessary, since the general atmosphere between the supercargoes at Canton, with its foreign factories (a combination of apartments and warehouses) in close proximity to one another,

65 BL, 10R/R/10/5, 'Diary and Consultation Books of Resident Supercargoes, 1761–1769', 1761/2, 7 July 1761, p. 3. Samuel Blount had served as supercargo at least once before, as the EIC registers of private trade reveal. BL, 10R/G/12/56 p. 93.

66 See Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company*, vol. 1, p. 183.

67 Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao*, pp. 3–4.

68 BL, 10R/E/3/105, 'Orders and Instructions to James Naish, Nathaniel Torriano, Philip Middelton, Abraham Wessels, Richard Moreton and Thomas Fytche, Council for China', 4 December 1730, Instruction 70, p. 23.

was comradely.⁶⁹ Due to the confinement of Europeans to a small strip of land and with little diversion from the daily business, dinners and evening entertainments among the Europeans, which occasionally included also Chinese merchants and compradors (licensed provision purveyors), formed the main source of amusement.⁷⁰ Friendships and business partnerships were formed and nurtured over time and certainly did not follow the logic of competing national enterprises. Charles Irvine, one of the key protagonists of this study, had close friends among the English, Dutch, French, and Swedish Companies present in Canton.

Supercargoes also needed good commercial instincts in their dealings with Chinese merchants. For any contract and commission signed to secure Chinese goods, it was vital to ascertain the creditworthiness of one's business partner. This was not only significant for one's own contracts (as money lending was very much part of the commercial culture at Canton), but it potentially also determined future transactions and orders placed during the next trading season by the Company one worked for. Rumours about the financial difficulties of a particular merchant would spread quickly in Canton – a place where nothing could be kept a secret for long. The different trading Companies shared their linguists with the other Companies and there was simply no way to prevent commercial information from being passed on. The exchange of information between Europeans was equally open. In fact, the supercargoes and commanders of each nation knew exactly what the others had loaded on their ships to Europe. New products and designs were quickly copied – and the guarding of musters was exceedingly difficult.

The assessment of the reliability of Chinese merchants was, however, significantly complicated by the fact that European traders in Canton were not allowed to learn Chinese. Indeed, serious punishment awaited any Chinese individual who endeavoured to teach a foreigner Cantonese or Mandarin.⁷¹ This meant that all European traders had to rely on a handful of 'linguists' (translators) as go-betweens, chosen by the Chinese.⁷² Around 1700, the Chinese linguists were still communicating with the Europeans in Portuguese. Yet by 1730, pidgin English, in fact an 'amalgam of many of [the] languages' spoken at Canton, had been adopted by Chinese of high and low status and by European traders. It facilitated the conduct of business and the sharing of information.⁷³

69 On the social life of Swedish Company traders in China, see Hellman, *This House is not a Home*.

70 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, pp. 132–134.

71 Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, p. 78.

72 The term 'linguist' was used by contemporary China traders.

73 Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, pp. 80–82.

Under these circumstances, establishing the commercial trustworthiness of Chinese business partners was a delicate matter, and yet it was crucial that the supercargoes could do so in order to avoid squandering resources or becoming a victim of fraud or bankruptcy.

Dealing with the uncertainties of trans-cultural commerce was not the only delicate balancing act that supercargoes had to perform. Their relationship with the Europe-based Company directors was also a matter of constant renegotiation. Episodes of outrage and blatant mistrust between the headquarters and specific Company servants – or even larger groups of employees – were generally much more concerned with the Companies' permanent settlements, especially in India and Southeast Asia.⁷⁴ Here, EIC merchants sometimes stayed for decades in a row without ever coming to the attention of their employers. Unsurprisingly, this could create significant mistrust at European Company headquarters.⁷⁵ Such rifts occurred much less with supercargoes in China, not least because until the 1750s they did not stay in Canton for long but rather shuffled back and forth and thus were more answerable to the concerns of the European-based directors.

3 Private Trade and Monopoly Structures: A Network Perspective

Occasional tensions between Company directors and their representatives overseas indicate a split between personal and corporate interests. Because supercargoes were also private traders, their trading interests were not necessarily aligned with those of their employing Company. The conflicts that emerged from this particular constellation – in which supercargoes were constantly changing hats as Company representatives and private traders – can be traced through official Company records, such as the instructions that were given to the small band of supercargoes who were appointed each year.⁷⁶ Economists and organisational theorists have studied this interplay of potentially clashing interests between employers and distant employees – usually in the context of the modern (multinational) firm.⁷⁷ But the availability of

74 Watson, *Foundation for Empire*. For the case of the VOC, see Nierstrasz, *In the Shadow of the Company*.

75 Adams, 'Principals and Agents', p. 20.

76 See, for instance, the case of EIC Captain Hurst on the *Royal Bliss*, BL, IOR/G/12/8, Instruction 68 for the supercargoes in 1712/13. Signed, London, 19 December 1712.

77 For instance, Bogaard and Sonkova, 'Principal-Agent Relationships in Multinational Banks'.

systematic data for the different East India Companies has also attracted the attention of sociologists and institutional economists. The latter produced a series of interventions that dealt specifically with the principal–agent problem – when one party (*agent*) agrees to work in favour of another party (*principal*) in return for a certain benefit as part of a contractual agreement.⁷⁸

This book contributes to ongoing discussions about the relationship between principals and agents in early modern long-distance commerce in a specific way, in that it stresses the *positive* impact that private-trade activities could have for the success of an employing company. It thus makes a significant contribution to a re-evaluation of Company and private trade. The Swedish East India Company is taken as an example to show that the private trade of its employees (the dominant group consisting of British interlopers from the 1720s to the 1740s) was in fact *beneficial* to Company concerns in a number of key areas of its economic activity. Private trade, this work centrally argues, encouraged product innovation, the development of lucrative niche markets for Chinese export wares in Europe, and also helped to consolidate the position of the SEIC in relation to its European competitors, as its agents shared private information, contacts, and clients with the principal (the Swedish Company). The supercargoes' private commercial networks that included wholesale merchants, investors, smugglers, and wealthy clients in Britain and on the European continent were, Chapter 2 argues, indeed highly advantageous for their temporary employers, too, since private-trade goods were sold at the respective East India Company auctions. This yielded considerable income for the formal Companies, without them having to bear the commercial risk of these transactions.

Stressing the symbiotic relationship between Company and employees – principal and agents – is one of the most recent and dynamic developments in the literature on the East India Companies. Emily Erikson in particular has put forward a new reading of the private enterprise of EIC commanders in Asian waters. They expanded British trade, she claims, by deviating from the routine shipping paths of the Company to conduct private trade elsewhere.⁷⁹ Her study explores the systemic impact of individual 'malfeasance' behaviour for a larger trading network: the British intra-Asian trade.⁸⁰ Her important study

78 Casas-Arce and Hejeebu, 'Job Design and the Benefits of Private Trade'; Erikson and Bearman, 'Malfeasance and the Foundations for Global Trade'; Adams, 'Principals and Agents'; Carlos and Nicholas, "Giants of an Earlier Capitalism"; Carlos, 'Principal-Agent Problems'.

79 Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*.

80 The term was introduced in Erikson and Bearman, 'Malfeasance and the Foundations for Global Trade'.

comes to the conclusion that '[m]onopoly rights were not the key to Company success; it was the partial abrogation of those rights (to private traders) that became the foundation of England's commercial success in Asia'.⁸¹ She argues furthermore that private trade changed the structure and reach of English trade in Asia, not in any straightforward way, but rather as an unintended by-product of individual opportunism.⁸²

In important ways, Erikson's work builds on an earlier strand of literature that detailed the relationship between private traders and the English East India Company, and their part in the transformation of the East India Company into a territorial power. The pioneering works of Holden Furber, Peter J. Marshall, and Ian Bruce Watson had already highlighted the crucial agency of British private traders in establishing first Britain's commercial dominance in the so-called country trade (or intra-Asian trade), and second its political and military hegemony over parts of the Indian subcontinent after 1757 and the Battle of Plassey.⁸³ What is new and exciting about Erikson's research is that she turns the lamentable consequences of individual acquisitiveness into an interpretative framework that allows us to see the relationship between private and Company trade as a system that was efficient and expanding *because* it operated in concert.⁸⁴

Erikson's method draws on historical network analysis, which favours quantitative data. A body of published sources, the EIC ships' logs, enabled her to chart and visualise contractions and expansions in the EIC (private) trade network in Asia between 1600 and 1757. By tracing diversions from the regular shipping routes of Company ships in Asia, she was able to show how the private-trade activities of Company commanders generated a more complex trading system over time, a network structure that interfered with and extended the regular trading routes scheduled by the EIC directors in London. This shift in focus from trade routes to trading networks is important. However, as this study demonstrates, her framework has left out, or greatly simplified, crucial elements of the workings of trade, which are key to understanding British commercial expansion in the Asian trade. Given the wide reception of her valuable study, my appreciative critique requires further elaboration.

First, Erikson problematically projects national borders into a complex trading environment in which identities were in flux and multi-national

81 Erickson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*, p. 2.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

83 Furber, *Rival Empires*; Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*; Watson, *Foundation for Empire*.

84 See Berg et al., 'Private Trade and Monopoly Structures'. The theme is equally explored in Nierstrasz, *Rivalry for Trade in Tea and Textiles*.

associations the rule.⁸⁵ This is mainly due to a misconception about how private trade operated on the ground. For instance, her work assumes that deviations from the regular shipping paths were usually the result of the single-mindedness of the commander on board a Company ship.⁸⁶ Yet, study of merchant correspondence and private accounts at least casts doubt on whether commanders always or ever went to new places on account of their own recklessness alone. Commanders did not have a single principal (the Company), but had, in fact, many principals, often from different European and sometimes Asian kingdoms on whose behalf they acted, in addition to pursuing their own enterprises. While Erickson's work opened up vital new perspectives for further research, it was this important multiplicity of agency relations that her work sacrificed to present her seemingly unambiguous dataset and story of *British* trade in Asian waters.

In reality, the composition of principals and thus the composition of the investments on board 'English' Company ships was multi-national and multi-ethnic. If this is true for the intra-Asian trade, this work demonstrates that the transnational is also the appropriate framework for understanding the direct trade between Europe and China. Erickson's wider arguments are still important yet need to be qualified by a nuanced analysis of the comparative success of British nationals in using local resources and by cooperating effectively with other Europeans across the trading Companies. This provides a key rationale for the present book.

In order to study the workings and networked nature of the China trade, this study provides a group portrait of British interlopers, many of whom were Scots, some Irish, and fewer English-born. The emerging picture and recurrent patterns demonstrate how informal networks actually operated within a landscape of competing chartered Companies. Historical trading systems produced changing landscapes of risks, exigencies, and opportunities that individual traders struggled to navigate. If we lose sight of the individuals (including their successes, setbacks and failures), their wider kinship, and business networks, we also lose sight of key characteristics of their wider trading worlds.⁸⁷

85 MacKillop, 'Europeans, Britons, and Scots'.

86 Erickson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*, p. 67.

87 The work of economic sociologist Mark Granovetter on social ties was hugely influential for the study of merchant networks, see Granovetter, 'Economic Action and Social Structure'; recent work that builds on Granovetter's insights includes Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks*, introduction; Davies, 'British Private Trade Networks'; Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust*; Antunes and Ribeiro Da Silva, 'Cross-Cultural Entrepreneurship in the Atlantic'; on the heuristic value of trading networks, see Markovits, 'Trading Networks in Global History'.

Building on significant work in this vein, especially by Francesca Trivellato, Cátia Antunes, and Tijn Vanneste, I deploy a network approach that gives due weight to interpersonal relationships between individual economic actors by considering them primarily as social beings, who had family responsibilities and whose careers were moulded by kin, friends, and patrons and not simply driven by opportunism.⁸⁸

Commercial relationships in the early modern period were built on the notion of reciprocity and on mutual interest. A well-functioning relationship between ‘correspondents’ within a network structure (who could live thousands of miles apart) was typically non-hierarchical, multifunctional, and often personal. Thus, members of a network ‘were not directed by or responsible to others in the way they would be to superiors in a hierarchy’.⁸⁹ Instead, their business relationship was characterised (at least at the outset) by reciprocity, mutual favours, and services – even if, of course, power and influence were unequally distributed amongst traders. For the context of the East India Companies, the book shows, this principle of reciprocity continued to drive informal cooperation between traders *regardless* of their position in the Company hierarchy. As such, it often undermined the formal hierarchies and strict-sounding rules laid down in the Company regulations.

The merchants of this study, British interlopers active in the China trade, were clearly able and eager to act on behalf of *multiple* principals in their homelands and within wider Europe, in addition to pursuing their own ventures. It is this constant changing of hats by which merchants and mariners managed to be the principal in some and the agent in other commercial transactions that represents one of the building blocks of early modern long-distance commerce.⁹⁰ The multiple functions that early modern merchants fulfilled for each other all contributed to their income.⁹¹ In order to serve their contacts effectively, merchants in the China trade performed different agency tasks, not limited to business matters alone. The sending of gifts, forwarding of letters, assisting with legal issues, finding placements for each other’s kin, and other services were

88 Work on Jewish trading networks led the way in this regard. See, for instance, Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*; Antunes and Polónia (eds), *Beyond Empires*; Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks*.

89 Hancock, ‘The Trouble with Networks’, p. 484.

90 This has also been noted in Gelderblom, *Cities of Commerce*, esp. pp. 76f. Gelderblom rightly points to the deep historical roots of the commission system in the Islamic world and medieval Italy, where commenda contracts were in use; on the agency system and the rise of multi-lateral trade, see also the seminal work of Ormrod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires*.

91 See Lemarchand et al., ‘The Current Account as Cognitive Artefact’.

all perfectly acceptable ways to ‘personalize the relationship ... [by] eliding the distinctions between business and personal domains’.⁹² Favours were given and returned, following a balance-sheet approach to social relations, while these frequently cut across Company affiliations and politico-geographical borders.

One could argue that monopoly Companies with their centralised administration and vertical hierarchies were, in a sense, an oddity in the otherwise decentralised trading world navigated by most early modern entrepreneurs in Europe and Asia. Centralised warehousing, decision-making, and the selling of goods at fixed intervals were important features of all the chartered Companies engaged in the Sino-European trade.⁹³ However, there were myriad ways in which this structure of contained competition was undercut. A highly complex yet uneven system of mobile agents, factors, and brokers underpinned the seaborne trade within Europe. It thus needs to be stressed that the agency system, with its emphasis on mutual interest and reciprocal favours, was not a marginal phenomenon: during my time frame, it was the norm and glue of commercial practices and social relations.⁹⁴ Historians of private trade have perhaps overemphasised the fact that East India ‘Company positions were unusual in that they combined employment and self-employment into one position’.⁹⁵ It depends on whether we look at these positions from the perspective of corporate history in the twentieth century or instead from the vantage point of the early modern period.

The China trade is exemplary for the dynamic that developed out of the coexistence of Company and private trade, leading to the establishment of a growing number of European port cities that acted as financial centres, transit points, and staple markets for Chinese export wares and supplies destined in turn for markets across Asia. Even though the Companies were keen to centralise the European end of the Asian trade and thus to limit access along the way to and from Asia, by creating ‘corridors’ and fixed gateways, they ultimately failed to control the involvement of a wide range of intermediaries who collaborated with Company employees out of smaller port cities on the continent and in Britain. This work explores in detail a range of common practices of cross-company collaboration *en route* from Company headquarters to China, by looking at the illegal passenger traffic, the credit mechanisms used by private traders, the lading of unregistered silver at Cadiz, and

92 Hancock, ‘The Trouble with Networks’, p. 480.

93 Berg, ‘Luxury, Luxury Trades, and the Roots of Industrial Growth’, pp. 184f.

94 For a fine study of agency relations in the eighteenth century, see Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*.

95 Erickson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*, p. 30.

the trans-shipment of goods and provisions between the ships of formally competing Companies. It reveals the close connections between the foreign merchant communities of Cadiz (especially the British, French, and Flemish) and the mobile China traders for organising the supplies and loans necessary to expand the trade of private individuals and the smaller interloping Companies.

Building on my findings presented in Chapter 4, private-trade networks reveal a more complete map of routes and nodes that shaped the early China trade. They also bring out its social and transnational elements in ways that a traditional history of the chartered Companies as individual and largely separate entities could not reveal. A qualitative network analysis, so effectively used in the recent literature on early modern commerce in the Mediterranean or the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, is still absent from the literature on the Canton trade.⁹⁶ This book tries to take a first step in that direction to highlight the important links and interdependence of British Canton traders and the wider merchant community in Europe. It elaborates how private traders could play one Company against the other – by constantly seeking the best terms of (private) trade and commissions available and by so doing turning into a flexible, pan-European workforce.

Similar to what Antunes found in cases in the Portuguese overseas establishments, British interlopers operated only partly in illegality. In fact, much of their profit came from using and maximising privileges through cooperation with state monopolies or through the appropriation of their power and infrastructure as direct representatives.⁹⁷ In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of different legal privileges granted to private traders in each Company. Crucially, these legal restrictions and opportunities were not static. They changed frequently, thus opening up new legal spaces (and loopholes) for entrepreneurial individuals eager to exploit potential niches for private trade. At the same time, in contrast to received ideas, this book shows that the private trade conducted by Company representatives – and especially by supercargoes – was not grudgingly tolerated by the Company directors. On the contrary, it was at times actively encouraged, since it secured the good will of these powerful traders.

96 One recent exception and a welcome addition to the literature on the later eighteenth century is Hanser, *Mr. Smith Goes to China*.

97 Antunes, 'Free Agents and Formal Institutions', p. 181.

4 The Archives of Private Trade: How to Assess the (In)visible

Like their colleagues in India, China supercargoes received salaries from their respective Companies that were totally inadequate vis-à-vis their skills, duties, and overall responsibility. This obvious discrepancy was somewhat cushioned by the various rewards and privileges supercargoes were free to make use of. As the early historian of English private trade in Canton, Earl H. Pritchard, wrote, ‘supercargoes were paid in a variety of ways aimed at encouraging their efficiency and zeal for the company’s service’.⁹⁸ Besides a small salary, their remunerations included, from 1731 onwards, a *commission* on the prime costs of the return investment from Canton, the exact percentage of which was fixed for each individual according to his rank; a so-called *allowance* to generate interest by investing money into the Company stock; ‘the *permission* to take out silver with which to buy gold’; and finally the *privilege* to use up some cargo space for their own goods on board Company vessels.⁹⁹

The direct and indirect payment of supercargoes in the other European Companies was comparable, but not identical to the English case. The French, Danish, and Swedish Companies also allowed their supercargoes and navigating officers to conduct private trade in goods (called *pacotille* or *petit port-permis*).¹⁰⁰ A plethora of unwritten rules and privileges opposed rather strict-sounding regulations in all Companies. In fact, despite the many restrictions and constraints that were put in place to safeguard the profitability of the chartered Companies in China, private traders had considerable space for manoeuvre.¹⁰¹ If we compare the situation in the different Companies, which private traders did themselves, we see that every change to the private-trade regulations created a new set of opportunities which individual Company servants were quick to discover and use. Moving from one Company to the next, a strategy repeatedly used by the actors in this book, can be understood as shopping around in order to secure the best terms for private trade. As I argue, the important role supercargoes played was mirrored in this range of rights and privileges, which these agents knew how to exploit, with significant

98 Pritchard, ‘Private Trade’, p. 109.

99 Ibid. The key texts that outline the development of the supercargo’s pay in the EIC are Morse, ‘The Supercargo in the China Trade’, pp. 199–209, and Pritchard, ‘Private Trade’. For the first comparative article on private trade regulations, see Berg et al., ‘Private Trade and Monopoly Structures’.

100 Ibid.

101 On the French private trade to and from India, see Margoline-Plot, ‘Les circuits parallèles’; for a short overview of French private trade at Canton, see also Schopp, ‘French Private Trade at Canton’.

consequences not only for their personal enrichment but also – and crucially – for the development of European demands for Chinese goods and even the portfolio of the official Company trade.

H. B. Morse published his five-volume *Chronicles of the English East India Company Trading to China* between 1926 and 1929.¹⁰² While attention is given to the Company supercargoes, they are, nonetheless, mainly considered in their role as Company representatives. Morse transcribed much of the EIC's official documentation on the day-to-day workings in Canton, sources that were written by the supercargoes themselves and which followed an established convention of noting down the particulars directly related to the Company commerce. Supercargoes, to be sure, did *not* write about their own private trade in these official diaries in great detail.¹⁰³ By confining himself to the 'official voice' of the British supercargoes, Morse therefore explored only a limited aspect of these traders' commercial activities. In the first volume, on the period 1637 to 1753, we learn a great deal about the relationships between the subsequent teams of supercargoes and the Chinese officials, although merely through the eyes of the European traders. Yet, we learn next to nothing about their mercantile backgrounds, their families, business partners, and transnational activities. Therefore, to go beyond the 'official voices' captured in Morse's materials and to explore how the personal and commercial background and experiences of China traders and supercargoes in particular shaped the conduct, geographies, and expansion of the early Canton trade in Europe is one of this book's main objectives.

The horizontal relationships between the Company servants of the larger and smaller East India Companies, which created the distinct dynamic of the early trade in Canton, is equally absent from Morse's account. His *Chronicles* are very much written from the perspective of a nineteenth-century civil servant, who interpreted the experimental and unpredictable twists and turns of commerce in the first half of the eighteenth century as a mere phase towards a more orderly world of exchange.¹⁰⁴ The supercargoes of the early China trade, instead, appear as imperfect civil servants, whose at times malfeasant or self-interested behaviour brought the Company repeatedly into trouble. Hence,

102 Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company*.

103 The only evidence of private trade to be found in these records are the 'manifests of private trade', the limitations of which we discuss later on.

104 Indeed, in Morse's words, the early Canton traders formed a mere 'training school from which were taken the select committee at Canton, 1780–1834, who were the finest representatives that England could have desired of her mercantile community'; idem, 'The Supercargo in the Canton Trade', p. 209.

while Morse's account offered a wealth of insights into the Company's dealings in China, this book can only partly rely on his 'official story'. In contrast, it explores more thoroughly the private correspondence networks and activities of supercargoes – especially within the European theatre of trade. It thereby directly challenges the understanding of private trade that Morse established and later Company historians echoed in their work: private trade as a supposedly marginal practice, one largely detrimental to Company commerce and efficiency.¹⁰⁵

In 1957, Earl H. Pritchard made the first and only attempt until now to reconstruct the long-term development of the private trade of exclusively English East India Company Canton traders, including minor officers, commanders, and supercargoes in the period between 1680 and 1830.¹⁰⁶ While using the *Chronicles* as his principal source, Pritchard added information from the 'manifests of private trade' and surviving entries on the value of private trade in the Company's Cash and Commerce Journals. The former comprised lists of articles registered by members of the Canton factory, commanders, and high-ranking officers to be sent to Europe on their account. His two-part article relied heavily on official regulations, which are mentioned in the Company by-laws, minutes, and the Canton diaries. However, for establishing what was actually traded privately, Pritchard limited his enquiry to those goods that were officially registered. He did not use a single private document to check the completeness of the 'manifests of private trade'. Entries in private cash books and diaries consulted for the present book, in contrast, make clear that the value of official Company records for understanding private trade in goods is astonishingly limited. They must be juxtaposed with matching (often private) sources in order to assess their reliability.

The same issue arises in the work of the eminent Company and maritime historian Christian Koninckx, who has provided the most comprehensive study on the Swedish East India Company's activities to date.¹⁰⁷ For want of a sustained engagement with private-trade records, he concluded that the private trade of Company servants returning from China 'did not as a rule attain any extraordinary dimensions but in many cases also did not permit of any detailed analysis, chiefly because the consignments involved were of minor importance or indeed negligible'.¹⁰⁸ My findings challenge this claim. I use, in particular, the detailed records that were left by a long-serving supercargo of

105 Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*; Pritchard, 'Private Trade'.

106 Ibid.

107 Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*.

108 Ibid., p. 267.

the same Company, the Scottish-born interloper Charles Irvine, who kept a great deal of material for befriended colleagues, as a counterpoint to Koninckx's gross underestimation of the scope and scale of the private trade conducted by supercargoes in the early decades of the SEIC trade to China. The sums that Irvine borrowed for his subsequent voyages and the amounts of silver he handled in Cadiz for other private traders give key clues to the extent of the private trade. Personal notebooks, bills of lading, and the extensive documentation of the sale of private-trade goods at SEIC auctions are moreover used to assess the size and impact of his private enterprise. The key aim of this study, however, lies not so much in the quantitative assessment of private trade in general (which would require a concerted effort of experts on all Companies and a larger group of scholars), but on its impact for establishing key practices and infrastructures for the distribution of goods in Europe.

Finally, a study on supercargoes and their business practices also makes a salient contribution to the wider issues of the commission trade and consumption of Chinese export art in Europe. Art historians and curators have shown some interest in the private trade of commanders and supercargoes, as the chief importers of those goods that have survived in today's museum and private collections.¹⁰⁹ These are often objects of exceptional beauty or workmanship, such as wallpaper and lacquerware, armorial porcelain, customised furniture, and fashionable trinkets – from painted fans to ivory snuffboxes. While it is commonly accepted that these objects were brought into markets and households by enterprising individuals, and not Companies, it has more often than not been impossible to clearly establish when and through whose commercial activities these masterpieces reached their European proprietors. Also, the functioning of the Company auctions and the place of private trade for the exchange of such refined pieces in private ownership is little understood. Even if new scholarship is starting to more thoroughly trace the itineraries of Chinese export wares, a closer investigation of the private traders who ordered, transported, sold, or gifted them provides an extremely useful starting point to understand the wider context of those goods that have survived in museum and private collections.¹¹⁰ By considering in detail the process of choosing, packing, and shipping goods in private trade – the peculiar logistics that stemmed from traders' quest to maximise the value of their cargo space on board – this book also opens up another dimension of design-related issues

109 Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*.

110 Gerritsen and Riello (eds), *The Global Life of Things*; de Bruijn, *Chinese Wallpaper in Britain and Ireland*.

in long-distance commerce, specifically explored in a chapter on private commissions (Chapter 3).

In sum, working through the historiography on supercargoes and the private trade with China in the period before 1760 has clearly established the need for a scholarly reassessment of private enterprise in this particular trading context, since its overall importance within the context of Sino-European commercial encounters has so far been neglected.¹¹¹ Although scholars such as Van Dyke and Pritchard have made important inroads, we are still far from fully understanding the role played by Canton traders as private entrepreneurs in general and the dynamics brought about by interlopers in particular. Indeed, a particularly large lacuna concerns the Company servants' involvement in the intra-European trade as wholesalers, commission agents, brokers, and smugglers. We know too little about their informal networks in Britain and on the continent. These, however, were of prime importance for the operation of their business – especially when we consider the frequent travels of supercargoes and other maritime traders. This book's focus on British traders who worked for at least some time in the service of foreign East India Companies brings out more clearly the sustained impact that migration and interloping had for the formation of informal networks, which connected the different trading entities on a personal and often subversive level.

5 Source Material

While this work draws on a significant corpus of diverse historical sources, including private correspondence, diaries, contracts, Company ledgers, annotated auction catalogues, images, and material artefacts connected to the European China trade, the analysis had to cope with peculiar archival logics and legacies. The unconventional careers of British interlopers who traded under (changing) foreign flags often brought fortunes to their families. Yet, fame and dignity were often achieved only by the next generation. Inevitably, the archival footprint of British interlopers in the China trade is often miniscule by comparison to the private and public records that were kept by their descendants, who succeeded in becoming respectable politicians, directors, governors, and military commanders of the Anglo-Indian empire by the late eighteenth century. The early interloping adventures of later classic English

111 Furthermore, Van Dyke did not consider the European end of the China trade; see Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*; Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao*.

East India Company families – including such names as Metcalfe, Cumming, Campbell, Pike, Ouchterlony, Hume, Harrison, Forbes, and Arbuthnot – had by then been forgotten, or had become well-kept family secrets. Indicative for this archival and historiographical fall into oblivion is the fact that the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* contains not a single entry about the subjects/agents of this book – although quite a few of them laid the foundation for dynastic grandeur. The objects of their trade, by contrast, have survived in significant numbers. Canton trade heirlooms such as armorial porcelain, reverse mirror paintings, and carved ivory works were proudly kept in family homes.¹¹² Yet the context of their acquisition and the careers connected to them remain largely unknown – for the most part because the private correspondence, commercial ledgers, and shipping records which detail their importation have largely been destroyed. It is therefore telling that the single largest collection of private papers relating to the early China trade known today belongs to a Scottish-born interloper who had no children of his own and who never married. The correspondence and business papers of Charles Irvine of Drum, a central figure in this book, were safely stored within the walls of a thirteenth-century castle, ten miles west of Aberdeen, until after the Second World War.

The extensive Charles Irvine collection that forms the backbone of this study incorporates several hundreds of documents that directly relate to the China trade between 1731 and the 1760s, and also to private trading activities connected to it. It includes business correspondence, commercial ledgers, current accounts (credit/debit accounts), invoices, receipts, bonds and insurance contracts, and shipping records of two kinsmen, both employed in the service of the SEIC in China as supercargo and officer respectively: Charles Irvine of Drum and his nephew James Rose of Clava. What is more, Irvine, who was a close confidant of the two Scottish SEIC directors, Colin (1686–1757) and Hugh Campbell (16??–1754), also kept a great many documents that relate to Company commerce. This makes it possible to compare formal regulations with actual private-trade imports in the SEIC through the extremely rich textual fabric of the Rose/Irvine papers. They provide key evidence for reconstructing Charles Irvine's entry into the China trade, his privileged place within the SEIC, and his transnational connections to banking houses,

112 The 'East India company at Home' project, led by Professor Margot Finn, brought together a team of academic researchers with a larger community of independent scholars, museum curators, family historians, and descendants to create a collection of case studies, which detail the material connections between the British country house and the Anglo-Indian empire between roughly 1757 and 1857. See, <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/case-studies-2/>.

investors, wholesalers, clients, and agents involved in the finance, import, and re-export of Chinese commodities. The papers also provide a unique view on the intricate business practices, successes, and failures of a great number of other interlopers employed in the East Indies trade who belonged to Irvine's business networks. The documents are used to shed fresh light on many more lives and careers involved in the experimental phase of the early China trade. The private trade records of Canton traders at The National Archives in Kew and the James Ford Bell Library in Minneapolis (USA) have furthermore been put into conversation with official English and Swedish East India Company sources and the material collections of public museums and country houses across Europe, the UK, and North America. Finally, insights from fieldwork in Scotland have been used to explore the practicalities of smuggling, in which a greater number of traders were engaged.¹¹³

6 Structure of the Study

This book offers a multifaceted thematic analysis of the private trade activities of British interlopers in the early China trade and of the role that informal networks played in directing the flow of capital, information, and commodities within a transnational arena. It is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 compares and connects the lives and careers of a number of British interlopers active in the early China trade by means of a group portrait. Its key interest is to identify relevant patterns of how various European merchants, who had often previously pursued other commercial ventures and contacts, came to enter the lucrative China trade during its experimental and volatile phase. It also asks what their prior commercial enterprises meant for the geographical expansion of markets for eastern goods. It demonstrates that interlopers changed their employer at least once and up to four times during their active careers. The chapter further explores the risks and opportunities involved in operating for different Companies, and also the specific legal challenges, loopholes, and state documentation and early 'passport' systems that interlopers exploited.

Chapter 2 discusses the wholesale and re-export trade for Chinese goods. It does so by investigating the interdependent relationship between Canton traders and sedentary merchants in Europe. The precise interactions and relationships between Company and private trade are explored by looking at how

113 Studying surviving smuggling infrastructures along the Scottish east coast, I engaged with numerous local specialists and guides, such as Derek Charles Janes at Eyemouth Museum, who has since published his 'Fine Gottenburgh Teas'.

commercial information was exchanged about suitable markets, and how the collaboration between Company servants and wholesale merchants impacted on the Company auctions.

Chapter 3 turns to one important element of the private-trade activities of Canton supercargoes: the special commission trade. Besides identifying the practices relating to the ordering of customised commodities, it also explores the double role of China traders as consumers and commercial experts. The chapter argues that special commissions encouraged product innovation, and that private trade was primarily responsible for managing the import of myriad niche and high-quality products during my chosen time frame. In a detailed analysis of the circumstances and regulations in place surrounding the actual shipping of Chinese export wares on board SEIC ships, the chapter shows the extent to which the choice of the private trader and the designs chosen relate to the tyranny of space (or rather the lack thereof). Past scholarship has focused primarily on aspects of decoration, colour, and lustre in Chinese as well as Japanese export art. This focus on veneers and effects has overshadowed the fact that the shape of export art was made to respond primarily to the pragmatics of shipping and handling, before even considering consumer fancies and artisanal skill.¹¹⁴ The right packaging was key to the trade as a whole. The design principle of the Canton trade, I contend, was the square box and rectangular chest.

Chapter 4 looks at the concrete organisation and financing of the private trade of Company supercargoes by exploring a particularly important city for cross-Company activities that has been largely overlooked by the existing scholarship on the China trade so far: Cadiz. I argue that Cadiz represented a hugely important node for cross-Company activities. Not by accident did many of the British interlopers that take centre stage in this book have connections of different kinds with this particular port city at the crossroads of multiple commercial arenas. I use the city as a place to develop a more systematic account of the functioning of the China trade while mapping the geographies of British private trade in a pan-European trading arena – thereby also connecting the eastern with the Atlantic trade.

¹¹⁴ On the importance of lustre and textures for the perception and imitation of Asian export art, see Etienne and Lee, 'Lüster, Lack und Liotard'.

British Interlopers in the Canton Trade

A Group Portrait

Biographical information on private traders operating in Canton, is more readily available for the latter part of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries.¹ A vast historiography has studied the entry of the Americans and the gradual decline of the Canton system from the 1780s onwards.² Indeed, it is the scholarly work on this later period that has overshadowed – and in some ways distorted – our understanding of an earlier time of commercial interaction. The eighteenth century was the era of the East India Companies, but it was also a time of enterprising individuals who traded from within and independently of these trading structures. The movers and shakers that feature so prominently in the history of the Atlantic economy and pre-colonial India existed for the China trade too. Yet, surprisingly, the European merchants and mariners who defined the formative period of the Canton trade have received little attention so far.³

This chapter demonstrates that while each China trader's life followed its own unique trajectory, there were important similarities, shared experiences and practices among British interlopers in the European East India Companies during the first half of the eighteenth century. Their businesses evolved individually, even if on similar lines. By tracing broader patterns and career paths, the following group portrait shows that the lives of these mobile merchants can provide a unique perspective on the opportunities and risks, as well as the conventions of a dynamic trade that captured the imagination of contemporaries like perhaps no other branch of European overseas commerce.

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- 1 Notable exceptions include Jessica Hanser's in-depth study of three British 'country traders' active in Canton and between China and India in the second half of the eighteenth century. See Hanser, *Mr. Smith Goes to China*; Hellman, *This House is not a Home*; biographical sketches are presented in Schopp 'French Private Trade at Canton'.
 - 2 Among recent studies, Fichter, *So Great a Proffit*; Van Dyke (ed.), *Americans and Macao*; Grace, *Opium and Empire*.
 - 3 In exploring the illustrious careers and activities of various Chinese merchant dynasties active in the Canton trade, Paul A. Van Dyke has contributed a vast and growing oeuvre for understanding the key Chinese players in the early decades of the Canton system. See Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*; idem, *Merchants of Canton and Macao*.

What unites the mobile merchants presented here is that they were all interlopers, who were born in the British Isles and migrated to the European continent. There, they connected intimately with the smaller European trading Companies, whilst always maintaining contact with their homes in Britain. Surprisingly few of the people who joined the Ostend and Swedish East India Companies were London-born. Many were born to the gentry, though they often came from not especially eminent branches of the landed elite. The predominance of Scottish and Irish merchants among the British interloping community in Europe is remarkable, and so are the ways in which regional, ethnic and family ties to North Britain were integrated into the workings of the China trade.⁴ Mobility was arguably the most important asset in developing a successful business, as these interlopers moved between markets, met clients and sought out agents in different parts of Europe who could sell Chinese goods on their behalf.

The timing of the China trade, with its fixed intervals, regular sales and dependence on the monsoon winds, provided a common framework for the merchants' operations. The number of European supercargoes and commanders who were appointed each year was sufficiently small to make sure every Company trader got to know their competitors personally. China traders were members of largely overlapping networks, and the bonds between British interlopers across the Companies were particularly strong. This finding is based upon my in-depth scrutiny of the copious correspondence, shipping and insurance records, ledgers and current accounts of two supercargoes and British interlopers in the Ostend and Swedish East India Companies respectively: Thomas Hall of Bengoe (1692–1748) and Charles Irvine of Drum (1693–1771). In Hall's and Irvine's private papers, most interlopers and a large number of high-ranking China traders of the 1710s to 1740s feature in some way, either as direct correspondents or as individuals that attracted comment. The business and social connections that existed between the members of this smallish community of traders make them an ideal group for a closer analysis, with regard to both mercantile profiles and practices.

This chapter, then, uses the careers of a group of loosely connected Canton traders in the first half of the eighteenth century as its point of departure in order to present a new perspective on and context for the early modern China trade. Whereas the 'associates' in David Hancock's ground-breaking study on

4 The focus of this chapter is mostly the Ostend and Swedish ventures with reference to the EIC and French undertakings. It is likely that the percentage of Scottish interlopers in the VOC and Danish Asiatic Company (DAC) was smaller. See Glamann, 'The Danish Asiatic Company', pp. 109f.

London's overseas traders advanced from marginal men at Britain's periphery to successful and patriotic citizens, the people who feature in the following analysis had a more ambivalent relationship with Britain's metropolis.⁵ The China traders were participating in global merchant networks formed on the back of ethnic, familial, and – in the case of many Scots and Irishmen – often political or religious ties, which impacted on their trading activities as much as it set limits to their loyalty to any one Company. Their commercial success lay partly in the fact that they came up with ever-new strategies to evade government regulations, and to avoid paying 'unnecessary' taxes or duties by operating out of ill-controlled places and free ports. The shifting geography of trade that resulted from their sojourning activities is developed more fully in Chapter 4. Here, the focus is on the social embeddedness of their trading activities. It is shown that personal friendships with individual directors and colleagues on board and elsewhere was more important to these interlopers than their loyalty to a particular flag.

The chapter does not seek to homogenise the life paths of merchants and mariners involved in the trade in Chinese export wares. On the contrary, it takes seriously and makes explicit the diverse backgrounds and varied commercial specialisations that individual merchants brought to the trade. These added, I argue, significantly to the pool of expertise and the dynamic of the China trade as a whole. The early development and expansion of pan-European markets for Chinese goods indeed built, in an important sense, on the previously established commercial networks and alliances of these interlopers. The existing social and commercial ties and supporting infrastructures of their activities could be effectively repurposed for attracting ever-wider client and consumers groups to Eastern goods, and for logistically supplying them with the merchandise. This suggests that it is salient to explore in more depth the *intra*-European activities and collaborations of China traders, who combined extremely mobile maritime careers with trading activities in Europe.

The group portrait develops several key arguments about early commercial training, previous trading activities and associations and how these profoundly shaped the merchants' entrance into and future development of the early China trade. It shows them to be comparatively more progressive merchants, often with a background in financial services, shipping and the re-export trades, which led them to perceive opportunities where others feared risks. It also demonstrates how the smaller interloping East India Companies on the European continent hugely profited from the accumulated trading experience

5 Hancock, *Citizens of the World*.

and expertise of these mobile traders, and how these engaged in hitherto little-studied cross-Company mobility that connected formally competing national monopoly ventures on a personal level. What emerges is a more complete picture of the legal restrictions and chances, frictions, hostility and privileges that British interlopers encountered – and how their lives effectively tied British Company politics and markets closely to commercial ventures and developments across the English Channel.

1 Charles Irvine: Canton Supercargo, Wholesale Trader, Family Patron

Charles Irvine was markedly relieved when the ship *Freden* approached Dover on 1 September 1747. It was then nearly three years since he had set sail from Gothenburg to embark on his farewell voyage to Canton. With his fifty-four years of age and over six journeys to the East for the Swedish East India Company (SEIC) alone, Irvine was a veteran of the China trade. His final voyage took a great deal longer than intended. In fact, he was ‘detained’ in China ‘a year beyond my computation’, because the Swedish vessels had missed their passage in the previous season.⁶ Charles Irvine as chief supercargo was left behind to look after the factory, gather intelligence and prepare the arrival of the next fleet of East Indiamen that were expected to enter the Pearl River in the summer of 1746. Charles Irvine divided his time between Canton and Macao (the latter the usual meeting place for Europeans outside the trading season), where he found himself in the company of his ‘very good friend’ Mr Duvelaer de la Barre, Edmond and François Roth and other old acquaintances from the French East India Company.⁷ Such unexpected delays were part and parcel of the life of a merchant mariner. To see the opportunities in those circumstances, however, was what made mobile traders like Charles Irvine particularly successful.

During his extra time in Asia, Irvine swiftly mobilised his local contacts as well as his networks of correspondents in Macao, Batavia and India and prepared shipments of Chinese tea and European cloth to be sold to European

6 Charles Irvine (Canton) to Colin Campbell (Gothenburg), 16 January 1746, Letter Book, 1744–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL; Charles Irvine (Canton) to John Irvine (Batavia), 23 February 1746, *ibid.*

7 Charles Irvine to G. Clifford & Sons, 20 January 1745; Charles Irvine to Colin Campbell, 15 December 1745; Charles Irvine (Canton) to John Irvine (Batavia), 23 February 1746, Letter Book, 1744–1748, Irvine Papers, FBL.

interlocutors in Batavia in partnership with a Chinese merchant.⁸ His nephew John Irvine, who had travelled to Asia independently of his usual employer, the SEIC, accompanied one such shipment of '500 chests of Bohéa & 1128 chests Sundry other fine teas' from Canton to Batavia on behalf of his uncle.⁹ Almost as a rule, Irvine downplayed the extent of his business and the profits involved when writing to third parties about it. When an English Company servant in India enquired about the outcome of his colleague's tea sale, Irvine responded in his usual dry manner: '[m]y Nephews voyage turned out little more than a new penny for an old one'.¹⁰ Such a comment has to be taken with a pinch of salt, however; experienced traders were exceedingly careful to keep up an image of themselves as hard-working, realistic and modest men of business.¹¹ Every hint at extraordinary commercial successes could raise prices or the chance of being cheated by others in the know.¹²

The hazards that China traders had to overcome during their careers at sea differed from those experienced by most international merchants, whose trading ventures were orchestrated from the relative safety of their metropolitan counting houses.¹³ Death and disease were constant companions, a fact that induced many 'East Indians' to record their earthly possessions perhaps more frequently than their contemporaries, and to draft their last wills many times over. For instance, John Searle, supercargo of the EIC in the 1750s and 1760s, left detailed instructions to his wife before every voyage he undertook on behalf of the Company, detailing his financial situation, outstanding debts and interests and how she should proceed 'Should I tipp off before I get to China'.¹⁴ On China ships, the death toll stood at an average of 10 per cent per voyage for much of the eighteenth century.¹⁵ Supercargoes and high-ranking officers certainly enjoyed more comfort during the voyage, with a small private cabin and better

8 Charles Irvine (Canton) to John Irvine (Batavia), 23 February 1746, Letter Book, 1744–1748, Irvine Papers, FBL.

9 Ibid.

10 Charles Irvine (Canton) to Samuel Greenhaugh (Madras?), 8 January 1747, Letter Book, 1744–1748, Irvine Papers, FBL.

11 Instructive on this point are the writings of a fellow trader and famous contemporary of Irvine, Benjamin Franklin. See 'Advice to a Young Tradesman', Thursday, 21 July 1748, p. 304.

12 On trust and litigations in agency relations, see Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*, esp. pp. 153–169.

13 Charles Irvine (Cadiz) to Hendrik König, Campbell & Co. (Gothenburg), 12/13 March 1736, Letter Book, *Three Crowns*, 1736–1737, Irvine Papers, FBL.

14 Account Books of John Searle, Supercargo in the China Trade, 1750–1786, TNA, Chancery Masters' Exhibits, C 107/154.

15 Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*, p. 408.

food and drink at the captain's table than the lower orders on board were given. Nevertheless, illnesses spread equally to the roundhouse and ravaged officers and humble seamen alike.¹⁶

The life of a merchant mariner was tough, and most men were eager to move ashore as soon as they had acquired a 'competence' (or fortune) that allowed them to settle somewhere in reasonable comfort. Even if Charles Irvine was in 1747 not yet considering retiring from business altogether, he looked forward to a less erratic lifestyle. Indeed, as he noted in confidence to a British correspondent in Madras in January 1746, 'it is most certainly true that I had given over all thoughts of coming more to China but my Friends thought proper, more for my Interest then for their Service that I should make this one Trip more'.¹⁷ In the previous fourteen years, Irvine had spent much of his time travelling – mostly to and within Asia. However, his business and family matters also required regular visits to London, Aberdeen, Lorient and Nantes, Hamburg, Ostend, Cadiz and Amsterdam. It is this unusually mobile lifestyle that, among other things, connected the small band of Europeans engaged in the China trade.

Through a combination of legal and illicit trading activities, Charles Irvine, too, had managed to acquire a small fortune and widespread contacts to merchants and markets across Europe, Asia and the Americas (Figure 1). His long and, despite the occasional setback, successful career as a Canton supercargo and wholesale trader allowed him to become an investor in other people's enterprises.¹⁸ Indeed, China traders like Irvine were often borrowers and lenders at the same time.¹⁹ They lent smaller sums of money to fellow traders in Asia and relatives at home, whilst taking up greater sums for making their purchases in Canton for sale in Europe. After retiring from the active service as a mobile agent of the SEIC in 1747, Irvine was now free to seek new business opportunities, act more decisively in family matters and to further strengthen his stake in the European market for East India goods.²⁰

16 On nutrition and disease on board EIC vessels, see Sutton, *Lords of the East*, esp. pp. 96–99.

17 Charles Irvine (Canton) to Samuel Greenhough (Madras), 31 January 1746, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL. His 'friends' were the directors of the SEIC, Colin and Hugh Campbell, Hendrik König and Niklas Sahlgren.

18 Lisa Hellman's claim that 'Irvine had constant economic difficulties, and eventually had to rely on the charity of his friend as he lived, poor and unmarried, in Campbell's home in Gothenburg' is not supported by any evidence in his rich private papers. Lisa Hellman, *This House is not a Home*, p. 80.

19 Chapter 4 engages with the investments and money-lending activities of Canton supercargoes, including Charles Irvine, in more detail.

20 Irvine had considerably power and influence within the extensive Irvine/Rose family networks, particularly on the younger generation, who depended on him for money, advice



FIGURE 1 *Portrait of Charles Irvine of Drum* (1760). By Cosmo Alexander (1724–1772). Oil on canvas
THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND, DRUM CASTLE

This staying ashore led Irvine to engage more frequently in illicit schemes, despite his mild reservations against such practices. While Irvine had repeatedly stressed his ‘natural aversion to Paddling [sic] & having to do with Smugglers’ in writing, he nonetheless became a big player in the contraband trade to Britain from 1743 onwards.²¹ Irvine had then long acted as a buyer and seller of diverse goods at SEIC auctions, but in the 1740s he developed a more pronounced preference for buying Bohea tea – the cheapest variety of

and approval. If things went wrong in his eyes, Irvine could be very direct and uncomfortable. See Catterall, ‘The Worlds of John Rose’.

21 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 9 April 1743, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

black tea available. Bohea tea readily sold in Britain on account of its low price and was shipped there in large illegal consignments by Charles Irvine, Colin Campbell and others, who used their local family networks in the northeast of Scotland to land and distribute the tea in Scotland.²² Irvine's transformation to becoming a full-time re-export trader was complete by 1747, but his prominent position in the European market for Chinese consumer goods had been carved out long before.

2 Irvine's Wider Network

Considering the course of Irvine's career, with 'all the disappointments that have happened' along the way,²³ his late success as much as the obstacles he encountered are part of a larger story about a group of restless traders who set out to challenge the claim to power of the two giants of the East India monopoly trade, the EIC and the Dutch VOC. The Aberdonian merchant Irvine is in many ways an exemplification of the kind of trader who was drawn into the orbit of the China trade during the hazy days of interloping activities in the first half of the eighteenth century. Irvine was ambitious, well educated, opportunistic, powerfully connected, clannish, and a Jacobite who lived in exile. Yet, like many other interlopers, he struggled to find his place in the world.

One fear that obsessed Irvine was the decay – real or imagined – of his family's former glory. News of the Jacobite Rising in 1745 had trickled through to him at Canton via the English ships, yet he was anxious to hear from his Scottish friends in London about the fate of his relations, who he presumed must have been involved in the fighting. On his homeward journey, in 1747, Irvine wrote to George Ouchterlony, his principal agent and trusted friend: 'One of the man of war gave us the Gentlemens Magazine for June last in which I find the total subversion of my Family which has been mouldering away for a century past or more was reserved to be completed in my days.'²⁴

Past experiences of financial ruin, or struggles to repay large debts, accompanied most of the interlopers in the China trade. Irvine was no exception to the rule. In addition to the general commercial risks involved in long-distance

²² Müller, 'The Swedish East India Trade'.

²³ Edmund Heath (London) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 29 September 1739, CIC, FBL. The remark referred to the confiscation of Irvine's property in the context of the so-called Porto Novo Affair. Gill, 'The Affair of Porto Novo'.

²⁴ Charles Irvine (on board the *Freden*) to George Ouchterlony (London), 1 September 1747, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL.

trade, British interlopers faced particular insecurities in their pursuit of trade under foreign flags. The legality of employing foreign subjects was challenged repeatedly in the first three decades of the eighteenth century and was a frequent point of contention between the new and the old Companies and their state representatives. The precariousness of the interlopers' existence was heightened by the fact that they moved from one place to another, often without having any previous knowledge of the local language or any particular attachment to the new environment. Consequently, British interlopers often remained strangers in those places that they temporarily called their home. Perhaps in response to their uprootedness, they sought out or intensified their connections with traders who came from similar backgrounds, or indeed shared this restless existence.

Charles Irvine, who had settled in Gothenburg in 1735 after a first and ill-fated voyage for the SEIC to India, never felt quite home in Sweden, though he enjoyed the company and care of a good number of friends, had assistants and servants and regularly contributed to charitable activities for the Scots in town.²⁵ Yet, by 1758, aged sixty-six, he was still uncertain about where he would spend his twilight years. His friends in London, George Ouchterlony, Elizabeth Campbell (widow of Colin Campbell) and Patrick Garden, repeatedly raised the subject in their letters to him, hoping Irvine, an old bachelor, would decide to settle in their neighbourhood at Angel Court or Richmond.²⁶ In 1758, Ouchterlony wrote:

I pray for your own & Friends sake quit that frozen climate, the death of our worthy friend Mr. C. C. [Colin Campbell] puts an end to that attachment & let us have the pleasure of seeing you on this side of the Water which I am sure would be more for your Health & when you will not doubt of meeting with hearty welcome.²⁷

25 Cormack, *Colin Campbell*. He was repeatedly accommodated by his friend Colin Campbell, who wrote upon his expected return: 'I have an apartment ready for you at my Lodgings at Mr Beckman's which Betty Smith will show you & provide you with everything necessary in my absence; so that you must not think of going to lodge anywhere else.' Colin Campbell to Charles Irvine at Gothenburg, 18 July 1747, CIC, FBL.

26 Charles Irvine (on board the *Freden* off Scilly) to George Ouchterlony (London), 24 August 1747, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL. Several British interlopers acquired property in London during their active trade on the continent, including Arthur Abercromby and Hugh and Colin Campbell.

27 George Ouchterlony (London) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 26 January 1759, CIC, FBL.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Irvine's personal network incorporated a large number of Scots and Scots-Irish.²⁸ Irvine moved, like so many members of his wider kinship network, in Jacobite circles. Before moving to Sweden, Irvine had been working as a partner for the Rouen merchant house of Arbuthnot & Co.²⁹ At a time when French trade to India and China was left entirely to the private initiatives of merchants at St-Malo, Irvine was able to travel to India and Canton.³⁰ The head of the Franco-Scottish merchant house, Sir Robert Arbuthnot (1669–1741), was an influential Jacobite and banker.³¹ The surviving correspondence between Irvine and different members of the Arbuthnot family provides clues to their close relationship. Sir Robert's wife Margaret sent Irvine medical recipes from London; John Arbuthnot, who took over the banking business from his brother Robert, acted, next to George Ouchterlony, as Irvine's chief source of information regarding political matters at home.³²

The solidarity between Scottish and Irish Jacobites on the continent was pronounced in the first half of the eighteenth century. There were enclaves in France, Italy, the Low Countries, Prussia and Sweden, as well as in the American colonial settlements.³³ Douglas Catterall rightly insisted that figures such as Charles Irvine and his nephew John Rose were 'participating in the eighteenth-century incarnation of a Scots medieval tradition of network-and-enclave based migration'.³⁴ There is much truth to that assessment. Yet, as the development of the Scottish role in the China trade shows, success came with the strategic integration into more heterogeneous trading environments

28 For magnificent detail on Scottish familial structures and the long-standing Scottish networks in Northern Europe, see Murdoch, *Network North*; Grosjean and Murdoch (eds), *Scottish Communities Abroad*; on early modern Irish networks, see O'Conner, *The Irish in Europe*.

29 In 1732, Irvine was writing from Rouen to a debtor in order to settle his business affairs there. Charles Irvine (London) to Patrick Bannerman (Paris), 9 December 1732, Copies of Letters, Charles Irvine Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1732–1737, Irvine Papers, FBL.

30 This is revealed by a number of receipts for the costs of provisions at Canton and price lists from various places in India; 'Price Lists, Exchange Rates, etc. 1724–1746 and Undated', esp. those between 1724 and 1727, Irvine Papers, FBL.

31 On the Arbuthnot's and Franco-Scottish trade, see Talbott, *Conflict, Commerce and Franco-Scottish Relations*.

32 Concerning the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, Irvine wrote 'I pray my good friend John [Arbuthnot] to favour me with a long letter of a weeks collecting & recollecting, & let him tell me the worst for I have thoroughly prepared myself to stand it all, with the assistance of God.' Charles Irvine (off Dover) to George Ouchterlony (London), 1 September 1747, Letter Book, 1744–1748, Irvine Papers, FBL.

33 For the forms of association and solidarity among Jacobites, see Pittock, *Material Culture and Sedition*, esp. ch. 4.

34 Catterall, 'The Worlds of John Rose', p. 68.

and with the widening of opportunities by way of cross-cultural commerce.³⁵ To be sure, Charles Irvine never shunned business with Englishmen or with merchants from other national backgrounds, on the contrary. Nevertheless, his circle of trusted intimates demonstrates a strong predilection for his countrymen (Table 1). The table has been compiled on the basis of qualitative rather than quantitative evidence from Irvine's copious correspondence. Counting the frequency of letters between correspondents (an important measure in quantitative network analysis) cannot conclusively shed light on degrees of intimacy, as intimates often saw each other on a regular basis, rendering letter writing unnecessary.³⁶ Jonas Malm Erickson, one of the few Swedes on the list, acted as his long-term assistant and bookkeeper; he accompanied Irvine on several trips to Canton from 1740 onwards and continued to serve as his agent in Gothenburg until Irvine's death in 1771.³⁷

The 'high degree of internal solidarity' that Edna Bonacich found to be a general characteristic of diasporic business communities captures not only the relationships between fellow Scots or Jacobites, but those between different sub-groups among the interlopers.³⁸ As Bonacich insists, 'since they plan to return, sojourners have little reason to develop lasting relationships with members of the surrounding host society, but they have every reason to keep deeply alive the regional and broader ethnic ties, for these relationships will persist in the future towards which the sojourner points.'³⁹ There is something about this future orientation (and the escaping of the past) that directed the interlopers' unbounded and opportunistic commercial behaviour. Bonacich's analysis of the impact of this forward-looking perspective on business portfolios and consumption patterns among foreign middlemen minorities also applies to the British employees of the smaller interloping East India Companies.

35 On the importance of cross-cultural networks for diasporic communities, see Trivellato, *Familiarity of Strangers*; Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks*.

36 Charles Irvine's correspondence with Colin Campbell and his wife, for instance, is at times sporadic. However, the close friendship and commercial partnership between them still manifests itself, not by the number of surviving letters, but through the content of their exchanges, the gift-giving practices between them and the numerous commercial transactions between them that were recorded in Irvine's ledgers.

37 Irvine's niece Mary Irvine received powers of attorney and, with the help of Jonas Malm, was busy for some time settling accounts and collect outstanding debts to her uncle in Europe. Malm's tidy handwriting appears all over Irvine's commercial ledgers. See, for instance, the neatly kept book 'The Cost and Package of my Private Trade on the Ship Ridderhus, Canton 1741–42', Price Lists and Exchange Rates, 1724–1746, Irvine Papers, FBL.

38 Bonacich, 'Middlemen Minorities', pp. 585f. More critical on internal cohesion of trading diasporas is Markovits, 'Trading Networks'.

39 Bonacich, 'Middlemen Minorities', p. 586.

TABLE 1 Charles Irvine's circle of intimates during his time in Sweden

Name	Place of residence	Origin	Family tie
Arthur Abercromby	London/Gothenburg	Scottish	
John Arbuthnot	London/Dunkirk	Scottish	
Colin Campbell	Gothenburg	Scottish	
Hugh Campbell	London/Gothenburg	Scottish	
Gilbert Elliott	Gothenburg/Castelbar	Scottish	
Patrick Garden	London	Scottish	Cousin
Robert Garden	London	Scottish	Cousin
James Gough	Cadiz	Irish	
John Irvine	Aberdeen/Gothenburg	Scottish	Nephew
George Kitchin	Gothenburg	Scottish	
Jonas Malm Erickson	Gothenburg	Swede	
George Ouchterlony	London	Scottish	
John Pike	Gothenburg	Scottish	
James Rose	Aberdeen	Scottish	Nephew
Petter von Utfall	Gothenburg	Swede	
Jacob v. Utfall Jeansson	Gothenburg	Swede	

In their commercial dealings, interlopers like other sojourners favoured the 'portable or easily liquidated livelihood' derived from middlemen occupations such as trading, brokering and money lending.⁴⁰ As a result, they were reluctant to tie up their money in the host country for too long. Irvine's investments were organised around particular China voyages and not for longer. However, towards the end of his career as a supercargo, Irvine was careful to invest in British EIC shares, thus channelling parts of his fortune back to Britain for the interest and security this brought.⁴¹ Whilst the acquisition of land was also a desirable

40 Bonacich, 'Middlemen Minorities', p. 585. The acquisition of EIC bonds, for instance, was a widespread phenomenon among the British interlopers in Sweden. This was one of the safest investments available at the time, and comparatively flexible, offering an interest rate of 3 to 6 per cent. See Bowen, *The Business of Empire*, esp. pp. 32–34.

41 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to George Ouchterlony (London), 30 September 1747, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL. With the help of Ouchterlony and two trusted kinsmen, Irvine had been able to smuggle seventy pieces of gold bars ashore in Dover, weighing close to 29 kg. Charles Irvine (off Dover on board the *Freden*) to Mr Fecton (Dover), 1 September 1747, Letter Book, 1744–1748, Irvine Papers, FBL; Charles Irvine (off Dover) to

prospect for Irvine, as a late interest in farming and cattle herding in Ireland suggests, he could not bring himself to invest his money in an estate, or any industrial venture. His close friend in London, George Ouchterlony, had moved into the manufacturing of coarse linen and sailcloth. Irvine was always interested in this business, but never thought of moving into production himself.⁴²

Another similarity between many interlopers and Bonacich's 'middlemen' was their frugality. At least some were willing 'to suffer short-term deprivation to hasten the long-term objective of returning to the homeland' with savings to allow them to settle there in style.⁴³ This was, however, certainly not true for everybody. Thomas Hall, one of the English-born servants of the Ostend Company, for instance, invested in ostentatious clothing, furniture and equipment whilst living on the continent, as his numerous tailor's bills indicate.⁴⁴ Yet, the lifestyle of the majority of interlopers is better captured in the case of Charles Irvine. Although he became an expert trader in luxury goods, he did not surround himself with splendour. Rather, he was more concerned with accumulating capital for his retirement and for the members of his extended family in Scotland, which prevented him from spending his profits on domestic comfort, horses or coaches. His personal modesty astonished at times even his close friends. For instance, Colin Campbell (Figure 2) noted in his will that Irvine should, after the former's death, finally accept 'my Gold Snuffbox that Her Majesty the present Queen of Sweden did me the honour to present me, with Her Majesty's Picture that is in it', and also 'some things of greater value that I had formerly ordered for him [Irvine], which he afterwards told me that he absolutely would not receive'.⁴⁵

Interlopers usually had more than their own wellbeing in mind. In fact, they often found themselves supporting many others back home, including cousins, nephews, godsons, foster children and the offspring of friends and business partners. Considering his frequent absences, Charles Irvine instructed George Ouchterlony to help any of his numerous relations who might be short

John Ouchterlony (Dover), 1 September 1747 (at midnight), Letter Book, 1744–1748, Irvine Papers, FBL.

42 Irvine wrote to Ouchterlony: 'Pray send me to Gothenburgh ... how your manufactures goe on, tho' I can't say that I shall make much use of them; yet I love to hear how the world goes & it will amuse me: an old coachman loves to hear the Clack of the whip.' Charles Irvine (on board the *Freden*) to George Ouchterlony (London), 1 September 1747, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL.

43 Bonacich, 'Middlemen Minorities', p. 585.

44 Bundles with trade bills are included in C 111/95–96 (Hall v. Hallett) and in boxes C 103/30–33 in the Chancery Masters' Exhibits, TNA.

45 Cormack, *Colin Campbell*, p. 13.



FIGURE 2 *Portrait of Colin Campbell (1686–1757), director of the Swedish East India Company (1731–1757). By Johan Joacim Sträng (1755). GÖTEBORGS STADSMUSEUM*

of money while he was away. After Ouchterlony had assisted one Alexander Irvine in order that he could study in Paris, Irvine wrote:

I do not know that I have any more Nephews that can come in your way in my absence but if any of them whether known to you or not should at any time stand in need of fifty Pounds, a little more or less I entreat you to let them have it on my account ... for it grieves me to see a parcel of young men lost for want of a Small matter to help them forward.⁴⁶

46 Charles Irvine to George Ouchterlony (London), 10 December 1743, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL.

Without a wife or children of his own, Irvine himself strove to support his Scottish friends and extended family who partly held a stake in the Atlantic trade.⁴⁷ The support of kinsmen, especially of the younger generation, was not, however, a mere act of charity, as Irvine's rhetoric of generosity might suggest. The advice, patronage and financial support offered by Charles Irvine to his kinsmen and close friends was expected to yield financial returns for both sides, strengthen the bond between them and eventually bring opportunities and prosperity to the larger family network.

Irvine himself increasingly came to rely on members of his extended family to advance his trading interests in Europe and Asia. In particular, his involvement in the illegal carrying trade of Chinese tea from Sweden to Scotland (which grew in proportion to his other commitments from the 1740s onwards) involved several of his immediate relatives as well as the offspring of close friends. His nephews James Rose, John Irvine and the young Thomas Irvine were all drawn into the orbit of the SEIC or the European re-export trade in the years in which Irvine had some influence in suggesting suitable candidates for the Company trade in China. The accounts of Charles Irvine leave no doubt that he was routinely acting in partnership with his kinsmen. The expectation that favours and loans had to be returned promptly was always made clear.

Family responsibilities also loomed large in the correspondence of other British interlopers. Arthur Abercromby of Birkenbog (1707–1761), a SEIC supercargo for many years, was congratulated by his friends on his appointment to accompany a VOC vessel to China late in his life, as they were well aware of Abercromby's mounting concerns about the financial situation of his relatives. Abercromby, who had to support a large family back in Banff (in Murrayshire), would be, as they hoped, 'once more in a fair way of being rich or Master of an easy Fortune which he very well deserves being a very friendly good Man & after your [Irvine's] Example ready to do for all his Relations'.⁴⁸ Kinship ties thus came with responsibility. Charles Irvine, like so many other interlopers in the China trade, took on wide-ranging responsibilities in a social universe that required him to maintain deep personal and financial cross-border ties, as his felt 'home' was usually not found in the fleeting host societies of his interloping activities.

47 Charles Irvine closely followed the career and business ventures of John Rose, to whom he lent in 1751 a significant sum of money to help him start a shipping business. See Catterall, 'The Worlds of John Rose', pp. 74f.

48 George Ouchterlony (London) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 19 December 1758, CIC, FBL.

Part of the privilege of working for one of the big or small East India Companies was the prospect of integrating one's personal network into the trade and finding placements for talented and not so talented family members. As elsewhere, established players looked 'for ways to use institutions to limit entry, reduce risks, and raise profits'.⁴⁹ In this regard, British interlopers were no different from their colleagues in the EIC. Upon reaching a position of influence and relative prosperity, they were quick to advance the material interests of their circle of intimates, often by excluding other traders. The importance of interpersonal relationships for the structure and development of the China trade is, however, hardly ever addressed in the existing literature. The following section discusses the commercial and maritime training of China traders and, where possible, considers their social background, since the outlook of their families often and crucially determined the ways by which they entered overseas trade in the first place. It will further detail how this varied group of British merchants and mariners actually became interlopers.

3 Ways into the China Trade

Becoming an interloper in the East Indies trade was rarely the long-term plan of eighteenth-century British, French and Dutch merchants and navigating officers. Nonetheless, many accepted the offers of investors based at Antwerp, Amsterdam and Ghent to accompany their ships to the East Indies shortly after the War of the Spanish Succession was concluded in 1714 and trade on the European continent could flourish once more. Following the Peace of Utrecht (1713/14), the Southern Netherlands were ruled by the Habsburg Empire and for a number of years after the war conditions looked promising for venturing into the long-distance trade eastward in which many states in northwestern Europe already engaged. A number of successful private voyages to China conducted by French and Irish traders from St-Malo raised hopes for financial gain in the Austrian Netherlands, too.⁵⁰ The great excitement about the prospects of overseas trade was very much a 'European postwar phenomenon', and so-called 'projectors' throughout the continent were approaching governments to support their ingenious schemes.⁵¹

49 Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies*, p. 56.

50 Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, vol. 1, p. 153; Bracken, 'Piracy and Poverty'.

51 Furber, 'East India Companies', p. 288; on the characteristics and discourses concerning the figure of the early modern projector, see Yamamoto, *Taming Capitalism before its Triumph*.

One of these schemes was the idea to found what would later become the Ostend General India Company (hereafter GIC or Ostend Company), which was granted a royal charter in 1722.⁵² The financial risk of the Ostend Company and the private ventures that preceded it lay with a diverse group of financiers, including well-known bankers from the Netherlands, Flanders and Brabant such as Pierre Proli, P. J. Cloots, Jacques de Pret, Paul Charlé and the Maelcamp brothers. These were joined by a group of Irish Jacobite exiles, including Thomas Ray, the Sarsfield brothers, and Patrick McNeny.⁵³ What these investors needed were bold and experienced traders who could turn the Ostend venture into a success. The obvious place to look was among the ranks of the existing Companies, as every trading season there were ‘many more candidates than there [were] places’.⁵⁴ This surplus of expertise and capital, especially in Britain and the Netherlands, encouraged the migration of highly qualified personnel to the provincial port of Ostend. Certain risks remained, under whatever flag the traders decided to travel, yet the prospects of quick promotion and the amount of private trade allowed to individual servants differed significantly from one Company to the other, and from person to person.⁵⁵

Regulations were often formulated in ways that suggest a degree of standardisation in the organisation and limitation of private trade. Yet, China traders were notorious for disregarding regulations. The directors themselves were willing to turn a blind eye to breaches in regulation by their personal protégés. The financiers in the Southern Netherlands knew all too well that they had to offer competitive terms in order to attract able and ambitious people from abroad.

Two of the key figures in the Ostend venture were the brothers Alexander and Abraham Hume. They were born in Ayton, Berwickshire, described in 1762 by the Scottish diarist James Boswell as ‘a dirty little village’.⁵⁶ As sons of a Quaker laird, the Humes belonged to the Scottish landed gentry, but were outsiders in religious terms.⁵⁷ As young men they would have been excluded from membership in one of the traditional livery Companies, but at the beginning of the eighteenth century, there were plenty of opportunities to gain a commercial training elsewhere.⁵⁸ For an apprenticeship in overseas and wholesale

52 For an overview, see Parmentier, *Tea Time in Flanders*.

53 Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, pp. 14–15.

54 Anon. (London) to Charles Irvine and Captain Thomas Neilson (Gothenburg), 14 October 1737, CIC, FBL.

55 Berg et al., ‘Private Trade and Monopoly Structures’, esp. pp. 129–133.

56 Boswell, *London Journal*, entry for 15 November 1762, p. 42.

57 Mackillop, ‘Accessing Empire’, p. 16.

58 Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies*, pp. 86–90.

trade, as well as for service in the British East India Company, they were eligible candidates. It is unknown where the Hume brothers received their first commercial training. Yet, it is likely that Alexander – who was ten years older than Abraham – went out to France or the Southern Netherlands for some time, since he wrote and read French fluently when he entered the service of the Ostend Company years later.⁵⁹

The Hume brothers were representative of many British interlopers who found employment in the Ostend or Swedish East India Company, in that they came from a provincial yet elevated social background, on Britain's northern economic periphery.⁶⁰ What they were given was a solid commercial education, and widespread contacts to merchants in London and abroad. It is fascinating to see which families looked west to the Atlantic trade, while others were keen for their youths to enter the service of the EIC or the intra-European trade. Most likely, individual family connections decided upon such choices at an early stage. There are, of course, many Scottish families who were represented in the trading worlds of both Asia and the Atlantic, yet a preference for specific geographical regions and commodities nonetheless often prevailed.⁶¹

Robert Hume, who was most likely the father of Alexander and Abraham, seems to have been involved in the management and insurance of East Indiamen from early on, operating from a counting house in Tooley Street, Southwark.⁶² As the works of Jean Sutton and Huw Bowen have shown, the 'shipping interest' of London formed a close-knit group of families who were able to limit outside competition for much of the eighteenth century, and who formed powerful alliances with and also took part in the commercial management of the EIC.⁶³ Between 1717 and 1720, Alexander Hume worked in the EIC's maritime service, perhaps as a junior supercargo.⁶⁴ The early experience of trading in the East was to be his entry ticket into a scheme that promised quick promotion and unusually high profits.

In 1719/20, together with a small group of Britons and Irishmen, Alexander Hume decided to quit the EIC service and travelled to Ostend to meet their new employers. Thomas Hall, Captain John Harrison, Captain James Tobin,

59 The 'Espece de Journal tenu par Mr. Hume' is one of many documents and letters written by Alexander Hume in French that are still preserved among the Ostend Company records at the Stadsarchief Antwerp, G.I.C. 5617.

60 On kinship networks and economic migration among Scots in the period, see the chapters by Andrew Mackillop, Douglas Catterall and others in McCarthy (ed.), *A Global Clan*.

61 This is neatly illustrated by the profiles of Hancock's *Citizens of the World*, pp. 40–84.

62 See Furber, 'East India Companies', p. 299.

63 Sutton, *Lords of the East*; Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit'.

64 Farrington, *A Biographical Index*, p. 401.

George Kitchin, James Naish, Charles Morford and the latter's uncle, Captain Charles Pike, were among the vanguards of a movement that expanded in the following years to include many more former EIC servants.⁶⁵ All of these traders had a strong practical connection to the sea and a deep-rooted interest in shipping and navigation. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the professional boundaries between commanders and supercargoes were still pretty blurred. George Kitchin, Thomas Hall, James Naish and Charles Pike served interchangeably in both positions over the course of their seafaring careers, following opportunities and privileges rather than the logic of different professional paths, whether that of merchant or mariner.

The unique perspective on interlopers in the China trade – men who changed their employing Company several times during their careers – can help us to understand to what extent practical expertise (that is knowledge of navigation, trading experience, bookkeeping as well as language skills) was a significant asset with which merchant mariners could advertise their individual value to a new employer. As the example of the Ostend venture showed, a supercargo who was also a skilled navigator was very employable in a landscape of mushrooming Companies and private initiatives whose promoters all sought a footing in the market for Asian goods.

On the subject of the Ostend Company and its British employees, it is possible to distinguish a first wave of recruitment that happened roughly between 1717 and 1720, which included mostly officers and commanders with previous experience in the East Indies trade. This was distinct from a second wave after the royal charter was granted in 1722, through which people with different trading portfolios and experiences were able to join. Many traders who joined the Ostend venture right at the beginning, and who were crucial in implementing the necessary trading structures, subsequently facilitated the entry of friends and relatives. The latter followed in the footsteps of the former, but often had less or no previous experience in the East Indies trade. What looked like a decline in 'skilled labour' in the recruitment practices of the Ostend Company was actually an indication of a quickly maturing trading enterprise.

First, as trade from Ostend expanded, there was an increased need for writers and assistants who were expected only to master the basics of accounting, have good arithmetical skills and a 'good hand', as they had to record transactions and copy letters for their superiors in the Company. These requirements were in place for all overseas trading activities. Many institutions and private

65 Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, pp. 12–27. There was also a great influx of Dutch and French traders, some of whom feature in a prosopographical study by Parmentier, *Het gezicht van de Oostendse handelaar*.

tutors provided courses that the young men destined for a commercial career would receive as their first training.⁶⁶ Such junior positions were sometimes staffed by family members or protégés of those who were already well established in the Company. It was through these mechanisms that not only were professional hierarchies implemented that were similar to those of the big East India Companies, but also that a new generation of young traders were brought up in the business of interloping in the China trade.

Second, during the last wave of recruitment from 1722 to the suspension of the Ostend charter in 1728, there was also a noticeable influx of ‘career changers’ who were well connected in the worlds of finance and the provision trade. An exploration of these personal connections helps to identify the vital links between Eurasia and Atlantic commerce, not only in relation to the supply of export commodities and silver via a host of intermediaries in northwestern Europe and Cadiz, but also to the return distribution of Chinese goods throughout Europe and the New World. A number of these – often little-studied – figures will now be introduced.

Merchants with a background in the wine, silver, textile and iron re-export trades were perhaps novices in the area of commerce to China, but they brought vital contacts and experiences with them into this new and dynamic branch of business. Many China traders were first and foremost merchants active in the intra-European trade, a background that had a lasting impact on their trading activities after they found a way to participate in the growing commerce with Canton. To take an example, the brothers Thomas and John Adam Coppinger, who joined the Ostend venture after 1723, had been part of the expatriate Irish Jacobite community in Ostend and Dunkirk, and had acted as crucial players in the Anglo-French trade in brandy and wine.⁶⁷ After they had entered the China trade on behalf of the Ostend and later the Swedish East India Company, they became major wholesalers of tea in Europe, while keeping their stake in the trade in alcoholic beverages.⁶⁸ The wine and beer trades

66 For a detailed discussion of the merchants’ training and the development of a specialist educational literature for young traders, see Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies*, pp. 86–90; Glaisyer, *The Culture of Commerce in England*.

67 On their connection to Thomas Ray, Patrick Sarsfield, Charles Hennessy and the Rothe (Roche) brothers, see Parmentier, ‘The Sweets of Commerce’, esp. pp. 72–74.

68 Thomas Coppinger was a prolific buyer of tea and porcelain at the Swedish Company auctions in the 1740s. See, for instance, the 1742 sales catalogues of the SEIC ships *Ridderhus*, *Stockholm* and *Fridericus Rex Suecia*. Sales catalogues of the Swedish East India Company 1733–1759, available online in the Warwick Digital collections, <http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/landingpage/collection/swedish>.

were perfectly compatible with the East Indies commerce, as large supplies for the ships' companies and factories in Asia were needed.⁶⁹

In all Companies, in fact, we find supercargoes and officers who were deeply involved in the trade in beverages, often with a strong regional focus on Portugal, Spain, France, Britain or the Low Countries. Charles Irvine, in partnership with the house of Arbuthnot, was for much of his early career a sedentary wine merchant at Rouen. Similar trajectories of merchants who only later in their careers turned to the opportunities of the China trade can also be traced amongst the servants of the British EIC. Frederick Pigou, Nathaniel Torriano and Stephen DeVisme, for instance – all EIC supercargoes in the 1720s and 1740s – came from families with strong links to the continent through their engagement in the import of French wines to England.⁷⁰

Amongst the second wave of people who joined the Ostend Company, there were also a number of Britons who had previously been working as stockbrokers and financial agents in London and Amsterdam, and who were, in the words of a contemporary merchant, 'drawn into those chimerical schemes', in which so many investors lost a fortune: the South Sea Bubble of 1720.⁷¹ Colin Campbell and Robert Hewer (d. 1746), for whom we have more evidence, belonged to this latter group of traders who found their way into the China trade through personal networks, but without any specialised trading knowledge in East India goods.

Both Campbell and Hewer came to the European continent in financial distress. The heavy debts they had accumulated through financial speculation, and their inability to clear them, were their main reasons for fleeing Britain.⁷² Hewer had such a large debt to pay off – including the £5,800 he owed Colonel Archibald Hamilton – that he was facing imprisonment.⁷³ Temporarily Hewer had relied upon the hospitality and support of two London friends, Thomas Hall and Charles Morford, who had already been trading under the Austrian flag

69 On the significant trade of Madeira wines to the East Indies and the involvement of Scottish merchants, see Hancock, 'An Undiscovered Ocean'.

70 Nathaniel Torriano's Account Books B (starts in the year 1697), in Accounts, Ledgers and Correspondence in English and French, Mainly Concerning Nathaniel Torriano, London Merchant, and the Estate of Susanna Torriano, TNA, Chancery: Master Rose's Exhibits, C 112/24.

71 Robert Hewer (London) to Thomas Hall (Ostend), 4 October 1720, TNA, Chancery Masters' Exhibits, C 130/132, also cited in Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 18. A new interpretation of this Company was offered in Paul, *The South Sea Bubble*; for an excellent discussion of previous bubbles, see Murphy, *The Origins of English Financial Markets*.

72 For the centrality of personal debt and credit in English culture and social life, see Finn, *The Character of Credit*.

73 See Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 48.

for some years. Morford, Hall and Hewer (who was originally from Plymouth) belonged to the same shipping circles in London, and their previous acquaintance certainly had an impact on how they promoted each other's interests. In 1723, Thomas Hall managed to secure Hewer a position as supercargo on board the Canton ship *Marquis de Prié*, of which he himself held the command. This elevated position on board allowed Hewer to recover a large part of his fortune and to pay off his creditors at home in Britain in the course of a few years.

After Hewer's first voyage to China, it was Hall who bought up large parts of the former's *pacotille* in order to sell the goods off little by little to individual consumers and wholesalers on the continent. This personal arrangement enabled Hewer to pay back his bonds fairly quickly, and also brought in enough cash to invest in the export cargo for a new journey in 1725/26.⁷⁴ What looks like an instance of selfless behaviour probably turned to good account for Hall. The great intimacy of their letters, however, leaves no doubt that the two became close friends and not only trading partners.

Both Thomas Hall, who had been working as a commander and supercargo for the Ostend Company since 1719, and Robert Hewer came from a similar mercantile background and were by no means outsiders as far as their political persuasion (Whigs without political ambition), religion (Protestant) or social status were concerned. They belonged to the proud merchant class of London, who frequented the Jerusalem and Lloyd's coffee houses and were always on the lookout for new commercial opportunities abroad. In a way, they were the least likely candidates to be attracted by interloping, yet personal ambition and financial necessity played a powerful role in attracting some men to the business of interloping who otherwise had no difficulty integrating themselves into London's commercial society. James Naish, for example, belonged to London's shipping circles and was both an experienced commander and supercargo of the British EIC. After his excursion into the Ostend Company, he would eventually return to his former employer in London.

Robert Hewer was the youngest son of a prominent merchant in Plymouth.⁷⁵ After his father's death in 1743, he and his brothers found hidden in his house, '£6,600 & upwards in money that hath lain there many a year untouched'.⁷⁶

74 Thomas Hall's Ostend transaction book details his purchases and sales between voyages and encompasses the time between 1723 and 1726. TNA, C 111/95.

75 Robert Hewer senior was elected as mayor of Plymouth three times between 1709 and 1732. In his will, he left practically his entire fortune to his eldest son John. TNA, PROB 11/727, Will of Robert Hewer, Merchant of Plymouth.

76 Robert Hewer to Thomas Hall, 3 June 1743, quoted in Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution*, p. 319.

The hoarding of cash was perhaps not unusual in times when money could occasionally be scarce and banks as an institution were not trusted and used by all merchants to the same degree. This amount, however, was exceedingly high and gives us a good idea of the background of young Robert. Considering that his son Robert lost a fortune of £40,000 almost at once, as all of it was invested in shares and bonds, his trust in the security of banks might well have been affected.

Robert Hewer's letters to Thomas Hall give detailed insights into his heavy losses in the crash of the South Sea stock between July and September 1720, an episode that he described as 'a melancholy circumstance, [which] hath almost broke my heart'.⁷⁷ In cultural terms, Hewer became a keen 'improver'.⁷⁸ After his time at Ostend, he travelled to Italy to learn the language. There he also developed an understanding of fine arts. After setting up house and trade in France as a dealer in East India goods, he was finally able to return home, thanks to the mediation of his friend Thomas Hall, having managed to settle his last debts and to arrange a reconciliation with the British Crown and the Court of Directors in London.⁷⁹ For the rest of his career, Robert Hewer remained a part-time trader with an ongoing interest in shipping and trade in East India goods, settling down in England as a country gentleman. His short career as an interloper was to have great impact on his later life, as it allowed him to buy a fine estate near Plymouth and to reintegrate into polite society in London and Devon.⁸⁰

Another British-born interloper who was enlisted in the service of the Ostend Company and who would later play a crucial role in the Swedish venture was Colin Campbell. Campbell did not have much experience with maritime trade before he joined the Ostend Company at some point around 1723.⁸¹ In his earlier career, he had been more interested in the stock market, and had specialised in financial services as a broker in London.⁸² His background as a clerk, and his familiarity with banking and speculative trading in bills of

77 Cited in Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 48.

78 On land owning, politics and art collecting as the preferred pursuits of successful London merchants, Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, pp. 285–319; pp. 347–375.

79 Upon the settlement, he personally wrote to one of the EIC directors from Paris, requesting permission to cross the Channel in order to resettle in England. Robert Hewer (Paris) to Matthew Decker (London), 17 August 1731, BL, IOR/E/1/22 ff. 169–170v, letter 94.

80 See the two bundles of letters from Hewer to Hall in TNA, C 103/130 (Hall v. Hallett) and C 103/132.

81 On Colin Campbell's connection to the Ostend venture, see Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, pp. xix, xxi.

82 Müller, 'Scottish and Irish Entrepreneurs', p. 151.

exchange, bonds and insurance policies, made him an ideal candidate for his later position as a Company director of the SEIC. Campbell, and the many investors in Scotland and London for whom he was acting, were hit hard by the bursting of the South Sea Bubble.⁸³ Throughout the rest of his life, he paid off debts, whilst accumulating an enormous fortune on the side. His executors settled the last claims *post mortem*, as Campbell had made provisions to satisfy all those who had lost money through his advice in the notorious summer of 1720.⁸⁴ As his will makes clear, he also gave generously to various charitable bodies both in Sweden and England, and provided ample means for the purpose of erecting a church in Gothenburg – a gift to and witness to the growing community of worshipping Britons in that town.

The influx into the China trade of merchants who, like Hewer and Campbell, had an intimate and yet often ill-fated connection to the rapidly expanding world of banking and speculation is significant. It challenges the older perception of merchant mariners as agents who simply acted on behalf of the Companies, but lacked a distinct entrepreneurial profile themselves.⁸⁵ Indeed, the variety of ways by which British merchants entered the China trade was considerable. However, what is striking is that most men were recruited from a pool of individuals who were exceedingly progressive in their commercial decisions, and who were familiar with all those commercial innovations that more traditional commodity traders feared and criticised.

Yehiel Prager, a prominent diamond merchant in Amsterdam, is illustrative of the more cautious and in many ways ‘conservative’ traders that still dominated the landscape of overseas trading well into the later eighteenth century. Prager tried everything to prevent the young folks who ran the family’s Philadelphia house from getting involved in the bills and exchange business, instead of focusing on the exchange of goods. His conservatism in these matters is evident in the letter he sent to his nephews abroad in 1784, in which he stressed the slow progress one should expect from one’s trade: ‘Respectable merchants do not concern themselves with it [the trade in bills of exchange] and you cannot get rich in one year. A merchant needs time and then respect comes of itself.’⁸⁶ The China traders under consideration here had a different take on these matters. The Bubble generation, born between the 1680s and

83 For intriguing new research on the perception of stock jobbers as financial criminals during the financial crisis years of 1719–20, see de Jean, ‘John Law’s Capitalist Violence’; Neal, *I Am Not Master of Events*.

84 Cormack, *Colin Campbell*, p. 10.

85 Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company*.

86 Cited in Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*, p. 203.

1710s, represented a group of curious and experimental merchants who seem to have felt comfortable in the world of high finance as well as with the intricacies of commodity trading. In that, they were perhaps an unusual lot.

Although Colin Campbell – the newly arrived ‘Ostender’ – was a latecomer in the business of long-distance trade (being already in his mid-thirties), he surely had social capital in the form of personal networks, and also the commercial background, to navigate this dramatic shift in his career with the utmost success. Even though he claimed to have been personally ‘not acquainted with [the] sailing of a ship & other sea affairs’⁸⁷ before his first voyage with the SEIC, he had already acquired vital trading experience in both China and India. For some time, he operated side by side with his brother Hugh Campbell, who might have had the status of a ‘free merchant’ in the Madras Presidency in the 1720s.⁸⁸

Even though most of Hugh Campbell’s business papers and correspondence are lost, we can still get a glimpse of his trading activities in India through the chance survival of the account book of an anonymous merchant in Madras, in which Hugh Campbell figures prominently.⁸⁹ In the 1720s, Hugh Campbell accompanied and invested in several ‘country voyages’ between Madras and Canton. Just before Colin Campbell accompanied the first SEIC ship to China in 1732, his brother was joining the last Ostend ship to Canton, the *Duke of Lorrain*.⁹⁰ He returned to Europe in the late 1720s, just in time to get involved in the formation of the SEIC.⁹¹ Country traders such as Hugh Campbell were able to build up an intimate knowledge of the China trade, as they often stayed in Canton or Macao for prolonged periods. It is therefore not surprising that these

87 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 12.

88 Even though he acted as one of the directors of the Swedish Company, his identity was protected. Hugh Campbell owned a house in London and later in Bedfordshire. His children (whom he outlived) were educated in England. Charles Irvine (on board the *Freden*) to George Ouchterlony (London), 24 August 1747, Letter Book, 1744–1748, Irvine Papers, FBL; Hugh Campbell (London) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 8 September 1747, CIC, FBL; on the sale of Campbell’s house and furniture in London, Arthur Abercromby (London) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 10 June 1758, CIC, FBL; TNA, PROB 11/823, Will of Hugh Campbell Esq. of Milton Ernest, Bedfordshire.

89 See Anon., ‘Account Book of an East India Merchant at Fort St. George, 1720–25’, FBL. There are also a number of letters written by Hugh Campbell to Thomas Hall in the 1730s, in which he complained much about the treatment of the Swedish Company by the French and English governments. Hugh Campbell to Thomas Hall, 19 June 1734; 28 August 1734; and 13 February 1735, TNA, C 103/132.

90 Thomas Braddyll (Fort William College, Calcutta) to Hugh Campbell, 20 January 1732/33, TNA, C 111/95 (Hall v. Hallett).

91 Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 101.

Britons who already operated at the margin of the monopoly system formed another important pool of experts, which small trading Companies were eager to have on board.

Before we turn to the background of the Campbell family, a note is due on the contexts in which European country traders like Hugh Campbell pursued their commercial schemes in the East. There, they acquired the vital expertise that was a precondition for their later interloping careers. Fort St George in Madras was then under the control of the EIC. However, as one of the most important trading enclaves on the Indian Coromandel Coast, the population of traders in Madras was always more mixed.⁹² In fact, as Holden Furber has shown, the number of people who belonged to the ‘floating “seafaring” group outside the English Company’s service’ significantly exceeded the civil servants who were officially part of the EIC trading establishment in Madras during the 1720s, by a ratio of more than 2:1.⁹³ Country traders like Hugh Campbell were crucial intermediaries who cooperated with ‘Ostenders’ and other interlopers as well as with EIC servants during their time of commercial operations in the East Indies. They encouraged direct links between servants of different European Companies and were a key driving force in the expansion of trade between different nodes of the Asian trading system.⁹⁴

The Campbell brothers of Moy in Moray traced their ancestry to a powerful Scottish noble family, the clan of Cawdor, and through them to the noble family of Argyll.⁹⁵ The headquarters of the clan, Cawdor Castle, lies mid-way between Nairn and Inverness, just off the coastline of the Moray Firth. The impressive drawing rooms, staircases and bedchambers of the medieval castle still feature a great many Chinese and Indian furnishings and decorative objects today. Colin and Hugh Campbell were raised in Edinburgh as sons of a prominent lawyer and must have enjoyed a good education and commercial training. Both their parents originally came from the northeast of Scotland, like so many other traders who served in the Ostend and later Swedish and Prussian East India Companies. The family did not seem to have had any obvious connections to East India circles in London. Yet, the eldest brother,

92 Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*, p. 301. For an excellent description of Madras as a cross-cultural trading place, see Ogborn, *Global Lives*, pp. 78–111.

93 Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*, p. 301.

94 The vital role of the ‘country trader’ and especially the ‘sea captain’ for the expansion of British trade in Asia in the first part of the eighteenth century has been stressed by Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*, esp. pp. 273–297. More recent studies that consider the impact of the country trade for the economic rather than political development of the Euro-Asian trade include the study of Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade*.

95 Cormack, *Colin Campbell*, p. 30.

Archibald, was a sea captain, which suggests some inclination in the family towards overseas trade.⁹⁶ As a Presbyterian, Colin Campbell had no great trouble in integrating into Swedish society. Yet, specific religious affiliations never seem to have been a guiding principle of his commercial networking with other merchants, as he was happy doing business with Protestants of various denominations, with Jews and also with Scottish and Irish Catholics. He was closely involved in Jacobite circles and shared a number of close friends with Charles Irvine, among them George Ouchterlony, Arthur Abercromby, Charles Metcalfe, George Kitchin and John Pike.

Colin and Hugh Campbell had been the chief supporters of Charles Irvine in Gothenburg until their own powers of patronage gradually melted away following the renewal of the first Swedish charter and the subsequent rise of domestic merchant interest. Despite the crucial roles foreigners had played for the development of the Company, the status of British employees in Sweden became more conflictive over time. George Ouchterlony, who had been intimately involved in Company affairs from the start, and who had (like Irvine) placed a younger relative of his in the Swedish service, complained bitterly to Irvine's nephew James Rose: 'your Comp[any] goes on layin more & more hardship on the [foreign] gentlemen in their Service, they will see their errors when it will be too late & will be sensible how unable they are to manage & carry on their trade of themselves, without the aid of these very Gentlemen.'⁹⁷ In the run-up to the renewal of the first Swedish Company Charter in 1746/47, rumours were spreading among the Scottish interlopers that Swedish merchants and investors in Stockholm would seek to limit the future influence of foreigners in Company affairs. Not quite as dramatically as some feared, but increasingly so, the most lucrative positions on board went to Swedes or naturalised Swedes from 1747 onwards, which was noted and criticised, of course, by the British faction.⁹⁸

During the 1730s and 1740s, the Campbell brothers had been at the height of their power and could manage the trade and distribute privileges to their countrymen quite freely. Their collaboration with the Swedish-born director Nicolas

96 Biographical information on the Campbells is rather scarce, and a lot of unsupported claims are to be found in the SEIC historiography. The most reliable source is perhaps Cormack, *Colin Campbell*. Cormack provided key data from Scottish birth and burial records and summarised the information given by Hugh and Colin Campbell themselves when they applied for naturalisation in Sweden in 1731 and 1736 respectively.

97 George Ouchterlony (London) to James Rose (Gothenburg), 27 December 1745, James Rose Correspondence (JRC), 1743–1769, Irvine Papers, FBL.

98 Hugh Campbell (London) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 8 September 1747, CIC, FBL.

Sahlgren and the German-born Henrik König seems to have been generally on friendly terms.⁹⁹ The important careers of the Campbell brothers mirror in some way those of the Hume brothers from Berwickshire, in that they all managed to rise from a position of weakness to one of great influence and wealth. Although interlopers *par excellence*, the Humes and Campbells became widely respected by fellow traders as ‘honest gentlemen’, and even achieved royal recognition through the granting of a title of nobility and the bestowal of numerous awards from Britain and Sweden respectively.¹⁰⁰ By offering their expertise to investors on the continent, both brothers managed to gain a lot more leverage than most of their colleagues at home in Britain could ever claim. As Andrew Mackillop has succinctly put it: ‘For the Hume dynasty, as well as Colin Campbell, successful Asian commerce after 1707 meant Europe, not Britain, and their subsequent careers vindicated that judgement.’¹⁰¹

After Alexander Hume’s initial success in India, by which he accumulated two very profitable cargoes for the investors in the Southern Netherlands, he was in the position to dictate – rather than to negotiate – his future terms of employment.¹⁰² In return for his services, Hume demanded a personal remuneration that stood in stark contrast to that received by high-ranking merchants in the EIC. The influence and extraordinary privileges that some British interlopers enjoyed during their time on the continent made them attractive trading partners for members of the big Companies.¹⁰³ For instance, Jan-Albert Sichterman, the Governor of Bengal for the VOC in the 1730s and 1740s, used his contacts with interlopers like Irvine to procure Chinese export wares for his vast collection of Asian porcelain and furniture.¹⁰⁴

99 Colin Campbell bequeathed his former co-director’s mourning rings upon his death.

100 Colin Campbell’s tokens of royal recognition encompassed several likenesses from the Swedish royal couple Frederick I and Ulrika Eleonora, in addition to jewelled emblems. His brother was granted the title of Count Hugh Campbell in recognition of his services for the SEIC and the national economy.

101 Mackillop, ‘Accessing Empire’, p. 24.

102 Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise*, pp. 261–267.

103 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Joseph Hartly (London?), 7 October 1747, Letter Book, 1744–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL. Faced with several bold requests from an EIC servant and future director asking for help with the private shipping of goods from China and the buying of goods at the Swedish auction on behalf of a future EIC director, Irvine partly declined his wishes, but added: ‘I propose to doe no Business for Commissions Sake, you may be sure I’ll serve my friends in Small matters as in great to the best in my power & shall always be glad to shew you that I remember kindly your Civilitys from time to time at Cadiz.’

104 The regular exchange of gifts and commissions is documented in the correspondence between Irvine and Jan Albert Sichterman. See, for instance, Jan Albert Sichterman (Fort

The lack of practical experience among investors in Europe led to their willingness to endow Alexander with extensive responsibility, as later Abraham Hume, in return for lavish rewards. In 1726, Alexander was appointed Governor of the Ostend Company in all of the trading posts in Bengal and on the Coromandel Coast, which included those trading posts he was yet to establish. Before he went out to India for the third time on behalf of the GIC, he was in the position to ask for

a salary of f [florins] 1000 per month to start 6 months before departure, 7½ per cent commission on all such effects as shall be brought home for ye Company's account sent from Bengal or ye Coromandel Coast ... one chest of the usual size allowed to the commanders ... which chest shall be delivered immediately on the ships arrival unopened and unexamined.¹⁰⁵

In addition, Alexander Hume secured 'half the salary and privileges' for his younger brother, who accompanied him to India. In order to deliver the best possible results, Hume also took it upon himself to give directions on the composition of the outward cargoes and provisions on board. Thus, Hume made sure he was also in charge of those elements of the trade that were usually decided by the directors in Europe. What seems rather odd at first glance, namely to ask for the delivery of 'one chest of the usual size ... unopened and unexamined', is significant.¹⁰⁶ Supercargoes always carried patterns, models and written instructions for special commissions and their own commercial experiments with them to China – and they took measures to protect their ideas from the eyes of curious competitors. They could lock the compartments of their writing desks, but otherwise it was probably difficult for them to order that their chests also remained 'unexamined', as Hume insisted. In fact, a supercargo's writing desk was the only piece of luggage that was considered strictly private and was only to be opened upon the death of the owner. In 1732, the EIC supercargoes noted such a case in the Company diary, confirming that they had

[o]pened Mr [George] Arbuthnott's Scritore which was sealed up after his decease, & Capt. Elliston delivered us the Papers that were found therein relating to the Hon.ble Companies Affairs & at the same time he

Gustavus, Chinsura) to Charles Irvine (Canton), 15 January 1743 and Sichterman to Irvine, 7 January 1742, CIC, FBL.

105 Cited in Narang, 'The Ostend Company's Records', p. 20.

106 Ibid.

requested that one of the Council might be present at the taking of the Inventory of his things, which we agreed to & appointed Mr Liell for this purpose.¹⁰⁷

From other cases, we know that merchant mariners carried not only their commercial ledgers, personal letters and notebooks with them, but also an up-to-date will, and said drawings or samples for their purchases.¹⁰⁸ The death of George Arbuthnot is commented on in Colin Campbell's travel journal and reveals the small world inhabited by China traders – a world in which cross-Company friendships and family bonds loomed large. Upon the arrival of the SEIC ship in China in 1732, Campbell wrote about one of the English mates, Mr Baron:

[He] surpriz'd me with the very disagreeable news of the Death of an Intimate friend & old Acquaintant of mine whom I had great Respect for, I mean Mr George Arbuthnot Chief SuperCargo of the 4 English ships bound for China, who had dy'd aboard the Linn in sight of the Islands not far from Macao, where he was buried, which gave me great Concern.¹⁰⁹

George Arbuthnot, another Jacobite was, in fact, the half-brother of Robert Arbuthnot, the Jacobite banker and former employer of Charles Irvine at Rouen, and of Dr John Arbuthnot, the famous London physician and satirist and a great friend of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope.¹¹⁰ George Arbuthnot's mother was Catherine Ouchterlony, a fact that well demonstrates the close connections between the northern Scottish families Ouchterlony, Arbuthnot, Irvine and Campbell – whose combined 'China interest' in the 1720s and 1730s

107 'Diary and Consultation Book of George Arbuthnot, Whichcott Turner, John Starke ... and Thomas Liell a standing Council for the management of affairs in China anno 1732', BL, IOR/G/12/33 (1731–1732), p. 65.

108 On Captain Richard Pinnell's death, his personal papers plus an inventory of all his material possessions were sent to London, where they were presented as evidence in a court case. Bundle of letters concerning Captain Richard Pinnell commanding the East Indiaman 'Elizabeth' in 1746, TNA, C 108/414.

109 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 89.

110 As his older brother, the writer John Arbuthnot, mingled in elite circles in England. Dr. Arbuthnot to Lady Suffolk, London, 6 July 1731: 'I came to town to meet my brother, who is just arrived from China. He has a little present for your ladyship, which, as he tells me, consists of some tea, a beautiful Indian pheasant, and some fine lackered thing' Anon. (ed.), *Letters to and from Henrietta, Countess of Suffolk*, vol. 1, p. 4.

reached from the French Compagnie des Indes to the Ostend, Swedish and English East India Companies.

4 New Companies and Old India Traders: The Demise of the Ostend and the Rise of the Swedish East India Company

Initially, the small interloping enterprises like the Ostend or the SEIC were regarded with envy and sometimes outright hostility in London, Amsterdam and Paris. It is important to recognise though that on a personal level, the friendly contacts between most traders in Canton were hardly tainted. The Ostenders repeatedly rented a hong – a combined dwelling house, office and warehouse space for the supercargoes and their assistants and servants – next door to the EIC, and joint entertainments and dinner invitations were the rule rather than the exception.¹¹¹ Yet, sociability and private association could not prevent the diplomatic conflicts that arose in Europe and India over the ‘British’ competition from Ostend and later Gothenburg. Ostend, this provincial Belgian port, had successfully attracted funds and expertise from across Europe and promised to be an example for ever-new initiatives that attempted to cut into the profits of the larger Companies. The directors of both the EIC and VOC principally feared that the prices of Chinese and Indian wares in Europe would go down through enhanced competition and greater availability of supplies.¹¹² By 1709/10, the EIC directors were already aware of the fact that ‘[t]ea is the commodity on which the Chief part of our expected profit ... depends.’¹¹³

After a few years of trading, the diplomatic pressure in Europe on the Holy Roman Emperor – who had confirmed the trading privileges of the GIC in 1722 – became too great and the charter of the Company was suspended. In addition, the Ostend trading factories in India were abandoned, and a great many individuals were suddenly free-floating and looking for other opportunities and employments. The China trade was continued for some time under the cover of ‘neutral flags’ (such as the Prussian ship *Apollo* in 1731), but the risks were too great to attract sufficient funds in the long run.¹¹⁴

111 Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 25. On cross-Company sociability in Asia, see also Hellman, *This House is not a Home*, esp. pp. 108–111; p. 176.

112 Nierstrasz, *Rivalry for Trade in Tea and Textiles*, pp. 55–61.

113 ‘List of Goods to be provided at Chusan by the Supra Cargo’s of the Rochester’, BL, IOR/E/3/96, pp. 289–291.

114 Hertz, ‘England and the Ostend Company’, esp. p. 276.

The Ostend Company, however, had been too successful for this to be the end of the story. Consequently, a number of investors, intermediaries and Company servants were able to continue their involvement in the China trade by shifting their core business to the newly established SEIC from 1731 onwards. Some Swedish historians have placed too much emphasis on the national outlook of the Company, whose headquarters were in Gothenburg. Christian Koninckx, for instance, has downplayed the transnational nature of the SEIC by stating that '[t]here do seem to be connections between the two companies (the Ostend and SEIC), but certainly no officially-organised transfer of men, of materials or of capital from one to the other'.¹¹⁵ By contrast, this study claims that the continuities in personnel and financial backing leave no doubt as to its deeply transnational foundations. As a commercial enterprise, the SEIC relied heavily on the import of trading expertise and navigational skills from abroad. The Company's demand was satisfied not only by hiring former Ostenders, but also by profiting from the wider networks of those who had previously traded in the East under different flags.

The official instructions for EIC supercargoes and commanders in the 1720s and 1730s reminded servants stationed in China and India to look out and, when possible, to detain any British subject who navigated through Eastern waters under the command of a rival Company or without a licence from London.¹¹⁶ Since Canton was a place where all Europeans were allowed to trade in the eighteenth century and where nobody could claim an exclusive right to do so, it was, however, a delicate mission for Company officers to attack or detain any national subject who was employed by another Company.¹¹⁷ Further complicating the matter, Chinese officials strongly resented any attempts to solve disputes of this kind on land. Though at any other place *en route* from Europe to China and back, interlopers had to fear the confiscation of their property or worse.

The EIC headquarter at London pursued in individual cases a more accommodating strategy, to prevent some key figures of the Ostend Company working for the Swedes. The EIC directors were aware of the danger of losing the Hume brothers once more to a rival Company, and therefore offered them

115 Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, pp. 16f.

116 In 1730, for instance, EIC commanders received special orders to seize a man by the name of Richard Dyer who was trading for some years between India and China without permission. 'Diary and Consultations of the Council in China and of the Council at Canton, 1729–1731' [1730], BL, 10R/G/12/30, p. 37; getting rid of private traders in Canton did not become easier later in the century: Hanser, *Mr. Smith Goes to China*, pp. 70–75.

117 Van Dyke, 'Conclusion', p. 148.

the chance to come back to the British Isles upon payment of an agreed fine. Alexander and Abraham both accepted the price put on their disloyalty and paid the £1,500 demanded by the EIC directors.¹¹⁸ They thus managed to continue their East India careers now from the heart of Britain's expanding empire. The family's connection to the EIC was significantly strengthened in the 1730s when Alexander was elected a member of the Court of Directors, in addition to being among the most active 'ship's husbands' for the EIC in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Alexander's younger brother Abraham headed the London Assurance Company, was a Member of Parliament between 1747 and 1768, and was ennobled as Baronet of Wormleybury, Hertfordshire in 1767.¹¹⁹ Sir Abraham also acted as a managing owner for the EIC from 1747 until his death in 1772. Members of the Hume family were acting as principal owners and managers for more than twenty ships between 1752/53 and 1786/87.¹²⁰ Abraham's younger son, Alexander, continued this family tradition, but was also working for the EIC as a China supercargo in the 1760s.¹²¹ Within two generations, the East Indies Trade had elevated the concerns of the Hume family in a significant and lasting manner. Abraham Hume the younger, 2nd Baronet, son of Abraham Hume (born in London on 20 February 1749), was already keen to leave the closed world of Company trade and shipping. After an extended Grand Tour in Italy, he became active in the art market, chiefly as an avid collector of Renaissance art from both Venetian and Bolognese masters.¹²²

Repatriation (and redemption) were thus possible and desirable for those interlopers who had accumulated enough money to live on the interest of their fortunes or who saw possibilities for starting a profitable business in London. The careers of the Hume brothers, Thomas Hall, Robert Hewer and James Naish present memorable examples of former interlopers who returned to the British Isles and continued to prosper there. In fact, as we shall see later in this chapter, they profited enormously from the experiences and contacts forged during their residence on the continent and in Asia. The majority of

118 Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 47.

119 Will of Sir Abraham Hume Bart of Wormley, Hertfordshire, TNA, PROB 11/981.

120 See the entries on charter parties signed by Alexander and Abraham Hume in the Company Court books starting from 11 October 1752, in BL, IOR/B/72, p. 165, through to 2 September 1778, in BL, IOR/B/94, p. 204. Further entries are in Farrington, *Catalogue of East India Company Ships' Journals*, appendix 1.

121 'Thomas Fitzhugh, Samuel Blount, Nathaniel Garland, Alexander Hume, Mann Horner, Thomas Smith and William Rous appointed Resident supercargoes for the year 1764.' Diary and Consultation Books of Resident Supercargoes, BL, IOR/R/10/5.

122 Borean, 'Abraham Hume e Giovanni Maria Sasso'.

traders, however, who had joined the Ostend venture did not return to Britain. Instead, they continued to be an opportunistic and highly mobile workforce, who shifted their capital and expertise from one Company to another over the course of their careers. Their nomadic lifestyle, the experience of repeated displacement and the impermanence of their everyday lives and material world allows us to understand the impact that global trade had on these *flexible subjects* and to focus on the mechanisms and moral regimes that were in place that provided structure and a portable home to Canton traders.¹²³

5 Britons Abroad, Interlopers at Home: Transnational Careers in the Making

As we have seen, frequent relocations and disappointment in, or at least obstacles to, great ambitions characterised the beginnings of many a mercantile career. A lack of financial support and opportunities at home drove many of the young men to London and further on to the continent. Between their mid-teens and their early twenties, they developed commercial skills and different degrees of knowledge about navigation, which formed the entry requirements for finding civil employment in the East Indies trade. What distinguishes China traders from most of their adventurous colleagues in Europe, the Americas and other parts of the East Indies, is that they were more likely to work, as established, for more than one, and sometimes up to four different, national trading Companies over the course of their active careers. Cross-Company mobility has, however, never been charted systematically, neither for the British nor for any other group of European traders. Yet, it provides a crucial theme for our group portrait of British interlopers, showing that they were indeed part of a larger movement. Table 2 summarises the widely scattered information available on about eighty British interlopers active in the continental Companies during the period of this study. This list is likely to be incomplete in at least three important ways, but it can nonetheless give a useful impression of the mobility of China traders at the time.

The first issue with the list is that there were probably more British people employed as supercargoes, commanders and officers than it would suggest. However, their names have not been recorded or preserved, or the spelling of their names might have been nationalised in ways that prevented their identification as British subjects. Second, even though it has been attempted to fully trace the different career moves for each individual, the study's overall focus on the EIC, the Ostend and the Swedish East India Companies meant

123 I have borrowed this conceptual term from Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.

that a greater range of materials concerning the personnel of those Companies was unearthed than for the Danish, French or Dutch Companies, or indeed for those who had traded in Asia independently. That said, if the secondary literature on the latter three is correct, British people did not play a significant role as commercial agents or navigating officers in any of them. The Danish Company instead attracted larger numbers of Dutch and French interlopers.¹²⁴ The French *Compagnie des Indes* was, according to Holden Furber, the Company with the least influence of foreigners overall.¹²⁵ Yet, it is entirely possible that a few more people on this list might have actually also worked for the VOC, Danish or French Companies at some point, which future research might further explore.

Third, some 'borderline cases' such as Charles Pike are included. Even though only his brother John was actually employed as supercargo by the SEIC, Charles was so vitally involved in the organisation of the first voyages from Gothenburg, both practically and financially, that his inclusion made sense. No doubt, a list that would also include the financiers and administrative staff behind the continental Companies would expand this group of merchants even further.¹²⁶ Many of the British financiers and wholesalers who were part of the networks of interlopers are treated separately in Chapter 2.

Hence, even though the data presented here is not exhaustive, it still gives a clear, and fairly accurate, image of where most of the British interlopers went abroad. British traders who did not find favour with the EIC, or who were impatient to reach a higher position in the Company hierarchy, undoubtedly moved to the smaller interloping Companies. On average, interlopers moved around 1.47 times between employers. The number of people who actually returned to the EIC after an interval on the continent was small. By contrast, the number of people who moved from the Ostend to the Swedish Company was far greater. The Ostend, Danish, Swedish and later also the Prussian Companies¹²⁷ were all in great need of foreign expertise, and the private trade privileges they granted to supercargoes looked much more attractive than in any of the larger Companies.¹²⁸

124 Gøbel, 'Dutch Influences'.

125 Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade*, p. 211.

126 Many of the British financiers and wholesalers who were part of the networks of interlopers are treated separately in Chapters 2 and 4.

127 On its foundation, yet with little concern for the vital role of interlopers, see Schui, 'Prussia's "Trans-oceanic" Moment'. For a recent intervention, see Felicia Gottmann, 'Prussia all at Sea?'

128 The workings of the privilege trade are explored in Chapters 2 and 3 in detail.

Few historians have recognised that foreign influence – be it in the form of employments, contacts, expertise or capital – and cross-Company mobility represented a distinct advantage for national ‘monopoly’ Companies in the eighteenth century. One exception was Louis Dermigny’s magisterial *La Chine et l’Occident*, which endorsed a comparative perspective by looking at the different East India Companies’ activities in China over the *longue durée*. Dermigny looked at the smaller interloping Companies in a discrete chapter, but evidence for cross-Company collaboration is nonetheless woven into the fabric of the narrative throughout.¹²⁹ While he did not focus on the migration of expert traders per se, or on their private trading activities or informal networks, he nonetheless acknowledged the fact that cross-Company collaboration was an essential part of the China trade. In contrast to Hosea Ballou Morse, he thus paid due attention to the international or foreign elements of the trading Companies – their *apatridité* – and saw the migration of personnel between different national trading bodies as a strengthening rather than a weakening factor for the Companies’ commercial success.

The composition of the crews on board European merchant ships has been explored in greater depth in recent years.¹³⁰ We now know that the community of seafarers on board East India Company vessels was often strikingly international. Common sailors were constantly moving between the Companies – as the high levels of desertions in Asia indicate. Large numbers of Germans, but also Asian lascars crews, were employed on board East India ships from early on.¹³¹ Yet, mobility among the maritime and mercantile elite, that is among commanders, supercargoes and officers, has so far been neglected in the literature – although its impact on the Companies’ commercial success was certainly vital, considering their prime importance in commercial decision-making. For the British maritime elite, represented in Table 2, we can say something about their backgrounds, and thus about what kind of people were more likely to seek employment under foreign flags.

What is striking is the great number of Scots that appear in the table. For the EIC, the surge of Scottish people in the Anglo-Indian military and civil service has been explored by George MacGilvary and, most recently, by Ellen Filor.¹³² However, this outward movement to the European continent, and from there

129 Dermigny, *La Chine et l’Occident*, vol. 1, pp. 160–199.

130 For a state-of-the-art discussion on seafarers’ mobility, desertion and its legal and performative framework in the early modern period, see Fusaro et al. (eds), *Law, Labour, and Empires*.

131 van Rossum, ‘A “Moorish World”’; van Gelder, *Das ostindische Abenteuer*.

132 Filor, ‘Complicit Colonials’; McGilvary, *East India Patronage and the British State*.

TABLE 2 British interlopers and cross-Company mobility, 1710s–1750s. Legend: Blue = Scottish. Yellow = English. Green = Irish. No colour = unknown. DAC = Danish East India Company. SEIC = Swedish East India Company. EIC = English East India Company. VOC = Dutch East India Company

Name	Free merchant in Asia	EIC	VOC	Ostend Company	Compagnie des Indes	SEIC	DAC	Prussian Company	Total number of moves
Arthur Abercromby			x			x			2
Mr Baron		x				x			2
Charles Barrington		x				x			2
Gerard Barry			x			x			2
George Bellenden						x			1
Ninian Brice						x			1
Andrew Brown				x					1
Francis Brown				x					1
William Brown						x			1
Archibald Campbell						x			1
Colin Campbell	x			x		x			3
Daniel Campbell						x			1
Dougal Campbell						x			1
Hugh Campbell	x			x		x			3
Thomas Combes				x					1
John Adam Coppinger				x		x			2
Thomas Coppinger						x			1

TABLE 2 British interlopers and cross-Company mobility, 1710s–1750s (cont.)

Name	Free merchant in Asia	EIC	VOC	Ostend Company	Compagnie des Indes	SEIC	DAC	Prussian Company	Total number of moves
Alexander Cumming					X				1
Andrew Deuchar					X				1
Walter Dormer			X		X				2
Archibald Duff					X				1
William Elliott		X			X				2
Gilbert Elliott					X				1
Captain George Elphinstone		X			X		?		2
John Forbes		X			X			X	3
Joseph Foster				X					1
Charles Graham (alias Brown)				X	X				2
John Greenfield					X				1
Thomas Gregory					X				1
Captain Roger Hald				X					1
Captain Thomas Hall		XX		X					3
John Harris								X	1
John Harrison		X		X					2
Robert Hewer				X					1
Alexander Hume		XX		X					3
Abraham Hume		XX		X					3

TABLE 2 British interlopers and cross-Company mobility, 1710s–1750s (*cont.*)

Name	Free merchant in Asia	EIC	VOC	Ostend Company	Compagnie des Indes	SEIC	DAC	Prussian Company	Total number of moves
John Hume			x						1
James Hume			x						1
Maddeson Hunt						x			1
Charles Irvine					x	x			2
John Irvine	?					x			1
N. Irvine						x			1
? Jackson				x					1
William? Johnson		x		x					2
Captain George Kitchin		?		x		x			2
John Ley				x					1
Alexander Maccauley						x			1
James Maule						x			1
John Metcalfe		x				x			2
Captain R. Mitchell				x					1
James Moir						x			1
Charles Morford				x		x			2
Mungo Murrey						x			1
John Neagle				x					1
William Nairn		x				x			2

TABLE 2 British interlopers and cross-Company mobility, 1710s–1750s (cont.)

Name	Free merchant in Asia	EIC	VOC	Ostend Company	Compagnie des Indes	SEIC	DAC	Prussian Company	Total number of moves
Captain James Naish		XX	X	X					4
N. Ouchterlony Thomas Ouchterlony						X X			1 1
Captain Ed. Pearson				X					1
Charles Pike		?		X		X			2
John Pike				X		X			2
James Rose						X			1
Alexander Ross						X			1
Gustaf Ross						X			1
Walter Ross						X			1
Edmund Rothe	?						X		2
Francois Rothe					X				1
George Savage				X					1
James Steward						X			1
James Tobin		?		X					1
John Thomson						X			1
Thomas Thomson		X				X			2
John Fotheringham						X			1
Jean Louis Tournac						X			1
Peter Waldo		X		X					2
Captain John Widdrington		X				X			2

TABLE 2 British interlopers and cross-Company mobility, 1710s–1750s (*cont.*)

Name	Free merchant in Asia	EIC	VOC	Ostend Company	Compagnie des Indes	SEIC	DAC	Prussian Company	Total number of moves
Ethelred Williams						x			1
John Williams		x				x			2
William Williams						x			1
John Young						x		x	2
Average moves Number of individuals = 80									1.49

SOURCES

ANON., 'LISTE DES SUJET NÉS EN GRANDE BRETAGNE, QUI SONT EMPLOYÉS DANS LE SERVICE DE LA COMPAGNIE DES INDES ORIENTALES DE SUEDE', SHIPPING RECORDS, IRVINE PAPERS, FBL; DERMIGNY, *LA CHINE ET L'OCCIDENT*, VOL. 1, ESP. PP. 165, 172, 178–179, 183, 189; MÜLLER, 'SCOTTISH AND IRISH ENTREPRENEURS', PP. 149–163; GILL, *MERCHANTS AND MARINERS*, P. 17, PP. 41–47; BL, IOR/E/3/110 FF. 296–300, 'ORDERS AND INSTRUCTIONS TO THOMAS THOMPSON, SUPERCARGO BOUND TO CHINA'; E/3/93 FF. 104–105, 10 NOVEMBER 1699, 'INSTRUCTIONS TO WILLIAM JOHNSON, SUPERCARGO OF THE WENTWORTH, BOUND FOR CANTON'; E/1/28 FF. 286–287V, LETTER 146 CONCERNING EIC SUPERCARGO PETER WALDO; E/1/16 FF. 16–17V, DATED 6 JANUARY 1725; LETTER 8, WILLIAM ELLIOTT IN LONDON TO THE COURT OF DIRECTORS ASKING TO CARRY OUT £200 TO BENGAL FOR HIS OWN ACCOUNT; BL, IOR/Z/E/4/34/Y26, 1753–1767, REGARDING THE PRUSSIAN SUPERCARGO JOHN YOUNG AND HIS REQUESTING ASSISTANCE FROM THE COURT OF DIRECTORS IN LONDON FOR THE RECOVERY OF DEBTS; ARTHUR ABERCROMBY (LONDON) TO CHARLES IRVINE (GOTHENBURG), 10 JUNE 1758, FBL; 'FÖRTECKNING ÖVER KOMPANIETS SKEPP UNDER 1 OCH 2 OKTROJERNA', SVENSKA OSTINDISKA KOMPANIETS ARKIV (H 22:1), GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITETSBIBLIOTEK.

to China and India, ran parallel to – or rather even anticipated – what was happening in the EIC a few decades later. The clustering of families from the northeast of Scotland, around Montrose, Stonehaven, Aberdeen and the Moray Firth, is particularly striking in the SEIC. This underlines the fact that there indeed existed long-established commercial contacts between the west coast of Sweden and Scottish coastal towns to the east, from Eyemouth (a great landing place of contraband teas) to Banff (a remote hub for the off-loading of continental goods) and Inverness in the north.¹³³

Among the interlopers captured in our list are also Irish nationals and quite a few Englishmen. Future research may discern how large the proportion of Catholics was among the latter. Walter Dormer was certainly one of them.¹³⁴ Finally, those individuals whose names are marked in bold in this list appear also in other parts of this study. They were either part of the extended Irvine network or that of Thomas Hall – or indeed they featured in both, as in the case of the Hume brothers, Charles Pike, Charles Morford and the brothers Hugh and Colin Campbell.

For the most part, interlopers seem to have come from religious or political minority groups (Jacobites, ‘Papists’ and Quakers were all represented in significant numbers), who escaped professional constraints at home, such as second-class citizenship in England, and who managed to accumulate wealth overseas from which a larger family network could profit in the long run. Others were unable to thrive on private trade in the foreign Companies and were easily trapped in their role as interlopers with little prospect of ever returning home. This group included, among others, John Forbes of Alford, who was declared bankrupt in 1755 and headed to Venice after being previously employed in the EIC, SEIC and Prussian Company; James Moir of Stoneywood, a wanted Jacobite, who was a user of the English poor box at Gothenburg, and Charles Morford, a dear friend of Thomas Hall, but a drunkard, who was repeatedly referred to as a problematic case in the Irvine–Campbell correspondence, but who was kept in employment in the SEIC.¹³⁵ Like David Hancock’s Atlantic traders, interlopers on the continent often came not from the centre of power – that is, London – but rather from remote parts of the newly unified Greater Britain.

133 On the connections between Eyemouth and Sweden, Janes, ‘Fine Gottenburgh Teas’.

134 On the Dormer family, Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks*.

135 Colin Campbell (Gothenburgh) to Charles Irvine (Lorient), 31 July 1742, CIC, FBL; Colin Campbell (Gothenburgh) to Charles Irvine (Lorient), 7 August 1742, CIC, FBL.

6 Flexible Citizens: Nomads of the Canton Trade

Early modern China traders could become stateless. In order to profit from the commercial opportunities that the smaller Companies offered, foreigners such as the British-born traders under consideration here often became naturalised subjects of another monarch, by taking up residence abroad, and by promising to support and not to betray the state that offered them protection. ‘The history of citizenship – that is, the idea that all individuals should be members of a particular state to which they owe allegiance and which, in turn, gives them protection and guarantees their rights – has been inextricably linked to the rise of the modern nation state.’¹³⁶ Yet, early modern historians have long argued that passports were commonly used before 1793, when the French developed a fully-fledged system for monitoring cross-border mobility.¹³⁷ For the early eighteenth century and the China trade in particular, passport stories exist in abundance and help to show the frictions that existed between the mobile identities of notorious border-crossers (our interlopers) and the semi-defined framework of formal citizenship in the early modern period.¹³⁸

In order to enter the SEIC service, foreigners were encouraged to apply for naturalisation in order to be able to reside permanently, trade, and own land in Sweden. Naturalisation also made foreigners eligible to seek positions in Government or the state administration.¹³⁹ Many, but not all, interlopers took up this plea. John Pike’s and Thomas Neilson’s naturalisation papers were kept among the shipping records of Charles Irvine, and those for Colin and Hugh Campbell have also been preserved.¹⁴⁰ Those who did not plan to establish themselves for long in Sweden, and who boarded the ships of the SEIC elsewhere, were still furnished with passports. These detailed the planned itinerary of their journey and the royal protection they enjoyed during their trip. A collection of such passports has survived among the business records of Charles Irvine (see Figure 3). In fact, every time Irvine travelled outside of Sweden, he

136 Berg, ‘Book Review’, p. 511.

137 Fahrmeir, *Citizenship*, p. 47.

138 Contemporary sources used the term ‘natural-born subject’ or ‘denizen’ rather than citizen. Contemporaries also distinguished between residents and strangers or aliens, see House of Lords, *An act to prevent*, repr. in *Statues at Large*, vol. 5, p. 328. The contemporary usage of these terms is also discussed in Schulte Beerbühl, *The Forgotten Majority*.

139 Fahrmeir, *Citizenship*, p. 18.

140 Shipping Records, item numbers 31–1i and 31–2i, Irvine Papers, FBL; Cormack, *Colin Campbell*; see also the letters between Henry Hackson and Charles Irvine, 17 June and 13 October 1757, CIC, FBL.

applied for a royal passport, as ‘these were usually valid for one journey’.¹⁴¹ Yet, what did passports look like in the early modern period, for what purpose were they used and how did they differ from the standardised and internationally accepted passport format we are accustomed to today?

Andreas Fahrmeir has stressed that a key step towards a standardised system of identification was the transformation of passports ‘from letters of recommendation issued by individuals or corporations’ into documents over which the state held a ‘monopoly’.¹⁴² During the first half of the eighteenth century, passports were still letters of recommendation. These ‘contained a request for assistance, sometimes on a pre-printed form with blanks for the name, personal details and route’. Charles Irvine’s passport (*Rese-pass*) for China in 1736 detailed the itinerary of the planned journey, and Irvine’s status on board the ship and in China: supercargo. It also gave the name of his principal – the Swedish East India Company. The document was signed by Bengt Ribbing, a nobleman and major-general of the Swedish infantry.¹⁴³

One of the reasons so many British-born interlopers wanted passports and naturalisation papers was that these documents gave the traveller confirmation of his rank and status, and thus ensured privileged treatment in case of detainment. Passports were signed by high-ranking members of the royal administration or even by the monarch, and thus suggested that the traveller had ‘access to court’, a key marker of elite status.¹⁴⁴ And since rank was often considered to be more important than nationality, royal passports had their specific function among the mobile elite in Europe.

For maritime traders, a passport could function as a kind of work permit *avant la lettre* – a document that stressed the legality of their employment. Yet, for interlopers, the possession of a royal passport (or of papers that testified to their status as naturalised Swedish subjects) did not necessarily protect them from hostilities, as the Porto Novo incident – in which Charles Irvine was involved – clearly showed.¹⁴⁵ In fact, ‘the British legal system assumed that releasing subjects from the “natural and perpetual” allegiance acquired at birth was impossible’.¹⁴⁶ Thus, a British-born trader who could fully document his

141 Fahrmeir, *Citizenship*, p. 49.

142 Ibid., p. 47. Fahrmeir sees 1793 as the watershed year, the moment when the French first implemented a national passport system to control cross-border movements.

143 A Henry Ribbing wrote to Charles Irvine in 1739 to thank him for taking on a private commission of porcelain for both Ribbing’s wife and sister. Henry Ribbing (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 29 August 1739, CIC, FBL.

144 Fahrmeir, *Citizenship*, p. 47.

145 Gill, ‘The Affair of Porto Novo’.

146 Fahrmeir, *Citizenship*, p. 25.



FIGURE 3 Rese-pass for Carl Irwine (Charles Irvine) for his journey to Canton as SEIC supercargo in 1736, Shipping documents, 1733–38, Box 11, Irvine Papers, FBL.

allegiance and rights as the subject of a foreign monarch was still considered to be a British subject. In the context of the East Indies trade, this meant that he was considered an interloper – the consequences of which affected several of the individuals mentioned in Table 2.

In 1723, the issue of interloping was addressed in Britain by '[a]n act to prevent His Majesty's subjects from subscribing or being concerned in encouraging or promoting any subscription for an East-India Company in the Austrian Netherlands'.¹⁴⁷ According to this document, interlopers were considered to be all British-born subjects who operated under 'a foreign commission' in the East Indies trade. Yet, other kinds of investments in foreign Companies, such as shareholding, were also declared unlawful. A slightly shortened version of the Act was reprinted and thus 'revived' in 1732, in view of the establishment of the Swedish venture.¹⁴⁸ Charles Irvine kept a copy of the 1723 Act among his personal papers, which represented a salutary reminder of the serious punishments that awaited him in case of arrest.¹⁴⁹

The arm of the law did reach Asia, where a few high-ranking members of the established Companies were taking measures to curtail the unwelcome competition of their countrymen. One episode will suffice to establish the point. In 1734, Thomas Combes and Thomas Thomson, two English-born members of the SEIC, were captured by the British at Porto Novo, south of Madras on the Coromandel Coast, detained in Fort St David and then transported to London on account of their illegal activities in joining the SEIC. Other British members of the SEIC had managed to escape to Tranquebar, the neutral Danish trading post. Yet their possessions were seized when the British attacked their newly established factory at Porto Novo.¹⁵⁰ Most of their colleagues on the SEIC vessel *Ulrice Eleonora*, who had travelled to Bengal to trade on behalf of the Company, were equally affected by the hostility of the English and Dutch traders stationed in India. After being chased away by British ships from the Indian coast, Captain Petter von Utfall and his remaining crew (which was already dwindling) were forced to stop at Cochin – then under Dutch control – for fresh water and food. Thomas Ouchterlony, a Scottish mate, was put in charge of the task.¹⁵¹ The Dutch in Cochin, however, refused to sell provisions to the 'Swedes' and detained Ouchterlony and thirteen of his companions, thus

147 House of Lords, *An act to prevent*, repr. in *Statues at Large*, p. 326.

148 *Ibid.*, p. 601.

149 Shipping Documents, 1733–59, Box 11, item 23–1j, Irvine Papers, FBL.

150 Gill, 'The Affair of Porto Novo', p. 53.

151 Thomas Ouchterlony rose to become a sea captain years later and was, as a relative of George Ouchterlony, directly involved in a number of smuggling voyages to British shores.

further reducing the number of people who could work the ship. Somehow, von Utfall and Irvine – who was the only supercargo left on board – managed to steer the ship to Mauritius, where they bought provisions and were able to recruit fifteen lascar sailors for the long return journey to Gothenburg.¹⁵²

As becomes clear from the Porto Novo affair, the legal status of interlopers was precarious because they could not count on being fully protected by the country under whose flag they travelled, despite possessing official documents. Nor were they considered to be legitimate British traders, who deserved the protection of the EIC and the Crown. As such, they were indeed *apatrides* (Dermigny's term) or *Heimatlose*, a concept that only came into use after the Second World War, but which captures best the delicate position of this mobile workforce throughout their interloping careers.¹⁵³

Conversely, the interlopers' precarious legal identity also opened up a number of advantages. Formal membership of a national monopoly Company provided access to the profits of Company commerce and generated myriad ways in which private enterprise could be advanced. Navigating their way through an incoherent system of early modern citizenry, China traders were notorious for accumulating increasing numbers of documents (naturalisation papers and passports for their travels), which testified to their status and changing identities as residents in different places. The widespread, and at some point almost respectable, practice among interlopers of changing employing Company, and with it their formal status as subjects or citizens, sometimes led to considerable confusion about their 'national identity' and legitimacy as traders.

Depending on the situation in which they were asked to clarify their status and allegiance, China traders could perform and document multiple identities. Part of this 'performance' of different national belongings was the fact that supercargoes in particular – those 'commercial polymaths' – were often multilingual. Their generally higher education, cosmopolitan interests and readings habits as well as prolonged stays in different countries on the continent allowed most of the British interlopers among this group to master various European vernaculars. This ability with languages undoubtedly increased their space for manoeuvre and helped them time and again to *convincingly* perform multiple national belongings – a vital asset in moments of crisis. However, this 'in-betweenness' could also backfire and cast suspicion on interlopers precisely because they could not be easily identified as clearly belonging to one specific nationality.

152 Gill, 'The Affair of Porto Novo', p. 53.

153 Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, vol. 1, pp. 160–199.

A case in point is the Irishman Edmond Rothe, a Jacobite of noble descent and Roman Catholic beliefs. Originally from Wexford on the eastern coast of Ireland, Edmond had moved to France together with his brother Francis, according to his own statement in 1730. He was naturalised as a French subject only in 1759 by a letter of Louis xv.¹⁵⁴ There were not many naturalisations happening in France in a single year in the period of this study, since only wealthy ‘aliens’ could afford to take this step in the first place. In France, ‘the procedure cost more than 350 *livres* (the equivalent of three years’ salary for a skilled Parisian craftsman)’.¹⁵⁵ Apart from periods in which naturalisation regulations were temporarily eased to attract specific professional groups, religious refugees or specific members of foreign national communities, individual naturalisation remained a privilege of the elite.¹⁵⁶

For a good reason, Edmond Rothe kept quiet about the fact that a mere two years before he received an official commission from the French East India Company to sail to Canton in 1743, he had made an ill-fated attempt to travel to China on board a Swedish Company ship. At the time, his brother Francis (François) was already pursuing a successful career in the Canton trade as the chief supercargo of the *Compagnie des Indes*.¹⁵⁷ In 1741, Edmond, together with thirty bags of silver worth the astonishing sum of 30,000 Mexican dollars, was among the private passengers on board the Swedish ship *Göteborg*, bound for China.¹⁵⁸ Just off Tenerife, however, the officers of a British ‘privateer’ searched the ship, as Britain was at war with Spain at the time. After interrogating Edmond Rothe, they arrested him and confiscated his treasure because they thought (or at least claimed) that he was a Spanish citizen.¹⁵⁹ The English officers did not believe that he was a Frenchman, despite his producing a French passport.¹⁶⁰ Such a large consignment of silver – on a Swedish

154 See the genealogy of ‘Edmond de ROTHE, le chevalier de Rothe’, in the electronic database GeneaNet: ‘Dans ses lettres de naturalisation (AN P2595 f°123–125), il dit être arrivé en France en 1730, avoir vécu à Paris 1730–40, avoir fait du commerce en Espagne, avoir embarqué en 1743 avec son frère François directeur de la Cie des Indes pour faire le commerce en Chine 1743–58. De retour en France fin 1758 ... (Prométhée)’.

155 Fahrmeir, *Citizenship*, p. 12.

156 It is perhaps not surprising that the majority of those who sought naturalisation in England were of a merchant background. See Schulte Beerbühl, *The Forgotten Majority*.

157 François Rothe was later put in charge of the Company sales at Lorient and of the Port of Lorient. He was naturalised in 1740.

158 Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, p. 107.

159 This episode is noted *ibid.*, pp. 107–108.

160 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

ship in Cadiz – was evidently intended to circumvent the private trade regulations in place in the French Compagnie des Indes.

The advantage of acquiring multiple documents of identification is suggested by the unstable, though possibly not precarious career of Auguste Tabuteau (1696–1755), alias Anders Taubeltou.¹⁶¹ Tabuteau was a Huguenot, whose family was originally from La Rochelle, but fled the country following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. They settled in Amsterdam, where Auguste was born. He acquired citizenship in the Netherlands, but as a young man moved to London, where he became a naturalised British subject at some point in the early 1720s in order to engage in the colonial trade otherwise closed to him as a Dutchman.¹⁶² In 1724, Auguste Tabuteau married the daughter of another Huguenot merchant from La Rochelle. He enlisted in the service of the SEIC in 1737. For this purpose, he was again naturalised. He afterwards sailed as supercargo to Canton on board the *Svecia* and again in 1740 to Bengal on board the *Fredericus Rex Suecia*. In 1743–1745, he was first supercargo of the SEIC in Canton on the ill-fated voyage of the *Göteborg*, which sank outside the home harbour of Gothenburg, filled with a rich cargo from China.¹⁶³ He disappeared from Sweden soon afterwards, as enquiries were made about whose fault this disastrous incident was.¹⁶⁴

Yet, Tabuteau went out to China again in 1749, this time on behalf of the VOC.¹⁶⁵ His frequent relocations were made possible by the simultaneous holding of multiple formal and informal identities: as a ‘French’ refugee, a citizen of Amsterdam, a naturalised British subject and a naturalised Swede, he could move about in Europe and Asia, pursuing his trading ventures under many different flags while being able to escape if something went wrong. This, then, was clearly an existence shaped by the imperatives of global commerce as well as a willingness to take personal risks.

Flexibility and opportunism are, according to Aihwa Ong, key features of the late modern capitalist. In her study of elite Hong Kong families and their weakness for foreign passports, she revealed the underlying motives and

161 For details on Auguste Tabuteau’s employment in the SEIC, see Jan-Erik Nilsson, ‘The Last Voyage of the East Indiaman *Gotheborg*, 1743–45’, electronic resource: <https://gotheborg.com>.

162 On the consequences of the Navigation Acts, see Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies*.

163 Göteborg Universitetsbibliotek: Svenska ostindiska kompaniets arkiv (arkivnr H 22:1, ligg. fol.) <http://www2.ub.gu.se/samlingar/handskrift/ostindie/dokument/document.xml?id=30>.

164 Hugh Campbell (London) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) 8 September 1747, CIC, FBL.

165 Nationaal Archief, Den Haag (Netherlands), Dutch East India Company, archive 1.04.02, inventory number 6238: Hartekamp Hauptbuch und Journal, 1749, fol. 2.

practices of transnational agency. The multi-passport holder is, for Ong, ‘an apt contemporary figure’, who escapes the political or economic constraints of their homeland by developing strategies of migration and capital accumulation abroad, without cutting the ties to his (or her) place of origin, family and culture. These ties to home continue to shape the identities of flexible subjects in the form of cultural norms, kinship obligations and communal discipline.¹⁶⁶ The cultural logic of transnationalism is, in Ong’s view, shaped by these ‘mutually reinforcing dynamics of discipline and escape’, as it generates a flexible attitude towards citizenship among border-crossers.¹⁶⁷

‘Flexible citizenship’ is a concept that also captures the opportunistic behaviour of interloping China traders during the first decades of the eighteenth century. In some respects, they were forerunners of the capital nomadism that characterises today’s global economy. Some, and mostly privileged, early modern traders and businessmen were not that different from their late modern counterparts in the way they sought to overcome the economic constraints and political landscape of their upbringing by adopting a nomadic lifestyle, which followed the call of commercial opportunities created by an increasingly connected trading world. Like today’s Asian elites analysed by Ong, British interlopers in the first half of the eighteenth century were tightly integrated into extended family networks and regional alliances – though, or rather because, their legal status was much more precarious. Their repeated displacement on the continent and in Asia did not sever these social ties.

At times of crisis, the nationality of an interloper was of critical importance and, as we have seen, multiple and therefore competing loyalties became an issue. Yet, as far as everyday trading practices are concerned, interlopers were more likely to be considered as neutral traders, with whom members of staff of different Companies felt free to do business, and through whom a great many services could be requested.¹⁶⁸ As might be expected, private correspondence also flowed freely between members of the different Companies. Irvine routinely carried packages of goods and parcels of letters with him to Europe, on behalf of people he had just met as well as for those with whom he was more familiar. Irvine’s status as an interloper did not impact on his privileged position within informal trading networks. Irvine and other interlopers like him were not excluded from British trading circles, either in Europe or in Asia. On

166 Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, p. 20.

167 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

168 Charles Irvine (on board the *Freden*) to Thomas and Adrian Hope (Amsterdam), 24 August 1747, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL.

the contrary, they played a crucial role in connecting Britain with the continent via the extended networks they established during their mobile careers.



To sum up, this chapter has drawn a group portrait of a good number of British interlopers on the European continent involved in the China trade during the first decades of the eighteenth century. While it has not been the goal to homogenise the lives of these interlopers, a number of important insights into the careers of many of the nomads among the China traders nonetheless became evident. First, it was shown that many paths could lead to Canton. As no specific training existed for European China traders at the time, those who entered this branch of business often used their previous networks and commercial expertise to succeed in the new trade. In this way, commercial practices already tested and mastered by merchants for the intra-European, the Mediterranean or the Atlantic trade could be transferred to the pursuit of trade with China. What became equally clear is that many merchants sought to combine their older networks and specialisations with their new Eastern ventures, thus merging different commercial networks and geographies in their businesses. The China trade was consequently intimately connected to already existing distribution networks and channels of trade, and became at the same time more diversified, while its reach increased.

Second, it has become clear that while these British interlopers had a precarious legal and social status during their sojourning, their fragile position could at the same time offer opportunities that were readily exploited. In view of the existence of legal loopholes, interlopers could adopt a number of different national identities and legal appearances, depending on specific contexts and personal circumstances. The available spaces for legal manoeuvres led a number of interlopers to change Company service more than once, even up to three times, striking proof of the professional mobility that the early decades of the still developing China trade encouraged. This was directly linked to different privileges and legal regimes that the smaller East India Companies offered to willing interlopers. The regulations and privileges for China traders – especially for those merchants higher up each Company's hierarchy, up to the rank of supercargoes and captains – differed markedly between the states. This plurality of legal regimes was by no means accidental, but should rather be read as a conscious strategy of the directors of the interloping Companies to attract the service of experienced China traders, not least from within the ranks of the EIC and the VOC.

Forging Markets

The European Re-Export Trade in Chinese Goods

This chapter proposes a change of perspective for studying European private trade with China in the first half of the eighteenth century by focusing on an extended network of Scottish merchants and mariners active in the import, wholesale and re-export of Chinese export wares.¹ It is primarily concerned with the mercantile links between a group of supercargoes who regularly travelled to Canton on behalf of the Swedish East India Company and their private contacts with agents and dealers in northwestern Europe, who were key players in the trade in Chinese commodities during this period. For the proposed analysis, we need to bring together two historiographies that usually operate separately from one another: the fields of maritime history and business history. In that pursuit, I am following in the footsteps of two doyens of East India Company research, Jaap R. Bruijn and Huw Bowen. Both historians have written on aspects of the lives of commanders of East India ships, both at sea and ashore.² For the first time, we are able to compare the social status, professional privileges and career trajectories of VOC and EIC commanders in a systematic manner.³ It is Bowen's achievement to have compiled a comprehensive account of the various sources of income that commanders in the English merchant marine developed as soon as they reached that prominent position.⁴ Neither of the two authors, however, explored the vital role played by commanders, supercargoes and other members of the merchant marine in distributing East India goods *within* Europe.⁵

1 Some parts of this chapter have previously been published in Brescius, 'Worlds Apart?', pp. 171ff.

2 Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit'; Bruijn, *Commanders of Dutch East India Ships*.

3 Bowen placed more emphasis on the trading activities of commanders, especially with regard to their role in supplying the European settlements in India with British manufactures. Bruijn's prosopographical study, in turn, placed considerably more emphasis on exploring the place of VOC commanders in Netherlandish society and less so on their private trade.

4 For important insights into the careers of commanders in the mercantile marine see Sutton, *The East India Company's Maritime Service*.

5 The missing link between Company trade and consumption is starting to attract more attention. For the wholesaling of Chinese tea and silks via Scandinavia, see Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North*.

In what follows, I argue that the analysis of East India Company *mariners as merchants* can help to fill some of the glaring gaps in the literature on private trade and the distribution of Chinese export wares in Europe as a whole. This chapter suggests novel ways in which we can think more generally about the integration of the Companies' 'maritime elite' into histories of European wholesale and retail trade.⁶ As will become clear, the selection of British-born mariners does not make this only a 'British' story. On the contrary, the partnerships between city merchants and Company servants deliberately transgressed the boundaries of the different monopoly trading Companies. In the previous chapter, we have seen the extent to which cross-Company mobility became a distinct feature of the early China trade and how individual careers profited from the coexistence of different national ventures between which they could choose. Even though traders moved their funds and official allegiance from one employing Company to another, their networks in Europe did not change entirely, but responded to the new possibilities. The benefit of studying those individual mercantile careers lies partly in the opportunity to avoid some of the limitations of traditional East India Company literature, with its focus on national success stories and chronologies of failure.⁷ Individual actors and the family and mercantile networks they maintained increased the level of cohesion between the Companies not on the level of policy or rhetoric, but perhaps more importantly on the level of the day-to-day management of the trade and the developing of markets in Europe.⁸ By using the exceptionally rich yet understudied primary material that is available for China traders active in the first half of the eighteenth century, I can extrapolate from individual case studies to describe larger mechanisms and structures that connected the world of mariners with that of sedentary European merchants.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first looks at private trade and its crucial role within the pan-European trading arena and for the success of individual Companies. It argues that the scale and scope of private trade has been underestimated because historians were largely unaware of the close

6 Bowen's 'maritime elite' refers to commanders of the British EIC alone, but we can usefully incorporate supercargoes and high-ranking officers of all Companies into this illustrious group. They belonged to the same networks, shared the unpleasant experiences of a life at sea and often socialised and intermarried ashore.

7 See the critique of Pettigrew and Veevers, 'Introduction', pp. 11f.

8 The call for a new business history that studies trading companies, 'the Giants of an earlier Capitalism', as Ann Carlos and Stephen Nicholas have called them, and family firms or merchant networks in a common framework and with similar analytical rigor has been voiced repeatedly. See in particular the excellent intervention by Gelderblom and Trivellato, 'The Business History of the Preindustrial World', p. 246.

integration and entrepreneurial activities of China traders in wholesale networks in Europe. However, as the following elaborations will demonstrate, China traders need to be understood within a dual framework: as members of the close-knit community of merchant seamen and as crucial gatekeepers of the European wholesale market for Chinese export wares.

In the second part, the discussion moves on to show, in depth, the interdependence of Company servants and wholesale merchants for the exchange of market-relevant information and the supply and distribution of Chinese export wares in Europe. A number of key questions are addressed: What commercial practices were in place that helped generate partnerships between sedentary merchants and Company men? How did the collaboration between those two groups shape the market for Chinese export wares in Europe? How did the China commission trade work in practice and what impact did private agreements have on the methods for selling merchandise at Company auctions? And what kind of conflicts could arise between sedentary merchants and merchant mariners as a result of the multi-tasking that China traders had to attend to; namely, to manage their own business *and* that of various principals including the Company, under whose protection they were travelling?

The third and final part will consider the specific role played by British interlopers and members of their informal networks in linking different national markets in Europe and in participating in the contraband trade to Britain. It contends that if we wish to understand 'British' commercial success in the China trade in the first half of the eighteenth century then we have to look to the European continent, where British merchant houses and interloping China traders closely collaborated to secure access to different European markets. But more than that, British merchants and mariners were also key figures in the illegal trade in Chinese tea to Britain, and the subversion of the British monopoly on the import of tea yielded large profits for those involved. An adopted network perspective will demonstrate that the Scandinavian tea cargoes were chiefly shipped to the continent and to British shores on account of Britons abroad.

1 Private Trade: Regulations and Realities

Before we turn to the European wholesale networks that China traders relied on for the distribution of their imports, it is salient to look more closely at the formal requirements and scale of private trade in the first half of the eighteenth century. China supercargoes (as well as commanders) received relatively low salaries from their respective Companies or charter parties. The salary alone

would not have enticed any merchant to go to China. Instead, they were counting on a variety of privileges and direct and indirect payments to make the trip worth their while.⁹ Supercargoes normally received a substantial commission on the prime cost of the Company's return investment from Canton. The exact percentage was fixed before departure and depended on rank and responsibilities. To give a rough idea of the sums involved, during the period of this study, the commission for a chief supercargo could easily amount to 3,000 Mexican dollars. In addition, supercargoes were given the opportunity (called *allowance*) to generate interest by investing privately into the Company stock (a privilege that could be shared in secret with monied colleagues and trusted contacts). Supercargoes and commanders were also permitted to bring a stipulated amount of silver with them to buy gold in China, an exchange that was especially popular with the servants. The silver for gold exchange (called *permission*) usually generated a safe profit for individual traders. It did not take up much space on board and had the added attraction that Chinese gold ingots could be more easily smuggled ashore upon return than, for instance, porcelain vases.

The trade in goods was the other key privilege and income generator of Canton traders. All European trading companies, big and small, allowed their traders to buy and sell goods on their own account.¹⁰ Varying limitations were put in place on the value, size, or weight of the goods that could be imported freight-free. Indulgence fees had to be paid to the Company if the amount of goods imported was found to have exceeded the privileges granted.

Rather strict-sounding regulations were formulated in all Companies to make sure that the private trade of Company servants would not endanger the profitability of the Company trade. Company hierarchies played a decisive role in keeping the private trade at bay. Supercargoes and commanders were quite firm in limiting the trade of their own subordinates, including the sailors – primarily because they needed the space for their own purchases.¹¹ However, despite the restrictions and constraints that were put in place for

9 The best overview on the privileges of EIC supercargoes is given in Pritchard, 'Private Trade (1680–1833)', p. 109. Other key texts that outline the development of the supercargo's pay in the EIC are Morse, 'The Supercargo in the China Trade' and Pritchard, 'Private Trade (1680–1833)'.

10 The first comparative article on private-trade regulations in different trading Companies is Berg et al., 'Private Trade and Monopoly Structures'; on the handling of private trade in the VOC see also Nierstrasz, *In the Shadow of the Company*.

11 On the impact of the small-scale trade of British mariners, see Lemire, "Men of the World"; on the private trade of ordinary sailors in the French East India Company, see Margoline-Plot, 'Les circuits parallèles'.

the direct trade with China, private traders had ample space for manoeuvre. Opportunities for enlarging a mariner's private-trade privileges existed in all Companies. To name just a few: the premature death or absence of a colleague on board usually led to an increase in privileges for the remaining travellers. Individual negotiations with ship-owners and directors could increase the cargo space as well, as did the declaration of 'presents' or objects for 'personal use' that often turn up in the 'manifests of private trade' of EIC personnel.¹²

On the grounds that evidence for private trade is of a scattered and unsystematic nature, its size and scope has been consistently underestimated for the first half of the eighteenth century. One crucial reason is the very limited selection of archival material that is generally used to measure the import of private goods on Company ships. Historians of the Canton trade have mostly relied on official records, Company by-laws, privilege-trade regulations and registers for calculating the volume on board individual ships and for establishing long-term trends.¹³ To be sure, this focus on official documentation (fragmentary as it is) can give us a clearer picture of the rules prevailing in different Companies and at certain points in time. However, it rarely tells us what was brought back in reality.¹⁴

For an illuminating example of the significant gap between rule and reality, we return to our central protagonist, Charles Irvine, who repeatedly acted as chief supercargo of the SEIC in Canton. In 1736/37, Irvine was officially permitted to bring back to Europe twenty chests or '2½ last' of merchandise (i.e. private goods) freight-free, a privilege that reflected his elevated rank on board, since cargo space was allocated according to rank.¹⁵ The same volume was granted to him two years later. During the period Irvine was active in the SEIC, supercargoes enjoyed the largest share of private trade, followed by commanders and officers on board. Next to his privilege trade Irvine was given a 2

12 It is, for instance, at best doubtful that the twelve chests of porcelain that Thomas Lyell (supercargo) declared to be 'presents for Margaret' in 1736 were really what they seemed; they are more likely to have been a parcel of merchandise for his various clients. See BL, IOR/G/12/39, p. 37. For a good example of an 'unhappy' supercargo who managed to increase his privilege cargo by negotiation, see Koninckx, 'Andreas Jacobus Flanderin', esp. pp. 249–250. Such negotiations equally took place regarding the privileges of James Rose, member of the SEIC and nephew of Charles Irvine, see Colin Campbell (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine (London), 8 October 1743, CIC, FBL.

13 For estimates, see, for instance, Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, p. 267.

14 Recent research on private trade on board of VOC ships confirms this assessment. See Nierstrasz, 'In the Shadow of the Companies', esp. pp. 194–197.

15 See 'Instructions etc. for the voyage of ship Three Crowns, 1736–37', Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1729–1747, Copies of Letters, 1736–1737, *Three Crowns*, item 36–1h, Irvine Papers, FBL.

per cent commission on the sales value of the Company goods that were sold at public auction.¹⁶

Irvine's private papers make it possible to reconstruct his personal investments over several years. In 1738/39, he assembled a private cargo in China consisting of 273 chests and 48 tubs of different sorts of fine teas, 1,424 pieces of Indian cotton textiles (which he had ordered from Madras), 223 pieces of Chinese wrought silks and 70 bales of raw silk.¹⁷ A long list of 'speciality goods' (including drugs and customised souvenirs) complemented his investment.¹⁸ His cargo was shipped back to Europe on board the *Fredericus Rex Suecia* and *Stockholm* in 1739. Even if we consider the unlikely case that Irvine may have bought up the entire 'privilege' cargo space of his colleagues to transport his goods to Europe, he would still have exceeded the space that was allocated to the whole crew according to Company 'instructions'. The latter was a document that had been signed before departure by two Company directors, Henry König and Colin Campbell.¹⁹ Why did the Company not dismiss Charles Irvine? Why, instead, was he sent to Canton for two further voyages, which were, as Irvine admitted, 'more for my Interest than for their Service'?²⁰

2 The Companies' Profits from Private Trade

In order to explain this constellation, we must consider the possibility that Irvine's private trade was thought to be *beneficial* to Company concerns, rather than 'malfeasant' – as is usually assumed.²¹ There are a few important points to be made here that help to put into perspective Irvine's seemingly discourteous infringement of private-trade restrictions. On a purely economic level, exceeding one's private trade yielded considerable income to the Company. The SEIC settled a 'fine' of 1,000 silver dollars for every excess last (which is, according to Koninckx's estimate, equivalent to 2,448 kg) of privilege trade.²² Thus, instead

16 Ibid.

17 Calculated from 'Invoice of Goods for my own Acc[oun]t', Canton, 14 January 1739, Shipping Documents, 1733–1738, Irvine Papers, FBL.

18 Irvine's notes mention twenty-four painted mirrors in lacquered and rosewood frames, '4 China knives', '12 Nankin Fans', 'Sundry enamelled copper', '13 chests rhubarb & pepper' and many more items of trade.

19 'Instructions etc. for the voyage of ship Three Crowns, 1736–37'.

20 Charles Irvine (Canton) to Samuel Greenhaugh (Madras), 31 January 1746, Letter Book, 24 December 1744–13 January 1748, Irvine Papers, FBL.

21 See, for instance, Erikson and Bearman, 'Malfeasance and the Foundations for Global Trade'.

22 See Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, pp. 155–156.

of preventing the growth of private trade, the SEIC simply charged those employees who had the capital to invest in additional goods.²³

On top of the stipulated privilege cargo, China traders were permitted to import more goods if there was space left in the hold or their own cabin.²⁴ My assumption is that the private cabins of the SEIC ships must have been considerably more spacious than those offered by other Companies. How else could we explain the huge numbers of chests that were designated to be stored in them? For instance, Charles Irvine directed the commander of the *Three Crowns* (the ship on which he travelled back to Europe in 1737) to put twenty-four regular chests, ten half chests and eighty small chests in his personal cabin.²⁵ Thereafter successive shipments arrived, adding a few more tubs and smaller parcels to the interior of Irvine's cabin. Thirteen other crew members and passengers travelled in their own cabins that year, each of whom transported very significant amounts of goods in them, making it necessary for Irvine to remind the commander to take 'care that every Officer who has one leaves room for himself to sleep'.²⁶ Clearly, Irvine was not the only one exceeding the limit for freight-free shipping. The total volume of private trade on board the *Three Crowns* (as noted by Irvine as chief supercargo) comprised at least 836 boxes and chests (large and small), 139 bundles and tubs as well as numerous other bulkier goods.²⁷ The payment of 'indulgence' fees for excess goods was worth the investment for many private traders and must be regarded as a matter of astute calculation rather than moral decay.²⁸

The Company also derived income from every private-trade good that was sold via its public sales, because warehouse fees, handling charges and commission had to be paid by the importer. The obligatory costs for private traders included a 3 per cent commission on the sales value of their goods sold at auction, plus warehouse fees, etc., payable to the SEIC.²⁹ In other words, and

23 See Instruction no. 15, 'Instructions etc. for the voyage of ship *Three Crowns*, 1736–37'. Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*.

24 For a thorough investigation of the on-board logistics of private trade, see Chapter 3.

25 Charles Irvine et al. (Canton) to Petter von Utfall (Whampoa), 12 December 1736, Letter Books and Account Books, 1736–1748, Copy of Letters, Ship *Three Crowns*, 1736–1737, Irvine Papers, FBL.

26 Charles Irvine (Canton) to Petter von Utfall (Whampoa), 6 January 1737, Letter Books and Account Books, 1736–1748, Copy of Letters, Ship *Three Crowns*, 1736–1737, Irvine Papers, FBL.

27 Calculated from Letter Books and Account Books, 1736–1748, Copy of Letters, Ship *Three Crowns*, 1736–1737, Irvine Papers, FBL.

28 A useful overview of EIC private-trade duties and charges that were payable to the government and the Company is given by Pritchard, 'Private Trade (1680–1833)', p. 118.

29 Instruction no. 15, 'Instructions etc. for the voyage of ship *Three Crowns*, 1736–37'. As was the rule for Company goods, private traders had to give their buyers a discount for

contrary to perceived ideas, the Company profited directly, and in the Swedish case, massively, from the trading activities of its servants through the introduction of duties and charges.

In addition, Charles Irvine's private trade – whose case is exemplary – was important to the commercial success of the SEIC in a number of other, perhaps more subtle ways. Instead of thinking of private and Company trade as two antagonistic systems, there is strong evidence to suggest that private trade actually contributed a great deal to the competitiveness of the SEIC in the European marketplace. For one thing, private-trade imports greatly diversified the range of goods and levels of quality that were sold at Company auctions. The impressive trading portfolio of Charles Irvine clearly supports this assumption for the Swedish case. The SEIC and most other Companies focused by comparison on a much narrower range of profitable imports and qualities than the private trade, a trend that became even more pronounced in the second half of the eighteenth century.³⁰ Some goods were imported exclusively through private-trade channels, such as Chinese paper and ink, fish skins, soy sauce, ginger, rosewood furniture, reverse glass paintings, enamelled copper items, rattan mats, armorial porcelain and the most expensive types of black and green tea.³¹ In other words, private and Company trade effectively complemented each other in order to supply, if possible, all strata of society and target dispersed markets across Europe with goods matching local, sometimes individual demands.³²

'prompt payment' of 2 per cent on the auction price. See 'Calculations of Wrought Silks in Private Trade from China to Gothenburg & thence to Holland', 1745, Price Lists and Exchange Rates, Irvine Papers, FBL.

- 30 The EIC, for instance, had altogether stopped trading in Chinese porcelain and silks by the end of the eighteenth century. See Farrington, *Trading Places*, p. 87. It was no secret to informed contemporaries that English private traders dealt in a stunning variety of Chinese export wares 'by which the company either cannot gain at all by or are not so gainful as others they prefer to engage in'. Postlethwayt, *The Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, p. 683.
- 31 Captain Thomas Gilbert focused his investment in 1730/31 on unusual types of teas, see BL, IOR/G/12/30, p. 71. Bottles of soy sauce were taken in fitted boxes to Europe by various EIC servants from at least 1726 onwards, see BL, IOR/G/12/26, p. 39; BL, IOR/G/12/38, pp. 114f. Captain Robert Bootle was particularly keen on importing new wares and materials such as rattan mats and knot wood images, see BL, IOR/G/12/44, pp. 154f.
- 32 In a letter to a relative of his who was going to China, Charles Irvine listed the goods and qualities that seemed suitable for specific markets such as Hamburg at the time, including different 'superfine' teas. Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to John Irvine (Gothenburg), 7 October 1747, Letter Book, 24 December 1744–13 January 1748, Irvine Papers, FBL; on the domestic market for Chinese silks in Denmark and Sweden, see Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North*, esp. pp. 94–135.

Alongside the argument about variety, there is also some consensus among curators and historians that private trade was the more dynamic and experimental trade and thus helped to anticipate or create novel desires.³³ This is not to say, however, that the SEIC or any other chartered Company was reluctant to change its orders, or blind to the whims of fashion.³⁴ Rather, the supercargoes were constantly reminded by the directors to seek out novel patterns and colour combinations for all merchandise for which fashion was a concern. Yet, the Companies often picked up ideas only *after* they were ‘tested’ in private trade and promised safe returns. This is true for the introduction of high-quality teas into European markets such as Souchon (black) and Hysan (green), but also for many other items of trade including fans, wallpaper, painted Canton enamels, raw silk and rhubarb.³⁵

Sometimes, individual supercargoes or commanders prided themselves on possessing a particular expertise in certain goods, as the written exchanges and conflicts between wholesalers and China traders make clear.³⁶ Special competencies of individuals in judging the quality of silk, tea and drugs were recognised and put to use by the Companies. To take just two examples, Charles Pike, active supercargo in the Ostend Company, was asked to provide detailed instructions for the first voyages of the newly formed SEIC not only on what was needed to set up a factory in Canton, but also how to judge tea quality.³⁷ Frederick Pigou, a long-serving supercargo and later director of the EIC, provided detailed written instructions to his younger colleagues on how to distinguish the different qualities in raw and wrought silks on offer in Canton.³⁸ Manning Lethieullier, supercargo of the EIC in the 1720s and 1730s, brought a special expertise to the China trade, as members of his family were wholesalers in porcelain.³⁹

33 A good and concise discussion of the buying strategies of EIC supercargoes and captains is given by Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*, esp. pp. 18–34.

34 BL, IOR/G/12/33, p. 37; Orders for wrought silks, especially, were meticulously planned as they had to conform to relatively swift changes in fashion. Lee-Whitman, ‘The Silk Trade’.

35 Chinese rhubarb was introduced to European markets by private traders. From the 1740s onwards, however, the Companies started to monopolise the import of that medicinal good. For more details on the rhubarb mania, see Foust, *Rhubarb*, pp. 88f.

36 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 21 May 1743, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

37 Charles Pike (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 29 January 1733, CIC, FBL; Charles Pike (Gothenburg?) to Charles Barrington and Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 11 February 1733, CIC, FBL.

38 BL, IOR/E/3/107, p. 298.

39 See Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*, p. 33.

The commission trade that linked individual commanders or supercargoes to specific clients – who might be collectors, wholesalers or shopkeepers – was a rich source of innovation and enabled the exchange of patterns, models and instructions that created a continuum of novelties that travelled between Canton and Europe. Since private traders in Canton quickly learned from each other, novelties soon became staples that were available in more than one auction room.⁴⁰ Precautionary measures were thus in order to guarantee a good profit. Wholesale merchants preferably used the *pacotille* trade of individual Company servants as a way to introduce new designs and to outwit competitors, as the direct communication with one trusted person provided more privacy than placing an open order with one of the Companies. Private-trade arrangements seem to have worked to the advantage of merchants who traded in fashion-sensitive commodities such as textiles.

To give an example of how this was done, in 1740, Charles Irvine accepted a very substantial commission from a merchant house in the Low Countries which ordered over 3,000 pieces of Chinese silk textiles including different types of damasks and painted taffetas.⁴¹ During a stop-over at Cadiz, Irvine was handed a packet of textile samples from a mutual friend. The samples had been dyed on purpose to serve as reference for the Chinese artisans, who were required to match those colours exactly. An accompanying letter from Cossart & Bouwer in Amsterdam included very detailed instructions regarding the assortment of colours wanted, as well as descriptions of the kind of designs that Irvine was expected to choose for them in Canton. Rococo motifs ‘de paysage, de chasse, à la *Chinoise* petit et mignon’ were to be preferred for bed damasks and satins. The rococo taste of the time was also reflected in the designs for their painted taffetas ‘a fleurs, oiseaux, papillons tous d’un meme dessin’, which they ordered in myriad colour variations.⁴² Jean Cossart and Isaac Bouwer knew that their profits very much depended upon the ‘novelty’ of their designs when they reminded Charles Irvine about the importance of not showing their patterns to anybody else in Canton other than to the Chinese

40 This phenomenon was remarked upon by Irvine’s trusted adviser Thomas Wilkieson: ‘It is often that you all run upon one & the same thing which makes it cost dear & fetch little.’ Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 19 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

41 This might be more than the SEIC imported in that same year. For a calculation of Company investments in silk textiles at the time, see Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North*, p. 111.

42 Cossart & Bouwer (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 20 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

painters.⁴³ They stressed in their letter that they had made a significant effort to produce an order that could rival the beautiful silks that had recently been imported by the French, and now thought to protect their ideas.⁴⁴

Even if Charles Irvine honoured this particular request, he had probably learnt something for himself that could be useful for his own purchasing strategies. Supercargoes, such as Charles Irvine, always kept a keen eye on the imports and judgements of his colleagues, by noting down as many particulars as possible of all their Chinese cargoes, official and private, and by visiting the Company auctions at Lorient in France as well as the Swedish sales.⁴⁵ Irvine choose to share some information of relevance with his employing Company or individual directors, but certainly not everything he knew.

If these contributions speak to the symbiotic relationship between Company and private trade in general, the situation of the Swedish venture was somewhat special. This particularly concerned the need to attract *foreign* buyers, upon whose purchasing power the Swedish venture essentially depended, since the home market could absorb only a fraction of the imported goods from China in the period of this study.⁴⁶ This is not to say, of course, that there was no demand for Chinese goods in Sweden. As Hanna Hodacs has shown, especially the cheaper but decorative wrought silks proved highly popular. So much so that a series of laws were put in place to ban their domestic consumption, first between 1745 and 1747 and once more in 1754.⁴⁷ However, the composition of buyers who attended the successive Swedish auction sales, especially during the critical phase of its first charter (1731–1746), make it unambiguously clear that Swedish China cargoes were mostly re-exported to North Britain and continental Europe.⁴⁸ This should not come as a surprise, since this was

43 Jean Cossart & Bouwer (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 21 January and 18 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

44 Cossart & Bouwer (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 20 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

45 See the letters that Charles Irvine addressed to various colleagues and potential buyers during his stay at Lorient in July 1742 (of which only drafts have survived). Among his correspondents were leading EIC servants and directors, such as Alexander Hume and Edward and Henry Gough but also his more intimate business partners such as Clifford and Sons, Cossart & Bouwer and George Ouchterlony. Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1729–1774, 42–3C–42–22C, Irvine Papers, FBL.

46 Auction records for the Swedish East India Company have survived in great number and provide key evidence of the multi-national composition of buyers. Online resource at cdm21047.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/swedish/search.

47 Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North*, p. 114.

48 Later in this chapter we will look more closely at the composition of buyers at the Swedish sales.

a period in which the Company was steered *predominantly* by foreign manpower, capital and expertise.⁴⁹

Now, it is worth remembering that markets, domestic and foreign, had to be built. Markets did not automatically come into being with the beginning of the direct trade between Sweden and China.⁵⁰ They gradually took shape; they waxed and waned with the opportunistic activities of individuals operating within the changing confines of their personal networks. An actor-centred perspective is thus key for understanding both the importance of individual supercargoes, commanders and officers to the success of the SEIC and for understanding the development of markets for Chinese goods in different pockets of Europe.

3 Public Sales, Private Agreements

We now turn to look in more depth at the ways in which wholesalers exercised direct influence on what was to be supplied from China by placing orders with those supercargoes and commanders who managed to get an appointment on one of the lucrative voyages to Canton.⁵¹ Through this form of collaboration, private trade became the loophole through which individual sedentary merchants could respond to and further encourage changing consumer demands. Agreements between members of the maritime elite and one or more merchant houses in Europe usually grew out of an already close business relationship between both parties, and a need to be seen in the context of the frequent exchange of mutual favours and commitments. As Tijn Vanneste has rightly suggested, the idea of reciprocity was central to the functioning of commercial networks and represented 'a basic cohesive element in long-lasting and stable commercial relationships'.⁵² In order to attend to this principle, 'merchants assumed different roles in order to guarantee reciprocal interest'.⁵³ Hence, depending on the circumstances, a figure like Charles Irvine could act as an agent for the great merchant house of George Clifford

49 Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, pp. 335–341; Müller, 'Scottish and Irish Entrepreneurs'; Mackillop, 'Accessing Empire'.

50 Berg, 'Cargoes'; Berg, 'Introduction', p. 3. On the development of a Scottish market and taste for tea, see Mackillop, 'A North Europe World'.

51 Once such appointments were made, news spread quickly within the transnational community of merchant seamen and dealers, see CIC, FBL.

52 Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks*, pp. 81–94, p. 82.

53 Ibid.

& Co., as a partner, or indeed as a principal by asking them to sell his teas in Amsterdam.

In many ways, the annual auctions in Gothenburg were more predictable than one might expect, since returning China traders quickly informed their associates and intended buyers about the different cargoes that were assembled in Canton, pointing out what goods might be of special interest to each of them. At the Company sales, Irvine bought tea and textiles on behalf of different merchant houses in the Low Countries who had already offered their services to the Ostend traders, including George Clifford & Co., Thomas Wilkieson, Jean Cossart et fils & Bouwer and Urbano Arnold. But he also used those experienced merchants as agents to dispose of his own goods on the continent.⁵⁴ Irvine's network of agents was not confined to the Low Countries, however. Irvine sold on Chinese goods via trusted contacts in Cadiz, Hamburg, Stockholm, London and Aberdeen, among other places.

Supercargoes and captains were extremely well positioned to become influential traders in their own right in Europe, profiting from a mix of personal experience, cross-Company intelligence and extensive private-trade privileges. It is little known that China traders were often able to keep their privilege cargo by paying the Company sales commission themselves.⁵⁵ The question of keeping or selling one's private-trade goods at Company auction depended on personal and strategic considerations.⁵⁶ Irvine's decisions were commonly based on the prices he could expect in foreign parts for his goods.⁵⁷ In December 1742, Charles Irvine informed his agent Thomas Wilkieson that he was concerned about the news that 'all fine teas, in which most of my *pacotille* consists bears but a poor price [in Amsterdam], therefore if any tolerable price is offered at our Sales I am resolved to let mine go'.⁵⁸ Letters written months after the December sales, however, reveal that

54 For instance, in 1742, Urbano Arnold was commissioned by Colin Campbell, Charles Irvine and Captain Dens to sell sixty-six chests of fine teas on their behalf as well as to assist James Rose (Irvine's relative) with the organisation of a smuggling voyage from Ostend. Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Urbano Arnold (Rotterdam), undated, Letter Book and Account Books, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

55 See Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*, p. 29.

56 The freedom to choose between different options was certainly also linked to the individual's financial situation, as all traders were bound up in complex credit relations. For a good discussion of this, see Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit', esp. pp. 45–50, 55–57.

57 'Calculations of Wrought Silks in Private Trade from China to Gothenburg & thence to Holland', 1745, Price Lists and Exchange Rates, Irvine Papers, FBL.

58 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 1 December 1742, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

Irvine had changed his mind and instead kept large parts of his private cargo.⁵⁹

Irvine hoped that the market prices would improve if he waited long enough, until those merchants desperate to sell had disposed of their goods for meagre profits. It was a dangerous game. He had to sell before news of fresh supplies from Canton reached Europe, which usually brought down the price, leaving Irvine and his agents with a time frame of roughly seven months to sell his entire *pacotille*. In May 1743, Irvine asked Wilkieson to hold out just a little longer with the sale of his fine teas until profits were safe. The reason he gave was that 'I love short accounts as well as other people, but I've brought them too far to let them goe at any great disadvantage, since I thank God, can wait a twelf [sic] months.'⁶⁰ Depending on market conditions, merchant seamen usually tried to sell at least parts of their private cargo to the highest bidder, whilst also investing in typical 'Company goods' such as Bohea tea and tutenague, thus expanding their portfolio considerably.⁶¹

What China traders needed, however, was the market-specific intelligence that only sedentary merchants could offer. Wholesalers provided insider knowledge on potential markets, price developments and local tastes – expertise that very few merchant seamen had because of their nomadic existence. In 1743, Charles Irvine tried to sell some fine Chinese silks in Stockholm via the Koschell & Conradi merchant house but was informed that the price of the fabrics was simply too high for their buyers, with the result that none had been sold when Irvine was beginning to prepare his next voyage to Canton.⁶² Eager not to misjudge the market again, this time he asked for advice from Stockholm: 'Je vous serais fort obligé de me marquer les Etoffes que vous croyez être demandé dans ce pays icy & les assortiment de Couleurs pour ma gouvernement en Chine.'⁶³ These market insights were often transmitted in written form, sometimes accompanied by samples.

59 See, for instance, Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to George Ouchterlony (London), 30 July 1743, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

60 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 4 May 1743, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

61 For Irvine's involvement in the Bohea trade see his regular correspondence with Charles Metcalfe in Hamburg and Pye & Cruikshank in Amsterdam in 1759, CIC, FBL.

62 There were several ways in which East India goods were sold by wholesalers and specialist dealers in Europe. Either goods were sold by public sale or they were shown to interested parties in private. Irvine therefore often kept private samples and pieces of fabrics (although the bulk of merchandise was in the hands of his agents).

63 Charles Irvine (London) to Messrs. Koschell & König (Stockholm), 23 November 1743, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL.

Local demand for specific goods differed from year to year. Commercial intelligence thus started to be exchanged whilst supercargoes were still on board their homebound China ships. In 1747, on board the *Freden*, Charles Irvine wrote to the Amsterdam merchant house of George Clifford & Co. about the particulars of the SEIC cargo in view of acting as their agent at the upcoming sales. Irvine expected his correspondent to be primarily interested in wrought silks. Yet, what qualities, colours and designs were suitable for their clients in the Netherlands and further afield? Irvine himself did not know this, but offered to use his position and connections with the Company directors to make sure Clifford & Co. were able to purchase parcels of goods at the auction which were tailored to their particular requirements. 'Doe your buyers love Paddesoys with larger or smaller wale [i.e. ridge]?'⁶⁴ Irvine knew that '[t]here is sometimes demand for particular Colours of Silks; if any such thing pray let me know it & how your buyers would have 100ps sorted, perhaps I may have some influence that way'.⁶⁵ In turn, the merchant seamen asked to be informed as precisely as possible about price developments for goods he was interested in buying on his own account.⁶⁶

There were several ways in which East India goods were sold on by wholesalers and specialist dealers in Europe. Commodities such as rhubarb, tea and porcelain were often sold by public sale. Irvine often preferred that his goods were shown to interested parties in private. Especially if market prices were low, Irvine was wary about selling his goods openly. He regularly reminded his agents:

not [to] expose them to publick Sales because when goods doe not sell they are afterwards blown upon; & I am the more induced to come to this resolution, that I am convinced that my goods by being kept in a proper warehouse will improve in quality to the taste of your buyers, I do not for all this limit you but only tell you my opinion, show them by all means when a buyer comes.⁶⁷

64 Leanna Lee-Whitman writes that Paduasoyes are 'a silk woven in a variation of the satin weave, with bindings arranged to create fine cross-ridges across the fabric'. See Lee-Whitman, 'The Silk Trade', p. 30.

65 Charles Irvine (on board the *Freden*) to George Clifford (Amsterdam), 24 August 1747, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL.

66 Ibid.

67 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 4 May 1743, Copies of Letters, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

Public sales, however, could be profitable at moments of temporary scarcity, great demand or at certain times of the year, such as before Christmas.⁶⁸ Although the strategies for selling private-trade goods in Europe were recurring topics of discussion between merchant mariners and sedentary merchants, it is telling that Irvine usually accepted the advice of his more experienced agents in Amsterdam, London, Hamburg and Stockholm.⁶⁹

In turn, China traders offered firsthand knowledge of and direct access to Asian markets. They also provided timely information about incoming cargoes for their correspondents – sometimes even before the Company directors came to know about them – and had the ability to point out particular lots of exceptional quality well in advance of the public auctions.⁷⁰ Insider knowledge of this kind allowed some merchants to ‘cherry pick’ goods at Company sales, when they operated in partnership with individual China traders. Specialist dealers often preferred to commission the goods they wanted prior to the beginning of the voyage and then waited for the individual Company servant to organise the delivery.⁷¹ Cossart & Bouwer, for instance, used several supercargoes who acted in accord with their interests to purchase the silks needed by the Amsterdam merchant house.⁷² Charles Irvine and the French supercargo Joseph-Julien Duvelaer de la Barre were friends and sometimes partners in business. Both received commissions from Cossart & Bouwer and regularly exchanged favours.⁷³ Duvelaer de la Barre was one of the first European supercargoes who was ordered to stay in China (as semi-permanent resident),

68 Irvine expressed some hope that his silks would find a buyer during the festive period when people were on the lookout for presents. Charles Irvine (London) to Messrs. Koschell & König (Stockholm), 23 November 1743, Copies of Letters, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

69 Sometimes his agents acted more quickly than his instructions could be carried by mail, which frustrated Irvine. Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wikieson (Amsterdam), 11 May 1743, Copies of Letters, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

70 A series of letters mentioning the particulars of what different Companies and private traders had bought in the season of 1746/47 were sent out by Irvine from Canton. Interestingly, he always altered the content of his cargo description slightly according to the trading interests of his correspondents in Europe. See the letters to Benjamin Hall, John Anderson, Cossart et fils & Bouwer and Colin Campbell, 16 January 1747, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL.

71 This is particularly the case with silk merchants and porcelain dealers; see, for instance, the correspondence between Charles Irvine and Koschell & Conradi/König (Stockholm), and Irvine with Jean Cossart & Isaac Bouwer in the Netherlands.

72 Jean Cossart et fils & Bouwer (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 21 January 1740, CIC/1740/17a.

73 Charles Irvine (*en route* to Gothenburg) to Cossart et fils & Bouwer, 2 August 1747, Letter Book, 1744–1748, Irvine Papers, FBL.

a practice that was eventually taken up by all the other Companies from the 1750s onwards.

In this particular constellation, mariners played the role of commission agents, who charged a service fee or claimed a share in the sale of the goods. There are also instances when merchant seamen fulfilled orders without charge, hoping to be granted other favours in turn. Usually, however, China traders accepted commissions because it generated additional income and guaranteed profits. In 1765, the London drug merchant Richard Gammon addressed John Searle, an English supercargo, before the latter embarked on his journey to Canton, asking if he and his friend Thomas Bevan would 'help Captain Ross in the sales of the amber in lump & seed pearls that he has on board'.⁷⁴ Gammon was shipping pearls, 'cash', coral and amber to Canton via a number of different Company servants, on behalf of his associate Challoner and at his own risk. In order to clarify that he did not merely ask a favour, he added: 'I got you put in the commission of a Box of Coral sent by Mr Challoner on the Company's register G^{CN}°5 & Capt. Ross invoiced at £3666.11 and I shall hope it will sell at a good price as it's by much the finest parcel I ever saw together.'⁷⁵

Being 'put in commission' by wholesale dealers like Gammon & Challoner generated additional income for China traders, especially when the sums were substantial, since the brokerage could greatly exceed the 1.5 or 2 per cent of the sales value common in the intra-European trade. Company servants could hope for at least 5 per cent in return for offering their services to metropolitan merchants such as Gammon & Challoner. To prevent smuggling, the British Company introduced a rule that diamond merchants had to pay the captain of a ship 1.4 per cent of the value of their registered diamonds on board of East Indiamen, even if the captain was not concerned with the purchase of the stones himself. Since these were stored in his cabin, the captain had a sensible interest in defending the legal trade in diamonds, chiefly because it generated personal income that would otherwise escape him.⁷⁶

In view of the great price fluctuations that characterised the trade in East India goods, the commission system became a crucial safety mechanism for

74 Thomas Bevan was one out of a small group of writers/supercargoes who were supported by the EIC directors in their efforts to learn Chinese, according to Morse, *Chronicles of the East India Company*, vol. 5, p. 27.

75 Richard Gammon (London) to John Seale (London), 22 January 1765, TNA, C 107/154, Flint vs. Holloway: John Searle, of Lambourne and Norton Mandeville, Essex, supercargo of the East India Company in the China trade: will, account books and papers (1750–1786).

76 Yogeve, *Diamonds and Coral*, p. 133.

individual private traders. Thus, part of the latter's *pacotille* consisted of parcels destined for specific European city merchants who had sometimes put considerable effort and funds into producing good patterns, novel designs and specific colour palettes for the goods that were to be produced in China.⁷⁷ Clearly, wholesalers and specialist dealers would not have made such investments if they were afraid of losing these parcels at the Company auctions against a competitor. A key point of discussion should therefore be to consider the means by which collaborations between wholesalers and Company servants worked out in practice. What mechanisms were in place to help circumvent the formal structures of Company sales that were based on competitive ascending-bid auctions? The paucity of sources on auction proceedings (and their circumvention) has led historians to believe that Company auctions simply proceeded as described in the Company by-laws and 'at the front of the printed sale catalogues'.⁷⁸ The latter provided some vital information for buyers, including directions on commodities that had to be exported (because of their being banned in the importing country), customs duties and discounts, reserve prices for each lot, duration of the sales and so forth. Yet, much of the actual workings of these auctions remain obscure.⁷⁹

In theory, at any rate, samples of all goods that were imported by the Companies or by private trade had to be 'fairly Exposed to the View of the Buyers at least Ten days before the Sale'.⁸⁰ This regulation was intended to give every merchant the opportunity to examine the quality of the goods they were interested in buying prior to the start of the auction. In practice, however, this was not always the case. While this chapter cannot treat the subject of auction manipulation exhaustively, it reveals some of the most common practices that helped to guarantee that those customers and befriended merchants actually got the goods, which they had ordered via private-trade channels. Needless to say, some goods never made it to the Company warehouses and were smuggled ashore before the ships arrived in the home port.⁸¹ All Companies strove to

77 Jean Cossart et fils & Bouwer (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 18 February 1740, C1C.

78 Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, p. 275; Most historians repeat rather than question the rule that 'All private trade goods had to be deposited in the company's warehouse for sale at the company's auctions "by inch of candle"'. Jean Sutton, *Lords of the East*, p. 81.

79 Scholars who have tried to compare formal auction rules and actual practices are Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*, pp. 216–223; and Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*, pp. 29–34.

80 See report on the discussions between 'The Commissioners of his Ma[jes]ties Customs' and 'Mr Liell and Sir Matthew Decker two of the Directors of the United East India Company on Friday last relating to the Method of Selling Goods in private Trade', 11 January 1722, BL, IOR/E/1/14, pp. 38–40.

81 Irvine successfully smuggled large quantities of gold ashore on his return trip from Canton, on his own account and for Captain Thomas Parker, an Englishman he had met at

prevent smuggling as it meant a loss of income and control over supplies.⁸² Yet, as long as private goods were properly registered and sold via the official auctions, the Companies seem to have turned a blind eye to the special arrangements between their servants and individual buyers.

First, private traders managed to prevent their goods being shown prior to the auction, so nobody except the intended buyer knew about their precise contents. We know that this occurred, because a German merchant who attended the EIC sales in London complained in writing in January 1722 to the ‘Commissioners of his Ma[jes]ties Customs that several parcels of Goods in private Trade had not been fairly Sold and that Some of them had not been Exposed to the View of the Buyers’.⁸³ Since the goods were *not* present in the auction room, and merchants only bid on what they had previously seen in the warehouses, this method effectively excluded all other buyers from seeing the goods beforehand, which meant that they were not able to make a sensible bid (Figure 4). The same letter reveals another practice that prevented the ‘wrong person’ from buying a specific lot. In response to the complaint of David Elers, the Customs officials suggested the introduction of a new rule:

[t]hat the Candleman or any Officer of the Company be not permitted to declare to whom the Goods belong thereby to hinder any person from bidding ... and in case the Candleman shall declare the Goods to be bought by any person too hastily and it shall be objected by the officers of the Customs attending the Sale that Such Goods were not fairly Sold that the Chairman and Directors then present shall cause the Same to be immediately put up to sale again.⁸⁴

As we further learn from the same document, the bribing of those who conducted the sales was another straightforward opportunity for securing certain parcels. Tellingly, the two directors of the EIC who handled this case, Thomas Lyell and Sir Matthew Decker, both notorious private traders themselves, rejected the above request by their colleagues from the customs office.⁸⁵ They

Saint Helena. See Charles Irvine to George Ouchterlony (London), 24 August 1747; Charles Irvine (off Dover on board the *Freden*) to Mr Fecton (Dover), 1 September 1747; Charles Irvine (off Dover) to John Ouchterlony (Dover?), 1 September 1747 (at midnight), Letter Book, 1746–47, Irvine Papers, FBL.

82 Bowen, ‘So Alarming an Evil’.

83 See BL, IOR/E/1/14, pp. 38–40.

84 Ibid.

85 Thomas Lyell had been a Canton supercargo for years.



FIGURE 4 *India House, London. The Sale Room*, Plate 45 (1808). PU1361. Aquatint, coloured
 © NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH, LONDON

replied, stating that they ‘did not mean that the Officers of the Customs should be the Judges of whether a lott be fairly Sold or not’.⁸⁶ Overall, there are surprisingly few formal complaints in the East India records that directly relate to methods of selling private-trade goods. What is clear from the cases we have, however, is that Company directors were reluctant to regulate the mechanisms of sale too closely. In this context, it is important to note that Company directors were anything but disinterested administrators. On the contrary, they were usually as involved in private trade as their employees.

The Swedish Company directors Colin and Hugh Campbell, Hendrik König and Niklas Sahlgren represent memorable examples of directors personally engaged in private-trade activities, as they were, for many years, among the largest buyers at the annual Company sales in Gothenburg. A series of annotated ‘account currents’ between Hugh Campbell and the Company reveal the staggering sums involved. In 1733 and 1734, for instance, Hugh Campbell apparently attended two sales, one on 22 October 1733 and the second on 11 March

86 BL, IOR/E/1/14, p. 40.

1734, where he bought goods worth 51,029 guilders.⁸⁷ Although it is not unproblematic to convert historical currencies into contemporary values, a tentative estimate is nevertheless useful: 51,029 Dutch guilders in 1733 would have had a purchasing power of roughly 1.4 million euros in 2020.⁸⁸ Indeed, Campbell undoubtedly bought on behalf of distant clients and investors as well as for his own account. To give another striking example, in 1748 the *Calmare* returned to Gothenburg with a rich cargo from Canton. Colin Campbell purchased – besides innumerable other things – 105 lots (that is 356 chests) of Bohea tea at the SEIC sales. The *Calmare* carried in total 1,584 chests of Bohea tea that season, which means that Campbell purchased 22.5 per cent of the ship's Bohea cargo.⁸⁹

For the small army of bookkeepers and writers based at Gothenburg, it was exceedingly difficult to separate the private dealings of Company servants such as Hugh Campbell from Company concerns, as both were often closely intertwined. We get a good glimpse of the challenges that Company clerks faced by looking once more at a few annotated balance sheets ('current accounts') that have survived among Charles Irvine's business papers. Here we learn that it often took years to settle disputes or reveal errors in the chain of transactions surrounding a particular voyage, since bookkeepers had to wait until all actors in question were actually physically present at Gothenburg in order to discuss, defend and cross-check the accounts for specific voyages. A clerk who took over from the previous head bookkeeper lamented: 'Having now followed Mr Langeloh with all possible attention through the innumerable turnings and windings of these accounts, we are amazed to see the transactions of one plain voyage so surprisingly blended and misrepresented.'⁹⁰ The state of accounts between the Company and individual servants, and commitments between different servants, were 'so variously represented by Messrs. Hugh Campbell, Langeloh, Beyer and Barclay; that of six or eight Sketches of it now before us, not any two agree, nor is there any one right.'⁹¹

87 Annotated current accounts presented by the Company bookkeepers, undated. Box 12, Accounts and Invoices, 1730–74, Irvine Papers, FBL.

88 According to the historical currency converter of the *International Institute of Social History* in Amsterdam: <https://iisg.amsterdam/en/research/projects/hpw/calculate.php>

89 Computed from the SEIC *Försäljningskataloger*, vol. 10, 'Calmare och Adolph Friedrich', <https://cdm21047.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/swedish>, last accessed 9 December 2020.

90 Annotated current accounts presented by the Company bookkeepers, undated. Box 12, Accounts and Invoices, 1730–74, Irvine Papers, FBL.

91 Ibid.

On an altogether larger scale was the customary practice among Company servants to organise pre-sales.⁹² A rare document from 1790, written by the London merchant Eleazar Levy Isaac, provides some detail about this method for acquiring privilege goods:

[I]t is usual for the merchants who trade and deal in such East India goods, immediately on the arrival of the East India ships to contract with the officers of such ships for the purchase of their merchandize at a price certain [...] and when the same goods and merchandizes are afterwards sold at the sales of the East India Company, the contractor buys them in and pays for them to the original owners according to the price before contracted, without any regard being had to the price bid for the same at such public sale.⁹³

In other words, a binding contract was formed between a Company servant and a city merchant that set the price of a parcel of goods. This enabled the merchant to outbid all competitors during the auction with the confidence that they would have to pay only the price that was agreed beforehand. There was even some quick profit to be made by the sedentary merchant, in the event that the bid-up prices went well beyond the agreed sum. Then, the merchant could refrain from making the highest bid, leave the goods to another merchant – who would most likely not be aware of the secret arrangement – and divide the profits with the Company servant. This profit comprised ‘the difference between the price fixed in the contract and the price actually paid at the public sale.’⁹⁴ There is sufficient evidence in the scattered private correspondence of China traders and in the Court of Chancery records to suggest that this was indeed a common practice earlier in the eighteenth century also.⁹⁵ The Company bookkeepers may have been aware of these dealings, yet no mention of it was found in Company records. Only when one side of the contract (buyer or seller) did not keep their promise, and the matter was taken to court, do we find a convenient accumulation of receipts that allows us to reconstruct the tactics used by importers and buyers respectively.⁹⁶

92 Contemporaries called them ‘fore-sales’.

93 Cited in Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*, p. 216.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

95 See, for instance, the dispute between EIC China trader Richard Moreton and Walter Greenwood Esq. (alias Newnam), who was promised a parcel of silks at a price certain. TNA, Chancery Masters’ Records, C 103/192, Moreton vs. Newnam.

96 *Ibid.*

It should not, however, be assumed that the circumvention of rules of selling imported goods by public auction was narrowly based on malfeasant behaviour on the part of the original proprietors and buyers involved. In fact, there is intriguing evidence to suggest that various types of goods were never intended for public sale in the first place. The sale of Indian pearls via the EIC auction was 'nothing but a farce'.⁹⁷ Only in 1803 were changes to the well-established system of a merely nominal sale of pearls made through an Act of Parliament, which led to the prompt protest of several merchants involved in the importation of pearls. Their letters explained and defended the previous mechanisms by which 'the sales at the India House, having been heretofore merely nominal, and the value (of the pearls was) ascertained by the register sent to the India Company from India'. Thus, based on the invoice price, the pearls were put up for sale and then 'bought in by the agent of the Company for account of the proprietors'.⁹⁸

With regard to the sale of pearls and diamonds from India, the EIC thus played an active part in protecting the privileges of a small group of respectable dealers, who bought annual licences to ship out coral, glass beads, silver and amber in return for diamonds and pearls. Anglo-Dutch Jews dominated the licence trade in precious and semi-precious stones and also had a big share in the drug trade, in which the Company did not have a great interest. The trade in those low-volume/high-value goods was very vulnerable to changes in demand and, as Yogev recounts, many diamond traders were strong opponents of selling stones by public auction, for the damage it could do to the market as a whole, but also for fear of price-rigging between buyers, or as contemporaries called it a 'chance of combination among the purchasers'.⁹⁹ The VOC, as Jan Luiten van Zanden reminds us, also did not put all goods up for public sale. Their imported spices such as nutmeg and cloves were instead sold straight from the warehouses at a fixed price defined by the Company. This was arguably not to protect certain interest groups, however, but to keep prices and profits high for the Company, who had a *de facto* monopoly on their sale in Europe.¹⁰⁰

There were thus a number of commercial instruments (and the list is certainly not complete) by which merchants and mariners managed to undermine the structure of competitive bidding at Company auctions. Hence, despite the

97 Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*, p. 134.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 298, citing from Mocatta and Goldsmid Letter Book, letters nos. 15 and 16 (15 August 1803, October 1803).

99 *Ibid.*, p. 299.

100 van Zanden, *The Rise and Decline of Holland's Economy*, p. 81.

existence of a regulatory framework for East India auctions, merchants and mariners managed to influence the redistribution of goods to a considerable degree. At their core, these methods speak to the extent to which city merchants and mariners were able to use informal networks to advance their own position in the European wholesale trade. Such private agreements between merchants and mariners helped to reduce uncertainties for both parties, but they also led to the accumulation of power in the hands of fewer dealers – who at times managed to dominate the wholesale market for certain products.¹⁰¹ By using their connections to merchant seamen across the different Companies, wholesalers could quietly pick up large quantities of goods without alarming their competitors, or they could try to drive up prices at the auctions – knowing that they would pay only previously agreed sums.¹⁰² Commanders, officers and supercargoes of the China trade thus appear in a new light if we take their involvement in the inter-European trade seriously. Despite recent efforts to illuminate various aspects of their social lives ashore, mariners in the East India Companies – and the mercantile marine in general – are mostly depicted as ‘rough-hewn men of the sea’,¹⁰³ who lacked the economic strength and social recognition of city merchants who dominate historical narratives of long-distance trade and Europe’s commercial revolution. Yet, this chapter argues that merchant seamen were decidedly more than the travelling agents who acted on behalf of Companies and individual investors. Rather, their ambition as merchants shaped the creation and expansion of markets for Chinese export wares in Europe and the success of the Company ventures abroad.

4 The Re-Export Trade

The previous sections have established some of the key mechanisms by which China supercargoes and commanders and their associates could profit from

101 Thomas Hall attempted in 1729 to buy up all available Singlo tea in order to be able to dictate prices on the continent. Dirk (Diederick) Smith (Amsterdam) to John Hallet Esq. (London), 14 March 1755, TNA, C 111/95, Hall vs. Hallett; see also the purchasing strategy of Thomas Wilkieson, acting on behalf of the Royal African Company, detailed in Hogendorn and Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade*, (1986), pp. 94–97.

102 A Dutch correspondent of Charles Irvine complained on one occasion that the prices for Chinese silks at the Swedish sales were so high that foreign visitors were entirely put off buying them. It is possible that prices were kept artificially high by the importers, who wanted to keep their wares themselves. Clifford & Sons (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 30 September 1747, CIC.

103 Bowen, ‘Privilege and Profit’, p. 44.

their privileged access to Asian goods in the European marketplace. Now, we will return to the specific role played by British interlopers in Europe. We will look in particular at the ways in which they used their displacement on the continent to develop an advantageous position in the lucrative re-export trade of Chinese consumer goods. By following the activities of Britons abroad, we see the extent to which they acted as links between different national markets. Their reliance on extended kinship networks and regional ties is particularly significant in this context, as it shaped their private-trade activities to a significant degree. A network perspective is useful to reveal trading patterns and commercial geographies which would otherwise remain hidden.

British interlopers such as Charles Irvine spent little time in Sweden and a lot of time at sea. When he came 'home', Irvine rented warehouse space for his goods and took temporary lodgings for himself or stayed at a house of his friend, Colin Campbell.¹⁰⁴ Still, they managed to sell their private goods, attend some of the Company auctions and secure commissions along the way. At the same time they had to organise provisions and an appropriate outward cargo for their next journey to China. In the most extreme cases they had merely three months to achieve all this. Arthur Abercromby was not the only supercargo to complain about the fact there was always too little time to get everything in order before leaving for Canton: 'You can't imagine what a hurry I am in having everything to provide aboard & ashore as the Company gives nothing to speak of.'¹⁰⁵ Irvine repeatedly apologised to the Campbell brothers – to whom he had granted powers of attorney – for leaving his private papers in a disordered state. Since they were working on a very tight schedule, we can appreciate why supercargoes and commanders had to delegate much of their business to trusted correspondents.

It was, of course, impossible for supercargoes and commanders to anticipate all the problems or misunderstandings that could arise in their absence regarding outstanding payments. However, Irvine, Abercromby and others like them usually left very detailed instructions and additional funds in the hands of different merchant bankers to 'acquit all demands' which were made in their absence.¹⁰⁶ Considering the special conditions under which supercargoes and

104 Colin Campbell repeatedly prepared lodgings at Gothenburg for his close friend Charles Irvine. Planning to go out of town for the day, he left a note insisting that Irvine 'must not think of going to lodge anywhere else' on his pending return from Canton. Colin Campbell (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine, 18 July 1747, CIC, FBL.

105 Arthur Abercromby (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 4 November 1758, CIC, FBL.

106 Ibid.

other merchant seamen operated, it becomes clear that only a close-knit network of sedentary merchants, friends and relatives could ensure that Canton traders could be more than commercial agents.

Charles Irvine, for instance, used a small but efficient network of merchants and kinsmen to run his wholesale activities in Europe – and well beyond the continent. Many of them were Scotsmen. Table 2 lists some of the agents Irvine relied upon to sell his Chinese consumer goods in different European markets and in Britain. The merchants that are mentioned were not the only agents that Irvine used, but those with whom he had routine correspondence and repeated transactions over many years. Irvine also used other agents such as Robert Main in Cadiz or John Forbes of Alford in Rotterdam, but was soon disappointed with their service.¹⁰⁷

At the height of his commercial activities in the late 1740s and early 1750s, Charles Irvine's wholesale network spanned seven European cities: Amsterdam, London, Antwerp, Stockholm, Cadiz, Hamburg and Aberdeen. The centre of network activity was not Gothenburg or London, as one might assume, but Amsterdam. Indeed, it was Amsterdam rather than London that became the prime entrepôt for Chinese export wares in Europe, and this includes Britain, if we consider the massive illegal trade to British shores in which Anglo-Dutch merchant houses played an important role.¹⁰⁸ Although the literature on Anglo-Dutch commerce uniformly attests to the relative decline of Amsterdam as the European redistribution centre for colonial goods in the eighteenth century,¹⁰⁹ its position as a marketplace for Chinese export wares and as a hub for commercial intelligence and finance surrounding the East India trade remained unchallenged during the period of this study. It is therefore hardly surprising that Irvine had several close contacts in that city.

Irvine's key contacts in Amsterdam were all houses of wider reputation and significance. Although most of these merchant houses and merchant bankers have been introduced at different points throughout this work, some further remarks about their trading interests and relationship to the China trade and British interlopers such as Charles Irvine are in order. Taken together, these merchant houses formed a key but elusive group of intermediaries who were

107 On the spectacular bankruptcy of John Forbes, see Catterall, 'At Home Abroad'. See also Pye & Cruikshank (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 2 August 1755, CIC, FBL; Pye & Cruikshank (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 9 August 1755, CIC, FBL.

108 Müller, 'The Swedish East India Trade'.

109 Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade*; the gradual rise of London as Europe's main entrepôt for colonial goods is charted by Ormrod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires* and Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies*.

TABLE 3 Charles Irvine's wholesale network

Period of collaboration	Name ^a	Place of residence	Nationality
1720s–1743	Thomas Wilkieson	Amsterdam	Scottish
1720s–1764	George Ouchterlony	London	Scottish
1730s–1760s	James Gough & Co.	Cadiz	Irish
1730s–1740s	Urbano Arnold	Antwerp	Flemish
1730s–1740s	Jean Cossart & Bouwer	Amsterdam	Flemish
1743–1750s	George Clifford & Sons	Amsterdam	Anglo-Dutch
1743–1770	Pye & Cruikshank	Amsterdam	Scottish
1740s–1750s	Koschell & Conradi/ König	Stockholm	German/ Swedish
1740s–1750s	James Rose	Aberdeen	Scottish
1749–1763	Charles Metcalfe	Hamburg	Scottish
1750s	Jennings & Findlay	Stockholm	Irish?/Scottish

Note

^a The names of the trading houses often changed over the years. New partners joined the firms or the business was handed over to the younger generation.

only informally connected to the different East India Companies. Through their cooperation with individual Company servants, however, they managed to play a crucial role for the functioning of the trade.

Thomas Wilkieson, born in Edinburgh, was perhaps the most important of Irvine's trading partners in the Netherlands in the 1730s and early 1740s. Wilkieson conducted his trading ventures from Amsterdam, but remained strongly connected to Britain. His trading interests literally spanned the globe. He was involved in Anglo-Dutch commerce, the trade to Spain and France, was engaged in the Atlantic trade and was dealing in East India goods.¹¹⁰ We know that Wilkieson acted as the principal agent at Amsterdam for the British Royal African Company, for which he regularly purchased cowries from the Maldives and Indian textiles destined for the African slave trade.¹¹¹

110 Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 2 January 1740, CIC/1740/1a. For Wilkieson's expertise regarding the trade with Spain and its American colonies, see Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 23 January 1740, CIC/1740/19a.

111 Hogendorn and Johnson, *Shell Money of the Slave Trade*, pp. 94–97.

Wilkieson also sold tea, textiles and rhubarb on Irvine's behalf, and supplied him with textiles (for export to China), wine and numerous provisions. In doing so, he was in regular contact with George Ouchterlony, Irvine's agent in London. Especially at times of war, Irvine and Wilkieson would jointly weigh the risks of sending Irvine's goods to Cadiz or Gothenburg for fear they might be confiscated at sea.¹¹² Their frenetic exchange of letters in 1739 about how to get a large consignment of English textiles from Wilkieson's warehouse to Irvine before his departure to China demonstrates the kind of responsibility that an agent like Wilkieson had. Questions such as which route was the safest, whose name should be on the bill of lading, what exactly should be insured and what flag should be hoisted in case of confrontation, were hotly debated by members of Irvine's support network.

The tone used by Wilkieson and Irvine in their routine correspondence was more personal and outspoken than in Irvine's other correspondence. This, however, did not prevent the two from engaging in regular disagreements over the quality of goods, and the best way and timing to sell them – discussions that make clear how difficult it was to predict the market for Chinese imports. One example of a disagreement, from 1740, also shows just how many professional groups were involved in the market for specific Chinese goods which were brought to Amsterdam by servants of the different Companies. Irvine, the importer of ten large chests of Chinese rhubarb in 1739, relied on the information given by the Chinese hong merchants for choosing the right quality for the European market. Given his firsthand knowledge of the rhubarb available there, he felt fairly certain that his parcel would fetch a good price.¹¹³ It was Wilkieson, his agent, who subsequently had the unpleasant task of informing Irvine that the quality of his rhubarb was actually not very good, and that the expected wholesale buyers in Amsterdam – the druggists – were to be trusted in their critical judgement.

[A]ll the surgeons & apothecarys together with the whole College of Physicians through all Europe are not so good Judges of the quality of it [rhubarb], as some of the Druggists & these are the persons we have to deal with, & it signifies little or nothing in being conceiled [sic] in one's opinion, when one has to do with persons who are the greatest Connoisseurs.¹¹⁴

112 Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 30 January 1740, CIC/1740/22a.

113 Bills of lading, 4 January 1739. Signed by Thomas Neilson (commander of the *Fredericus Rex Suecia*), Shipping Records, items 39–3d and 39–4d, Irvine Papers, FBL.

114 Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 16 January 1740, CIC, FBL.

For Wilkieson, both raw silk and rhubarb were ‘very capricious articles’, not least because they were likely to suffer from the long and humid journey back to Europe by ship. Wilkieson thus wrote to Irvine that ‘I am told that to pack Rhubarb in Rice will preserve it from the worm.’¹¹⁵ Wilkieson gave meticulous advice on a wide range of subjects and commodities, and always looked out for ways in which to facilitate Irvine’s mobile business. For instance, he arranged for patterns to be made out of Irvine’s textiles so the latter could take some of them with him to China for comparison with his new purchases.¹¹⁶ It was also planned that Irvine would show these samples to potential buyers in Sweden before his scheduled departure, thus hopefully securing the interest of his future clients.

Irvine’s collaboration with Wilkieson also shaped the very logistics behind his trading. His efficient dealings with Wilkieson and his other agents become evident when we consider how and where Irvine forwarded his Asian goods once he arrived in Europe from China. Following the Company sales, Irvine distributed his *pacotille* and auction purchases among his sales agents in Amsterdam, Stockholm, Hamburg, and so forth, who stored them until a convenient moment for resale emerged.

Yet, wholesale agents like Wilkieson offered more than practical expertise and help in the logistics of trade. Since they also participated in other trades and had contacts with myriad other correspondents unknown to Irvine, they effectively increased the reach for Company servants to a larger and more varied customer base. Irvine placed a great deal of trust in the commercial abilities and integrity of his agents, and in Wilkieson in particular. When Wilkieson broke the news of his pending retirement from business in 1743, Irvine wrote him a personal letter that clearly reflected the private and commercial appreciation he had for his correspondent:

[I] do with the greatest sincerity & Joy [...] congratulate you on your resolution of Setting limits to your ambition & and retiring from business tho’ I assure you it gives me at the same time no small concern to think that I am losing a friend in whom I could & would, on occasion, put trust sans reserve.¹¹⁷

115 Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 19 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

116 Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), two separate letters, both dated 27 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

117 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), undated, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL.

Wilkieson's business was subsequently taken over by his former junior partners, two young British merchants in Amsterdam, who had formed an independent firm called Pye & Cruikshank. Charles Pye was English, while George Cruikshank originally came from Aberdeen. They continued to sell tea for Irvine until the late 1760s. It was during the same decade that Pye & Cruikshank developed a strong interest in the Anglo-Indian remittance business. Together with Clifford & Sons, Hope & Co. and a few other Anglo-Dutch firms, they made a successful transition from import/export merchants into large banking houses. Yet, their wealth, connections and knowledge of the East Indies trade derived from their extensive shipping concerns as tea dealers and factors for merchant seamen like Charles Irvine, George Kitchin and George Elliott. Little is known about Pye & Cruikshank's trading activities outside the East Indies trade, but their financial weight became apparent when they started issuing government loans and became active in war finance around the mid-eighteenth century.¹¹⁸

Charles Irvine's nephew, Thomas Irvine, learnt the intricacies of trade and banking as well as the Dutch language during his apprenticeship at Pye & Cruikshank, which was arranged and paid for by his uncle.¹¹⁹ This arrangement arguably strengthened the bond between Irvine and the Amsterdam merchants and was taken to alter the prospects of trade of both Irvine senior and junior.¹²⁰ It also gave Irvine senior, however, a right or opportunity to steer the career of his nephew in a direction that he felt was useful (for himself). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Thomas Irvine was eventually drawn into the orbit of the China trade, not as mobile servant of one of the European trading Companies, however, but as a re-export merchant who was largely concerned in the illegal trade of shipping 'Gottenburgh tea' to Scotland.¹²¹ With his business associate, Thomas More, Thomas Irvine worked sometimes independently, sometimes in coordination with his uncle, who was by that point also mostly concerned with the re-export of tea to the continent and to British shores.

118 The involvement of Pye & Cruikshank in the East Indies remittance trade is discussed in Furber, *John Company at Work*.

119 Thomas Irvine (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) 25 April 1750, CIC, FBL; Pye & Cruikshank to Charles Irvine, 25 April 1750, CIC, FBL; Thomas Irvine (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 25 May 1753, CIC, FBL.

120 Charles Irvine also supported in a material way the career of other kinsmen, including John Rose. See Catterall, 'The Worlds of John Rose'.

121 Janes, 'Fine Gottenburgh Teas'. There are quite a few letters addressed to Charles Irvine under the name of the newly formed partnership between Thomas Irvine and James More (a Scot based in Gothenburg) that give evidence of the development of the smuggling business. See, for instance, More & Irvine to Charles Irvine, 28 May 1760, 2 April and 7 May 1760, CIC, FBL.

The importance of Amsterdam within Irvine's own private-trade network – and the Company trading system more generally – is perhaps best exemplified by the Anglo-Dutch merchant house of George Clifford & Co (from the mid-1740s Clifford & Sons). The Clifford family came to the Netherlands from the north of England in the mid-seventeenth century.¹²² George Clifford III (1685–1760), a wealthy merchant banker with close connections to the Gentlemen Seventeen and the EIC directors in London, acted as the official informant of the EIC in the Netherlands. As such, he provided regular information on prices, the departure and arrival of East Indiamen, the timing of different auctions, and so forth (Figure 5). After the death of George Clifford senior, his sons continued the agency service.¹²³ The larger East India Companies all used a system of agents to gain reliable information about their trade and the competition. Of course, the Companies' entire staff consisted, in a sense, of commercial agents and potential informants. However, those who supplied the Companies with commercial information on a regular basis from different port cities in Europe were another category of external agents. Agents did not receive a fixed salary but were paid irregular gratuities and compensations for all costs that they incurred on the Company's behalf, such as the postage of letters, the feeding and housing of stranded sailors, the supply with provisions and other outlays.¹²⁴

In the EIC records, transcriptions of the letters received by Clifford & Sons have partly survived, together with newspaper cuttings announcing sales and cargo details of many ships and across the different East India Companies. The Amsterdam house received these announcements from their informal contacts within the Companies, and then took it upon themselves to forward the information in a timely manner to the Court of Directors in London. In a letter from 1768, Clifford remarked on the expected sale of two SEIC ships, one of which was the *Louisa Ulrica*, which had just returned to Gothenburg.

We received these [announcements] this evening from Sweden, and thought it our Duty to forward them to you immediately for the inspection of the Gentlemen Directors, which, we hope, they will be pleased to take in good party. As the two above mentioned ships have brought a very considerable quantity of Tea, and there being besides Seventeen more Ships expected this year in Europe from China, viz. 8 English, 4 Dutch, 3

122 Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks*, p. 70.

123 See the extensive correspondence between George Clifford & Sons and Peter Mitchell Esq. at East India House, London. BL, 10R/E/1/51, pp. 1–233.

124 Thomas, 'East India Company Agency Work'.



FIGURE 5 *Portrait of George Clifford III (1685–1760)*. Merchant banker in Amsterdam; informant of the EIC in London; investor in the Ostend Company, SEIC and VOC. Attributed to Balthasar Denne, date unknown. Oil on canvas.
COURTESY RIJKSBUREAU VOOR KUNSTHISTORISCHE DOCUMENTATIE

French, & 2 Danish, it is very probable, that Teas will in general go very cheap.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ George Clifford & Sons (Amsterdam) to Peter Mitchell Esq. at the East India House in London, dated Amsterdam, 1 July 1768, BL, IOR/E/1/51, p. 2. The newspaper announcement is dated 18 June 1768; BL, IOR/E/1/46–51 (1763–1769) contains several dozen letters

Geographically speaking, Amsterdam sat – like Cadiz, to which we turn in Chapter 4 – at a crossroads for the cross-Company exchange of information about incoming and outgoing vessels, their expected cargoes and any irregularities regarding their passage. These irregularities could include unusual routes taken, delays, numbers of deaths, sickness on board, shipwrecks or the need for repairs, and so on. The annual cycle of the China trade followed the rhythm dictated by the monsoon winds. The concerted departure and arrival of ships to and from China – for which even minor delays were bad for business – naturally impacted on the flow and availability of information. Merchants who were active participants in the wholesale trade were keen to gather as much information – as early as possible – from their private correspondents in order to be able to plan ahead and to predict the market.

Sometimes, well-connected merchants received rather sensitive information about the expected cargo of a China ship even before the Company directors concerned were informed by their employees. Knowing this, Irvine apologised in advance to George Clifford & Sons for not having given any particulars about the cargo on board the SEIC ship *Freden* in 1747, claiming that '[o]ur Gentlemen Directors have justly been displeased when notes of cargoes have been sent before they had them themselves henceforth you'll excuse my not sending it you herewith'.¹²⁶ At the same time, however, Irvine hoped to be furnished with timely price information by Clifford to decide what to buy at the upcoming auction in Gothenburg. He thus urged Clifford to 'mention the prices of Sundry Teas, wrought Silks and Tutenague: not that I have any concern directly or indirectly in either, being only passenger; but may possibly be a buyer of these'.¹²⁷ The gathering of information was of prime importance for all participants in the wholesale trade, including the Company supercargoes in their role as *private traders* and re-export merchants.

Clifford & Sons were investors and shareholders in various East India Companies during the period of this study. They were involved with the Ostend venture and the VOC and remained in close contact with supercargoes and captains of various rival Companies. Later, they also invested in SEIC ventures. George Clifford regularly sold tea and silks in Amsterdam for Charles Irvine, Arthur Abercromby, Colin Campbell and other British interlopers. Yet,

from Clifford & Sons relating to cargo lists of various Companies and banking services offered for the EIC.

126 Charles Irvine (on board the *Freden*) to George Clifford & Sons, 24 August 1747, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL.

127 Ibid.

they also figured as buyers of Company goods.¹²⁸ The Clifford family entered the city government of Amsterdam in the mid-eighteenth century, which perhaps shows best their integration into Dutch society. In the 1760s and 1770s, Clifford & Sons also became key players in the Anglo-Indian remittance business, through which EIC servants channelled their fortunes back to Europe. It is through these financial services (and the speculation that accompanied the trade in bills of exchange and Company shares) that they eventually went bankrupt in 1773, taking with them a great many others into the financial abyss.¹²⁹

Given the many alliances to the big and small East India Companies and George Clifford's involvement with British interlopers, his official role in the EIC is rather surprising. The trust that was placed in the merchant and banking house of Clifford & Sons by subsequent generations of EIC directors can partly be explained by the close links that it maintained within the broader Anglo-Dutch trade. In any case, its loyalty was never questioned. It would be undoubtedly very revealing to undertake a comparison of the sort of information that George Clifford actually gathered from his many trading partners across Europe, on the one hand, and the arguably much more limited pieces of information he was willing to pass on to the Companies, on the other.

For private traders, such as Charles Irvine, in turn, it was a distinct advantage to count such eminent merchant houses amongst their friends. The vital information these connections provided, especially about price developments, was particularly valuable. To give an example, George Clifford & Sons were the first to know in 1744 that the EIC planned to legally purchase certain types of tea at continental auctions, since in that year the Company could not fulfil its obligations, that is, meet the demand.¹³⁰ Such information was crucial as it kept the prices up for quite some time. And the individual decision-making of private traders was certainly influenced when such an opportunity for legal selling occurred. It was only when prices really went down that Charles Irvine and others were willing to sell their goods on to smugglers.

Amsterdam was the place where most of Irvine's tea went in the 1730s and 1740s, a part of which was certainly sold on to smugglers who would have brought it to the Channel Islands – the preferred gateway for contraband tea

128 On their involvement in the re-export trade of Indian diamonds see Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks*, pp. 70 and 153.

129 Gastra, 'War, Competition and Collaboration', esp. pp. 61f.

130 Chris Nierstrasz concludes that private trade in tea must have been relatively small in the EIC before 1745, especially in comparison to what was brought back by VOC servants (and the employees of the Scandinavian Companies). See, Nierstrasz, *Rivalry for Trade in Tea and Textiles*, p. 85.

bound for England. Yet, Amsterdam also supplied the German lands and wider Central Europe with Chinese tea and other consumer goods. The names of the purchasers listed by Pye & Cruikshank in their regular correspondence following every sale they made on Irvine's behalf support the assumption that much of Irvine's fine tea was actually bought by German merchants and captains who visited Amsterdam for that purpose.¹³¹ This concentration of tea in one place had its disadvantages, of course. The outbreak of military conflicts, any sign of political instability and also the temporary overstocking of that market could all be disastrous for the importer, since profit margins on the legal sale of tea were anyway becoming very slim.¹³² It is therefore not surprising that Charles Irvine actively sought to develop alternative outlets for his goods.

Although Irvine continued to supply tea to his agents in Amsterdam throughout the 1750s, at the same time, however, he also looked elsewhere to sell his SEIC auction purchases (especially of black tea) – auction purchases that increased dramatically after he gave up his active career as a supercargo.¹³³ The first outlet that was developed by Irvine and many of the other Scottish-born interlopers was their home country. Smuggling voyages to the Isle of Man were also organised occasionally. This was the case, for instance, in 1743 when Irvine reported to George Ouchterlony – his partner in many such smuggling ventures – that his kinsman 'T.O.' [Thomas Ouchterlony] was 'ready to sail [as] passenger for the Isle of Mann [sic] with a large Pacotille'.¹³⁴

Yet, after 1743, a group of interlopers and their associates who joined together through their common interest in selling tea clandestinely in Britain organised a more regular tramping trade between Gothenburg and the northeast of Scotland, where most of them originally came from.¹³⁵ This group included Adam and Archibald Duff, Captain Urquart, Arthur Abercromby, Peter Dens, Colin Campbell, Captain Kitchin, James Moir, George Elphinstone, George and

131 Pye & Cruikshank (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), letters dated 17 February, 9 March, 23 March 1748, CIC, FBL.

132 Diederick Smith (Amsterdam) to John Hallet Esq. (London), 14 March 1755, TNA, C 111/95, Hall vs. Hallett.

133 See the twenty-one annotated auction catalogues of the SEIC between 1747 and 1758 from the Swedish National Archive: <http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/landingpage/collection/swedish>, Irvine was among the top five buyers of tea at the SEIC sale of the *Prins Carl* in 1756 according to the calculation of Hodacs and Müller, 'Chests, Tubs, and Lots of Tea', p. 286.

134 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to George Ouchterlony (London), 30 July 1743, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL.

135 For an excellent discussion of the inland support networks of smugglers and the role of tea dealers in Scotland at the time, see Mackillop, 'A North Europe World of Tea'.

Thomas Ouchterlony, Charles and John Irvine and James Rose – the latter was actually bringing the goods ashore.¹³⁶ The existence of extended regional, and in particular kinship, networks was key for this risky but profitable illicit trade to the north.

Irvine also extended his access to the German market by appointing an agent in Hamburg who marketed his goods directly.¹³⁷ Charles Metcalfe, a Scottish resident merchant in Hamburg who had formerly travelled as supercargo on board Swedish vessels, started to sell tea for Irvine and Captain Kitchin from 1749 onwards, thereby reporting precisely every price fluctuation and the general atmosphere among the tea brokers in Hamburg, or, as he called them, ‘our speculative chaps’.¹³⁸ The market for tea had certainly developed for some time in Hamburg.¹³⁹ German demand for Chinese consumer goods seems to have picked up during the time in which Irvine entered the market. Metcalfe repeatedly reported on the growing number of specialised traders in town. Charles Irvine visited the German lands twice, as his application for royal passports shows, first Stralsund and later Hamburg, in 1752 and 1758 respectively.¹⁴⁰

German merchants regularly attended the SEIC sales, yet they also received merchandise from the Dutch sales, from Copenhagen and from London.¹⁴¹ Every sales catalogue of the SEIC mentions German names. Some appear frequently, including the merchants Keller, Schull, Schutz and Jacobsen. The brothers Jacobsen were prolific buyers at the Swedish auctions for many years. Interestingly, Theodor and Jacob Jacobsen never bought any tea in Gothenburg. Instead, they focused on wrought silks and porcelain. The Jacobsen family were naturalised British subjects and among the largest investors in Bank of England shares in the early eighteenth century.¹⁴² The fact that they did not take an interest in tea – despite the great price difference to the London market – is telling and suggests that they had personal reasons to avoid the contraband

136 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to George Ouchterlony (London), 14 May 1743, Letter Book, 1742–1743. Thomas Irvine joined the business a few years later.

137 For some time, he also used one Jacob de Vlieger, but soon relied entirely on Metcalfe.

138 Charles Metcalfe (Hamburg) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 13 June 1755, CIC, FBL.

139 Interestingly, official trade statistics show no particular demand for tea in Hamburg at the time. See the findings of Fertig and Pfister, ‘Coffee, Mind and Body’.

140 Passports for Stralsund and Hamburg, Shipping Documents, 1733–59, Box 11, item numbers 52–ii and 59–2i, Irvine Papers, FBL.

141 See the digitised sales catalogues from the Swedish National Archive in Stockholm (Riksarkivet), Warwick Digital Collection: <http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/landingpage/collection/swedish>.

142 See Schulte Beerbühl, *Deutsche Kaufleute in London*, esp. p. 116 and p. 136.

trade to Britain. A good reputation was difficult to build up, but could easily be lost, if merchants engaged in illegal activities.

Koschell & Conradi, a firm associated with the German-born merchant Hendrik König, one of the SEIC directors, also acted as sales agents for Irvine. The firm was based in Stockholm, and Irvine repeatedly sent his *pacotille* silks to them to be sold in the Swedish market. They specialised in selling and producing decorative wares, primarily wrought silks, porcelain and enamelled tableware from Canton. Sweden, as Hanna Hodacs rightly insists, did not have a large domestic market for East India goods and worked instead a 'peripheral emporium' supplying other parts of Europe with fine manufactured goods from Canton.¹⁴³ British interlopers in the SEIC still tried to sell in this small market, but were generally more successful in the special commission trade, by which the Swedish aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie sourced their armorial tea sets and ready-made wallpapers.

In a detailed memorandum designed to instruct the young Gilbert Elliott, who was going to China as first-time supercargo in 1743, Irvine warned that the buyers in Sweden should not be misjudged, because 'I have observed that people here will pay for a good thing', he exclaimed.¹⁴⁴ He continued to explain to Gilbert that whether a parcel of silks would find customers in Sweden, or needed to be re-exported to other places, depended on different factors. It is 'very hard to judge what may do best, black Padesoys to be sure answered incredibly this last voyage for which reason I fear it will be dangerous now to medle [sic] with them'.¹⁴⁵ The success of previous sales thus did not guarantee steady demand. The Swedish market was quickly saturated, and demand 'varies pretty much not only as fashions [go] but according to quantities imported & therefore ought to have been particularly inquired into here & at Stockholm'.¹⁴⁶

In the end, private traders gained a distinct advantage from their expanded network of agents across Europe. Not only were they better informed about price developments elsewhere, but private traders slowly but surely also learned what was preferred in different markets. This, as Irvine came to realise, meant for instance that what he perceived to be good-quality tea was rejected in Amsterdam as being 'overtasted'. In an unusually sharp retort to Wilkieson's account of his difficulties in selling Irvine's tea in Amsterdam,

143 Hodacs, *Tea and Silks in the North*.

144 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Gilbert Elliott (Gothenburg?), 10 April 1743, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid.

Irvine replied that ‘we [the supercargoes] chose the Teas for the same reasons that your buyers find fault with them.’¹⁴⁷ In offering an explanation of the obvious differences in tastes, he wrote: ‘I think your tastes are framed from your own [VOC] teas, which from China directly are the worst any Europeans bring, & that from Batavia wretched Stuff.’ If they could not be sold in Amsterdam at a profit, Irvine could still send the teas elsewhere. Complaining about market conditions did not help, as Irvine knew perfectly well. After all, ‘[t]here is no disputing of tastes and we ought to conform ourselves to the humour of the place where we propose to sell.’¹⁴⁸

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In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated the integration of Canton traders into European wholesale and re-export markets. This has been achieved principally by tracing the mutually supportive and sometimes conflicting relationships between sedentary merchants and Company supercargoes. British interlopers in the smaller Companies, in particular, were successful in developing extensive contacts on the European continent and in Britain for selling Chinese consumer goods on a wholesale level. The case of Charles Irvine has been taken as a revealing example of the activities of a larger group of expatriate traders who developed a stake in the re-export trade, into which Britain was fully integrated. Geographically, the sales networks of British interlopers extended from the highly developed consumer societies of the Netherlands and England to relatively remote places such as Montrose, Aberdeen or Stockholm – not to speak of miniscule Stralsund.

The integration of different national markets was perhaps a result of the patchwork of chartered Companies, all of which faced certain import restrictions in domestic markets that made re-export to other parts of Europe a key feature of the trading system on the whole. Yet, it was also the existence of cross-Company collaboration and mobility, and the informal networks which grew out of certain border-crossing activities, that shaped the distinct ways in which markets were connected. British interlopers were free agents par excellence: they managed to use their precarious legal position to gain access to Chinese goods in the first place and then to sell them on advantageous terms wherever they established informal links to wholesalers and petty smugglers.

147 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 21 May 1743, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

148 Ibid.

In this extraordinarily dynamic phase of the China trade, in which European markets were built and structures and practices were still very much in the making, supercargoes played a paramount role in integrating the Chinese and European spheres of commerce. With a gradual change of policy that most Companies adopted by the late 1750s, however, China supercargoes stopped going back and forth between China and Europe after the end of each trading season. Instead, they were expected to spend several years – and in some cases, decades – in Asia in a row, oscillating between Canton and Macao in order to oversee local developments and plan ahead to the arrival of the Company fleet each year. This change of policy had huge implications for the story told here about the pre-1750s period.

The critical role and direct influence of supercargoes in the development and distribution of Chinese export wares in Europe could thus not be maintained in the second half of the eighteenth century. Instead, Canton supercargoes increasingly turned to the intra-Asian trade, to money lending and the remittance business to make a fortune for themselves.¹⁴⁹ The trade in goods was now left almost entirely to the commanders and officers of the ships, who upheld the entrepreneurial spirit and links to the merchant community and individual clients in Europe.

¹⁴⁹ On the money-market in Canton, see Hanser, *Mr Smith Goes to China*.

Treasures in the Cabin

Chinese Export Wares and the Special Commissions Trade

The paper history of things – described by travellers, enumerated in manifests, toll registers, household inventories, and lush descriptions of ceremony and ritual – tells one part of the story. The physical presence of surviving artefacts in modern collections reveal another dimension. When combined with their artistic representation and undergirded by an understanding of economic value and exchange, our material microhistories no longer look particularly small or simple.¹



This chapter looks at a neglected but important aspect of Europe's early commercial relations with China: the privilege trade of the maritime elite. It approaches the economic, social and artistic mechanisms of exchange that shaped the movement of Chinese export goods in the early decades of the eighteenth century from the perspective of the traders themselves, rather than the Companies. Further, it advances a set of related arguments about this particular branch of commercial transactions. It demonstrates that the private trade with China was greater and more significant than previously understood. It also argues that the privilege trade was a crucial vector through which special, peculiar and novel Chinese goods and fashion styles arrived in Europe. The 'fashion element' was especially pronounced in the case of private commissions – when commanders and supercargoes received purchase orders from individual European consumers for customised goods, such as a specific Chinese silk, a particular type of shoe, a miniature model of an East Indies ship carved from ivory or a porcelain portrait figure. These small private commissions stand at the heart of this chapter. Where the merchandise survived the journey to Europe in good condition, it provided a nice profit for

¹ Findlen, 'Afterword', p. 245.

the seafaring merchants. Small special commissions thus essentially differed from the mariners' private trade in more speculative bulk goods that targeted the European masses, as in the case of Chinese teas. Their successful sale in Europe, in contrast, depended on many contingent factors such as transitory price structures and changing demand and supply at specific times and places. Maritime traders' involvement in bulk goods and the wholesale trade, which was analysed in the previous chapter, carried a greater element of risk than did private commissions for individual consumers.

The present chapter furthermore demonstrates that the privilege trade of commanders, supercargoes and captains was not only a way to make a profit, but that it also presented an important asset that members of the maritime elite effectively used in different ways and for various purposes. For one thing, many commanders and supercargoes were pioneering consumers of Chinese goods themselves. Their own appetite for conspicuous consumption and display of fashionable Chinese goods could be satisfied through their own privilege trade. This turned them into significant arbiters of taste, who through their own lifestyle attracted European clients to the peculiar allure of goods from the East. Yet, the privilege trade also allowed merchant mariners to nurture their family ties and friendly connections across Europe. They did so through extensive gift giving of Chinese-made objects. In this case, the imported goods of the privilege trade were emotionally charged, intended, as they were, to sustain wider kinship and commercial networks and to keep the memory of these extremely mobile merchants alive among their scattered circles of confidants and associates. By studying these private gifts and commissions, historians can get a glimpse of the wishes and expectations that wider family members of China traders, and their larger groups of friends, had with respect to this new and exotic trade.

In addition to this personalised function of gift giving to friends and kin, the privilege trade also allowed merchant mariners to strategically lubricate their relations with powerful East India Company directors. The latter were avid consumers of Chinese luxuries, too, and, as this chapter reveals, personally commissioned these goods from members of the maritime elite. But beyond that, the privilege trade also provided a special, private space on board that could be used flexibly for other services and favours. For instance, supercargoes and commanders regularly received enquiries from friends stationed across the East Indies to transport their special cargo in their private cabin to Europe, precisely because this offered a specially protected realm during the voyage. The privilege trade thus fulfilled myriad and important functions in the early China trade. Its services ranged from a way of making a guaranteed profit through custom-made private commissions to lubricating family and strategic

ties with high Company officials. Ultimately, through personal consumption, gift giving and the fulfilment of special purchases, the privilege trade was also a crucial way to showcase and increase the attraction of Chinese goods and ever-changing tastes. It thus presented a forgotten catalyst for fashion innovation and the creation of new consumer demands across pan-European markets.

The private trade in Chinese consumer goods rarely respected national-political boundaries. Depending on their personal networks and social aspirations, merchant mariners managed to build up client bases in Britain and on the continent. These encompassed members of the aristocracy, but also wholesalers and specialist dealers in Chinese goods, in addition to members of extended business and kin networks. Canton traders were necessarily engaged in a dialogue with all these groups, in order to be able to respond quickly to changes in demand. Precisely how the privilege trade and private commission could become an important vehicle for attracting new consumers to the burgeoning trade with the Middle Kingdom requires an exploration of the very processes through which such orders could be placed.

This chapter is, first, dedicated to the definition and explanation of different types of commissions within the private trade in Chinese customised consumer goods during the first half of the eighteenth century. It offers a typology that reflects the different people involved in both small-scale and large-scale commissions. The chapter will then move on to explore the ways in which commanders and supercargoes managed their private commission business. The aim is to demonstrate that, contrary to misperceived notions, merchant mariners acted as both key consumers *and* distributors of Chinese export wares, thus bridging the gap between maritime and sedentary actor categories and historiographies. Third, by looking at private-trade goods in detail – their design and the ways in which they were packed and stored aboard Company ships – I suggest a reinterpretation of the motives and concerns by which goods were chosen for markets to Europe. I argue that a rich literature concerned with the decoration and quality of Chinese export art has hitherto ignored the fact that the shape of export art was functional to the point that we can speak of a trade in containers. The design of trade goods and the choosing of goods by individual traders were subject to the tyranny of space (or rather a lack thereof). The pragmatics of shipping and handling, and how they impacted on artisanal skill and consumer choice, will be explored in this chapter by tracing the design principles of the Canton trade: the square box, the flat-pack and the rectangular chest.

Every East India Company supercargo and commander, down to the petty officers, enjoyed some officially assigned cargo space on board Company ships to engage in private trade. Those further up the hierarchy could call a cabin their own; a small room they inhabited for many months whilst travelling back

and forth between China and Europe. Whilst providing at least a minimum of comfort and privacy for their owners, cabins were jam-packed with freight-free goods. Space was extraordinarily precious for seafaring traders and it provides an important lens through which to understand the stakes and dynamics of the early China trade.

1 Chinese Export Wares and the Market for Private Commissions

The more recent works on Chinese export wares such as porcelain, silk textiles, wallpaper,² rosewood furniture, watercolour paintings and lacquerware acknowledge the decisive role that private-trade played in providing a gateway through which fine-quality wares, souvenirs and customised pieces entered European markets – yet the intricacies of the so-called commission trade remain a puzzle for most scholars.³ The most substantial literature on private-trade goods exists for Chinese export porcelain, and a small number of these studies focus exclusively on commissioned wares – the so-called *chine de commande*.⁴ The object-based research of art historians has led to the identification of a chronology of styles and techniques in pottery and painting that were in use during the period of this study. In the past few years research has been conducted on other types of private-trade goods that places this *connoisseurial* subject of Chinese export wares within wider historical debates about the emergence of a global material culture backed by long-distance trade.⁵ Museum collections of Chinese export porcelain and furniture in Europe and the United States sometimes allow researchers to link increasing numbers of individual objects to their first owners and to grasp elements of the ‘social life’ of these objects as commission goods, gifts and memorabilia.⁶

2 Research on Chinese export wallpaper has advanced significantly in recent years; see, e.g., de Bruijn, *Chinese Wallpaper in Britain and Ireland*; for continental Europe, the definitive study is Wappenschmidt, *Chinesische Tapeten*.

3 See, for instance, Pierson, ‘Chinese Porcelain’.

4 For a general overview, see Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*; Kerr and Mengoni, *Chinese Export Ceramics*; Godden, *Oriental Export Market Porcelain*; Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*; Clunas (ed.), *Chinese Export Art and Design*. On the trans-Pacific trade in Chinese porcelain, see Priyadarshini, *Chinese Porcelain in Colonial Mexico*. For works on armorial porcelain in different national markets, Kroes, *Chinese Armorial Porcelain*; Díaz, *Chinese Armorial Porcelain*.

5 Bae, ‘Joints of Utility’; Wu, ‘Chinese Wallpaper’; Kleutghen, ‘Imports and Imitations’.

6 Smith, ‘Manly Objects?’; Clifford, ‘From Canton to Country House’; for a theoretical engagement with the social dimensions of things, see Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*.

A scholarly interest in the private trade of individual merchants in the early China trade is now slowly emerging after decades of intense focus on the competition between different trading Companies as institutional actors. The study of eighteenth-century shipwrecks of East Indiamen and their cargoes has provided key evidence to distinguish the official Company trade in porcelain from that carried out on private accounts.⁷ What becomes clear from the study of shipwrecks, auction catalogues and memorandum books is that the East India Companies bought a surprisingly large amount of coarse and middling qualities of blue and white and polychrome tableware. The Companies' focus on affordable, and more standardised products for larger markets became more pronounced after the mid-eighteenth century.⁸ By contrast, merchant seamen in Company service continued to obtain a highly diverse array of fine-quality pieces and designs. Parts of these were customised for individual consumers, merchants, patrons and friends in Europe.⁹ The evidence for a single trading year illustrates this fact. In 1774, as the art historian David Sanctuary Howard has shown, 'only two specified design patterns [were] ordered by the Hon. East India Company for over a thousand pieces of enamelled ware, and four specified designs among an even larger quantity of blue & white.' By contrast, it is clear that 'apart from armorial ware – which averaged about fifty annually – there were probably hundreds of other individual pieces or designs chosen from Canton shops by servants of the East India Company'.¹⁰

In the British case, Chinese and Japanese lacquerware in the form of panels, picture frames, folding screens, trunks, tea trays, bookcases and cabinets, tables and other costly items of household furniture was from the 1720s onwards purchased exclusively on private account.¹¹ Within the smaller East India Companies, namely the Ostend and Swedish ventures, furniture and lacquerware was solely imported via private trade. This was equally true for other

7 Jörg, *The Geldermalsen History*; for an excellent discussion of shipwrecked material culture, see Green, 'Valentines', esp. pp. 242–248.

8 Van Dyke and Mok, 'Rise of the Private Traders', esp. p. 57.

9 Godden, *Oriental Export Market Porcelain*, p. 15.

10 Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*, p. 11.

11 For a short period of time, in the early 1700s, the EIC invested in lacquerwares, such as fans, nesting tables and tea trays. But this enterprise was soon abandoned. The Court of Directors reminded their outgoing supercargoes that 'It is found by experience that they [Chinese artisans] Lacker or Jappan better at Chusan than at Canton therefore be very curious in getting all the Lacquer'd or Jappann'd fans don well and by the best Workmen.' Quoted from BL, 10R/E/3/96, fols. 289–291, 'List of Goods to be Provided at Chusan'; a large Company order of tea tables of different sizes was placed with the outgoing supercargoes in 1709, see BL, 10R/E/3/96, p. 577.

fancy goods such as mother-of-pearl snuffboxes, enamelled copper, ivory fans, wallpaper, painted glass and *blanc de chine* figures.¹² This observation should not lead us to the conclusion, however, that China traders were *only* after the costly and expensive items of trade. On the contrary, supercargoes and captains often purchased a wide range of qualities in porcelain, textiles, tea and furniture on private account. The common assumption that private traders merely provided for the top end of the market, whereas the Companies targeted mass consumers of cheap but fashionable wares, does not always hold true. Indeed, I would argue that a straightforward distinction between private-trade and Company goods on the basis of quality considerations alone is not always possible, or even particularly useful, to make.

The fact that private traders imported cheaper wares alongside extravagant luxuries instead hints at the composite nature of the private trader's commercial strategies and portfolio. If we look at the aggregate shopping lists, private-trade declarations and ledgers of individual traders, it becomes clear that commissions made up only a part of the overall portfolio of goods purchased by individual traders during their trips to China. The *pacotille* of captains and supercargoes typically included various small-scale commissions (for which a fee was charged) and the fulfilment of large orders for individuals and wholesalers. In addition, depending on their special expertise and distribution networks, traders invested independently in specific commodities such as rice, Chinese rhubarb, silk textiles or different types of tea. With a keen eye on developments in fashion, they equally sought out novelties in design or craftsmanship. Our British interlopers in Ostend and Gothenburg were more inclined to specialise in goods that found wider markets across continental Europe and North Britain, as the home markets in Sweden and the Austrian Netherlands were growing, but not at the same rate as the trade expanded.¹³ Local contacts with individual merchants and consumers were, however cherished by foreigners such as Charles Irvine, and continued to lead to special commissions – from ready-made fans and waistcoats to customised furniture and plates.

But why did traders accept special commissions in the first place? On the most basic level, commissions represented a relatively secure source of profit and could thus contribute to reducing the overall commercial risks involved in maritime shipping. Sometimes a maximum price was agreed upon accepting

12 See Kerr and Ayers, *Blanc de Chine*.

13 As a counterpoint to that, there was consistently high demand for Chinese silks in Scandinavia which both the Scandinavian East India Company and private traders successfully catered for. Hodacs, 'Cheap and Cheerful'.

the commission, sometimes the price was settled after the arrival of the cargo. Yet, a commission fee was normally due and thus contributed to the regular income of the trader in question. On another level, the acceptance and fulfilment of commissions played myriad strategic roles for traders in the nurturing of their social relations and financial obligations; commissions played decisive roles for the nexus of patronage, friendship, family and self-fashioning. Taken together, the amount of goods coming in via the privilege trade of single individuals as commissions and speculative purchases could assume remarkable proportions.

One telling example of a captain who grossly disregarded the official regulations of the English Company is the case of Captain Francis Nelly, commander of the English East Indiaman *Hartford* and an acquaintance of Colin Campbell, Thomas Hall and Charles Pike, who died in Canton shortly before the English ship could embark on its return journey in 1731/32.¹⁴ Nelly's *pacotille* was subsequently auctioned off at the autumn sales at London's India House for the benefit of his creditors and heirs.¹⁵ The chance survival of an EIC auction catalogue of 1732 – which was submitted as evidence in a lawsuit – provides us with the opportunity to look at Nelly's investments more closely.¹⁶

The annotated auction catalogue includes the price estimates of the textiles that were put up for sale on behalf of Francis Nelly. In total 158 lots of textiles were sold on his account, and the total of the reserve prices was in the region of £10,000.¹⁷ Yet, wrought silks made up only one part of Nelly's investment. Table 4 shows the types and amount of China goods Nelly had registered as 'privilege trade' in 1731 with the Canton supercargoes who had noted the details in their 'diary & transaction book'.¹⁸ It shows that the 158 lots of textiles

14 In 1730, 'the commander's homeward bound privilege had been more or less fixed at 13 tons', an assigned space that Nelly at least doubled to bring his merchandise home. For an overview regarding the changing allocation of privilege space on East Indiamen, see Pritchard, 'Private Trade', p. 118.

15 Nelly drew up his last will before heading to Canton on 26 November 1739, appointing EIC Captain Richard Pinnell, Samuel Skinner (a Canton supercargo) and his wife as executors. Nelly bequeathed his house in Poplar, as well as the proceeds of his estate, his chinaware, furniture, pictures, clothing apparel, etc. to his wife (Kathell?) Nelly and ordered that Government securities, shares, etc. should be used to invest his fortune, heritable by his wife and their two sons Francis and Richard Nelly. Nelly's two sisters inherited £500 each. TNA, PROB 11/653/19, Will of Francis Nelly of Poplar.

16 When commissions failed to be delivered or came in at a much higher price than previously agreed, commissioners sometimes took to the law. TNA, Chancery Master's Exhibits, C 103/192, Moreton vs. Newnam.

17 Ibid.

18 BL, IOR/G/12/31, p. 224.

TABLE 4 Captain Francis Nelly's private trade on the Hartford (1730/32)

Chinaware	125 chests and boxes
Chinaware	1,095 bundles
Tea	58 small chests
Tea	118 tubs
Silks	30 chests
Coarse cloth	1,225 bundles
Lacquered ware	10 chests
Arrack	15 butts
Fans	2 boxes

SOURCE: BL, IOR/G/12/31, P. 224.

which appear in this list as '30 chests of silks' were complemented by a range of other goods, including ten chests of lacquered wares and a large amount of tea and chinaware. The Company *Cash and Commerce Journals* include useful data on the sales value of private goods for various individuals from 1699 through to 1784, including those of Francis Nelly for 1732. Nelly's charges payable to the Company alone amounted to the staggering sum of £13,436, whereas the sales value of his private-trade goods lay at £29,979.¹⁹

Captain Nelly might have been prompted to make this unusually large commitment to silks following the enthusiastic assessment of the European market by the directors of the EIC. The directors had given instructions to their supercargoes in 1730 to buy some 15,600 pieces of wrought silk on Company account, at an estimated cost of 1,365,000 Chinese tael, representing 22 per cent of the total investment of the Company across its four China ships that year.²⁰ They wrote that:

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- 19 Pritchard, 'Private Trade', appendix XI: 'Private Trade of Captains and Others on Various Ships, 1699–1784', p. 252.
- 20 These sums were computed on the basis of: 'A Compilation of the China Investment to be made at Canton, for the Cargos to be laden on board our ships Hartford, Macclesfield, Cesar and Harrison, with Orders & Directions relating there to', 4 December 1730, BL, IOR/E/3/105, 1730–1731, p. 24. The directors anticipated a total investment in merchandise other than gold of 4,796,500 Chinese tael (or £1,598,837). Three tael equal one pound sterling. See Nierstrasz, *Rivalry for Trade in Tea and Textiles*, 'Measurements', p. xv.

[w]e are encouraged to demand so large Quantity of Silks, by the Prices they are now at in Foreign parts, and we make no doubt of their turning to good account if you are careful to procure such as are perfectly well manufactured, agreeable to the following Directions with respect to the Colours, and at or about the usual Process [id est: prices] as specified in the Computation.²¹

It is more likely, however, that Nelly had bought at least part of the silks on commission for a group of shopkeepers or wholesale merchants, on whose orders, expertise and market projections private traders and Company directors equally relied.²² Upon gaining a post for a journey, supercargoes soon informed the members of their networks and asked if they could be of any service – thereby indicating that they were open to receiving advice, orders or loans. As the example of Nelly illustrates, the composition of the private cargo that individual traders assembled for the European market can at times be pieced together by using both Company records and private notes or ledgers. The volume of capital involved is at odds with previously held assumptions that the privilege trade (which includes the commission business) of private individuals in the first half of the eighteenth century was always niche, small scale and confined to the purchase of unusual and luxurious products.²³

2 Typology of Commissioners in the China Trade

The business ventures of captains and supercargoes thus ranged from small-scale commissions to the fulfilment of large orders for individuals and wholesalers and speculative purchases on a single voyage – a kaleidoscope of activities that calls for a structured analysis with regard to the different types of markets and buyers involved. I propose to differentiate between four different types of commissioners. In doing so, it is crucial to account for change over time, since access to Chinese wares greatly increased in the middle decades of

21 'Orders and Instructions to James Naish, Nathaniel Torriano, Philip Middleton, Abraham Wessels, Richard Moreton and Thomas Fytche, Council for China 4 Dec. 1730', BL, 10R/E/3/105, p. 25.

22 Chapter 4, below, provides a detailed analysis of these dynamics.

23 This view has not remained unchallenged. For the volumes and diffusion of *pacotille* goods in the French East India Company and textiles especially see Margoline-Plot, 'Les circuits parallèles', p. 113; for a comparative glance at multiple companies, see Berg et al., 'Private Trade and Monopoly Structures'.

the eighteenth century, not least due to the increased shipping of the different chartered Companies.²⁴ Until the 1740s, special commissions were almost exclusively undertaken by, and for, East India Company personnel, associated ship owners, shareholders and their wider family networks.²⁵ These often small-scale orders form the first group of my analysis.

An important characteristic of such commissions was that they were part and parcel of the dense patronage networks that evolved around the East India trade. The appearance of private commissions in the notebooks and letters of Canton traders provides us with a glimpse into the 'affective and strategic uses' that Chinese objects had in a trading world so heavily reliant on the logic of mutual obligation.²⁶ Before the mid-eighteenth century, private commissions were not offered to strangers. Instead, they contributed to the cementing of marriage alliances, memories, friendships and commercial partnerships of those intimately connected to the trade.

Commissions were also accepted from friends stationed in one of the trading factories on the subcontinent. John Searle, supercargo in the English China trade between 1758 and 1765, scribbled in his notebook the commissions that had reached him by letter from friends and colleagues there, who requested either things from China such as 'a Pair of Backgammon Tables neatly made in China for William Mills Esq', or indeed from Britain, as he was returning there. Amongst those special commissions to be send to India 'by the first Ship after my Arrival were 20 to 30 of the Newest and Genteelest Patterns drawn on Paper for Chintz paintings, the best that can be had for Mr. Stratton'.²⁷ They were the emotive and social currency among fellow traders and helped to maintain and expand commercial and familial networks over large distances. Private commissions, together with gifts, favours and customised memorabilia, formed part of a 'fluid register of exchange' that underpinned the development of the trade in Chinese goods and, as the example of the commission of patterns demonstrates, the dependence of innovation on personal delivery.²⁸

In order to analyse this branch of private commissions, we can rely on evidence in the form of mercantile correspondence, account books, probate

24 In the 1750s the EIC alone sent about twenty ships to the East in one sailing season. In the late eighteenth century this number more than doubled to fifty ships per year. See Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit', pp. 43f.

25 Royal families were also among this first group of commissioners. Howard, *Chinese Armorial Porcelain*, p. 69.

26 On the persistence of gift-giving strategies among the Anglo-Indian elite, see Finn, 'Colonial Gifts'.

27 Memorandum, undated (most likely from 1765), of John Searle Esq., TNA, C 107/154.

28 Finn, 'Colonial Gifts', p. 205.

inventories, wills, sales catalogues and private-trade registers. In addition to lists and other written documents, there exist particularly rich legacies of material culture. This is partly to be explained by the fact that customised goods are often easier to relate to a particular recipient/consumer. What is more, since many of these objects were displayed rather than used on a daily basis, there is an abundance of extraordinary pieces that have survived in museums and private collections up to the present day.

The second group of commissioners started to appear more frequently from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, and encompassed the upper middle classes, the lower gentry and aristocratic circles.²⁹ Special commissions from China became fashionable among these elite social groups partly through the influence of East India Company servants. The class of merchant mariners who plied the seas from the West Indies to China, Batavia and Calcutta were part of a new mercantile elite that became ever more powerful in the urban centres of commerce, in politics and, lastly, in the polite circles of Europe. The fact that these newly rich 'seamen' gradually mixed and mingled with the gentry (and sometimes even with the high aristocracy, as well as artists and artisans) had tangible effects on patterns of consumption in Europe.³⁰

To understand the gradual expansion of the commission business from the intimate to the urban environment and its move towards the provinces and country houses, this second type of commissioners must be considered. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, private commissions became desirable and accessible to a much wider range of consumers, namely those without personal ties to Company supercargoes and commanders. This shift towards a more anonymous 'market for special commissions' is neatly summarised by an announcement that appeared in 1763 in the *London Chronicle*, or *Universal Evening Post*:

On New Year's Day was launch[ed] from Messrs Wells's deck in Deptford, a fine ship for the service of the Hon. East India Company called the

29 Even if access to the commission trade was still restricted until the 1750s, the fashion for Chinoiserie was very widespread at this point across Europe. For a fine study that sensibly includes Chinese export wares, see Sloboda, *Chinoiserie*.

30 The many surviving pieces of Chinese armorial porcelain in Britain and on the continent best reveal the personal connections between EIC servants and the landed elite in Europe. For examples, see Kerr and Mengoni, *Chinese Export Ceramics*, esp. pp. 39–57. As a collaborative venture 'The East India Company at Home (1757–1857)' project generated many detailed studies on individual Company families and their political, imperial and material connections to the British landed elite. Finn and Smith (eds), *The East India Company at Home*.

British King to be commanded by Captain Peter Pigou. After the launch the Captain gave at the Crown and Anchor in the Strand an elegant entertainment and a ball to a brilliant assembly of near two hundred ladies and gentlemen of distinction.³¹

Such lavish events in a London coffeehouse were perfect opportunities for attracting private commissions from 'ladies and gentlemen of distinction' that would otherwise have to buy ready-made wares from the shops that specialised in merchandise from China. The ball mentioned above took place shortly after Peter Pigou (1732–1783) had been appointed master of this new ship. Pigou himself came from an extremely wealthy East India Company family, with two of his brothers being active supercargoes in China and his father Frederick Pigou (1711–1792) serving as a powerful director of the EIC in London. Before Pigou senior was appointed to the Court of Directors, a position that he held almost continuously between 1758 and 1777, he had been chief supercargo on several voyages to China himself. His personal instructions on how to distinguish the different qualities of Chinese silks were presented to many supercargoes that went out to Canton under his patronage, and reflect an intimate knowledge of the demands for China goods in Europe.³² This asset could be passed down the family line to a new generation of China traders, such as to Peter Pigou.³³ As the episode with the London ball clearly demonstrates, the latter was well acquainted with the established – but also with the newly emerging – conventions and 'tricks' of China supercargoes who were eager to attract ever-greater circles of buyers for special commission goods. However, Pigou might have taken on too many commissions, for he was dismissed in 1765. The Court of Directors discovered that on his return journey from China, 'Capt. Pigou of the *British King*' and three of his officers had disposed 'of large quantities of their private trade at Lisbon, where the said ship touched to have the main mast repaired'.³⁴

We can perceive a further widening of the market for special commissions when corporations, Masonic lodges, guilds and companies discovered the

31 *London Chronicle, or, Universal Evening Post*, 13, Thursday, 30 December to Saturday, 1 January 1763. My emphasis.

32 BL, IOR/E/3/107ff., esp. pp. 107f., 270–275; p. 298.

33 Frederick Pigou was also the co-owner of gunpowder mills at Dartford, Kent. See Cook, 'Andrews, Miles Peter'.

34 Srinivasachari (ed.), *Indian Records*, p. 105. Regional newspapers reprinted the news from the *London Gazette* (21 July 1765), noting the stay of the *British King* in Lisbon, which was in apparent need of repairs. See *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 15 August 1765, British Newspaper Archive.

potential of having their group identity not only put on paper and rhetorically expressed in vows, but also materialised in the form of, for instance, elegant drinking vessels from China. Punchbowls in particular, which were associated with manliness and homo-sociability outside the home, were favourite commissions in the second half of the eighteenth century.³⁵ The third type of commission thus came from institutions rather than from individuals. This development falls in a slightly later period, mainly towards the later eighteenth century. Because of the great number of pieces ordered by such institutions at once, some fine examples survive in museums today. Howard writes that '[b]y the end of the century supercargoes, captains and officers of the English East India Company alone had purchased special commissions in Canton' for roughly 'thirty livery companies, at least twenty societies and two regiments'. In addition, via these maritime merchants, also a number of 'mugs, punchbowls or plates for two inns, a breeches maker, a post office, a hat-maker, a boat-builder, a "man-midwife" and "George Harding, China Warehouse, No. 189 Minorities" in London' were bought in China and shipped to their European consumers.³⁶

The last of the four groups of private commissioners outlined here is probably the one that has been the most inconspicuous in existing scholarship. Nevertheless, as I would argue, it was in many respects the most influential with regard to market developments. From the early eighteenth century onwards, wholesalers and retailers (such as mercers) sought to get hold of the best wares from China, commodities in which they dealt in bulk in Europe. Soon, they understood that access to the *pacotille* of merchant mariners was the best way to get new products, new patterns and better qualities. The large-scale commissions that were organised in partnership between wholesalers and mariners are treated in depth in Chapter 2 but are listed here since they represented another key type of commissioners.

3 Families and Consumers Associated with the East India Companies

As Howard has found in his pioneering study of private trade in porcelain, '[i]n England a comparatively small circle of families, related by blood or background, succeeded both in directing what became the largest company in the world and at the same time in acquiring much of the porcelain that survives

35 Harvey, 'Barbarity in a Teacup?'

36 Howard, *The Choice of the Private Trader*, p. 26.

today'.³⁷ In fact, the first armorial wares in England (imported c. 1710) were all commissioned by affluent EIC servants, managing owners of East Indiamen, shareholders, directors, captains and supercargoes.³⁸ In France, the situation was comparable. In the first two decades of the eighteenth century, most 'orders came from the court, senior civil servants and managerial staff of the Compagnie des Indes'.³⁹ However, soon 'families of standing in the provinces, especially Brittany' started to order family china, too. According to Louis Mézin, their 'proximity to Lorient', where the Company auctions took place, 'and connections with families associated with the Compagnie des Indes fostered the growth of the trade in private export china'.⁴⁰

Dutch merchants might well have started the fashion for armorial wares as items of regular trade, since most of the very early examples were made for Dutch families. Here, the overall trend is similar to what happened in Britain and France: we see an extraordinarily high proportion of commissions from VOC servants and financiers.⁴¹ The Dutch trade emporium in Asia was Batavia. From early on it was exposed to a wide variety of Chinese export goods, as Chinese merchants and adventurers visited the port regularly.⁴² Individual Company officials assembled vast collections of Chinese goods during their stay in Asia and commissioned, in some case, excessive numbers of porcelain sets, many of which would have been difficult to sell on because of their customised design. Jan Albert Sichterman, rightly called a Dutch nabob, who had served the VOC at its Asian headquarters in Batavia in the early decades of the eighteenth century before rising to become Dutch Governor of Bengal, owned 'ten tableservices, each of more than hundred pieces, and ... 41 complete tea services', many of which were decorated with the family crest, a squirrel.⁴³

Clearly, armorial wares helped this new mercantile elite in northwestern Europe to render visible their access to powerful ordering networks of what was at the beginning of the eighteenth century still a fairly exclusive trade. In his excellent study on the influences of Chinese porcelain on Southeast Asia, Japan, the Middle East and Europe, Robert Finlay describes the slow beginning of the porcelain trade through Portuguese and Spanish merchants, who

37 Ibid., p. 12.

38 See *ibid.*

39 Mézin et al., *Cargoes from China*, chapter on 'Family China', pp. 153–181.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

41 A good overview of these is provided in Jörg, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade*. Jörg also describes how models and drawings were furnished to the supercargoes for their regular purchases of Company porcelain. See *ibid.*, esp. pp. 106f.

42 Blussé, *Visible Cities*, esp. pp. 30–40.

43 Jörg, 'Jan Albert Sichterman', p. 190.

initially supplied only a few royal and church dignitaries on the continent.⁴⁴ This royal monopoly on Asian luxuries was only broken with the entrance of the Dutch into seaborne trade in Asia. Large dinner sets comprised up to 400 pieces of customised porcelain. These sets included plates in different sizes, sweetmeat dishes, fruit baskets, tureens, serving plates and knife handles, which were an impressive statement of wealth and family identity. Armorial wares seemed to have offered the rare combination of being modern consumer goods while clearly playing with notions of exclusivity, family legacy and heritage.⁴⁵ Such items initially proved particularly popular among families that had only recently made their fortune.

In order to commission a set of 'family china', painted wallpapers or embroidered or hand-painted silks for curtains and bed hangings, it was necessary to approach supercargoes and commanders of East Indiamen directly. This is mainly due to the fact that private commissions typically involved the exchange of written instructions, miniature models, patterns of fabric, portraits, drawings or sketches of the design. A coloured drawing (or engraved book plate) featuring the armorial bearings, crest and Latin motto of the family, would have been provided as a model for the production of customised porcelain.⁴⁶

The fact that these coloured drawings were indeed the main, and often sole, basis for the production of armorial ware by Chinese manufacturers is reflected in the following anecdote. Geoffrey Godden has documented the unfortunate commission of the London-based merchant Calverley Bewicke, who ordered a porcelain service with his armorials around 1740. The commission was executed with great precision. By mistake, however, his written instructions were reproduced as well. Thus, '[e]ach piece of the service was duly painted in China with "Our coats of arms" in untidy script written beneath the armorials.'⁴⁷ Such mistakes occurred with some regularity and reflect the sometime unforeseen complications of trans-cultural commission businesses that linked self-conscious European consumers to anonymous porcelain painters in Canton.⁴⁸ Plain ceramics were sent down from the kilns of Jingdezhen to be decorated in Canton according to the demands of the foreign

44 See Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art*, esp. pp. 254–261. On the importance of the Chinese community at Manila for the supply of Chinese goods to the Spaniards, see Johns, *China and the Church*, esp. pp. 54f.; on Manila as a crossroads for global trade, see Tremml-Werner, *Spain, China, and Japan*.

45 On this interplay, Smith, 'Manly Objects?.'

46 See Godden, *Oriental Export Market Porcelain*, p. 16.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

48 Van Dyke and Mok, *Images of the Canton Factories*, see esp. 'Problems with Porcelain', pp. 23–28.

traders. Porcelain painting workshops in Canton employed a great number of workers of varying skill and experience, thus explaining the great differences in the quality of painting between different commissioned porcelain sets and between different pieces within a single set. William Hickey, a British visitor to Canton in the year 1769, was:

shewn the different processes used in finishing the China ware. In one long gallery, we found upwards of a hundred persons at work in sketching or finishing the various ornaments upon each particular piece of ware, some parts being executed by men of a very advanced age, and others by children even so young as six or seven years.⁴⁹

Given their evident uselessness as respectable objects of display and self-fashioning, it is not surprising that very few of such curious pieces survive in museums and private collections today.

Despite this particular failure, the example of the merchant Bewicke's ordering of his family service clearly shows how this commission business of Chinese export wares actually worked for the European consumer. The exchange of drawings and models suggests that buyers were directly involved in the process that led to the production of customised goods in China. In this context, small-scale commissions reflect the *active* pursuit of consumers and merchant seamen of novelties in an otherwise increasingly standardised trade.⁵⁰ The value of analysing special commissions therefore lies partly in the possibility of uncovering the numerous, but forgotten, acts of innovation in eighteenth-century consumption.

One example of such innovation was the way in which design motifs travelled from one form of object to another, producing a pleasing unity in interior decoration.⁵¹ In fact, drawings of armorial bearings, floral bouquets and allegorical figures were sometimes given not only to one, but to different artisans and shopkeepers in order procure a range of customised goods of the same style. Coats of arms were not only placed on porcelain. Sir Francis Child the Younger, an appointed director of the EIC between 1721 and 1732, who served in different committees relevant to the commission process, namely the committee that oversaw private trade and the committee of warehouses,⁵² furnished

49 Spencer (ed.), *Memoirs of William Hickey*, p. 210, quoted in Van Dyke and Mok, *Images of the Canton Factories*, p. 23.

50 For theoretical reflections on the importance of novelty in consumer behaviour, see Bianchi, 'Taste for Novelty'.

51 See, for instance, Hellman, 'The Joy of Sets'.

52 Sharma and Davies, 'A Jaghire without a Crime', p. 91.

his mansion Osterley House, near Richmond, with an impressive range of Chinese lacquered furniture.⁵³ This included a cabinet, a richly decorated writing desk, trunks or clothing chests, an enormous lacquer screen and eight identical hall chairs – all decorated with his coats of arms (Figure 6).⁵⁴

These objects were not obtained in a free-market setting; members of the Child family were major EIC investors and served as directors: it was entirely through their intimate connection to Company infrastructures and personnel that these objects could be purchased. By analysing the potential private traders who could have furnished these items to Sir Francis Child, we can gain a better understanding of the role that patronage and power relations played for the commission trade. Child's special orders were delivered shortly after their arrival in Britain and were most likely never advertised at the EIC auction.⁵⁵ This privileged access to lacquer of exceptionally high quality and in quantity was reserved for those high up in the Company hierarchy.⁵⁶

Between the early 1720s and 1732, the period in which all of Sir Francis Child's items were purchased, there were very few EIC servants who declared importing greater quantities of lacquerware as part of their private trade. A certain Captain Robert Hudson appears to be the most likely candidate for such a large and prestigious commission. He was experienced in the China trade and could thus provide the necessary contacts to hong merchants, shopkeepers and artisans in Canton. Moreover, he was part of a well-connected family of ship owners and Company servants. Good relations within the Company's Court of Directors were essential for the career of any merchant seaman, since all appointments to East Indiamen, and all allocations to voyages, had to be ultimately approved by the Court.⁵⁷ Hudson seemed to have been indeed well positioned within these powerful circles, since in 1726–1728, he was able to secure the position of the first officer for his brother Charles on the *Prince Augustus* (his brother would later become a commander himself).⁵⁸ The directors of the Company usually acted as patrons for certain supercargoes and ships' officers.

53 Cruickshanks, 'Sir Francis Child'.

54 The chairs were only assembled in Europe. The lacquered backs and seats were shipped 'flat-packed' from China, see Bae, 'Joints of Utility', pp. 55f. For a full case study regarding Osterley's Asian legacy, see Sharma and Davies, 'A Jaghire without a Crime'.

55 On the functioning of East India Company auctions and the subversion of official regulations, see Chapter 2. A room-by-room listing of the vast number of Asian export wares at Osterley is provided in, 'The 1782 Inventory'.

56 Carolyn Sargentson, in her study of the *marchants merciers* of Paris, notes the difficulty that French mercers often had in the period considered here finding lacquer of exceptional quality on the continent. See Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets*, pp. 63f.

57 See Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit', p. 45; *Caledonian Mercury*, 27 August 1754, p. 3.

58 BL, IOR/G/12/26, p. 39.



FIGURE 6 One of six lacquered hall chairs, part of a larger armorial set of 16 items with the Child coat of arms, on display at Osterley.
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In return, they were able to use these personal ties to commission objects that were clearly different in both quality and originality from pieces that would be sold at the EIC auctions (Figure 7).⁵⁹

The commercial ledgers of the EIC contain details about the private trade of high-ranking crew members on many voyages to China. Through these

59 Private-trade goods such as textiles, tea, spices, fans and sugar candy were usually sold separately from Company goods, yet also by auction. See, for instance, 'Richard Moreton's claim in the East India Warehouse' (c. 1732) listing all his private-trade goods on four different ships awaiting the public auction, quoted in TNA, Chancery Master's Records, C 103/192, Moreton vs. Newman.



FIGURE 7 *Model in ivory of a Chinese pleasure barge, mid-eighteenth century, Chinese export*

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sources, we learn that Captain Robert Hudson went out in 1724–1725 to navigate the *Macclesfield* to Canton. According to EIC records, he brought back the conspicuously large cargo of ‘2 Japan Escrutores, 2 Japan Screens’, one box with ‘Dressing Boxes’ (*nécessaires*), ten cases ‘lacquered trunks’, two cases of ‘lacquered chests’, and an additional two cases with ‘lacquered screens’.⁶⁰ This quantity of lacquerware on account of a single merchant is unusual not only in comparison to most of his peers, who often brought home a single box of lacquerware. Rather, if we look at the private cargo of Hudson’s next voyage as commander of the *Macclesfield* in 1727–1729, we see that this time he contented himself with investment in a single box of Japanware and two lacquered writing desks. This might reasonably be seen as an indicator that he had taken on a large commission for lacquered furniture on his previous journey and did not usually specialise in speculative purchases of fine furniture.⁶¹

60 BL, IOR/G/12/25, p. 9.

61 See BL, IOR/G/12/27, p. 123.

However, without the matching correspondence or delivery receipts that mention Child as the actual owner of Hudson's goods, it is difficult to argue that he was. The commission might well have spread over a few colleagues who went out in the same season. Richard Nicholson, a supercargo who also took passage on the *Macclesfield* in 1724–1726 – and thus shared every meal with Robert Hudson over two periods of travel, each lasting nine months – might well have taken some of the commissioned goods of Sir Francis Child on his account. As these examples can demonstrate, personal acquaintances and the individual position of a servant within the Company's hierarchy were vital for the successful realisation of the high-value commission trade.

Although commanders and supercargoes of the China trade all belonged to the European maritime elite and were bound together by a strong group identity often strengthened by family ties, key differences in upbringing, education and social comportment still have to be taken into account when we look at them as commission agents. Not every commander was likely to be trusted with a commission of the calibre of Sir Francis Child's lacquered furniture. On the contrary, contemporaries often commented on those representatives of the maritime elite whom nobody would have liked to have at their own ball or tea party – and hence would probably not have trusted for choosing the right silk fabrics, vases or furniture for their elegant homes.⁶²

Some merchant mariners were indeed ill-mannered or untrustworthy, others dangerously short-tempered and quite a few were known drunkards. Eliza Fay, who wrote a widely read travel journal later in the century, rightly commented on what many passengers must have thought when they witnessed the uncouth behaviour exhibited by some Company commanders. Captain John Lewis, an EIC commander in the 1770s and 1780s, 'appears to be an excellent seaman, but the roughest being surely that nature ever formed, in language and manners. The oaths he swears by are most horrible and he prides himself in inventing new ones.'⁶³ Colin Campbell confirmed that 'many Captains of ships ... huff & strut & bounce & curse & swear upon Decks', so as to increase

62 William Hickey, a most acute observer of social etiquette and personal comportment, immortalised the inhabitants of the British Canton factory in 1765, during his four-month visit there, where he was received in his words own with 'a hospitality and kindness nothing could exceed'. Yet, his travel narrative also gave an account of more shadowy characters in his company; the mad Doctor Court, who made a game out of attracting and then beating up Chinese pickpockets, the choleric and vain surgeon Mr Carnegie, whose likeness (a self-portrait he commissioned in unfired clay with a famous Chinese export artist in town) was not to his liking. Spencer (ed.) *Memoirs of William Hickey*, pp. 220f.; p. 227.

63 Fay, *Original Letters from India*. Cited in Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit', p. 44.

their authority upon the rest of the crew.⁶⁴ The opposite could be found, too, of course, in men careful to appear as rich and flamboyant as possible. Hickey described the Scottish-born commander Patrick Lawson, who later turned interloper, in no ambiguous terms as 'a prodigious coxcomb both in dress and in manners, and like my friend Douglas was distinguished in the India service by the title of "Count" Lawson. [...] Being a determined schemer he was perpetually engaging in some wild speculation which, if you credited his assertions, could not fail yielding a profit of five hundred per cent.'⁶⁵

Friendships between commanders, supercargoes and lower-ranking officers cut across national boundaries and the established vertical hierarchies on board.⁶⁶ Yet, social rank and individual comportment were key elements for the formation of friendships and had, in the end, a considerable impact on who was participating in joint transactions and who was not. For Charles Irvine and Colin Campbell, piety, modesty and honour were key markers of an individual's character.⁶⁷ Like him, there were many supercargoes and some commanders, too, who behaved like gentlemen and who made no secret of their disgust with the base behaviour and bawdy atmosphere on board East India ships. In Europe, they mingled in circles of learned men and the landed elite and as such they were more likely to receive prestigious orders for armorial porcelain, custom-made wallpaper and other personalised items of display. Thus, the social connections and their place within polite society in Europe of supercargoes and navigating officers played a paramount role for their success in the special commission business, which was by definition a very personal matter.⁶⁸

Unfortunately, very few China traders kept separate records of private commissions which would allow us to distinguish clearly between the goods brought by them for sale at the regular auctions, objects that were brought home as a trial, as presents, for their own consumption or indeed as special commissions. Instead, private orders were noted randomly in small notebooks,

64 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 67.

65 Spencer (ed.), *Memoirs of William Hickey*, pp. 213f.; Patrick Lawson famously fitted out a former French ship in 1787 which he navigated to Canton.

66 On friendship and sociability among foreign visitors in Canton, see Hellman, *This House is not a Home*, esp. pp. 130–136.

67 They shared a distaste for drunkards. Campbell wrote also at length about an incompetent Swedish commander on his first journey to China in an SEIC ship. See Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, esp. pp. 1–19.

68 Colin Campbell mingled in highest circles in Sweden, procured commissions, gifted lavishly and received many tokens of acknowledgment by the Swedish royal family in return. See the objects mentioned in his last will. Cormack, *Colin Campbell*.

Souchon with Texian
 C7 74 to 155, 15 Chests weighing Gongs at 65 Cattes of each
 Cattes 975. at 15 Cattes Tare
 Tare 225.
 Net 750 Cattes at 29 1/2 of Paul. 2175. 2175. 5. 0. -
 80 Gigs from Hongqua 3021. 5. 0. -

 More 391. 8. 0. 0

 3913. 3. 0. 0

1 League arrack, perhaps got in other small Cattes
 1 Tea sett directed Palpetski, 'tis my Lady bespoke it.
 1 Box China Ink Gov^r. Ancarcrona
 1 Box H.C. cont. 7 Canisters Souchon & 4 Gov^r M^r. H. Campbell
 1 Box D. cont. 24 Mustles fine Teas for M^r. H. Campbell
 1 Box D.B. cont. Sundrys by M^r. Dal'cier & clabans

FIGURE 8 Special commissions taken on by Charles Irvine in 1745 on board the *Calmar*. 'Invoice of Pacotil[le] on the Calmar', January 1745. Shipping Documents, Box 11, Folder 1742–1745, Irvine Papers, FBL.

on loose sheets of paper, on the back and bottom of contracts or delivery receipts and in commercial ledgers. Of course, commissions are also mentioned in the surviving correspondence of China traders. Their scattered and unsystematic recording makes it exceedingly difficult to establish patterns for individual traders and to show who received more commissions from shopkeepers or manufacturers, and who was put in charge of royal commissions or orders from the aristocracy.

Figure 8 is symptomatic of the ways in which special commissions were noted down in merchants' private records. The packaging often carried the initials of its owner, indicating that these goods were already taken. Intriguingly, the extract from the invoice of Irvine's *pacotille* is the only piece of evidence that there is about Irvine's own love life. From Canton, he brought '1 Tea Sett directed Palpetski' with the remark added 'tis my Lady [who] bespoke it'.⁶⁹ Strangely enough, none of Irvine's letters ever mentioned this woman companion. The China ink for Governor Ancarcrona, by contrast, was a routine commission, since the governor asked for ink every time Irvine went out to China. And so were the '7 canisters of Souchon' purchased on behalf of the SEIC director Hugh Campbell.⁷⁰

69 'Invoice of Pacotil[le] on the Calmar', January 1745, Shipping Documents, 1733–1759, Box 11, Irvine Papers, FBL.

70 Ibid.

As we have seen, private commissions form a sub-category of private-trade goods. They were kept distinct from those speculative purchases that were intended to be sold at public auction. Arjun Appadurai has pointed to the fact that luxury goods, which were usually reserved to a small group of elite consumers, could be made accessible to the non-elite strata of society via meandering routes.⁷¹ Marshall Sahlins thought primarily of theft, plunder in wartime, piracy, smuggling and other – often violent – intrusions into the trading cycle. Yet, the ‘pragmatics of trade’ (as Sahlins described such diversions) could also be of a more mundane nature.⁷² Indeed, private commissions were often diverted from ‘the preordained path’ that most China trade goods took, simply by categorising them differently.

By means of a semantic shift, Canton traders managed to provide members of their personal networks with items that would have otherwise been reserved for the very rich. In the memorandum books of the EIC, in which supercargoes and commanders noted down their private trade, usually in as little detail as possible, individual objects and packages are singled out and described as ‘commission’, ‘for personal use’, ‘present’ or ‘gift’ to conceal the market value of a specific imported object. Supercargoes and other private traders were indeed careful to stress the personal nature of parts of their cargo in order to signal that these goods were not intended to be sold to the highest bidder. Thus, rhetorically, special commissions were taken out of the cadre of mere commodities. Instead, they were declared to be tokens of friendship for their families, patrons and friends. Special commissions became a loophole for the distribution of customised goods, but also a gateway to secure more ordinary goods of especially fine quality for specific individuals, such as the ‘24 Musters fine Tea for Mistress C. Campbell.’⁷³ The special privilege of Canton traders lay not only in being able to access goods in China directly, but in directing them to specific consumers – from China with love.

In many instances, however, it is exceedingly difficult to tell which private-trade goods were commissions and which were not. In a journal kept between 1724 and 1726, Thomas Hall noted down some particulars about the owners and prices of the goods that he had privately imported from China (Table 5). Individuals of the Belgian nobility had asked him to purchase smaller items. The Duchess of d’Arenberg (an Italian princess by birth) spent over £300 on eleven pieces of Chinese silk fabric, and the Marquis of Campo, a Spanish

71 Appadurai, ‘Introduction’, in idem (ed.) *The Social Life of Things*, p. 26.

72 Cited *ibid.*

73 ‘Invoice of Pacotil[le] on the Calmar’, January 1745, Shipping Documents, 1733–1759, Box 11, Irvine Papers, FBL.

TABLE 5 Purchasers of Thomas Hall's pacotille in Aug. and Sept. 1724^a

Name of buyer	Articles	Price in £	Arranged by
Madame Duchess d'Arenberg	7ps pequins	175	Mr J. Worth
	3 ps gorgorons	120	Mr J. Worth
	1 ps damask	46	Mr J. Worth
Marquis de Campo for his wife	3 ps damask	138	Mr J. Worth
Josefa Arcadia Rodríguez	1 chest Hyson tea	292	Louis Baernert
Christian F. de Steiner	Snuffbox and sword case	39	
	Embroidered satin	108	
Widow of J. Van Colthen Anon.	Chinaware	4160	
	6 lots damasks à 10 ps		John Butler
Anon.	Colour/gold plates	2418	John Butler
Captain Peter Jackson	Charts	304	
Jacobus Maelcamp	Saffron	4	
Total		7804	

^a I have rounded £s to £ for readability.

SOURCE: 'JOURNAL BOOK OF AFFAIRS OF THOMAS HALL. BEGINNING IN OSTEND AUGUST 10TH 1724'. TNA, CHANCERY MASTERS' EXHIBITS, C 111/95, HALL VS. HALLETT.

nobleman of Flemish descent, purchased wrought silks and the most expensive type of black tea for his Spanish wife. The difference in size between the purchases of individual consumers such as Christian F. de Steiner, who bought a snuffbox, sword case and some embroidered satin, and large-scale purchases made by shopkeepers or wholesale merchants to which the widow of J. van Colthen probably belonged is clear (see Table 5).⁷⁴

While we need more research on the precise mechanisms of the special commission trade conducted through commanders and supercargoes, we also

74 'Journal Book of Affairs of Thomas Hall. Beginning in Ostend August 10th 1724', TNA, Chancery Masters' Exhibits, C 111/95, Hall vs. Hallett.

need to enquire about the Canton traders' own conspicuous consumption. Clearly, itinerant Canton traders sought to display their wealth and their connection to the Asian trade as much as their land-based counterparts in the military or civil service in India.⁷⁵ The private commissions demanded by former supercargoes and commanders can inform us about the objects sought after for personal use in the period that marked the height of fashion in Europe for all things Chinese.⁷⁶

4 Commanders and Supercargoes as Consumers, Suppliers and Entrepreneurs

Soon after official appointments were made for a journey to the East, the correspondence of British supercargoes and commanders regularly shows a sudden rise of letters containing informal 'wish lists' – which were usually given by a number of relatives, business associates and former colleagues. For instance, on 17 March 1740, Hugh Campbell, a director of the Swedish East India Company, former free merchant in the intra-Asian trade and friend of Charles Irvine, gave his last-minute orders when Irvine was about to embark on the *Ridderhuys* to China. In exchange for Campbell's £40.17s, in gold that Irvine would still need to turn into silver at Cadiz at a favourable exchange, he was asked to bring for 'Mrs Campbell a [piece] of Embroidery upon the finest dark coloured Satin olive or brown of a fine large running pattern with worsted Silk'.⁷⁷ For his daughter Campbell ordered 'a piece of Embroidery on whatever yellow Satin' with a 'handsome ... but not a very large Pattern'. Probably intended to be used as presents were the '50 catts best Souchong', cattees, '20 ditto best Peckoe' and '20 ditto best Hoysan: putt up in handsome pott' that he commissioned from his friend.⁷⁸ By contrast, 'A complete tea service with Coffee pott, slop basin of enamelled copper' as well as 'A barber's basin and bottle of ditto' might well have been commissioned for use in his own household. A slop basin was part of a tea or coffee service into which tea and coffee

75 See Nechtman, *Nabobs*; the diverse research findings from 'The East India Company at Home (1757–1857)' project also need to be considered, which significantly enrich our understanding of the influence that the East India Company and empire had on Britain's material past.

76 Porter, 'Chinoiserie'; the fashion for Chinese and pseudo-Chinese ornaments figures prominently in Scott, *The Rococo Interior*.

77 Hugh Campbell (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 17 March 1740, CIC, FBL.

78 Ibid. Such porcelain jars ('potts') for tea and spices were used for display and were regular gifts among merchants.

dregs were emptied. Unfortunately, we do not know whether Hugh Campbell had a specific design in mind for his coffee set, or whether he relied upon the taste of Charles Irvine in such matters. In any case, he gave clear instructions for the '2 pairs of painted looking glass of the model I herewith send you'.⁷⁹

This last order is especially interesting and tells us much about the fact that British interlopers were among the first who owned and displayed such new fancies from China. Reverse mirror paintings from China became highly fashionable in the second half of the eighteenth century. Elaborate gilded frames in rococo taste then usually replaced the original wooden frames.⁸⁰ The mirror in its original frame depicted in Figure 9 shows an early example of such a 'painted looking-glass' in European design. In 1739, Charles Irvine mentions for the first time that he had brought from China on the *Fredericus Rex Suecia* '20 small boxes of painted glass and chinaware'.⁸¹ Unfortunately, we have no certain knowledge about the two pairs of paintings that Hugh Campbell commissioned in 1740, which was very early and suggests that merchants associated with the East Indies trade could indeed act as trendsetters for new luxuries from China. But is there a promising trace? Thierry Audric, the author of the first comprehensive study on Canton reverse mirror paintings, at least suggests that the subject of a portrait in a private collection, known as *Unidentified Englishman in a Landscape*, strongly resembles Colin Campbell.⁸² For all the good reasons he gives, this might actually be him, but it could also be his brother, Hugh Campbell, who was an SEIC director, too, and who commissioned two pairs of paintings according to a model he handed over to Irvine, who was a trusted family friend.

Such small-scale commissions among the members of the maritime elite reveal the private tastes of merchant mariners as pioneering consumers. The complexity of commissions and their subsequent distribution is particularly well illustrated by an example involving Colin Campbell and a Chinese merchant. Leaving the active trade to younger peers, Colin Campbell still sought to maintain his amicable connections with Suqua – the most prosperous hong merchants in Canton of the time – through gifts and special commissions. Charles Irvine's voyage to the port city in 1740 was thus a welcome opportunity for Colin Campbell to nurture the friendship through the commission of

79 Ibid.

80 Audric, *Chinese Reverse Glass Painting*, p. 110.

81 Bills of lading, 4 January 1739, signed by Thomas Neilson (commander of the *Fredericus Rex Suecia*), Shipping Documents, 1733–59, Box 11, items 39–3d and 39–4d, Irvine Papers, FBL.

82 Audric, *Chinese Reverse Glass Painting*, esp. p. 91.



FIGURE 9 *A Chinese export reverse mirror painting, c. 1750, in original hardwood and gilded Chinese frame. Height (with frame) 72.5 cm; width 59.7cm. Decorated with leaves, butterflies and two squirrels eating grapes or nuts*
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presents to some of the Chinese merchants with whom he had previously dealt directly as supercargo. He thus instructed Irvine:

Try if you can get at Cadiz a few of the small Essence bottles that come from Italy, & buy for my account a dozen of them (or two dozen if not too dear) to be distributed between Suqua, Tan Chinqua & Manuel as presents from me, also if you can get 3 small pots of Portuguese snuff of which one also to each of them.⁸³

This exchange of gifts was attended by the closure of accounts between Suqua and Campbell. His instructions to Irvine show that private commissions were not only organised from Europe to China, but apparently also the other way around. Hence, we learn that Irvine was asked to bring Suqua the sales revenue of 4,599 Mexican dollars 'of the Silks & Chinaware I brought & sold here for him'. In addition, he was asked to bring 'my enclosed letter, letting him know at [the] same time that I do not charge him commission or any other charge for my trouble, but have served him for nothing as I promised him'.⁸⁴ This instance, then, reveals not only that personal relations between Western merchants and Chinese wholesalers at Canton were much more intimate than the traditional historiography of the Canton trade suggests.⁸⁵ It also reminds us that supercargoes and commanders acted as mediators for a profitable trade in *both* directions, and that wealthy merchants from China clearly saw the potential of European markets for their products. Small-scale commissions lay very much at the heart of that trade, especially because they brought together more closely the buyers and suppliers of goods over such vast distances.

As this written evidence makes clear, the correspondence between maritime merchants reveals unique details about the nature of private commissions, the people involved and the practicalities of ordering customised goods. Through the survival of merchant letters, we learn among other things that special commissions sometimes required the repeated exchange of materials, drawings and instructions before an object could actually be made in China. To take one example, Colin Campbell wrote to his friend Charles Irvine that

83 'Private Memorandum' from Colin Campbell (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 10 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

84 Ibid.

85 More recent work on the relation between European merchants with their Chinese counterparts has done much to revise the obsession of earlier studies with the supposed rigidity and arbitrariness of the Canton trade. See, for instance, Van Dyke, 'Weaver Suckin'; Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macau*.

he had sent on board the *Ridderhuys* 'a red lacquered teak for Chairs in order to have 12 Rosewood Chairs made for the teak' in Canton.⁸⁶ For the execution of his order, Campbell suggested: 'As Compradore Atay made the Seats he may also make the Chairs the best & newest fashion you can get, but not too heavy and clumsy.' In addition to the chairs Campbell asked for 'a good rosewood hand Scritore but smaller than the ordinary Sort & lighter, & to be well fastened together'.⁸⁷ Certain private commissions were thus made possible only through considerable logistical operations: Campbell's lacquered teak panels had to travel the long way from China to Europe and back, and the final product back to Europe again, after Campbell had finally decided what he would like to have made from them.

We know that Colin Campbell owned, in fact, a substantial collection of Chinese export wares. His last will and testament (annotated and published in 1960) gives us a taste of the objects that he acquired both personally and through private commissions. He bequeathed a number of items to the young wife of Niklas Sahlgren, who was not only a close friend of Colin Campbell, but acted also as a fellow director of the Swedish East India Company from early on. Of his generous gifts, Campbell wrote that, 'Out of Friendship and real Esteem that I have always had for Mrs. Catharina Christina Sahlgren, alias Grupp (second wife), I desire her to accept of my large Lacquered Chest, or Chest of Drawers, with all my China, Pictures on Glass, and my Emerald Ring that Her Majesty the present Queen of Sweden did me the Honour to present me.'⁸⁸ This not only shows how esteemed the British interloper Colin Campbell had become through his services to the SEIC, but also that these interlopers could possess extraordinarily valuable items for their private spaces.

Another telling incident, recorded in the commission book of Captain Patrick Lawson, commander of the *Lord Holland* East Indiaman in 1778, regards the placement of special commission orders by private consumers from Europe.⁸⁹ Prior to Lawson's departure for Canton, Mrs Lawson (alias Bridget Hennessy) collected orders from six female customers who seem to

86 'Private Memorandum' from Colin Campbell (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 10 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

87 Ibid. Kyoungjin Bae used that quotation in her work, but misread the source. It is 'Compradore Atay', not 'Commodore Hay', who is referred to as the maker of the chairs. Cf. Bae, 'Joints of Utility', pp. 6of.

88 Quoted in Cormack, *Colin Campbell*, p. 11.

89 Patrick Lawson was born in Banff (Scotland), which was then one of the main smuggling centres on the north coast of Scotland, and he was related to the Duff clan (Earls of Fife). Several members of the Duff family previously worked for the SEIC and were heavily involved in the contraband trade to Britain via Scotland.

have been her acquaintances and a number of shopkeepers, too. She wrote down in marvellous detail the specifics of these different commissions. For her 'own particular wear', by contrast, she first wanted to be furnished with patterns and an estimate of the price before giving orders for it to be made. She thus informed her husband:

I send twenty yards of Muslin with a drawing of a Barley lheap [sic], I should wish the fag [remnant] cut off and it worked, one blade in silver the middle of a shining kind and the rest Silver thread. [T]he other blade that crosses it, green silk ... worked in the fag and sent to me as patterns with the price of doing the 20 yards.⁹⁰

Among various other commissions for herself, including '1 Sett large Jarrs', teaboxes, sugar dishes in filigree style, 'some slight taffetas', '3 pieces winter silk', another black and two grey silks, 'some pelongs', Mrs Lawson also promised to 'send a shoe a size larger I should wish them as they shrink'. She furthermore added that 'the same size of the pattern shoe will also do for Mrs MacLellan but I beg she may not get the Europe[an] heels'.⁹¹ Mrs Lawson not only provided written instructions on how she wished things to be made but also referred to a range of numbered drawings (unfortunately lost) for the many different sets of porcelain and furniture damasks that her customers expected her to procure, noting already the initials with which the chests should be marked.

From the detailed descriptions of the commissions we can appreciate just how much influence on the precise decoration a consumer could have when procuring a unique token from China. Of course, some consumers were less discriminatory, and so Mrs Lawson wrote to her husband that all 'things very pretty and very cheap would be acceptable to Mrs. Mae'.⁹² This direct involvement of women in the collection, preparation and arrangements of payments for special commissions is only surprising at first sight. In fact, many of the supercargoes and commanders worked in close collaboration with their wives and female relatives. In mercantile correspondence, women often feature as consumers of Chinese luxuries. By looking at receipts and account books, however, we understand that they were key *distributors* as well.

90 Bodleian Library, Oxford (BLO), MS. Eng. hist. c.331, account book of Captain Patrick Lawson (nineteen pages, dated 1778), p. 1.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

5 Designs Made for Maritime Mobility

The design of Chinese export wares is commonly attributed to both the changing tastes of European consumers and the ingenuity of Canton artisans and artists who managed to accommodate or respond to Western taste with astonishing ease and flexibility. The East India Companies and indeed individual Company servants who travelled to Canton took on the role of expert communicators in this process and negotiated between distant demands and local supplies. And even though it is true that supercargoes were intensely preoccupied with choosing the right patterns and colours for silk garments, wallpaper and chinaware for specific markets, and by learning how to distinguish and decide upon different qualities of drugs and tea, lacquer and paintings, I claim that functional aspects played a key role in their commercial decisions on what goods were imported to Europe in the first place. Scholarly concerns with decoration, colour and the lustre of Chinese as well as Japanese export arts have hitherto ignored the important fact that the shape of export art was functional in the extreme and had to respond to the pragmatics of shipping and handling before consumer fancies and artisanal skill could be considered.⁹³ The design principles of the Canton trade were the square box, the flat-pack and the rectangular chest.

Supercargoes were chiefly responsible for the safe packing and shipping of the cargo on board the East Indiamen. In that role, they collaborated and often fought with commanders over issues such as overcrowded cabins and common rooms, moist and musty holds, careless packing of easily breakable commodities and the dangers of goods in motion in a ship that was regularly swaying and shaken by bad weather conditions at sea. Formal rules and a set of best practices regarding the order in which goods were taken on board were attended to in all Companies. The Company cargo and bulk purchases of individuals in porcelain (of key importance due to its weight), rattan, tutenague⁹⁴ and rice were, for instance, always transported in the ship's hold – 'to give stability to the ship'.⁹⁵ Tea and raw silk were lightweight and

93 See, for instance, Etienne and Lee, 'Lüster, Lack und Liotard'; my reading of Chinese export wares is shared by a recent study on the Sino-British furniture trade, Bae, 'Joints of Utility', p. 57.

94 Tutenague is an alloy of zinc and copper and was steadily imported on Company as well as private accounts.

95 As Conrad Gill pointed out, supercargoes generally preferred to buy 'smaller wares, because larger pieces of china-ware', for instance, 'were less easy to pack, involved more loss if they were broken'. Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 33.

therefore stacked on top of such heavier wares. They were also supposed to be stored in the back part of the hold and between decks and in the bread room, where it was relatively dry.⁹⁶ Storage space was valuable in itself, but tight packing also contributed to minimising damage.⁹⁷ Today, we are, of course, attuned to the shipping container logic/containerisation of global trade.⁹⁸ But already early modern traders made an effort – as much as the irregular storage spaces within sailing ships allowed – to use space wisely and cost-efficiently.

Historical depictions of the processes of weighing and packaging tea at Canton give us a glimpse of how important it was to standardise packaging for commodities that were bought *en masse*. The dimensions of tea chests and tubs in which loose tea was transported, for instance, were standardised by the early 1720s, and perhaps even earlier.⁹⁹ The logistical challenge becomes quite clear if we consider, as Hanna Hodacs and Leos Müller have, the overall volume of the Scandinavian purchases of Bohea tea alone in a single year. The authors calculated that '[i]f one were to have piled the chests containing the Scandinavian import of Bohea tea from 1754 – a total of 10,339 chests – on top of one another, the stack would have measured almost seven kilometres in height: 6,763 metres, 21 times higher than the Eiffel tower'.¹⁰⁰ Since the tea and other goods had to be carried and transferred many times during their journey between the Canton factories and the Company vessels at Whampoa, and then again on arriving near the home port, standardisation of weight and dimensions in chests allowed for their seamless storing on board, and eased their supervision, moving, counting and marking (Figures 10 and 11).

Critical to the China trade is the fact that there was often a fine line between packaging and merchandise. Sea chests, carrying cases, trunks and boxes of all sizes were needed for the safe packing and shipping of smaller items of trade. Making a virtue out of necessity, many containers were made of attractive timbers,

96 See, for instance, the detailed instructions for the EIC supercargoes on board the *Loyal Bliss*, BL, IOR/E/3/97, p. 666.

97 Ibid.

98 On the fetishisation of the container as a metaphor for globalisation, Haugen, 'The Social Production of Container Space'. I thank Lesley Nicole Braun for alerting me to this current debate in anthropology.

99 Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 36. Though amendments to the thickness and protection of the chests and their content were regularly made, see 'Orders and Instructions to James Naish, Nathaniel Torriano ...', Council for China, 4 December 1730, BL, IOR/E/3/105, p. 19.

100 Hodacs and Müller, 'Chests, Tubs and Lots of Tea', pp. 277f.



FIGURE 10 *Determining the weight of the tea chests.* Anonymous, Canton c. 1770. Watercolour on paper, 313 × 250 mm.

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were carved, lacquered or otherwise embellished and could subsequently be sold on as furniture and decoration fit for travel and domestic display.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Details of which can be gathered by the description of 'Lacquierte Waren' in the SEIC sales catalogues. For 1733, see p. 133; for the sale in 1736, see p. 81. Accessible online: <http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/landingpage/collection/swedish>.



FIGURE 11 *Sampling the tea*. Anonymous, Canton c. 1770. Watercolour on paper, 313 × 250 mm.

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Furniture, of course, is in itself excellent for packaging more fragile goods such as prints, drawings, rolled-up wallpaper, painted mirrors, fans, woven silks and accessories of all sorts – as it is for hiding small things from the discerning eye



FIGURE 12 *Small padouk bureau. Chinese for the English market, c. 1730. The stand, a later English addition, is mahogany and probably nineteenth century.*
 © MICHAEL PASHBY ANTIQUES

of customs officials and Company surveyors.¹⁰² And if one looks at the dimensions and boxy designs of Chinese export furniture, its purpose as a temporary storage home for other merchandise is hardly concealed. Inside individual pieces of furniture, there were often numerous separate compartments, often lockable, that could protect smaller, and often high-value commodities from theft, official registration and curious eyes.

Even though Chinese export wares were highly decorated, they remained simple in form. The most common feature was the square or rectangular shape; cabinets, trunks, writing boxes, bookcases all responded to the logistical demands and challenges of sea travel. The aforementioned were later upgraded by mounts of European craftsmanship. Legs or a complete stand were then added that brought the trunks and cabinets to a sufficient height so that the

102 On the myriad methods of smuggling articles of private trade ashore without paying the Company the appropriate fees, see Bowen, ‘So Alarming an Evil’; further on smuggling practices in the eighteenth century, see Mui and Mui, ‘Trends’; idem., ‘Smuggling and the British Tea Trade’



FIGURE 13 Interior view of the small padouk bureau. Chinese for the English market, c. 1730.
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eye of the European viewer could admire their decoration (Figures 12 and 13). At the same time, the elevated position of often-inconspicuous writing boxes or *nécessaires* diverted the gaze from the signs and purpose of the objects' seafaring careers – for instance, the brass hinges at the sides by which they were carried. Larger pieces of furniture such as bookcases and writing desks were pragmatically composed of two pieces – thus facilitating their transport – that were retrospectively mounted on top of each other.

To add to the panorama of functional design that dominated the China trade from early on, we can note that tea tables and serving trays, which were traded in great numbers, were as a general rule constructed in a set of five in defined sizes, so that the smaller tables could be neatly stowed within the larger ones, creating a nest which used up the least possible space during transport. Interestingly, as evidence from the Swedish auction catalogues suggests, tea tables were also sold on in sets rather than individually.¹⁰³ One wonders whether they parted from their 'brothers and sisters' at some point in a shop or whether they continued to be used and displayed as a set once they entered a more permanent home. Buyers at the Swedish (and no doubt other European) auctions, too, were also given the opportunity to purchase larger table tops for

¹⁰³ SEIC sales catalogue, 1736, pp. 87–90.

gaming and tea drinking in square, round and oval shapes – but, again, without any legs attached.

More elaborate designs were always possible and would augment the price, but even if such were chosen, they had to be able to be stowed tightly. In order to achieve that prerequisite, folding mechanisms were used extensively in Chinese export furniture design.¹⁰⁴ The advantages of folding and disassembling parts for transporting furniture were known to the Europeans as well as the Chinese in military contexts. We cannot go into more detail here about the parallel development of campaign furniture in East and West, but to point at least to the common *spirit* also articulated in the design of Chinese export wares is not too big a stretch.

The supremacy of the box can be traced to smaller objects of the trade, too. Full-body miniature portraits of Canton traders made from bamboo and clay (which were sometimes dressed, but always painted) came in wooden display cases. Some have survived in museum collections. The portrait figure of a Western merchant in the V&A collection, c. 1710–1725, neatly fits into a slightly taller lacquered display case, which is opened thanks to a front door with hinges.¹⁰⁵ The sitters in these lifelike clay portraits – souvenirs which were wildly popular with the China traders from the 1710s onwards – often appear seated on miniature Chinese chairs, or were depicted reclining on a Chinese-style daybed sporting fashionable garments.¹⁰⁶ Exemplary is the case of Thomas Hall, the Ostend interloper who figured centrally in Chapter 1 (Figure 14). Intriguingly, the chair designs used for these miniature portraits were altogether atypical for Chinese export trade furniture. Horseshoe armchairs, for instance, were simply too bulky to be packed conveniently (Figure 15). As they could not be shipped in parts, as it was commonplace with chairs intended for the European market, they seem to have had no further appeal to the enterprising minds of the traders. Yet, as representations *in miniature*, Chinese-style furniture helped to render visible the sitter's direct access and personal connection to that distant kingdom, which attracted so much attention in Europe at the time.

Chinese-style furniture of a bulkier kind reached Europe, of course, in the form of images. The two-dimensional export arts of Canton such as reverse

104 Several interesting examples are provided in Bae, 'Joints of Utility', p. 57.

105 Figure of a Western merchant with wooden box, China, Qing dynasty, c. 1710–1725, FE.32-B-1981, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Another such portrait in its accompanying, but much more humble case is depicted in Sargent, '“The Features are Esteem'd Very Just”', p. 213.

106 Clay figures have attracted much attention lately, see Broomhall, 'Face-Making'; Schokkenbroek, 'Figuring Out Global and Local Relations'.



FIGURE 14 *Figure of Thomas Hall, 1715–1730.* Unfired clay, wood, velvet, straw. 31.115 cm × 33.338 cm × 15.24 cm. Attributed to Chinqua, active early 1700s, Canton, China.
© PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM, SALEM

glass paintings, prints and paintings on paper abound with flattened representations of large tables, benches, intricate stools, sumptuous armchairs and daybeds.¹⁰⁷ Thus, even though a very limited range of furniture was actually traded, Europeans were made familiar with a broader spectrum of styles used in China, through both paintings and treatises on Chinese architecture and aesthetics.¹⁰⁸ The peculiarity of China trade furniture that played so effectively with the shortage of space in sailing ships is the more evident if we compare it with the kind of elaborate and much less standardised furniture made from solid ivory and Asian timbers that came to Europe from Murshidabad,

107 The full spectrum of furniture used in reverse glass paintings can be seen in Audric, *Chinese Reverse Glass Paintings*.

108 Influential in this regard was certainly the former supercargo of the Swedish East India Company, William Chambers, who published his widely read treatise on Chinese architecture, furniture and design in 1757. See. Idem, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*.



FIGURE 15 Clay-figure depicting DAC undercargo Peter Mule (1693-1749), Height: 41 cm. Chinese artist, 1731. Canton, China.

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Vizagapatam and other places on the subcontinent as much cherished possessions among the colonial elites.¹⁰⁹

Myriad other goods came in purpose-made cases. Expensive ivory carvings of pagodas or junks were surrounded by display cases, which were usually made of glass.¹¹⁰ Fine teas were sold and gifted in attractive canisters, boxes and cases, and so were mother-of-pearl fans, Chinese ink, knives, walking canes and ‘ivory hats’, as Charles Irvine listed them in his private register of ‘Trinkets and Trifles’ that he had bought in Canton in 1739.¹¹¹ The dimensions of crates for porcelain were set so they could contain a precise number of

109 See Smith, ‘The Afterlife of Objects’, esp. pp. 80–83; for comparison, see also the ‘hybrid’ furniture produced for the French inhabitants of Pondichery. Le Doucic, ‘Encounters around the Material Object’.

110 See, for instance, the model of a Chinese junk shown earlier in this chapter (Figure 7).

111 ‘Bill of lading, Five Brothers, Gothenburg, 1739’, Shipping Documents, 1733–59, Box 11, item 39–1d, Irvine Papers, FBL.

sets. Sago was used as protective material within porcelain crates, which was subsequently sold at Company auction. Small and lockable caskets and *nécessaires* were equally produced in great numbers. Looking at the array of available boxes as packaging that turned into decorative commodities across the eighteenth century and the characteristics of furniture used, it is striking how scholarly analysis has so clearly focused merely on consumer demands for domestic display and self-fashioning, and not also on the imperatives of trade, shipping and spatial confinement.

6 Making Room for Private Trade

In order to get closer to the actual transport of goods, we have to hang on to our traders. Everybody on board an EIC ship, from commanders and supercargoes, writers, cooks, surgeons and passengers, to the large number of seamen, worked and slept in close proximity to their own and other people's merchandise and personal luggage for a journey of about nine months. Private space was non-existent for most mariners: it was indeed a key privilege for only a small number of navigating officers and merchants (and sometimes other passengers) on board.¹¹² The lower somebody stood in the ship's hierarchy, the more restrictive the rules were on their usage of space and their right to carry merchandise and provisions.¹¹³ Midshipmen, chief carpenters, gunners and the like were allowed to fill one sea chest of specified dimensions with trade goods and souvenirs. Others further up in the hierarchy on board were allowed to stow two to six privilege chests with goods in the hold.¹¹⁴ In addition, they were allowed to carry a chest with personal goods and garments to which they had access during their long and hazardous voyage. The bulk of private trade, and we are talking about several tons of goods per person, belonged to the commanders and supercargoes. Part of their private-trade cargo was stored in the hold and between decks. But supercargoes and commanders also used their private cabin to bring home a good portion of their more precious investments

112 The lack of personal space remained an issue well into the nineteenth century and is masterfully described in Pietsch, 'Bodies at Sea'.

113 The SEIC filled half a chest of tea on behalf of each sailor, for which they were given cash after the voyage. Letters to Captain Kalling and Ekmans, 31 August 1741 (written by Charles Irvine in his role as chief supercargo of the SEIC), Shipping Documents, 1733–59, item 41–1d, Irvine Papers, FBL.

114 These regulations were changing slightly from year to year and from Company to Company. On freight-free tonnage restrictions in the EIC, see Pritchard, 'Private Trade', esp. p. 113 and pp. 118f.



FIGURE 16 *Hut van de chirurgijn op het VOC-schip de Stavenisse*. Jan Brandes, 1785/86. Brush, 155 mm × 195 mm.

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and commissions, for which they did not have to pay any duties to the employing Company.¹¹⁵ To illuminate the ways in which travelling furniture and space were used during the voyage, we now turn to the cabins of the Canton traders.

Depictions of the interiors of EIC trading vessels are quite rare for the earlier part of the eighteenth century.¹¹⁶ This is particularly true for the personal space of the cabin. Jan Brandes, an amateur artist who travelled on board the VOC ship *de Stavenisse*, painted such a detailed view in 1785/86: the interior of a cabin of a Company surgeon (Figure 16). From that depiction, we can tease out a few aspects of relevance to the question of how supercargoes made room for their private trade.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ The place for elite sociability on board was the captain's table in the round-house, access to which was highly restricted. Portraits of commanders usually focus on this larger and furnished space on board.

The image is rendered a bit like a view into a room in a doll's house. The onlooker is invited to walk or peep in and look at three of the walls. The furnished room prominently features a fitted and elevated bunk with bedding, a large stand-alone writing desk with several lockable compartments and an armchair; a fitted washstand, three shelves for books, a framed painting and, to the left of the viewer, a lockable, two-part closet, of the full height of the room. In addition to the window, there is a sliding door, indicating that air could circulate and that the passenger enjoyed daylight, a true luxury in the age of wooden sailing ships.

Even though some elements of that room are transferable to the realities of the cabins of supercargoes a few decades earlier, the extraordinary level of cramped- and crowdedness that is apparent from written documents is not reflected in the image. Charles Irvine addressed a letter of regulations with regard to the storage of goods to the commanders of the two Swedish ships at Whampoa in 1741, instructing them of their shared responsibility in policing the implementation of these general rules. Regarding the organisation of cabin space, it was ordered that at least '2 foot square be left entirely empty at the Entrance into the Cabins of the first & second Supercargoes of both Ships & of the first and Second Captains of the Riddarhus & one foot square in the cabins of the other supercargoes [...]'.¹¹⁷ This demonstrates that apart from a really small space that was to be left free of goods at the entrance of each cabin, the room was absolutely packed with things. The floor was covered with chests, which brought down the overall height of the rooms for their inhabitant. Tea chests were commonly used for that purpose but could also contain other goods. This the writer revealed when he reminded his fellow travellers '[t]hat there be no Teas stowed in Cabins but in the Original or Country Package & that there be no goods stored in them above three foot high'.¹¹⁸ The transportation of porcelain in cabins was – apart from items of necessary use during the voyage – strictly forbidden.

It cannot be stressed enough how important it was to be able to close doors and jam individual packages and pieces of furniture together in order to avoid their getting loose and moving within the small space of the cabin. As Tamson Pietsch has described in a fine article on social life at sea a full century later:

The floor literally moved beneath the feet of passengers with the rolling of the ship; it tipped them over and pitched them about, sometimes

117 Letters to Captain Kalling and Ekmans, 31 August 1741, Shipping Documents, 1733–59, Box 11, Irvine Papers, FBL.

118 Ibid.

overboard. Not just walking, but all manner of bodily activity needed to be relearned. Passengers took time to acquire new 'sea legs' and in bad weather they could even be thrown out of their berths while sleeping.¹¹⁹

What pertains to passengers on two legs regarding unintended motion was also true for four-legged furniture. A writing desk and a chair were often the only movable pieces of furniture in the cabin space that supercargoes used for their original purpose. A writing desk with foldable top and a chair brought stability to their bodily comportment and facilitated practices that were essential to a merchant's routine and leisure on land and at sea: the reading and writing of correspondence and accounts and the study of books.¹²⁰

Other large items of furniture intended for later sale such as additional writing desks, bookcases and cabinets were temporarily repurposed to serve as containers, thus limiting their motion. They were jam-packed with other merchandise, from wrought silks and paintings to ivory snuffboxes and shoes of gold. Coming back to the point that design needed to be appropriate to the idiosyncratic challenges of maritime transportation, it was of prime importance to travellers that cabinets and trunks could be locked. Cabinets were sometimes put down on the floor of the cabin to avoid their falling over onto their owner or, as Kyoungjin Bae suggested, were repurposed as bedframes and benches.¹²¹

In order to cushion and protect individual pieces of furniture, textiles and bundles of cloth were particularly suitable for storage in cabins. A small ivory carving, made in Canton for the Dutch market in the first half of the eighteenth century, offers a rare view of such soft bundles as they appear next to a number of chests with hinges and a purpose-made carrying case, arguably to contain and protect the large porcelain jar that one of the depicted traders embraces devotedly (Figure 17). Intended as a souvenir, this carving takes a light-hearted view of the perils of transport and the emotions that traders expressed in relation to the handling of their precious cargo. Even though all three men are smiling and show real dedication to the goods in their movements, the hands of the figure on the left indicate that he is still worried that

119 Pietsch, 'Bodies at Sea', p. 215.

120 Charles Irvine ordered new books in French and English before every journey and exchanged them with colleagues such as Arthur Abercromby. He read Montesquieu and Racine with particular dedication and later in life also expressed his admiration for progressive works of history writing such as David Hume's multi-volume *History of England*, the first volume of which appeared in 1754.

121 Bae, 'Joints of Utility', p. 54.



FIGURE 17 *Three Dutchmen in a Sloop*. Ivory carving, Canton, c. 1725–1750, 7 cm × 16 cm.
© RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

his attendant (to the extreme right) might mishandle his goods. The figure in the middle appears, instead, fully absorbed by the task of holding a single jar. No wonder – as he is standing in the midst of a tiny boat that would be rocked about by the smallest wave.

In relation to the issues of packing and shipping, it is, in sum, imperative to see traders both as cunning entrepreneurs and as worried, sometimes suffering individuals. They needed to somehow find a compromise between packing as many freight-free goods as possible and creating a space they could actually inhabit safely and comfortably for many months.¹²² Smart decisions on design and packaging such as the delicate method of stacking smaller goods within larger ones (call it the Russian doll strategy) within the space of the cabin were core preoccupations of China trade entrepreneurs that demand our attention – and perhaps a little admiration. A vast literature on private and Company trade has been either occupied with the ornamentation of individual objects or with the study of orders and cargo lists to calculate the overall significance of particular categories of goods (such as tea, porcelain and silks) over time. Yet the space in between, that is the critical role of logistics in determining not only the composition of imported goods but, crucially, also their design, has instead been highlighted here. China traders literally made room for private-trade goods when they attended to social obligations at home and

122 On boredom, discomfort and desperation at sea, see Pietsch 'Bodies at Sea'; for a dense and illuminating reading of the material culture of ocean-travel in the medieval Indian Ocean world, see Lambourn, *Abraham's Luggage*, esp. pp. 189–218.

to financial expectations; they sacrificed a good deal of personal comfort to that end, about which they sometimes reminded their clients in Europe.¹²³

• • •

To conclude, this chapter has explored the role of Europe's maritime elite in the trade with China through a special focus on their important privilege and commission trade and its myriad functions in 'greasing' this global commerce. Supercargoes, captains and commanders, either employed in the older and bigger East India Companies or working as interlopers for the smaller Companies on the continent, were significant European merchants and also collectors and consumers of Eastern goods in their own right. To understand more thoroughly the roles of merchant mariners as significant facilitators of cross-cultural commerce in the realm of the commission trade, a typology of four different kinds of commissioners was presented. The typology showed that early European consumers for novel Chinese goods often had close family relations to privileged East India Company merchants, which allowed them to acquire and display fine Chinese objects literally unavailable on the open market during the early stages. It also showed that with time, the consumption of goods from China radiated beyond such well-connected Company families, ultimately including wider social groups, professional distributors and institutions such as corporations, clubs and Masonic lodges. The latter secured access to the distribution channels of private traders through personal contacts and polite sociability, as in the case of lavish balls being thrown by China traders upon their appointment in order to attract a wide range of special commissions. The different types of commission make clear that to fully understand the importance of supercargoes and captains for Europe's trade with China during the first half of the eighteenth century, it is vital to acknowledge them as fully-fledged commercial entrepreneurs and as avid consumers. The fulfilment of special commissions for friends and fellow traders played a particularly prominent role in the first half of the eighteenth century, the mechanisms and meanings of which have been explored here in detail.

By shifting the focus more closely to the assemblage of goods that made up the private trade to China, this chapter has finally revealed a novel aspect of the design principles underlying the trade. It argued that even though the decoration of Chinese export wares changed according to Chinese innovations

123 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 4 May 1743, Letter Book, 1742–43, Irvine Papers, FBL.

and European fashions, the shape of Chinese export wares remained firmly confined to the limiting forces of the available cargo space on board. The physical environment of the ship, its hull and cabins, and the physical properties of the trade goods themselves were used as a lens through which to explore the much-neglected relation between space and hierarchies in explaining the nature of the private trade between Europe and China. The strength of the China trader lay in his capacity to buy and pack judiciously a maximum of small-volume but highly profitable goods. The unpacking and display of the manufactured goods in the Company warehouses marked only the beginning of their transformation from a trunk or other shipping container to a stand-alone piece of furniture or decoration.

European Geographies of Private Trade

Cadiz as a Cross-Company Hub

It is impossible to fully understand the European context of the China trade by looking only at the official headquarters of the different East India Companies as strategic nodes for Company and private trade activities. Important as the headquarters were as administrative centres, this chapter demonstrates that much of the illicit trade and regular provisioning on Company ships happened elsewhere. Every stop along the trade routes between Europe and China was a potential place to do business for those on board. There were, however, a number of port cities and settlements in Europe that developed a more systematic, even integral role for Company servants and their private commercial networks. This chapter looks at the interplay between both well-known port cities and other less likely settings for the China trade in Europe which played a significant role for the supply and organisation of the private trade in Chinese consumer goods in particular.

The emergence of smaller interloping East India Companies between the 1710s and 1730s expanded and altered the geography of the China trade to a significant degree. Port cities such as Cadiz, Antwerp, St Malo, Dunkirk, Ostend and Hamburg came to play decisive roles in facilitating cross-Company activities. As Chapter 1 has shown, China traders relied on a wide network of trusted suppliers, investors, commercial agents and kin, whose whereabouts can be reconstructed through merchants' private papers. These collections of correspondence provide information not just on the mobility of people connected to the China trade but also allow one to reinstate places on the map that have received very little or no attention from Company historians so far. By focusing on familiar and unfamiliar sites for the flow and accumulation of information, merchandise and money destined for the Sino-European trade, I argue that we gain a fuller understanding of the practices adopted by private traders at the time. This perspective also allows for a better understanding of the ways in which their informal networks established alternative geographies of finance and distribution. This decisively helped to turn a marginal trade in luxuries into a systematic and innovative part of Europe's growing commerce in exotic foodstuffs and manufactured consumer goods.

The central case study presented here is Cadiz, the silver city of Europe. The chapter will trace its mercantile functions in relation to the China trade and

its wider connectedness to the centres of interloping activities in western and northern Europe. To date, the role of Cadiz in the Canton trade has not been studied explicitly. East India Company historians, who mention the town only in passing, refer to it as a mere stopover where fresh provisions and additional silver were uploaded. There is no recognition in the existing body of literature of the crucial place and involvement of the merchants in Cadiz in financing China cargoes, in arranging private loans and securing investments and in enabling cross-Company activities. The following account, in contrast, seeks to reconstruct the interloping networks within which the city's foreign merchant community operated and flourished. Based on the analysis of private correspondence, diary entries and shipping and insurance records, the chapter shows that Cadiz was a vital entrepôt, smuggling haven and also a financial centre for the China trade during the first half of the eighteenth century.

1 Port Cities, Merchant Communities and the Study of Networks

The rise and decline of early modern port cities is a pet subject of economic historians.¹ Set in a comparative framework, port cities represent convenient units of analysis for investigating economic change over the *longue durée*.² A classic example is that of London, which by the early eighteenth century had taken over much of the carrying trade in colonial goods – which prior to that had been dominated by Amsterdam.³ London, as David Ormrod and others have argued, also dominated the important Baltic trade by the turn of the eighteenth century, transforming the city into Europe's capital for commerce. Most comparative works on trade, including the studies by Ormrod and Israel, operate within a bi-national framework by pitting the relative strength of one city (or country) against the comparative weakness of another.⁴

The study of networks requires a shift of approach, from drawing comparisons to recovering and explaining connections and their development and impact over time. A focus on the connections *between* different maritime cities needs to privilege the human actors who created and maintained commercial

1 O'Brien (ed.), *Urban Achievement*.

2 Gipouloux, *The Asian Mediterranean*; an attempt to provide a framework for comparing and connecting European and Asian port cities was made by Haneda (ed.), *Asian Port Cities 1600–1800*.

3 Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade*.

4 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 43; the limits of this perspective are considered in depth in Ormrod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires*, pp. 334–351.

links, primarily the local merchant communities. An actor-centred approach to trade is capable of challenging or qualifying trade statistics and macro-economic narratives, especially when black market operations are taken into account. Network studies can thus fulfil an important role by complicating the picture of international trade. Instead of privileging nations as 'natural' units of analysis (as they still are for many economic historians), attention is paid to particular trading routes and nodes as sites of multinational interactions. Early modern port cities were dotted with foreign enclaves or diaspora communities and were connected through them to the wider world.

These foreign merchants played a formidable role in cultivating the connections between their ancestral homeland and their place of (temporary) residence. Contemporaries repeatedly commented on the fact that the despatch of national subjects to distant ports was vital for the organisation of cross-border trade and advantageous for the domestic economy.⁵ Members of a single merchant house could put a 'new' place on the map for their fellow countrymen and existing contacts. If the trade looked profitable, others followed suit – bringing their own network of correspondents with them. This, in turn, diversified the trade links of the town to a considerable degree. Hence, London interests, for instance, were promoted by British traders based in Cadiz, Hamburg and Dunkirk, etc., who, again, relied upon a diverse set of contacts, both locally and internationally.

Throughout the Age of Commerce,⁶ port cities were places where capital, goods, commercial expertise and information were concentrated and constantly changed hands to an unusually high degree. The existence of a built infrastructure for trading purposes, such as a suitable harbour and repair facilities, warehouses and auction rooms, exchange and coffee houses, was also crucial for merchants and mariners who spent even short periods of time in a foreign port. The reliability and transparency of local customs and trade regulations ideally helped to encourage commercial links between European cities and states, but personal trust (so important for the formation of business networks) still depended on the familiarity with particular merchants in town.

For an overseas merchant, the decision to move one's business to a new place entailed a number of considerations. Among the most important concerns were the security of his property and his personal safety and that of his family and employees. The neutrality of a coastal town in times of war was desirable, but rarely a given. Religious tolerance, tax advantages for foreign

5 Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World*, pp. 2–3.

6 I embrace the periodisation used by Gervais, Lemarchand and Margairaz (eds), *Merchants and Profit in the Age of Commerce*.

residents and the proximity to markets and waterways also impacted on the decision of merchants to relocate, or to leave the business with an agent in town. Such individual considerations alone, however, do not explain why specific networks privileged certain places and avoided others. It was the specific composition of the merchant community and the existing trading potential and privileges of a specific town that could cause even large networks to move on to a new place or trading route.

The entrance of Cadiz into the China trade provides an especially illuminating example of how commercial networks were built on local expertise and contacts on the one hand, and on foreign interests and distant connections on the other. The importance of Cadiz in the China trade was closely linked to Jacobitism and the general surge of interloping activities in Europe from the 1710s onwards – whereby merchant bankers in the Low Countries, France and the Netherlands created a strong incentive for experienced East India traders from Britain, France and the Netherlands to move abroad and to shift their expertise to one of the interloping companies.⁷ Their trading schemes were organised, financed and manned transnationally. Cadiz, a neutral port in the landscape of competing East India Companies, became a common hub for the organisation of private and Company trade, yet it relied on its intimate connections to other places in Europe, such as Amsterdam, Antwerp, Paris, Gothenburg and London. Since the seventeenth century, the city represented a safe haven for the dispossessed Irish Catholic nobility and the Jacobite military families from Scotland and Ireland who had turned to commerce for a living.⁸ The wider networks of the foreign merchant community in Cadiz were central to the city's turn towards China from the 1710s onwards. After some time, however, Cadiz merchants came to represent not only the interests of Flemish, French, British and Dutch investors (whose agents they were), but they also developed a stake in the China trade themselves. It is this interplay between Cadiz (or more precisely its foreign merchant community), a number of other port cities and the highly mobile workforce engaged in the China trade that will be fleshed out in this chapter. It demonstrates the transnational context of the China trade in Europe.

7 On the Scottish Jacobites' turn to Empire, see MacInnes, 'Union, Empire and Global Adventuring'.

8 On the Irish exiles in Spain, see O'Sceá, 'Special Privileges for the Irish'; Fannin, 'The Irish Community'.

2 The Vanguard

By 8 [o'] clock in the morning we got to Anchor in Cadiz Bay ... As I was preparing to go shore, there came aboard in a Spanish Boat two of our SuperCargos, Mr Brown & Mr Pike with some others[.] They inform'd me that there was a strict Imbargo lay'd upon all merchant ships by orders of the [Spanish] Court [...] For the greater privacy I went ashore with our SuperCargos in the same Boat that brought them aboard [...] I got into Town without being question'd at the Gate, & went directly to Lodgings which Mr Brown had provided for me at a friend's house. From thence we went directly to our merchant from whom I receiv'd sundry Letters that had been waiting me there some time from some friends. The merchants having the money all ready, the first thing we set about was to see it weigh'd, which we did immediately & press'd them to get it shipp'd as soon as possible.⁹

This seemingly unspectacular passage from the travelogue of Colin Campbell, a Scottish supercargo, alludes to some of the varied and significant roles that Cadiz played for the organisation of both private and Company trade in the early decades of the eighteenth century. This was no ordinary stop at Cadiz. Rather, it was made by the very first ship of the newly founded Swedish East India Company (SEIC) heading to China in 1731. The stakes and fears ran high. Campbell and his allies may have preferred to avoid stopping at Cadiz at all and rather to leave Gothenburg for Canton directly. Yet Campbell was forced to lay anchor and disembark at Cadiz nonetheless, given the essential assets he needed to procure in that vital Spanish port city for the upcoming journey to Canton. It is worth exploring in some detail who the two other supercargoes that he mentions – 'Mr Brown & Mr Pike' – were, and why they and seven other British subjects entered the Swedish ship only at Cadiz. It is also worth considering what exactly Campbell sought to gain in the city, and how he and his confidants went about it while seeking the utmost 'privacy' (i.e. secrecy) regarding their doings.

The two supercargoes had good reason to enter the ship in secrecy. Mr John Pike was an Englishman, and hence strictly forbidden from providing his services to the Swedish East India Company. As a precautionary measure, Colin Campbell had actually brought with him a set of documents (a passport for travellers) signed by a high-ranking member of the Swedish admiralty, which confirmed that these English supercargoes were naturalised Swedes.¹⁰

9 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 14.

10 The naturalisation papers of John Pike and Captain Thomas Neilson have survived in 'Legal and Unclassified Documents, 1698–1759,' (items 31–ii and 31–2i), Irvine Papers, FBL.

The family of the 'Swedish' supercargo John Pike belonged to those prominent shipping circles in London which had joined the Ostend venture at an early stage (Figure 18). Captain Charles Pike, John's brother, was a close friend of Thomas Hall and the Hume brothers, and had commanded the *St Joseph* in 1723, having been employed as a supercargo on other Ostend journeys to China. Charles Pike was also instrumental in planning and supervising the first journeys of the newly founded SEIC as a financier and consultant, without any intention of going to China himself. A big fish in the tea trade, he provided detailed instructions to Company employees about what exactly was needed to establish a trading factory in Canton, with whom one should do business, and how one could test the quality of the tea leaves presented by the Hong merchants.¹¹ His brother John, who was in 1732 waiting to go out to China on account of Colin Campbell and the other directors of the SEIC, was not new to this trade either. The Pike family was thus well positioned, not least by having yet another kinsman, Borlace Pike, stationed at the English factory at St Helena as her Governor and a nephew in London (Charles Morford) waiting to join his uncle in Sweden after only a short career with the Ostend Company.¹²

Family connections of that kind mattered for three reasons. First, the placement of family members in different trading Companies and port cities provided continuous access to Asian goods for the family network, and this, crucially, via different channels. Second, the geographical spread of family members and trading partners provided more diverse, quicker and certainly more reliable commercial information than the directors of the individual Companies could provide at times. Third, cross-Company investments were easily undertaken by remitting and circulating capital between family members, whose activities time and again cut across the structure of the different trading Companies.

Besides John Pike, the excerpt from Colin Campbell's diary makes clear that another supercargo was secreted on board the SEIC ship: a certain 'Mr Brown'. His background also deserves consideration since Campbell's notes make it very clear that Brown's real family name was not Brown at all, but rather Graham. However, neither a supercargo called 'Graham' nor 'Brown' appears on the list of (former) SEIC employees drawn up in 1740 in the midst of the

11 Charles Pike to Charles Irvine, 29 January 1733, CIC, FBL.

12 'Mr Morford' is mentioned by Colin Campbell as one of the officers who had waited in Cadiz to join the Swedish ship from there; Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 21. Charles Morford continued to supply Thomas Hall with consignments of tea and news during his later career in the SEIC, see Charles Morford (Gothenburg) to Thomas Hall (London) June 1740, TNA, C 103/130.



FIGURE 18 *Portrait of John Pike*. SEIC supercargo and Company director. Part of a pair of painted mirrors in Chinese lacquered and gilded frames depicting Mr and Mrs Pike. Canton, c. 1740.

COURTESY SJÖHISTORISKA MUSEET, STOCKHOLM

diplomatic struggle between Sweden and Britain following the Porto-Novo affair.¹³ One possibility is that Graham died before the list was drawn up; the other is that he had returned to England by that time and that his friends in Gothenburg were sensible enough to protect his identity and one-off involvement in the Swedish scheme. In any case, during the SEIC venture, it is clear that Graham *alias* Brown was convinced that it was best to travel in disguise.

By travelling individually to Cadiz from provincial ports such as Deal in Kent, rather than going to Gothenburg directly to join the SEIC ship to China there, Mr 'Brown', Mr Pike, and a number of other British Ostenders, managed to reduce the risk of being arrested by British authorities. Rumours spread too quickly in London and departing from the capital would have certainly aroused suspicion among East India circles. In fact, the directors of the English EIC fully expected the Swedish venture to be a continuation of the Ostend Company. Thus, they actively tried to prevent certain known individuals, such as the Hume brothers and Charles Pike, from also attaching themselves to *this* new competitor by making a generous counter-offer.¹⁴ However, the directors did not have the names of all interloping offenders, and often remained ignorant about the latter's future plans and present whereabouts. This allowed people like Graham and John Pike to lend their expertise to the smaller Companies for specific voyages, while keeping their place of residence in England in the hope that their appearance in Canton would not be revealed and held against them upon their return. The extended Ouchterlony family, for instance, kept positions and investments afloat in several Companies, while their headquarters always remained in London. As far as the regular correspondence between him and Charles Irvine reveals, none of the family members ever got into trouble.

A particularly striking case was that of James Naish, the supercargo who has left the greatest paper trail of all supercargoes in the East India Company records. Naish, a former EIC, Ostend *and* VOC captain/supercargo, returned to London in the late 1720s, without being interrogated or punished for his interloping in any way. On the contrary, he was soon put into commission by the directors in London as chief supercargo of the China fleet going out in 1730. Exploiting this plum position to its fullest potential, Naish illegally brought

13 The official list of British subjects in the SEIC service was preserved among the papers of Charles Irvine. Especially illuminating, of course, are those individuals who do not appear in there. Among others, Hugh Campbell, one of the 'secret' directors in Gothenburg and a key financier of the scheme, is not mentioned at all, since he was hoping to return to England without negotiating a tremendous fine for his interloping activities.

14 Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, pp. 43, 47.

home a great deal more gold than was allowed and was even accused of having presented fictitious purchasing prices to the Company and pocketing the difference himself. Only this serious accusation of a fellow member of council in Canton led to his permanent dismissal from the English Company's payroll. The jealous George Arbuthnot – who himself had several members of his family engaged in the continental Companies – would have been surprised at the moderate financial punishment that Naish negotiated after a long and tedious lawsuit.¹⁵

During the 1720s and early 1730s, there was enormous concern in London about British subjects moving to the continent and attempting 'to show', in the words of the then secretary of the EIC in London, 'the fflanderkins [sic] the way to the East Indies'.¹⁶ These worries were widely shared among the Gentlemen Seventeen in Amsterdam and the directors and state officials in Paris, who also knew that a great number of their countrymen were seizing the opportunity to travel under Habsburg protection.¹⁷ This period of intense discussion and legal action seems to have been followed by a more pragmatic view on the nature of the job market for East Indians. After long negotiations following the so-called Porto Novo affair, whereby the *Ulrica Eleonora* was taken as a prize on the Coromandel Coast in 1733, a treaty was signed in October 1740 between the Swedish and British Crowns that solved this ongoing conflict peacefully. It prohibited further British merchants from sailing with SEIC ships – while those already enlisted in Swedish service were allowed to continue to do so.¹⁸

The level of continuity between the Ostend Company (which was closed down for good in 1730) and the SEIC that was founded the following year becomes especially clear when we look at the role of Cadiz in provisioning the ships with silver, foodstuffs, merchandise, insurance papers and so forth. From Colin Campbell's diary, we learn that the two supercargoes, a British-Ostend sea captain called George Kitchin and a small band of young Jacobites from the North of Scotland (who were hired as assistants to Campbell) had already been waiting in town for three weeks. During that time, they had organised suitable accommodation 'at a friend's house' and also the supply of greater quantities of 'Sherry or Xeres wines', which were considered a necessary part of

15 See the affair of the supercargo James Naish whose interloping background was well known to fellow traders in the British East India Company and whose jealousy caused his eventual fall from grace, *ibid.*, pp. 110–117.

16 Thomas Wooley (London) to Thomas Hall (Ostend) in 1731, cited in Gill, *Merchants and Mariners*, p. 43.

17 Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, vol. 1, p. 166.

18 Müller, 'The Swedish East India Company', p. 78.

the officers' diet on board and in China.¹⁹ As foreign visitors to the town, those allies of Campbell had to rely on members of the local merchant community as go-betweens for whatever business they wanted to engage in. Being able to fall back on familiar contacts thus proved crucial, as their stay in Cadiz was but short. Indeed, in order to secure the necessary supplies for the upcoming voyage in that port city in time, a great many arrangements had already been made in writing.

The short passage above from Campbell's diary also mentions some 'friends' and 'merchants' who are said to have organised the supply of silver now waiting to be 'weighed', minted and shipped aboard the Swedish ship *Fredericus Rex Suecia* – and this despite the 'strict Imbargo lay'd upon all merchant ships by orders of the [Spanish] Court'. In order to avoid being forced into Spanish service 'to carry out a secret mission in the Mediterranean', the Swedish captain had to pretend to be the commander of a 'King's ship', or man-of-war. '[I]n order to carry on the farce the better', Colin Campbell had 'order'd the Captain to put on his best Cloths & come ashore in his Pinnace' to meet the local Governor for an interview, showing him the fake ship pass and the commission letter from 'his late Majesty'.²⁰ In doing so, he was reluctantly aided by James Gough, a resident merchant in Cadiz of Catholic Irish descent, whose language skills allowed him to act as an intermediary by answering the Governors' questions according to Campbell's direct instructions. Lying about the true identity of a foreign ship was a risk, yet it was one that Gough was willing to take.²¹ His financial commitments to the Swedish venture left him no choice. Hired as an agent, he undertook to supply the large stock of silver for the Company and private trade on board this Swedish China vessel. This was not the only time that Gough acted as an important intermediary. On the contrary, the merchant house of James Gough & Co. provided services to a large number of China traders across the boundaries of the different East India Companies. The Irvine papers include both incoming letters and copies of the letters Irvine wrote to James Gough & Co. There is also a collection of bills of lading, various bottomry bonds and the detailed instructions by Colin and Hugh Campbell for Charles Irvine with regard to the formers' arrangements with the Cadiz merchant house.

That Campbell and his allies chose to organise the resources and provisions in Cadiz for their upcoming voyage to Canton reflects an important development of the time: during the early decades of the eighteenth century, Cadiz

19 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 16.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

21 *Ibid.*

became a 'natural place' for *all* China traders (except the Dutch) to buy provisions and to stock up on silver.²² More than that: Cadiz also became a key site for a flourishing passenger traffic to the East, and a vital node for the exchange of information and the hiring of personnel. It was also a place where cross-Company money-lending took place, and a port where goods from all over Europe were sent in order to cater for the specific needs of enterprising private traders on their way to the East. Such a thorough analysis of the city's functions will allow us to better understand the importance Cadiz had gained by the 1710s for the China trade, both for the workings of the different East India Companies and for private activities.

3 Flows of Silver from a Network Perspective

When the *Casa de Contratación* moved from Seville to Cadiz in 1717 as part of an ambitious reform of the Spanish colonial system, the flow of commodities from Latin America was also diverted to Cadiz. Silver shipments from the rich mines of Potosí and Mexico poured into the town, attracting a sizable community of foreign merchants who hoped to gain access to Spanish colonial markets and the lucrative re-export trade in bullion.²³ The crucial role of foreign merchants as commission agents in town was fully acknowledged by contemporary analysts:

[C]omme il n'y a que les Espagnols qui ayent droit d'envoyer des marchandises aux *Indes Espagnols* ... la plûpart des Marchands de Cadis ne sont Presque que des Commissionaires auxquels les Marchands des Pays Etrangers envoient leurs marchandises pour les charger en leur nom pour l'Amérique, & leur envoyer les Piastres & autres marchandises qu'ils reçoivent en retour.²⁴

22 Louis Dermigny confirms that the French and Scandinavian ships used to stop at Cadiz. Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, vol. 1, p. 249. Although VOC ships did not usually stop at Cadiz, Dutch merchant houses were still involved in the supply of China traders from other nations. In relation to the SEIC, Christian Koninckx stated that no fewer than '38 ships called at Cadiz to take on their cargo of silver' between 1731 and 1766. Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, p. 120.

23 On the extraction, circulation and cultural representation of New World silver in the early modern period, see Pieper, de Lozanne Jefferies and Denzel, *Mining, Money and Markets*.

24 Ricard, *Le Négoce d'Amsterdam*, p. 525.

In 1730, a traveller to Cadiz furthermore noted: 'There is no place in Europe where there is such an abundance of money and where it changes hands so quickly.'²⁵ Its access to colonial silver defined the nature of the city's commerce with the rest of Europe.²⁶ Even though Cádiz did not have a purpose-built structure like London's Royal Exchange or the Amsterdam Beurs at the time, Cadiz was all about the insurance business, exchange and speculation. Merchants of various kingdoms and religions congregated out in the open on the *Calle Nueva* twice a day to meet underwriters, brokers and potential clients.²⁷ Even though a profusion of goods other than silver landed in Cádiz, these goods scarcely left the harbour and warehouse premises of the merchants in town. As Ruiz Rivera and García Bernal have shown, Cádiz was 'an entrepôt and nothing else'.²⁸ There was no industry in and around the city for the processing of colonial goods such as sugar, and no textile manufacturers, who could have produced goods for national or international markets, until the second half of the eighteenth century.²⁹ This orientation out to the sea partly explains the dominance of the foreign merchant communities in town. The hinterland of Cadiz merely produced agricultural products, which were sold on to seafarers and merchants who entered the port. The city's impressive harbour overlooked the Atlantic, enabling vessels of all sizes to lay anchor there (Figure 19).

The privileged place of Cadiz in the Atlantic trade altered the economic outlook of the city, which had traditionally enjoyed strong links with the Mediterranean and various other ports, including Marseille, St Malo and Cork. The special relationship with Ireland and its merchants, for instance, helped Cadiz to sustain vital exchanges with the British Isles in times of war between Britain and Spain.³⁰ Such intra-European trade links continued to impact on the composition of the large foreign population of Cadiz. In fact, foreigners made up 13 per cent of the city's total population in 1714; and a great part of that 13 per cent was registered as merchants, their assistants or clerks.³¹

Particular trading privileges were granted in Cadiz to Catholic merchants from across Europe, who were given resident status in town and who could own property. During the first half of the eighteenth century, however, very few of these foreign Catholic merchants were authorised to trade directly with

25 Cited in Bustos Rodríguez, *Los comerciantes de la Carrera de Indias*, p. 16, my translation.

26 On Cadiz in a wider perspective, see Bustos Rodríguez, *Cádiz en el Sistema Atlántico*.

27 Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute*, p. 94.

28 Rivera and Bernal, *Cargadores*, p. 264.

29 Weber and dos Santos Arnold, 'Ports', p. 348.

30 Morales, 'Identity and Loyalty'; Schüller, 'Irish-Iberian Trade'.

31 Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute*, p. 98.



FIGURE 19 View of the City of Cadiz [*Prospect des berühmten See-Hafens. Cadix*], Gabriel Bodenehr, Augsburg around 1700. Source: The Barry Lawrence Ruderman Map Collection. Courtesy Stanford University Libraries

the Iberian colonies across the Atlantic. The naturalisation of foreigners was not exactly encouraged by the Spanish Crown: at least ten years of marriage to a Castilian woman and residency for more than twenty years in Cadiz were among the legal requirements to be eligible for entering the Spanish monopoly trade as a naturalised subject.³² Yet, these rather stringent requirements did not prevent foreigners from dominating the silver trade in town, not as official members of the colonial merchant guild (*Consulado de Cargadores de Indias*), but rather as intermediaries who bought and exported the silver illegally.³³ The contraband trade organised itself so that by the 'mid-18th century foreign wholesale merchants computed more than 80% of the total net income gained by trade in Cadiz', a large proportion of which involved the export of New World silver.³⁴

Pilar Nogués-Marco's research into the Cadiz black market for silver and the arbitrage business connected to it allows us to situate the China trade within this wider history of contraband silver flows. Nogués-Marco identified a network of large-scale smugglers in Cadiz, as well as how they managed to buy

32 Nogués-Marco, 'Bullionism', p. 65.

33 Crespo Solana, 'A Network-Based Merchant Empire', esp. pp. 150–152.

34 Nogués-Marco, 'Bullionism', p. 66.

silver cheaper than the officially fixed rate. She discovered that the biggest players involved in the export/smuggling of silver from Cadiz were to be found among the city's French and Franco-Irish merchant houses.³⁵ The French houses in particular formed powerful cartels cemented by inter-marriage and regional association.³⁶ The key sources of her research were the half-monthly price reports that correspondents in Cadiz sent to the Roux merchant house in Marseille – who were the recipients of large amounts of silver throughout the eighteenth century.³⁷

Neither Nogués-Marco nor others who have worked on the different foreign merchant communities in Cadiz, however, noted the city's strong connection to the Canton trade.³⁸ This is less a criticism than a salutary reminder of the limitations of a network-focused approach, in that it (re-)produces a distinct and often partial geography of trade that reflects the location and commercial interests of the members of a specific network, but not necessarily those of other networks involved in the same branch of trade. Having said that, it is the plurality of network studies that helps to detect crosslinks between coexisting or competing networks. Thus, although each network study highlights only a fragment of the big picture, in the long run we get a much closer view of the commercial world inhabited by individual traders.

4 The Cadiz Merchant Community and the China Trade

The Roux merchant house in Marseille, as Nogués-Marco has shown, received regular reports about black market prices for silver from their trusted contacts in Cadiz. Among those correspondents of the Maison Roux were Jacques Gough et Cie, Boby LeGobien et Cie, Guillaume & Joseph Masson and Co. as well as Casaubon, Behic et Cie.³⁹ As we shall see, all of the above-mentioned were also involved in the supply of silver for the SEIC and in the informal arrangement of loans and the supply of treasure to private traders on their way

35 The merchant names and their importance were established by the analysis of correspondence to the Roux merchant house of Marseille, which was a major recipient of shadow silver. The Roux records are held in the archive of La Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Marseille.

36 The majority of merchants came from Brittany (St Malo) and Provence. Nogués-Marco, 'Bullionism', pp. 102–111.

37 On the pragmatics of the illegal trade, see *ibid.*, pp. 81–90.

38 Crespo Solana, *El comercio marítimo*.

39 Nogués-Marco, 'Bullionism', pp. 72–73.

to China.⁴⁰ Other notable houses that managed the provision of China ships at Cadiz and that seemed to have operated *independently* of the Roux network included Robert Main & Co., Nicholas Langton (later Carew, Langton & Co.), Galli, Belloni & Company and the two French counting houses of Galart & Co. and Barbou & Besnier. One should add though that the supply of passing East India ships at Cadiz was only one leg of their silver business. Cadiz merchant houses also sent consignments of silver directly to London and Amsterdam, not least on behalf of the Company directors of the EIC and VOC. In England, silver for export to India and China 'had to be in foreign coin because export of English money and of silver bars was prohibited'.⁴¹ However, considering the many wars and crises of trade between Britain and Spain throughout the eighteenth century, this channel of supply stood on shaky ground.⁴²

Table 6 provides a comprehensive list of merchants who provided silver to the SEIC ship *Stockholm* in 1740, all of whom were members of the large foreign merchant community at Cadiz. Gough & Co., Masson & Co. and Galart & Co. were the top suppliers in 1740. In fact, these three merchant houses had already served the Swedish Company and its private traders for a decade by this point. What the table clearly illustrates is the extent to which the 'Swedish' China trade relied on the involvement of local merchants from across Europe. Flemish, French and British houses were dominant within this heterogeneous group. This may not come as a surprise, if we consider the fact that merchants of these nations were also chiefly involved in the interloping activities for entering the China trade at the time. There is no reason to believe that this particular constellation of suppliers (as it appears in this snapshot of 1740) was in any way atypical. It remains to be hoped, however, that similar sources for the other Companies will be found to reveal the composition of suppliers involved in the China trade via Cadiz – as silver brokers, agents and financiers. What seems to be beyond doubt is the fact that the connection between Cadiz and Canton relied heavily on the presence and connections of the foreign merchant communities in Cadiz. In fact, Spanish names are almost completely absent from the records consulted, perhaps explaining why the historiography on the Atlantic silver trade has never considered Cadiz's strategic role in the direct trade with the Far East.⁴³ From the perspective of foreign silver traders

40 See Table 2.

41 Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*, p. 125.

42 Ibid.

43 Ongoing efforts are made to better integrate the Atlantic into global histories by pointing to the dense and varied connections and capital flows between Asia, Africa, Europe and the Iberian empires. See Bohorquez, 'Linking the Atlantic and Indian Oceans'.

and our interlopers, however, the city looked out to the Atlantic, but China was in plain view.

Fortunately, biographical information about the background of Cadiz merchants involved in the China trade exists in a few cases. For instance, the French nationals Juan Casaubon (also known as Jean Cazabon) and Juan Behú (Jean Behu) settled in Cadiz in 1720 to trade with the Spanish Americas. Together

TABLE 6 Merchant bankers at Cadiz and their silver supplies for the SEIC China ship Stockholm, in 1740

Supplied by	Nationality of supplier	Payments in: marcs, onzes, piasters	Value in reales
G. J. Masson	French	4526.2.4	38242.3.5
Robert Main & Comp.	English	1756.2.9	15111.17.4
E. & J. Galart & Comp.	French	6002.2.4	50712.18.10
Galli, Belloni & Comp.	Italian	677.1.1	5721.1.9
J. J. Proli	Flemish/ Italian	1367.7.1	11557.16.8
Jean Schmidts	Flemish?	202.5.11	1712.10.3
Boby Le Gobein & Comp.	Flemish?	417.0.0	not recorded
Barbou & Besnier	French	390.6.11	3302.1.11
Ley & Vanhalen ^a	Irish, Flemish	241.0.2	2096.7.7
James Gough & Comp.	Irish	7679.7.0	not recorded
Gustav Ross & Gough & Co.	Scottish, Irish	1896.15.0	23281.7.10
Collated bill for the silver on the Stockholm		25153.49.32^b	

Notes

a These are probably Lorenzo Ley and his son-in-law Juan Van Halen. See, Rodriguez, *Cádiz en el Sistema Atlántico*, p. 209.

b The presentation of foreign currencies is rather different in contemporary sources. In today's terms, the rounded total sum is 25,153 Mexican dollars.

SOURCE: COMPUTED FROM 'ACCOUNT OF TREASURE RECEIVED ABOARD THE SHIP STOCKHOLM FOR ACCOUNT OF THE SWEDISH EAST INDIA COMPANY', CADIZ, 1740, SHIPPING DOCUMENTS, ITEM 40-66D, IRVINE PAPERS, FBL.

with a number of minor partners they formed the trading firm Casaubon, Behic et Cie. Behic came from Bayonne and married locally. His wife Josefa Potenciana Pain was a rich heiress whose father, Gilo Pain, was an important figure in the French merchant community.⁴⁴ Pain's other daughter Manuela Juana married another powerful silver smuggler in Cadiz in 1746, the St Malo merchant Guillaume Macé.⁴⁵ Little is known about the background of Jean Casaubon – apart from his striking success in business. The merchant house of Casaubon & Behic achieved the highest net income in town, which amounted to 40,000 pieces of eight in 1771.⁴⁶ (Hugh Campbell regarded them as the most eminent merchants in Cadiz well before that date.) Since the reputation of merchants was not necessarily connected to the legality of their dealings, it should come as no surprise to discover that Casaubon and Behic were also two of the chief smugglers in town.

Another case for which bits of information are available about those houses that supplied the interloping Companies and private traders with silver is that of Guillaume and Joseph Masson, who were among the top suppliers for arriving China ships in the 1730s and 1740s. The merchant house's yearly income, which was assessed by the Castilian government for the introduction of a single tax based on wealth, stood at 35,000 pieces of eight in 1771.⁴⁷ Regarding their previous careers, we know little more than that the family came from Orléans. Joseph Masson's presence in Cadiz under the Spanish name Juan Mazón y Compañía can be traced from 1713 onwards. 'In the consular list of 1765 Antoine Masson appeared as an attached merchant of the (St Malo) Merchant House Verduc, Vincent.'⁴⁸

A good example of the transnational outlook of British houses in Cadiz is that of the Gough family, who were not only silver brokers in Cadiz but were also keenly involved in the trade to the Far East. James (or Jacques) Gough, and his brother Edward (Edouard) Gough, belonged to the small but potent group of Irish traders whose Catholic background had allowed them to establish close ties with the enemies of the British crown.⁴⁹ This, however, did not hinder them from trading, at the same time, with British Protestant subjects.⁵⁰ Living at Cadiz, and thus at a crossroads of official and private trade east- and

44 Garcia-Mauriño Mundi, *La Pugna*, p. 264.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

46 Nogués-Marco, 'Bullionism', p. 79.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 79.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

49 Lario, 'The Irish Traders of Eighteenth-Century Cadiz'.

50 Morales, 'Identity and Loyalty', p. 201.

westwards, merchants like James Gough thus enjoyed unrivalled access to the fruits of the European expansion. As men on the spot, they received requests for a wide variety of financial, personal and commercial services from merchants from all parts of Europe, who were preparing to go to the East or wishing to send merchandise to the Spanish colonies. At the same time, these Cadiz-based merchants were able to use these contacts to invest in Oriental and colonial goods themselves.⁵¹ Robert Main & Co., for instance, received a consignment of Indian fabrics and ready-made clothes such as 'waistcoats and breeches embroidered with silk' worth 1,100 silver dollars in 1736 from Charles Irvine.

British houses figure less prominently in the business records of the Roux merchants, but that does not mean that they were not important. As early as 1712, Robert Allen, a promoter of the South Sea scheme pointed to the fact that Britain had greatly profited from the work of the merchant houses in Cadiz who supplied the galleons with 'great Quantities of our Manufactures'.⁵² The author even took some pride in the fact that his countrymen 'found means to remit privately to their Principals in England' the extracted bullion from Cadiz.⁵³ Although the idea of bilateral trade relations still dominated the economic thinking of writers at the time,⁵⁴ in practice profits were often achieved by multilateral trading schemes and partnerships. British traders in Cadiz were not just linked to London, as the straightforward representatives of interested parties in England. Instead, the arbitrage business in which they engaged was bound up with a number of other cities in Europe, including Paris, Amsterdam, Hamburg and Antwerp. This meant that the general patterns and geographies of trade became more complex in the eighteenth century. 'The growth of commission business, linked with the provision of financial and shipping services' tended to decentralise trading patterns and to increase multilateral

51 'Invoice of Sundry Goods and Merchandise loaded on Ship Three Crowns Pet[t]er V. Uffall Master and are consigned to Mr Robert Main & Co. at Cadiz', 28 January 1736, Shipping Documents, Box 11, Irvine Papers, FBL. Messieurs Galart and Comp. clandestinely sold a parcel of Indian embroidered cotton caps in Cadiz, which they had received from Hugh Campbell. As in France, there was a total ban on Asian textiles in Spain, including both silks and cotton as early as 1718 by royal decree.

52 Allen, *An Essay on the Nature and Method*, p. 17. This essay was dedicated to the Lord High Treasurer of Great Britain, Robert, Earl of Oxford.

53 Ibid.

54 David Ormrod writes that '[b]efore Isaac Gervaise produced his System or Theory of the Trade of the World in 1720, mercantilist writers consistently failed to provide an adequate description of the existing multilateral payments'. Ormrod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires*, p. 74.

investments, a development that affected the business of overseas merchants everywhere.⁵⁵

It is therefore important to remember that British expatriates in Cadiz were connected to the British Isles through trade and family communication, but also that – at the same time – they entertained diverse networks on the continent. Indeed, it was such multilateral networks that British interlopers in the China trade often came to rely on for raising money and to sell their goods on their return from China.

The beginning of Cadiz's involvement in the China trade is likely to go back to the contacts between the French and Irish merchant communities in Cadiz on the one hand, and the Franco-Irish cluster of extremely wealthy private traders operating out of St Malo in Brittany on the other.⁵⁶ In 1712, a group of private traders from the port city of St Malo – inhabited by no more than 20,000 people at the time – 'took over from Paris the monopoly of the French East India Company', albeit only temporarily.⁵⁷ This state-led trading body had become increasingly defunct from 1701 onwards and ceased to organise and finance expeditions on its own. Instead the French state granted licences to private entrepreneurs for voyages to India and China. The merchants from St Malo and others who joined them from Dunkirk and elsewhere were highly successful in defending French interests in the China trade, at a time when the direct trade with Canton was still at an early stage.⁵⁸ For convenience and in order to circumvent French import restrictions on textiles, the Chinese cargoes of the St Malo ships were actually landed and sold at Ostend – cementing the close connection between the two interloping port cities.⁵⁹ St Malo, France's 'cité corsaire', had also enjoyed close links to Malouin merchants in Cadiz for decades, making it possible to organise the steady flow of silver that was needed in Asia (but also in Europe) at the time.⁶⁰

There is thus a great deal of circumstantial evidence, albeit scattered, that points to the connection between Cadiz and St Malo for the private trade to

55 Ibid., p. 68.

56 Weber and dos Santos Arnold, 'Ports', p. 347. Louis Dermigny states in passing that '[d]es maisons de Cadix ont participé aux voyages français à Canton par la Mer du Sud, et celui du Compte-de-Lamoignon [a Malouin ship], en 1714–1718, a été effectué pour le compte du Languedocien d'Andalousie Étienne Gilly'. Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, vol. 1, p. 192.

57 Bromley, *Corsairs and Navies 1660–1760*, p. 280; Sino-French private trade activities in this period are briefly discussed in Schopp, 'French Private Trade at Canton'.

58 St Malo merchants were interested in the trade with China, but had even greater interest in the Pacific, see Lespagnol, *Messieurs de Saint-Malo*.

59 Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, vol. 1, p. 167.

60 Stein and Stein, *Silver, Trade, and War*, p. 113.

Asia. Unfortunately, no research exists as yet that establishes exactly when and how Cadiz started to become this vital nodal point for the China trade. Tracing the beginning of novel trading geographies is generally difficult.⁶¹ What we do know for sure is that the city's role was well established with the formal appearance of the Ostend Company in 1722.⁶² The Cadiz merchant house of Gough & Co. had possibly already catered for the needs of the Malouin China traders.⁶³ The trajectory of the family certainly gives us good reason for such speculation. James Gough was born and baptised in St Malo on 3 November 1692.⁶⁴ The involvement of his family in the St Malo trade to India and China is anything but surprising considering the small number and close-knit community of Malouin peers who lived in Cadiz at the time. We know that the family was active for the Ostend Company in providing Spanish silver and provisions.⁶⁵ Edward Gough Jr, resident merchant in Dunkirk, was also a shareholder in the Ostend Company.⁶⁶ Edward Gough's business was closely connected to that of his brother James in Cadiz.⁶⁷ The brothers' strategic placement at Cadiz and Dunkirk allowed them to serve the different, formally competing enterprises over a long period.

The Gough kinship network also included British capital. Two members of the immediate family served subsequently as EIC directors in the first half of the eighteenth century. Harry Gough became a director in 1736 and was reappointed several times until 1750.⁶⁸ Intriguingly, Richard Gough, the only son

61 The role of specific merchants and smaller networks in this process has been meticulously researched for a case study of Madeira and the trans-Atlantic wine trade, in which Scots played a major role. Hancock, *Oceans of Wine*.

62 Don Geronimo de Uztariz comments in 1724 on the export of Mexican and Peruvian silver to Asia by the Ostend Company in his *The Theory and Practice of Commerce and Maritime Affairs*, vol. 1, p. 61.

63 Edward Gough (the elder), originally from Waterford in Ireland, appears to have been an established merchant in Cadiz and Cork at least since 1685. We know that he maintained regular business correspondence with John and Helena Aylward, at St Malo, and other Irish traders in France, Ireland and Spain. See Arundel Castle Archives, Aylward Papers, 1672–1717, Business Correspondence, bundle 45, Letters to John Aylward from Edward Gough in Cadiz, April 1685–September 1688, August 1696. The Gough family was also connected by marriage to one of the most notorious Malouin trading families at Cadiz, the Walshes, originally from Dublin.

64 Ref. AHMC, Cabildo p. 13. Cited in Fannin, 'Spanish Archives and Source Material'.

65 Parmentier, 'The Irish Connection', p. 41.

66 Pfister, 'Dunkerque et l'Irlande', p. 106.

67 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 16.

68 East India Company, Court Book 10R/B/64 (labelled 57) April 1736–March 1738, 8 April 1736. My thanks go to Georgina Green, who generously provided me with an excellent transcript of the Court Books. For details on the marriage, see Jones (ed.), *Hertfordshire 1731–1800*, p. 207. There was also a Richard Gough who was elected director in 1702, but

of the EIC director (who became a notable antiquarian), married one of the daughters of Thomas Hall – the ship-owner and former Ostender whom we encountered in Chapter 1. A Captain Charles Gough repeatedly sailed the EIC vessel *Richmond* to China as commander from 1731 onwards and a Richard Gough travelled to Canton as supercargo on board the *Winchester* in 1740.⁶⁹ The Goughs exemplify other British family businesses that extended their networks first to Spain, Holland, the Low Countries and France, and later also to Scandinavia and Germany. They did so in order to remain afloat in times of war and to reap the profits from selling in markets that would otherwise have been closed to them. The Pike, Metcalfe and Harrison families, for instance, were similarly successful in placing their kin in the EIC as well as in foreign Companies. Cadiz, St Malo, Dunkirk, Antwerp, Amsterdam and Ostend offered both the necessary infrastructure and the right composition of entrepreneurial individuals to engage in the business of interloping effectively.

Continuity in the business of interloping was thus not only provided by itinerant traders such as Charles Irvine and his colleagues operating out of the smaller Companies. Crucially, it was also sustained and facilitated by a group of sedentary merchants and merchant bankers, with members of the Gough family in Cadiz among them, who turned the wild landscape of Sino-European private interest and Company trade into an orderly business.⁷⁰ Yet, neither the literature on Spanish overseas trade nor the historiography on the different East India Companies has so far provided an account of the city's strategic role for the direct trade with China. By focusing on the multiple commercial functions of the city, I argue that Cadiz became a crucial linchpin for cross-Company activities, as it turned, from the first quarter of the eighteenth century onwards, into a nodal point where most ships bound for the East Indies eventually passed by or stopped for some time.⁷¹

there seems to be no family relation to the Irish Goughs. See, IOR/B/47, 22 July 1702–19 April 1705.

69 The private trade of both Captain Charles and Richard Gough was registered in the Canton diaries of the English East India Company, to be found in BL, IOR/G/12/40, pp. 100f. and BL, IOR/G/12/48, p. 70, respectively. Charles Irvine was definitely acquainted with Captain Gough. See, Letter Book, Copy Letters, 1736–1737, *Three Crowns*, Irvine Papers, FBL.

70 Writing to the supercargo Arthur Abercromby, at Gothenburg, who was uncertain yet whether he would go out to China that season, James Gough assured him: 'if you would go on in the Swedish Company's service (...) or not (...) you'll always find us ready to serve you here in as much as it lye in our power'. James Gough & Co. (Cadiz) to Arthur Abercromby (Gothenburg), 15 July 1749, Miscellaneous Correspondence, Box 9b, Irvine Papers, FBL.

71 We can include Port St Mary, a settlement further north within the Cadiz bay area, in our analysis.

5 Cadiz as an Entrepôt

The broad array of services available in Cadiz certainly made it an attractive port of call for merchants and mariners who sought to increase their outbound cargo and capital stock. Crucially, this was often done without the knowledge of their employers back home at the respective Company headquarters. Wine and liquors, livestock, oil, capers, almonds, raisins, citrus fruits, pistols and manufactures from Italy were all available in this town, and shipments of French and English textiles suitable in modest quantities for the Chinese market equally arrived in Cadiz through the help of a string of intermediaries.⁷² Orders were made by Company supercargoes by writing to Cadiz merchant houses for the supply of goods. It is, however, worth noting here that the transport of such goods destined for China did not necessarily have to take place on the ships of one's own employing Company. Rather, most, if not all, China traders entertained friendly relationships with colleagues working for other East India Companies. They sometimes asked one another for the favour of receiving merchandise on each other's behalf, be it out of convenience or out of necessity.⁷³

Duvelaer de la Barre, a former French supercargo who was able to buy a magnificent estate in France in the mid-1740s after only three trips to China, did not hesitate to draw on the service of former colleagues in the EIC, who undertook to remit 50 'shoes of gold' on his behalf to England in 1751.⁷⁴ More mundane enquiries were perhaps even more common. This was the case, for instance, in 1758, when shortly after receiving his appointment as chief supercargo of the VOC China fleet, Arthur Abercromby, a Scot formerly in the service of the SEIC, wrote to two of his colleagues in Gothenburg with a casual enquiry that was intended to circumvent the restrictions of his employers in Amsterdam. Abercromby knew that the Swedish ships would go to China

72 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p.18.

73 This is where Company records are particularly useful as they feature many cases in which goods were seized on suspicion that they actually belonged to foreign subjects. For instance, BL, 10R/H/497, p. 13, 205 contains papers 'connected with the claim for the release of gold belonging to Andrew Reid, illegally brought from Canton by Captain Gostlin of the *Sussex* and seized by the Company under the pretence that it belonged to a Frenchman, M. Duvelaer de la Barre, 1738–1745.'

74 'Diary and Consultations of the Council in China', BL, 10R/G/12/53, p. 67. 'Shoe of Gold, in *Commerce*, an ingot used as money in China. Gold is here considered as merchandize; it is sold in regular ingots of a determined weight, which the English call *shoes of gold*; the largest of these weigh 10 tales, and the gold is reckoned 94 touch (that is 94 parts fine in 100)'; from Rees, *Cyclopaedia*, no pagination.

via Cadiz, and that whoever was in charge on board would have the opportunity to receive from the hands of ‘Messrs. Careux, Langton & Comp.’ a load of sherry and butter on his account, trusting that ‘I can depend upon what these Gentlemen will send aboard to be good.’⁷⁵

A good overview of the personal provisions taken on board at Cadiz is given by the regular communications between the master of an SEIC ship (moored at Whampoa) and the chief supercargo of the Swedish factory, who was residing in Canton in 1736.⁷⁶ The latter repeatedly asked for provisions to be sent down to the factory, which belonged to different members of the factory and their friends in the adjacent hongs. Luckily, the owners of each parcel are detailed in a number of surviving copy letters. Entries such as ‘One Cask Brandy belonging to the French Supercargoes’, to be delivered to the Swedish factory, are to be found in abundance, which give us a fairly good idea of how the culture of cooperation on a personal level permeated the formal competition between the Companies.⁷⁷

Not all ships had to lay anchor in Cadiz in order to replenish their stores. Supply vessels from Cadiz were also sent to the open sea to cater to the needs of passing EIC vessels that sought to avoid calling at its main harbour. In fact, the illicit trade of commanders and supercargoes was often carried out this way, according to the conclusive findings of Huw Bowen. A fleeting encounter at sea that involved the un- or uploading of goods from one ship to the other had to be well planned. There was always also the risk of being reported by members of the crew who were not involved in the smuggling activities. Bowen collected reports of this kind, which were brought before the Committee of Private Trade in London between 1762 and 1771. From these reports we learn that many of the cases of outbound smuggling on British EIC ships are registered to have happened in the Cadiz bay area, and also further south near Madeira and Tenerife.⁷⁸ The sending of smaller supply vessels that were carrying provisions and contraband was thus part of the service provided by the foreign merchant community in Cadiz.

75 Arthur Abercromby (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 4 November 1758, CIC, FBL.

76 See, for instance, Charles Irvine (Canton) to Petter von Utfall (Whampoa), 27 August 1736; Charles Irvine (or his assistant) (Canton) to Petter von Utfall (Whampoa), 22 September 1736; Letter Book, Copy Letters, 1736–1737, *Three Crowns*, Irvine Papers, FBL.

77 Charles Irvine (Canton) to Petter von Utfall (Whampoa), 30 August 1736. Letter Book, Copy Letters, 1736–1737, *Three Crowns*, Irvine Papers, FBL.

78 Bowen, ‘Privilege and Profit’, p. 65, table 3.

The same mechanisms that proved useful for private trade could also be used for the benefit of the Company trade. When Colin Campbell arrived at Cadiz in 1731, he ordered the Swedish captain to keep the vessel at a safe distance from the harbour whilst he was joining the other British crew members on land. There, at a distance to the harbour, the Swedish ship waited for the *Hannibal*, an English ship that had a cargo (probably textiles) on board, which had been ordered by Campbell in his role as Company director.⁷⁹ Bearing in mind that Campbell sought to keep the true identity and destination of the Swedish vessel secret, all uploading of goods and the minting of coins had to be conducted clandestinely. In order to ensure that the silver was not discovered, additional precautions were taken. In 1736, for instance, Robert Main & Co. delivered eleven bags of silver to the value of 9,914 Spanish dollars (or 102,083 reales) on board the ship the *Three Crowns*. This shipment of silver coins, however, appears in the stack of receipts relating to the voyage as a delivery of 'New Mexico hard lemons'.⁸⁰ Crucially, the secret provision of the Swedish ship, which was believed to be a man-of-war, was only made possible through the involvement of experienced supercargoes, who, in turn, were able to rely on Cadiz merchant houses as intermediaries that were familiar with the needs of this particular branch of business. In order to understand the logistics of trade and the role of Cadiz therein, we have to take seriously the continuities between one interloping adventure to the next and the privileged position of Cadiz within global trade networks.

Foreign merchant houses here were able to cater for the needs of the East Indies trade because Cadiz was already tightly integrated into the intra-European and Atlantic trade systems. This brought a profusion of agricultural products and manufactures to Cadiz. The emerging China trade in the early eighteenth century was heaped on top of an already wide-ranging portfolio of business activities available to foreign merchants in this town and should therefore not be seen in isolation. The distinct composition of the merchant community in Cadiz, with its accumulation of interloping entrepreneurs such as Malouins, Flemish merchants, Catholic Englishmen, Scots and Irishmen (many of whom were Jacobites in exile), however, helped to shape certain trading practices specific to the China trade that remained in place for much of the eighteenth century.⁸¹ Most importantly, Cadiz merchant houses took on

79 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 16.

80 See the four invoices signed by Robert Main & Co. on 22 March 1736. Shipping Documents, 1733–1759, Box 11, Folder 1733–38, Irvine Papers, FBL.

81 The 'interloping activities' of the French and British traders are much better understood for the Atlantic trade. See Bromley, *Corsairs and Navies*; Stein and Stein, *Silver, Trade, and War*; Ruiz, '¿Cádiz, Jamaica o Londres?.'

a mediating role in facilitating cross-Company activities – a point explored in more detail over the following pages.

What did the supply pattern look like, who was involved and where did the European goods that were transhipped in Cadiz come from? The chief goods that came on board in Cadiz for both the Company and private trade were New World silver from the mines of Mexico and Potosí, textiles from France and England and foodstuffs from France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Scotland and Ireland. Moreover, there was a wide range of consumer goods traded such as ‘Portuguese snuff’, ‘elephant’s teeth’, claret, books, incense, glass beads and bottles, pistols and other fine manufactured wares that were taken on board at Cadiz by individual Company servants and passengers either as gifts or commodities.⁸² Yet, the bulk goods are the ones that most interest us here, for they had to be ordered in advance and were traded in a systematic manner.

Well in advance of their actual arrival in Cadiz bay, supercargoes and captains advised their suppliers in Europe to send consignments of goods suitable for China or India to Spain, where they could be conveniently uploaded without the interference of Company inspectors and customs officials, who always sought to examine the cargo of outgoing vessels in their homeport according to the updated regulations of the respective Company.⁸³ The Companies often prohibited the export of certain types of goods that they themselves wanted to sell in China, thus forcing the servants to either look out for alternatives or to find ways to circumvent these regulations in their homeport.

In Sweden, Company servants also tried to get around paying the Crown duties. Technically at least, all textiles, wine and other merchandise for export from Gothenburg had ‘to be declared to the customs, stored in the Company’s warehouse and kept sealed until shipment when a recognition of 1/8%’ had

82 Charles Irvine (on board the *Calmar*) to George Ouchterlony (London), 10 December 1743, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL; ‘Invoice of the sundry goods and merchandise loaded on Ship Three Crowns (...) consigned to Charles Irvine & Alexander Cuming’, Hugh Campbell (Gothenburg), 29 January 1736, Shipping Documents, 1733–1759, Box 11, Folder 1733–38, Irvine Papers, FBL.

83 Wilkieson gives news of an accident on board the ship that had *perpetuana* (a durable woollen fabric that contemporaries called ‘perpets’) on board, but was apparently plundered by an English crew on its way to Cadiz. See Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 30 January 1740, CIC, FBL; in 1740, Campbell was concerned in this large shipment of ‘perpets’ to the value of £15,000 and gave instructions about what to do if they did not arrive in time to be shipped to China. Colin Campbell (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 10 February 1740, CIC, FBL; George Ouchterlony delivered yellow broadcloth from England to be taken to India as early as 1732. Charles Flescher – alias George Ouchterlony – (London) to Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 30 December 1732, CIC, FBL.

to be paid by the exporter.⁸⁴ Sending goods to Cadiz was thus one way for Company servants to avoid declaring prohibited articles, to avoid paying duties or to simply augment their outbound investment. Cargo space was not an issue for ships bound to China; in fact, many Company ships left Europe half empty. Considering that the ships of the SEIC were significantly larger than the EIC vessels that were sent to China in the first half of the eighteenth century, it becomes clear why the volume of private trade was less of an issue for the Company directors in Gothenburg.⁸⁵ The composition of the private cargo was far more important.

In order to appease vociferous critics at home, and to redress the negative trade balance with China, the British EIC tried to fill at least 10 per cent of the outbound cargo of each ship with domestic manufactures. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the overwhelming majority of the Company investment (around 90 per cent), however, still consisted of silver.⁸⁶ In addition to the Company exports and the private trade of their servants, the EIC also granted licences to London merchants who shipped coral, silver and precious stones to India and China in return for Indian diamonds. Sometimes they also allowed English entrepreneurs to test the market for new export goods by granting one-off licences for their sale abroad. It was actually rather difficult for the Company to sell their manufactures (consisting mostly of woollen fabrics) at any profit in China. It is therefore not surprising that the interference of Company servants in this fragile branch of the Company trade was considered a cardinal sin.⁸⁷ The export goods that were most in demand among private traders and the different Companies were specific types of light woollen fabrics – worsted (perpets) and woven (broadcloth and long ells) – that were produced, to a high quality, in England and France to be sold in China. Preferred dyes for the Chinese market seem to have been yellow and orange.⁸⁸ The quality of the dyes and the particular variety of the fabrics were key to their success,

84 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. xv.

85 The cargo capacity of EIC vessels was usually stated to be between 450–499 tonnes. See Sutton, *Lords of the East*. Instead, newly built SEIC ships like the *Göteborg* had a carrying capacity of up to 1,000 tonnes. Koninckx, *First and Second Charters*, pp. 156–158. On the difficulties of assessing the true tonnage of East India ships see Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, vol. 1, pp. 202–207.

86 Morse, 'The Supercargo in the China Trade', pp. 200f.

87 Hanser, 'Mr Smith Goes to China', pp. 183–185.

88 Charles Flescher – alias George Ouchterlony – (London) to Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 30 December 1732, CIC, FBL.

and hence a typical point of discussion between sedentary suppliers and our men on the move.⁸⁹

A few examples must suffice here to illustrate what transpired on a regular basis with regard to the supply of European textiles for Chinese markets. Mr Thomas Wilkieson, a Scottish resident merchant in Amsterdam, repeatedly ordered English 'perpetts' and 'Aix-la-Chapelle [broad] cloth' on account of the Campbell brothers, Auguste Tabuteau and Charles Irvine and had them shipped to Cadiz.⁹⁰ Jean Cossart et fils & Bouwer, merchants in Amsterdam, also sent French textiles for export together with musters for their own commissions of Chinese silks to Cadiz merchant houses for further processing.⁹¹ The quality of the goods alone, however, did not secure safe profits for European textiles in China. The market was very limited and the competition between private traders was fierce. Knowing roughly how much would be brought to Canton in a given season was therefore a key concern for those planning to make a large investment in textiles rather than silver. Thomas Wilkieson, who was busy preparing Irvine's consignment of Aix-la-Chapelle broadcloth for Cadiz, had instructions to take into account what he knew about which other China traders were planning to buy that fabric. Somewhat speculatively, Irvine wrote:

I am never [one] for prying into other Peoples affairs, but I suspect that some People have already ordered some such Goods, if so I will hold only to the Sum above mentioned (5 to 6000 guilders), but if you have no knowledge of other orders for such goods you may goe as far as eight thousand Guilders for my account & if possible I may still enlarge the quantity.⁹²

89 George Ouchterlony (London) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 26 January 1738, CIC, FBL; Colin Campbell (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 10 February 1740, CIC, FBL; Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 13 August 1743, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL.

90 A mere sixty pieces of Aix-la-Chapelle cloth cost £219. See Charles Irvine (London) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 28 September 1743, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL. Tabuteau and Irvine had previously operated in partnership in financing a large consignment of long ells and broadcloth for export to China, costing them each £408. See Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Hugh Campbell (Gothenburg), 23 August 1743, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL.

91 Jean Cossart et fils & Bouwer (Amsterdam) to Charles Irvine (Cadiz), 18 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

92 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 13 August 1743, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL.

Such passages make it clear that individual Canton traders were dependent on sedentary merchants in Europe and the kind of information they were able to gather about the supply and demand for certain goods. However, private traders were equally dependent on the collaboration of merchants in Cadiz, who received and processed the goods in their name.⁹³ Although he was stuck in China for a year longer than planned, Charles Irvine could still rely on the services of James Gough & Co. at Cadiz, who handled a consignment of French goods on his behalf and organised its safe passage to Canton. On 4 January 1746, Irvine reported to Cadiz that '[m]y Pacotille from Paris came safe last year by the French Ships'.⁹⁴ He was especially fortunate to receive his merchandise via the French East India ships as 1745 proved to be a particularly black year for the SEIC – since both of their China ships that season were wrecked on their voyage out to China.⁹⁵

Besides woollen cloth, wine was another staple good of the Indies trade that was handled by Cadiz merchant houses. English commanders were granted permission to ship Madeira wines freight-free, in case they were ordered to go there, whereby the directors in London simply legalised a practice that they could in any case not control.⁹⁶ The supercargoes and officers of the SEIC also bought a great deal of wine in private trade, for which they seem to have paid no freight.⁹⁷ Anglo-Swedish supercargoes like Irvine, Abercromby and John-Adam Coppinger, who were experts on wine and familiar with the trade, ordered a more diverse range of European wines for their own consumption and potential customers in the European settlements.⁹⁸ Both George Ouchterlony in London and Wilkieson in Amsterdam managed the shipment of wines to Gothenburg and Cadiz for several members of the SEIC. In 1743, Irvine ordered from Wilkieson, '2 casks of your grey Peace', '4 hogheads of the best Claret you can lay your hands on in bottles & that it be as bright as a ruby; the value of 200 bottles more or less' and 'good Rhenish & like quantity

93 'Charges at Cadiz for Sundries from Dunkirk for Robert Main & Comp.'s account', 25 May 1740. Shipping Documents, 1733–1759, Box 11, item 40–36s, Irvine Papers, FBL.

94 Charles Irvine (Canton) to James Gough (Cadiz), 4 January 1747, Letter Book, 1746–47, Irvine Papers, FBL.

95 Van Dyke, 'The Yan Family', p. 38.

96 Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit', p. 48.

97 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. xv.

98 On the involvement of the Coppinger family in the smuggling trade of Swedish teas into Britain via Ostend, see Parmentier, 'The Sweets of Commerce', pp. 72–74. See also Hancock, *Oceans of Wine*.

of Mosell wine', worth about £1,000.⁹⁹ At Cadiz, supercargoes and captains could buy additional supplies, especially of sherry, a part of which at least was bought for the Company account as provisions for the journey and their stay at Canton.

A significant aspect of the trade in Cadiz is that it served both Company *and* private trade. Even though individual commissions might have been trifling in some instances, the large number of transactions that could be fulfilled there against the payment of commission fees (usually 1 per cent of the sum of each transaction), in the short period of time in which the China ships lay in the harbour, made it a lucrative business for foreign merchant houses to engage in. On behalf of the Swedish Company during the voyage of its first ship to China, Campbell and the other supercargoes arranged the entire provision of silver in Cadiz – a pattern that persisted throughout later voyages (see Table 7). In addition, the uploading of English textiles and the buying of fresh meat and livestock such as goats and chicken, water, bread, greens, butter, brown potatoes, dried and fresh fruit, wine and sundry marine stores for the journey took place in the Spanish port city.¹⁰⁰ Supplying a ship with upwards of a hundred men on board was certainly a costly endeavour. In 1736, James Gough & Co.'s bill for the supply of sundry necessities on board the *Stockholm* amounted to 11,161 reales.¹⁰¹ In addition, each of the supercargoes had their own arrangements with the merchant houses, with regard to the supply of silver coins for their *pacotilles*.

Christian Koninckx bravely attempted to reconstruct the development of silver supplies for the SEIC ship by ship. Unfortunately, he did not mention where this silver was bought. It is likely, however, that most of the bullion was contracted in Cadiz. For the period between 1733 and 1765, he thus collected information to come up with figures on the silver cargoes of twenty-three vessels (Table 7). If we compare his data with our private records, however, we see that they do not match. As the surviving material in the Irvine papers makes clear, Koninckx's figures are incomplete. For the *Stockholm*, for instance, Koninckx found evidence of only 6,550 Mexican dollars put on board in 1740. Yet, Table 6, which details the names of the Cadiz suppliers, shows beyond

99 Charles Irvine (London) to Thomas Wilkieson (Amsterdam), 28 September 1743, Letter Book, 1743–1744, Irvine Papers, FBL.

100 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 18.

101 'Account of provisions & other charges made for the Swedish East India Company Ship *The Three Crowns* Capt. Petter von Utfall bound for China by orders & for account of Mr. Charles Irvine', March 1736, Shipping Documents, 1733–59, Box 11, Folder 1733–38, item 36–14d, Irvine Papers, FBL.

TABLE 7 Silver cargoes of the Swedish East India Company between 1733 and 1765

Expedition N ^o	East Indiaman's name	Year	Silver cargo in Spanish currency		Value in silver dollars (dater silvertnym)
2.	<i>Drottning Ulrica Eleonora</i>	1733	—	—	51.490 d.smt.
10.	<i>Riddarhuset</i>	1740	35,200 <i>Mexico Pesoes</i>	—	105,036 11 2 3
11.	<i>Stockholm</i>	1740	6,550 <i>Mexico Pesoes</i>	—	195,437 5 1 3
12.	<i>Fredericus R.S.</i>	1740	67,150 <i>Mexico Pesoes</i>	52 chests	227.215 26
13.	<i>Götheborg</i>	1741	—	—	632.290 25 2 3
14.	<i>Calmar</i>	1741	—	43 chests + 1 bag	—
15	<i>Drottning of Sverige</i>	1742	45,200 <i>Mexico dollars</i>	—	—
16.	<i>Götheborg</i>	1742	—	47 chests	—
17 .	<i>Riddarhuset</i>	1743	40,000 piasters	44 chests	105.805 8
18.	<i>Calmar</i>	1743	— <i>Mexico dollars</i>	43 chests	—
19.	<i>Fredericus R. S.</i>	1743	— <i>Mexico dollars</i>	57 chests	—
22.	<i>Louisa Ulrica</i>	1746	173,838 25 32 <i>Mex.doll.</i>	—	634.316 16
24.	<i>Adolph Friedrich</i>	1746	210,631 <i>Mexico dollars</i>	(45) chests	688.024 20 2 3
25.	<i>Calmar</i>	1746	229,628 1 4 <i>Mexico dollars</i>	—	750.088 11 2 3
31.	<i>Louisa Ulrica</i>	1749	—	32 chests	—
32,	<i>Adolph Friedrich</i>	1750	—	47 chests	—
34.	<i>Prins Carl</i>	1750	204,199 <i>Pesos duros</i>	—	—
36.	<i>Hoppet</i>	1752	—	41 chests	—
39.	<i>Prins Carl</i>	1753	(from London & Amsterdam)	—	—
51.	<i>Riksens Ständer</i>	1760	(part from Gothenburg)	—	—

TABLE 7 Silver cargoes of the Swedish East India Company between 1733 and 1765 (*cont.*)

Expedition N°	East Indiaman's name	Year	Silver cargo in Spanish currency	Value in silver dollars (dater silvertnym)
52.	<i>Friedrich Adolph</i>	1761	200,000 <i>Pesos fortes</i> (49) chests	—
54.	<i>Stockholms Slott</i>	1762	290,000 <i>hard Mexico dollars</i>	73 chests —
61.	<i>Stockholms Slott</i>	1765	300,000 <i>Real de plata</i>	75 chests —

SOURCE AND COPYRIGHT: KONINCKX, *THE FIRST AND SECOND CHARTERS*, P. 196.

doubt that the bills amounted to *at least* 26,153 Mexican dollars that year. Koninckx's table does not offer absolute figures but only rough approximations. The actual amounts probably exceeded his numbers by a large margin. If we believe his table, there was a dramatic increase in silver on board SEIC ships from 1746 onwards – the year the royal charter was renewed. Koninckx suggests that such increasing amounts of silver simply reflect the greater cargo space available on later voyages of the SEIC. Yet does this explain the sudden and exponential rise of silver between 1743 and 1746? I contend that this is not the case. My hypothesis is that the method of recording private silver on board changed with the new charter, and that the figures Koninckx presented for the years between 1733 and 1743 are way off because they do not take into account the large amounts of silver that were put on board by the directors, supercargoes and passengers, etc., for their private trade and as private investments in the Company stock.

We can briefly stay with the year 1740, for which we have relatively dense data, in order to extract some figures to underline the argument above. In 1740, Colin Campbell wrote what he called 'a private memorandum' to Charles Irvine, which gave detailed instructions about Campbell's personal investment in silver and English textiles for China. Irvine routinely acted on behalf of the Campbell brothers in their role as private investors. Campbell's instructions accompanied Irvine from Gothenburg to Cadiz and further on to China. They detailed the vast amounts of silver that were put on board the three SEIC ships that were sent out to China in 1740 for the private account of one of the directors. Colin Campbell writes that:

I am to be concerned in the Stock of each Ship £ B.lo [bottomry loan]¹⁰² 15000 of which Mr James Gough & Company have orders to provide in New Mexico Dollars the Amount of 15000 Sterling for the Ship *Stockholm* & as much for the *King Frederick*. As for the other £15,000 B.lo for the *Ridderhuys* I allot my share of the Perpetts expected from England & my part of what Mr Wilkieson may remit you on account of the Cloth that has been lost, and out of my part of what may Still be sent to Cadiz. [...] You are to pay for me to Suqua at Canton the Amount of the Silks & Chinaware I bought and sold here for him with according to the annexed Account make (scanty?) B.lo 4,599 paying him in Mexico Dollars at some value as you buy them at or find them to be at when you are at Cadiz. ... In case you should be disappointed in the Perpetts from England dye and that there may be wanting Sufficient to make up £15,000 Stock on the *Ridderhuys* & to pay Suqua, I must desire you to take up for me as much as may be wanting at Bottomry.¹⁰³

In other words, the expected silver cargo for a *single* trader amounted to just under 50,000 Mexican dollars in 1740 – exceeding the Company bill for silver by a large margin. Comparing private records with those that have survived for the SEIC therefore reveals how large the share of private investments was in the Swedish case. It equally demonstrates that Cadiz merchant houses served many important clients in the China trade, and the official Company trade was only one leg of their business, since private traders also purchased a similarly large amount of silver.

6 Company Recruitments and Passenger Traffic to China

Money and goods destined for China reached Cadiz from all over Europe. And so did people coming to the city looking for a gateway to Asia. In 1731, on his way to China, Colin Campbell made some additional recruitments of personnel in Cadiz. The officers on board were ordered to look out in the city for a decent cabin cook who would prepare meals for the supercargoes and officers, who all enjoyed dining rights at the top table. Amongst the English ships in Cadiz Bay they found an Italian cook whom they hired on the spot. There existed a strict hierarchy on board regarding access to wine and fresh

¹⁰² A bottomry loan was a type of maritime loan to which we will return later in this chapter.

¹⁰³ Colin Campbell to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 10 February 1740, CIC, FBL.

food. Dining rights at the captain's table were a matter of rank *and* negotiation, like the size of the *pacotille* that officers could ship freight free.¹⁰⁴ Two English carpenters also joined the venture in Cadiz, replacing the men that had been hired by the captain in Stockholm, who proved to be a disappointment. While the ship lay at Cadiz, the carpenters were busy making smaller repairs to the vessel and building from scratch the round house and cabins for the supercargoes and leading officers.¹⁰⁵ Campbell also hired a midshipman, a young Scot by the name of James Maule, who had assisted Campbell in providing 'sundry necessaries for the ship, which would not have been so easy for us to do for want of the Language & Knowledge of the place'.¹⁰⁶ This young man, who had been to India once, was recommended to Campbell, and so were the two other Jacobites in exile he hired as writers.

Cadiz appears to have been a particularly convenient place for those seeking appointments on board East India ships, and for those who wanted to circumvent the great competition between different candidates at Company headquarters. In the case of the Swedish venture of 1731, Colin Campbell was actively creating opportunities for friends and relatives of fellow Jacobites by hiring them *en route* without prior consultation with his peers in Gothenburg. In his diary and his correspondence with Charles Irvine, he made no secret of his preference for experienced British subjects over Swedes who had never set foot in Asia.¹⁰⁷

Yet, individual experience alone does not explain the pattern of recruitment. Instead, Campbell's patronage was also given to a number of young and inexperienced men, who were recommended to him by the Company's 'friends in England', meaning his own associates. The recruitment of relations and acquaintances by individual Company directors was a ubiquitous feature of the East Indies trade, indeed it was common to all trading Companies – big and small. As contemporaries rightly suspected, such informal ties between the managing directors and individual servants in the East might be the 'reason that induces the company not to be very rigorous in examining their [servants]

104 James Rose, for instance, one of Charles Irvine's nephews, was promised the position of second mate on a SEIC ship in 1743. Yet, James Rose hoped to negotiate privileges above his rank through the influence of his uncle, reporting that 'he had but a few words with [Colin Campbell] on the Street, I expect the wages & privileges of a Chief mate as also the Table which by your mediation may be made save'. James Rose (Gothenburg) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 22 September 1743, CIC, FBL.

105 Hallberg and Koninckx (eds), *A Passage to China*, p. 22.

106 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

107 *Ibid.*, pp. 21f.

accompts [i.e. accounts]. It is even said, that the directors screen them because they share in the profits.¹⁰⁸

If Cadiz became a site for the recruitment of salaried members of staff, it was also a place where free merchants were looking for opportunities to get on board. Passenger traffic was, of course, not unheard of in the other Companies. We know that English EIC commanders were allowed to generate additional income by taking passengers on board who paid for a berth (or even for a cabin on their own, depending on personal circumstances) and the victuals consumed during the voyage.¹⁰⁹ The amount paid was a matter of negotiation between the commander and either the individual passenger or a third party, who had commissioned the passage. This way, a great many women, children (legitimate and illegitimate), servants and slaves moved from one continent to the other. For instance, in December 1732, the EIC supercargo Nathaniel Torriano paid the sum of £22 to 'Capt. Grantham for the passage of my black maid & other charges for her'. In July of the same year, Torriano received a commission fee from a Mrs Hennela Arabin Champais for having arranged the passage 'for the little black girl [Captain Saunders] brought over [for the amount of] 5"07"06'.¹¹⁰ At least in theory, all passengers had to obtain travel permits before the crossing, and a licence if they intended to conduct trade in Asia. However, we know of many private entrepreneurs who operated within Asia without official recognition or Company affiliation. It is thus safe to say that there was a regular and significant movement of people back and forth, which was subject to informal arrangements rather than Company decision-making.¹¹¹

Specialised studies about the activities of 'illegal traders' in Canton, Madras and Bombay exist, yet the circumstances of their crossings from Europe to Asia and back are hardly known.¹¹² There is scattered yet conclusive evidence of a regular passenger traffic from Cadiz to China during the first half of the eighteenth century. The smaller East India Companies, and in this context especially the Swedish venture, facilitated the movement of private entrepreneurs

108 Speaking of the VOC in this regard, see de Uztariz, *The Theory and Practice of Commerce*, p. 188.

109 Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit', p. 48.

110 Account Book of Nathaniel Torriano (1716–1736), *Compte d'argent*, 3 December 1732/33, p. 45, and 13 June 1733, p. 46, TNA, C/112/24.

111 For the second half of the eighteenth century, we even have some figures. The number of (British?) non-Company residents in the Bengal presidency alone rose from 232 heads of household in 1766, to just under 1,000 in 1800. See Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, pp. 23–24.

112 A vivid description of the circumstances of illegal residency and the difficulties that the British Company faced in returning a disagreeable subject from Canton is given in Hanser, *Mr Smith Goes to China*, esp. pp.71–75.

(in addition to the women and children on board the ships of whom we have evidence, too). These entrepreneurs travelled with an independent fortune, and with plans to engage in the country trade between China and India on their own terms and risk. Company servants too often relied on a passage with one of the smaller Companies in order to be able to conceal the true size of their fortunes from employers.¹¹³ Interestingly, there were no Swedes among the private entrepreneurs who boarded the Swedish ships at Cadiz between 1731 and 1746, the end of the first charter. Rather, the small Companies were used as a gateway to the East by British, Dutch and French interlopers. The latter had contacts with different Company employees here and there, but no official affiliation to any of the trading Companies in Asia.¹¹⁴ Free agents thus made effective use of the neutral status of places like Cadiz, which were far away from the individual East India Company headquarters, but at the same time lay at a crossroads for pan-European trade activities with Asia.

7 Financing the Private Trade

Supercargoes and officers who took the great risk to travel to China did so in the hope and expectation that just a few of such trips would suffice to generate a considerable fortune. To engage in business on a grand scale, however, China traders needed to raise large sums in Europe that would not only augment their working capital in coin and kind, but which would also spread the risks onto many shoulders outside their immediate family. The capital needed for a single voyage was usually 'well beyond the means of most who served as officers', or even for those who were appointed as supercargoes.¹¹⁵ An outward investment of £10,000 to £30,000 was not uncommon amongst the supercargoes who traded under the Swedish flag. Only the bold commanders of the British EIC matched such grandiose investments at the time, while they found myriad ways to keep the actual value of their outward cargoes to themselves. For the second half of the eighteenth century, Huw Bowen has done us a

113 There are several letters within the Irvine correspondence of colleagues from the French East India Company who travelled via the Danish East India Company back to Europe: the Rothe brothers, for instance.

114 Samuel Greenhough, Quentin de la Metterie and Samuel Harrison operated out of Madras and Patrick and Robert Garden were moving between Macao and Batavia. They were all part of Irvine's intra-Asian supply network, but none of them was ever employed by one of the Companies.

115 Bowen, 'Privilege and Profit', p. 46.

great service by uncovering in a number of cases the discrepancies between what was officially declared by EIC commanders as private trade (somewhere between £2,000 and £2,500) and the *actual* costs of their purchases for voyages to China and India, which far exceeded the official valuation.¹¹⁶ For the period of the present study, very little research has been done on this issue so far. It is worth asking, however, how China traders actually managed to raise these large sums needed for this extensive private trade (*pacotille*). In the following, we will attempt to shed light on this question by focusing on the special role of Cadiz as a market for credit in the first half of the eighteenth century.

By analysing the accounts and insurance records of one conspicuously successful trader, the SEIC supercargo Charles Irvine, we can identify the key financial mechanisms in place at Cadiz – and the extent to which the financing of Europe's private trade to China was organised transnationally. Even though most of the material presented here concerns the British-born servants of the Swedish East India Company, their practices were certainly not unique. A future analysis of the nationality and residence of investors who stood behind individual supercargoes and captains in the 'old Companies' (particularly the French and English, but also the Danish) would certainly uncover a similar patchwork of transnational financial entanglements.

Experts on the country trade have long argued that commercial collaboration and cross-Company friendships between European private traders of different nationalities were the rule rather than the exception in Asia.¹¹⁷ The reasons given range from P. J. Marshall's emphasis on the pursuit of profit as the main driving force for cross-Company collusions, to Andrew MacKillop's take on the reconfiguration of regional and national identities at the colonial frontier in India, where Europeans felt more familiar with one another than back home.¹¹⁸ Yet, the intensity of cross-Company activities in Europe, and more specifically at Cadiz, has been overlooked so far.¹¹⁹

There are three dissimilar groups of mercantile actors that are important in this context. First, the itinerant China traders who touched at Cadiz on

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 58–63, and Table 2: 'The Private Trade of William Hambly, 1780', p. 62.

¹¹⁷ Such transnational collaborations are best explored in relation to the private remittance trade from India to Europe. See, for instance, Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, esp. pp. 251–256; Furber, *John Company at Work*.

¹¹⁸ MacKillop, 'Europeans, Britons, and Scots'.

¹¹⁹ Holden Furber presents an exception, for he also focused on the 'international' (European) composition of the shareholders of the different *kamers* of the VOC and British EIC, showing that the percentage of foreign shares in both trading Companies was substantial from the outset and did not become 'nationalised' over the course of the eighteenth century. Furber, 'East India Companies', pp. 273, 276.

their way to the East and who sought to collect their treasure from one of the local merchant bankers, or who sought a contract for additional loans in town. Second, city merchants and private lenders (among whom were many women) from different places in Europe who looked to invest their spare capital in a venture that promised interest rates of 30 to 37 per cent. This was the usual rate of return for money lent for the duration of a round trip to China during the first decades of the eighteenth century. Wartime rates were even higher. Third, the relatively small group of foreign merchant houses in Cadiz, which brought far-flung investors and individual Company servants together by offering a range of financial services to both parties. They processed insurance contracts and sea loans, remitted money and cashed bills of exchange in return for a commission and additional charges subsumed under the term brokerage. I argue that these merchant houses were absolutely crucial for making Cadiz *the* place for cross-Company money-lending/financing in Europe in this period by drawing on their personal links to networks of servants of different trading Companies.

Crucially, Cadiz merchant houses also helped investors who lacked any formal connection to the East India Companies to make investments in the East Indies trade. Through the mediation of Cadiz bankers, investors were enabled to lend money to supercargoes such as Charles Irvine whom they had never met in person. Cadiz thus became more than just a convenient place for the uploading of victuals and contraband. It also became an important node for processing all kinds of *indirect* investments in the China trade. If the individual trajectories of many China traders appear as a series of border-crossings, the financial structure behind the private trade was equally diffuse and transnational in scope.

The focus on Cadiz helps to disentangle some of these more complex transactions in the early China trade and to expose a pattern of investments that was efficient, widespread and apparently routine. In the following, we will look at credit arrangements that answered the needs of, on the one hand, Company servants who were desperate to increase their working capital and financial security, and distant investors on the other, who chose to insure cargoes and lent money in return for the payment of high premiums. These arrangements included sea loans (also called bottomry or respondentia) bonds and investments in the treasure of the Swedish Company.

8 Sea Loans and the Cross-Company Money Market

One of the most pervasive and effective credit instruments available to China traders in the first decades of the eighteenth century was the sea loan. A sea

loan was a 'distinctive and ancient mercantile institution' and, just like the commission system (*commenda*), they were already used in the Mediterranean world of the Middle Ages.¹²⁰ Largely ignored by modern economic historians, sea loans in combination with the commission system worked to encourage multi-lateral commodity and capital flows in the Age of Commerce. Depending on the language in which the contract that accompanied every loan was written, the terms *bottomry*, *respondentia* and *à la grosse aventure* were often used interchangeably.¹²¹ Contemporaries used these different terms to describe a type of contract that combined elements of maritime insurance with a straightforward loan.¹²²

What was of key importance to our itinerant China traders was the fact that 'in this particular system of credit, lenders, not borrowers, bore business risks, and repayment was conditional upon the safe arrival of a trading venture'.¹²³ The exact parameters of the agreement were subject to negotiation, but the text of the contracts was sufficiently similar to suggest a great deal of routine in their usage. Thereby, an agreed sum of money was borrowed against the security of a ship's cargo or 'bottom'. This was drawn at a stipulated interest rate (prime/premium) and was repayable after an agreed period of time. In the context of the China trade, this was usually the duration of the voyage plus a few additional months during which time the cargo was sold. Contracts were usually handwritten by the borrower and then signed by the lender (or by someone with power of attorney for the lender). Merchant bankers such as

120 Bohorquez, 'Linking the Atlantic and Indian Oceans', p. 24.

121 Diderot and d'Alembert (eds), *Encyclopédie*, 'Bomerie', vol. 2 (1751), p. 317: 'BOMERIE, s. f. terme de commerce de mer, c'est une espece de contrat, ou de prêt à la grosse aventure, assigné sur la quille du vaisseau, différent de l'assurance, en ce qu'il n'est rien dû en vertu de ce contrat, en cas de naufrage, mais seulement quand le navire arrive à bon port. On a donné ce nom à l'intérêt des sommes prêtées entre marchands sur la quille du vaisseau, ou sur les marchandises qui y sont chargées, moyennant quoi le prêteur se soumet aux risques de la mer & de la guerre; & comme la quille d'un vaisseau s'appelle bodem en Hollandois, on a nommé ce prêt bodemerie ou bodmerie, dont nous avons fait celui de bomerie.'

122 The secondary literature on maritime law and history distinguishes more firmly between *bottomry* and *respondentia* contracts, but contemporaries were less precise in their usage of the terms.

123 Bohorquez, 'Linking the Atlantic and Indian Oceans', p. 24; The insurance part of the contract stipulated – in the wording of one *bottomry* contract between Charles Irvine (borrower) and Claude Luis de Grand & Comp. (lender) – of 1736 that 'all risks of the sea, fire, enemys, men of war, or other casualties' were to be covered by the lender. *Bottomry* contract dated Cadiz, 22 March 1736, Shipping Documents, 1733–59, Box 11, Folder 1733–38, item 36–8d, Irvine Papers, FBL.

Jean Pierre Henssens in Antwerp also sent out printed templates to Cadiz, to which only the agreed sums and signatures had to be added.

Even though interest rates were generally high at 30 to 40 per cent (by today's standards at least) – and especially at times of war – long-distance traders nonetheless cherished sea loans. The reason is that they increased the merchants' commercial flexibility and enabled them to act upon unusual opportunities in the marketplace despite a shortage of personal funds. John Searle, for instance, a supercargo employed in the EIC, explained his decision to take up £100 from a Mr Thomas Copper at bottomry in this light. However, he also cautioned his wife (who looked after his business during his absence from London) that it would be advisable for her to pay back the borrowed sum immediately, in case she heard that Searle lost his passage or died abroad. The reasoning behind this was that every delay in payment after the agreed lifespan of the contract would cut too far into their profits.¹²⁴

Normally, China traders signed bonds for the duration of a round trip, for instance from Cadiz to Canton, including numerous stopovers along the way, and back to Gothenburg (or any other destination in Europe). These long-term loans were part of the structural financing of East India voyages – since China traders usually covered large parts of their planned investment in the East with bottomry contracts in Europe. As such, bottomry bonds provided a lucrative and reliable opportunity for lenders to invest in the China trade of particular Company employees without entertaining direct connections to the Company under whose flag the latter were sailing. The private nature of the contract also encouraged its use as a channel for cross-Company investments.

The foreign merchant community at Cadiz played a key role in facilitating this kind of loan business, especially for traders who stopped there on their way round the Cape of Good Hope. The reasons Cadiz proved to be an ideal environment for a money market for the China trade were threefold. First, silver was cheaper and more readily available there than in the rest of Europe, thanks to the burgeoning black market, which absorbed about 50 per cent of the bullion that arrived from the Americas in the first half of the eighteenth century.¹²⁵ Second, the arrival of East India ships from different nations on their outbound and homebound journey created a natural meeting point for Company employees, encouraging cross-Company activities. Third, the large presence of foreign merchant houses in Cadiz linked the city effectively to the various centres of commerce in northern and western Europe. This made the remittance of profits from bottomry loans an expedient and often lucrative

¹²⁴ Ledger of John Searle, China supercargo in 1755/56, TNA, C107/154.

¹²⁵ Nogués-Marco, 'Bullionism', p. 35.

venture, since favourable exchange rates were taken into account by lenders and borrowers when deciding where the proceeds of the loans should be cashed.¹²⁶

For the historian, sea loans provide an unrivalled glimpse into the multi-lateral payment system that was in place in Europe, since contracts usually provide full details about the place the silver was supplied and where the contract was signed. Contracts offer detailed information on those people who were involved as lenders, borrowers, brokers and witnesses, often including their place of residence. Moreover, the backs of the contracts carried information about the merchant bankers who received and remitted the proceeds after payment was due. The movement of cash in kind or as bills of exchange is made visible by the various merchants' signatures on the back of the contract, who thus acknowledged the receipt and further remittance of the specified sum.

A good example of what was happening on a regular basis is the bottomry contract, dated 28 December 1741, Canton, between Charles Irvine and Arthur Abercromby (borrower) and Don Francisco Namptata Stamma (lender). Stamma was represented by the French supercargo Francis Roth in Canton. Roth deposited the sum of 1,500 Mexican dollars with Irvine and Abercromby on the *Stockholm*, which was ready to sail back to Europe. The money that was supplied in Canton on behalf of a Spanish merchant first went through the accounts of merchants in Marseille and St Malo, before it was cashed in Cadiz. The involvement of merchant houses across Europe in a single transaction of this kind is significant. It seconds the argument made by K. N. Chaudhuri that the East India trade 'was becoming multilateral in character' in the period between 1660 and 1760.¹²⁷ The special role of Cadiz in the silver circuits, which underpinned both private and Company trade to the East, is remarkable and speaks to its close integration into pan-European and crucially cross-Company networks of finance and shipping at the time.

Cadiz was of course not the only marketplace for sea loans. Supplementary bonds could also be arranged on an *ad hoc* basis in Asia, a consequence of the unpredictable nature of the trade for the individuals involved. In China, bottomry loans were sometimes taken up by supercargoes, who saw the

126 Correspondents regularly discussed the right time to remit money from Cadiz to other places in Europe 'pour profiter du Change'. See, for instance, Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Jean Cossart & fils et Bouwer (Amsterdam), 1 December 1742, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

127 Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia*, p. 173.

opportunity to corner the market for a specific Chinese product in Europe. In 1746, for instance, Irvine saw this happening. He spread the news among the wholesale communities of Amsterdam and London that the Danish supercargoes had 'taken up from Europeans & Chinese at least 30 Thousand Tales' at bottomry in order to dramatically increase their stake in wrought silks.¹²⁸ Although Irvine added in a private note to Colin Campbell that the Danish 'being bold Traders have gone deeper than I would have venture[d] to do in their case', he appreciated their understanding of the situation. That was because the competition for silks was greatly diminished that year. In total, nine European ships were expected, of which only the Dutch had bought wrought silks in any significant numbers. In order to justify the payment of interest at 40 per cent on their bottomry bonds, Irvine added, the Danish silks 'must sell very high to bring them profit'.¹²⁹

While this takes us briefly away from Cadiz, it should be noted in this context that bottomry loans were also popular in the intra-Asian trade.¹³⁰ European merchants involved in the long-distance trade with Asia discovered that these loans were an extremely useful way to transfer funds in both directions. In 1724, John Harrison and Alexander Hume jointly lent £6,000 at bottomry to Thomas Hall, who was going to China in the employ of the Ostend Company on board the *Marquis de Prié* – whereas Hume and Harrison were sent to India instead to establish a series of trading factories. Hume and Harrison probably used this method to remit their money safely and profitably to Asia.¹³¹ Gedalia Yogev found that diamond merchants in London used this method from the 1750s onwards to purchase diamonds in India.¹³² Before that time, diamond merchants had always commissioned commanders or supercargoes to sell coral, silver and precious stones on their behalf, the proceeds of which were reinvested in Indian diamonds which were then brought back to London, incurring a great deal of commission fees and freight for the merchant.¹³³ In

128 See letters to Cossart & Bouwer (Amsterdam), John Anderson (London) and Benjamin Hall (London), all dated 16 January 1746, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL.

129 Charles Irvine (Canton) to Colin Campbell (Gothenburg), 16 January 1746, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL.

130 See, for instance, the examples given by Nadri, *Eighteenth-Century Gujarat*, pp. 71–73. Some contracts are printed in Van Dyke, 'The Yan Family', pp. 39, 56–57.

131 Thomas Hall's 'Ostend Journal', 21 September 1724, p. 14, TNA, C111/95, Hall vs. Hallet.

132 Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*, pp. 126–128.

133 On EIC ships, the commander 'received 1.4 per cent' of the value of the diamonds in his charge 'for his trouble'. In addition, there would have been a commission fee for the outbound journey and the 2.5 per cent that the Company charged for freight. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

addition, diamond traders faced the risk that the coral would be badly received in India.¹³⁴

By contrast, bottomry bonds promised to bring a handsome interest to the diamond merchant, as long as the ship reached its destination. By distributing loans to individuals who travelled on different ships, it was even possible for the diamond traders to spread the risks of their annual investment. Even for those investors who did not have similar engagements in the commodity trade to and within Asia, sea loans seemed to have offered a welcome investment strategy. Similar to the investment opportunities offered by agency houses in India in the late eighteenth century that Anthony Webster has analysed, the bottomry loan business attracted investors, to repeat an important point, who did not have any formal role in the East India Companies.¹³⁵

Judging by the surviving contracts in the Irvine papers, it is clear that sea loans were used before 1750 to remit money from Asia to Europe. They also illustrate the complexity of capital flows that were in place. In 1741, for instance, Quentin de la Metterie, a French free merchant at Madras, ordered the Franco-Irish supercargo at Canton, Jacques Louis Friell, to sign two bottomry bonds on his behalf with members of the Swedish factory.¹³⁶ The loaned sum plus interest (amounting to 3,900 Mexican dollars) was to be repaid to de la Metterie's business partner at St Malo, four months after the ships' arrival in Gothenburg.¹³⁷ The 'Swedish' supercargoes involved in this cross-Company transaction were Charles Irvine (a good friend of de la Metterie, with whom he regularly exchanged gifts as well as personal news), Hans Turleon, Gerard Barry and Arthur Abercromby. De la Metterie was not the only French trader who discovered the advantages of cross-Company money lending.¹³⁸ Francois Rothe and Duvelaer de la Barre, supercargoes of the French East India Company

134 Ibid., p. 127.

135 Webster, *The Richest East India Merchant*, pp. 45f.

136 Both the Rothe and Friell families were ennobled for their service to French commerce. See Dromantin, *Les réfugiés jacobites*, pp. 93f., 443–447, 472; Jacques Louis Friell was, like the Rothe brothers, an Irish Jacobite refugee – his full name being O'Friell – who had settled in France and enjoyed a long and successful career in the Compagnie des Indes. O'Friell was at times Company treasurer at Pondichery and supercargo at Canton.

137 Bottomry contract dated Canton, 28 December 1741 between Charles Irvine/Arthur Abercromby (borrower) and Quentin de la Metterie in Madras (lender) – who is represented here by Jacques Louis Friell in Canton – for the sum of 2,600 Mexican dollars (principal plus interest at 30 per cent) on the SEIC ships *Riddarhus* and *Stockholm*. Shipping documents, 1733–59, Box 11, Folder 1739–41, item 41–4d, Irvine Papers, FBL.

138 In 1734, 'Mr de la Mettré' [sic] was described by the EIC supercargoes in Macao who sought his advice on trading conditions at Amoy as 'a Free Merchant who had lived hereabouts some years'. Cited in Morse, *Chronicles*, vol. 1, p. 231.

at Canton, equally loaned money to their Swedish colleagues at bottomry to transfer their gains to Europe, yielding an interest of 30 to 35 per cent.¹³⁹

Another obvious advantage of this method of transfer was that such dealings went unnoticed by the Company bookkeepers in Lorient. The money was usually transferred to the foreign merchant houses of Cadiz, which handled such matters discretely. Thanks to the distinct composition of Cadiz's foreign merchant community, the city remained a key site for the unwinding of transnational dealings among the private traders active in Asia. Duvelaer de la Barre used the French merchant bankers Casaubon & Behic at Cadiz for his transactions with the Swedes. Francois Rothe, instead, appointed James Gough (a fellow Irishman and Jacobite) to receive the proceeds of his bottomry contracts with Irvine.

The central position of Cadiz for the arrangement of bottomry loans for the outbound China trade is best understood if we look at the contracts of one merchant in more detail. The secondary literature on bottomry loans, thin as it is, rarely mentions the name, nationality and place of residence of the brokers and investors involved – details that are always given in such contracts.¹⁴⁰ This neglect by historians is particularly curious since few merchant documents of the early modern period are as standardised as bottomry bonds or could be used so fruitfully to uncover the networked nature of long-distance trade. For this contextualisation of the European side of the China trade with which this book is centrally concerned, sea loans provide invaluable evidence of the transnational flow of investments that sustained the private trade with Asia. Because the documents used here mostly relate to the borrowing practices of one particular and important trader, they necessarily represent a unique constellation of lenders and brokers. However, I claim that the places that feature prominently in the chosen set of sources also played a crucial role for the financing of private trade more generally.

Table 8 summarises the information of twenty-five bottomry contracts that were signed by Charles Irvine between 1736 and 1741. For the sake of clarity, I have picked out only those contracts in which Charles Irvine borrowed money

139 Bottomry contract dated Canton, 29 December 1741 between Charles Irvine/Archibald Duff (borrower) and Duvelaer de la Barre (lender) for the sum of 3640 Mexican dollars on the *Riddarhus* and *Stockholm*, Shipping documents, 1733–59, Box 11, Folder 1739–41, item 41–7d, Irvine Papers, FBL; ditto dated 28 December 1741 between Arthur Abercromby/Charles Irvine (borrower) and Francois Rothe (lender) for the sum of 650 Mexican dollars (item 41–6d).

140 One notable exception is Tomlinson, 'From Campsie to Kedgeree', esp. appendix 1: 'John Lennox's Bonds and Respondentia for Voyage of Southampton, 1781–85', pp. 189–190.

TABLE 8 Irvine's bottomry loans (1736–1741): list of lenders and brokers

Year	Name of lender	Place of residence	Name of broker	Place of residence	Amount borrowed in florins	Ditto in £s	Premium
1736/37	Jean Pierre Henssens	Antwerp	Etienne and Joseph Galart & Comp.	Cadiz	2040		37
	Paul Charlé	Antwerp	Dessinhuysen, de Vos, et Comp.	Amsterdam	6265.17		37
	Pierre Proli	Amsterdam	Nicolas Langton	Cadiz	4719.2		35
	Claude Luis Gand & Comp.	Cadiz	Claude Luis Gand & Comp.	Cadiz	1298.18		
	Urbano Arnold and Cesar Sardi	Amsterdam	Nicholas Langton	Cadiz	2359.11		35
	Jean Pierre Henssens	Antwerp	Etienne and Joseph Galart & Comp.	Cadiz	8160		37
	Hermanus Scheppers	Amsterdam	Etienne and Joseph Galart & Comp.	Cadiz	8160		37
	Urbano Arnold	Amsterdam	Nicholas Langton	Cadiz	3525.11		35
	Jean Pierre Henssens	Antwerp	Joseph van Laethum	Göteborg	3000		32
	Monsieur Estelmans	Antwerp	Jean Pierre Henssens	Antwerp	6000		32
	Madame Joffronive Prüggemans	Antwerp	Jean Pierre Henssens, Urbano Arnold	Antwerp	3000		32
	Mademoiselle Joffronive van Havre	Antwerp	Jean Pierre Henssens	Antwerp	3000		32
	Franila Roisier Bois	Antwerp	Jean Pierre Henssens	Antwerp	5000		32
	Henry Geelhand de Merxem	Antwerp	Jean Pierre Henssens	Antwerp	5000		32
Totals					61526.77		
1736/37							
1738/39	John Walsh	Cadiz	None	Signed at Cadiz		1000	30

TABLE 8 Irvine's bottomry loans (1736-1741): list of lenders and brokers (*cont.*)

Year	Name of lender	Place of residence	Name of broker	Place of residence	Amount borrowed in florins	Ditto in £s	Premium
Jean Baptiste Coget	Amsterdam	Urbano Arnold	Signed at Cadiz	3000		32	
	Pietro Proli	Antwerp	Urbano Arnold	Signed at Cadiz	17000		32
	Urbano Arnold	Antwerp	Nicholas Langton & Comp.	Cadiz	6000		31
Totals					26000	1000	
1738/39							
1740/41	Giacinto Mellerie	Antwerp	J. J. Proli	Cadiz	3102		30
	Urbano Arnold	Antwerp	None	Signed at Cadiz	6000		30
	Urbano Arnold	Antwerp	None	Signed at Cadiz	1000		30
	Urbano Arnold	Antwerp	None	Signed at Cadiz	2000		30
	Urbano Arnold c/o Cesare Sardi	Amsterdam	None	Signed at Cadiz	4000		30
	Urbano Arnold	Antwerp	None	Signed at Cadiz	3000		30
	Urbano Arnold c/o Cesare Sardi	Amsterdam	None	Signed at Cadiz	10000		30
	Etienne & Joseph Galart	Cadiz	None	Signed in Cadiz	2828		30
Totals					31930		
1740/41							

SOURCE: CHARLES IRVINE'S BOTTOMRY BONDS, 'SHIPPING DOCUMENTS, 1733-38 AND 1739-41', BOX 11, IRVINE PAPERS, FBL.

from investors single-handedly. There are also a few contracts in which Irvine held only a small share or provided security for one of his colleagues, lending his good name in order to help traders lacking credentials to get a lower interest rate.¹⁴¹ Thus by excluding joint bonds and those contracts in which Irvine appears as a lender himself (from 1741 onwards), we are still left with a fairly conclusive picture of the capital Irvine generated by this method during three of his six trips to Asia on behalf of the Swedish East India Company. No bottomry bonds have been preserved for his first journey to India on behalf of the SEIC in 1733. This might be explained by the fact that the lawsuit following the capture of the *Ulrica Eleonora* at Porto Novo meant that a great deal of evidence documenting the personal losses would have been left by Irvine with those who negotiated the reconciliation between Britain and Sweden.

For Irvine's penultimate and final voyages to Canton in 1743 and 1745, his need for borrowed capital had dramatically decreased. After 1741, apparently no more loans were issued on behalf of Irvine as a borrower. The data presented in Table 8 thus tells us something about the development of Irvine's personal fortune in addition to the significant questions it raises about the location of lenders and brokers involved in financing the private trade to China. Irvine successfully made the transition from being a major borrower, even in 1736/37, to becoming a substantial investor in other traders' enterprises.¹⁴² This gradual transition from borrower to lender was typical for British private traders operating in India. Profits on lending were often higher than the traffic in goods. In 1741 alone, Irvine lent a total of 19,000 florins at bottomry to two SEIC captains, Martin Kalling and Israel Ekman, at an interest rate of 30 per cent.¹⁴³ Within the scope of eight years, Irvine's prospects and standing as a merchant had thus been entirely transformed, despite the great disappointments that had accompanied his trading ventures as an interloper.¹⁴⁴

141 Bottomry contract dated Canton, 27 December 1741 between Hans Turleon (borrower) and Quentin de la Metterie (lender) – who was represented by O'Friell in Canton – for the sum of 1,300 Mexican dollars (principal plus 30 per cent interest). Because Turleon died on the home journey, it was Irvine who paid off the bond, for which he was later reimbursed by the executors of Turleon in Gothenburg. See the rear page of the contract in Shipping documents, 1733–59, Box 11, Folder 1739–41, item 41–3d, Irvine Papers, FBL; bottomry contract dated Cadiz, 22 March 1736 between Alexander Cumming/Charles Irvine (borrower) and Robert Crew (lender) – using Thomas Main & Co. as brokers – for the sum of 3,730 Dutch guilders (principal plus 26 per cent interest), to be repaid in Cadiz. Irvine had a share of 20 per cent in the loan and risk. See, Shipping documents, 1733–59, Box 11, Folder 1733–38, item 36–8d, Irvine Papers, FBL.

142 See Davies, 'British Private Trade Networks and Metropolitan Connections', pp. 147–153.

143 19,000 florins in 1741 had the same buying power as 375,541.50 British pounds today.

144 Charles Irvine (Canton) to Samuel Greenhaugh (Madras), 8 January 1747, Letter Book, 1746–1747, Irvine Papers, FBL.

When he started his career in the SEIC, his friend and mentor Colin Campbell still saw the necessity of informing Irvine about how to go about raising additional sums of money for a voyage. Campbell recommended making friends with some of the merchants in Stockholm such as Erick Nissen, 'a good man & rich & who can be of service in lending money when you go [on] another voyage, Mr. Langeloh our Bookkeeper can make you acquainted there'.¹⁴⁵ Compared to some of Irvine's British colleagues, who had come to the Swedish venture via Ostend, he did not at this stage entertain personal contacts with any of the key financiers in the Southern Netherlands.¹⁴⁶

For his first voyage with the SEIC, instead, Irvine seems to have relied mostly on resources advanced by his extended family and friends in London, including George Ouchterlony and Patrick Garden. Garden, who was operating for some time as a free merchant in Macao and Batavia, provided long-term loans at a favourable rate of interest to his cousin. The debts Irvine had incurred to make a start as a supercargo in the SEIC were only settled after ten years of trading. In 1743, after four voyages in the SEIC, Irvine wrote to his cousin in London that he 'long[ed] for nothing so much as to know the net produce of my Labour for these as years Last past'.¹⁴⁷ Every new voyage brought with it new debts and an uncertainty about how much (if any) profit would be made after settling the bonds. The Porto Novo affair had taken many years to settle, years in which Irvine was deprived of the funds he had put into this unhappy journey to India. Ultimately, reparation was paid by the EIC. Yet it was not sufficient to cover Irvine's investment in money and goods and the considerable interest that had accrued. To settle his debts for good, Irvine asked Garden in 1743 to 'make a particular account ... of all these unlucky transactions' and 'how they have been payd with interest ... so as to bury in oblivion if possible' this whole affair.¹⁴⁸

The traumatic events of the Porto Novo affair certainly caused Irvine much personal pain. Yet, it did not affect his creditworthiness. With the initial help of Cadiz merchant bankers such as Galart & Comp. and James Gough, Irvine's name was soon promoted. He thus attracted considerable sums and an advance of trust from a long list of independent investors from the 'merchant

145 Colin Campbell (aboard the *Frederick*) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 23 February 1735, CIC, FBL.

146 At least there is no evidence of him having any direct correspondence with them before 1738.

147 Charles Irvine (Gothenburg) to Patrick Garden (London), 8 January 1743, Letter Book, 1742–43, FBL.

148 Ibid.

republics' of Antwerp and Amsterdam from 1736 onwards.¹⁴⁹ It is significant that Irvine's early bottomry bonds were always signed by one of the Company directors in Gothenburg, Colin or Hugh Campbell. They confirmed the considerable privileges of Irvine as supercargo. They also reveal Irvine's entitlement to a certain percentage of the profits that were made by the Company on the ships he was serving in (called commission), which provided additional security to his lenders. With the status of 'first supercargo' came the SEIC privilege to receive a commission of 1.5 to 2.5 per cent 'of the net proceeds of the public sale of the return cargo'.¹⁵⁰ Such commissions were thus exceedingly high in the SEIC.¹⁵¹ For his voyage on the *Riddarhus* in 1740–1742, Charles Irvine's share of the Company's net profits lay at 1.5 per cent. This amounted to the staggering sum of 33,750 Mexican dollars – a handsome monetary recognition of his service to the Company. The second supercargo on this voyage, Arthur Abercromby, received a commission of 13,500 Mexican dollars, a sum that did not even include the proceeds of his *pacotille* or the interest generated by his investment in the stock.¹⁵²

Considering the expected and considerable income of China supercargoes, bottomry loans were thus a relatively safe investment for independent lenders. Once Irvine's reputation as a 'good debtor' was established, he was no longer in need of the Company to secure his private loans. Irvine's connections and eminent status in the China trade were such that in 1751, when the SEIC was without funds in Canton and in no condition to purchase an appropriate cargo for the return voyage, it was Irvine who acted as a broker. He collected subscriptions for a massive bottomry loan of £215,000. This secured the continuity of the Swedish trade in Canton that year.¹⁵³

The Swedish Company, however, did act as security for other traders as well. In fact, bottomry loans were taken up by a great number of Company servants in the SEIC (also during its second charter). Christian Koninckx found a list of the bottomry loans taken up by Company servants on the *Finland*

149 I borrow this term from Mary Lindemann, who sought to integrate places like Hamburg, Antwerp and Amsterdam in the same framework. Eadem, *Merchant Republics*.

150 Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, p. 341.

151 Here, some comparison can be offered for the EIC, since a certain 'Mr Jonathan Scarth Dec^d Fourth Supracargo' received '£3000 and Mr John Forbes Fifth [...] £2000' on account of their commission and interest in the cargoes of the ships *Stafford* and *York* arrived from China in 1745. BL, 10R/B/69 (labelled 62), 1746–1748, pp. 130f.

152 Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, p. 342. The archival sources on which he based these figures are in LAG. ÖST. A 152 55 fols. 19 and 178.

153 Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, p. 296.

and *Stockholms Slot*, which sailed to China in 1763.¹⁵⁴ Surprisingly, it included loans taken up by ‘quartermasters, ships’ carpenters, ships’ smiths and even seamen and “boys”; all of whom had borrowed sums of money to conduct private trade and pledged their expected salaries of the journey in case they were unable to repay the loan. For those who had little chance of raising money in or outside their immediate families, their official role as Company servants helped them to participate in the professional market for credit, as their employment offered at least some security to professional lenders. Cadiz thus remained a key market for credit after the period of this study. Koninckx leaves no doubt that the practice was common enough to persuade the SEIC to make it an obligation for their servants to give notice of their private loans after 1746.¹⁵⁵

Intriguingly, there is also evidence in the Court Books that the EIC in London meddled in the market for sea loans themselves, by providing money at bottomry to the commanders of their ships. It is unclear how widespread a practice this was. In 1734, a request of Captain Charles Raymond was granted to be paid in advance ‘£2,000 on Bottomree on the same terms as other captains’. Only a few years earlier, the Committee of Treasury had been willing to furnish ‘Capt Robert Mead [with] £3,000 of the Company on Bottomree on the usual conditions’.¹⁵⁶ Further entries have been found that confirm that the EIC granted loans at least until 1747.¹⁵⁷ By doing so the EIC could claim a substantial share of the profits generated by the private trade of commanders. This was a source of income independent of the freight and other charges the Companies extracted from Company employees in any case. There is no evidence that supercargoes also borrowed money from the EIC. This was perhaps an arrangement between the Company directors in London and the commanders alone, who were not formally their servants as they chartered the ships from a close-knit group of ships’ husbands.

The SEIC, it seems, did not have designated funds to act as a lender. In fact, until 1753, the Company did not even have a permanent capital stock, but rather raised money and paid out the dividends for each voyage separately. In practical terms, this meant that ‘the Company was dissolved again and again

154 Ibid.

155 Ibid.

156 East India Company, Court Book, BL, IOR/B/62 (labelled 55), 5 April 1732–2 April 1734, 21 February 1732, p. 270; Court Book, BL, IOR/B/63 (labelled 56) 3 April 1734–31 March 1736, 22 January 1734, p. 245.

157 See also the petition of Elizabeth Steward, widow of Captain Gabriel Steward, who upon his death still owed money to the Company, which was given out as a respondentia loan. BL, IOR/B/69 (labelled 62) 1746–1748, 11 March 1747, p. 243.

after the redistribution of capital plus dividends from an expedition, then re-established for the next venture', although many of the investors 'allowed their shares to be carried over to the next expedition'.¹⁵⁸ In contrast to the EIC, which used its fixed capital to act as a lender when they signed bottomry contracts with individual commanders, the SEIC instead encouraged their servants (which included the directors *themselves*) to borrow money from third-party investors for their purchases in China. These were then sold through the Company auctions. Crucially, privately arranged sea loans thus contributed indirectly to the Company's economic performance. By outsourcing significant parts of its money-raising activities to the servants, the SEIC's trade waxed and waned with the private money invested in it year by year. Traditionally, private trade is thought of as an annexe to the Company trade, which expanded and contracted according to Company tonnage and the restrictions laid upon it. For the smaller interloping Companies, however, the opposite is true: 'The history of the smaller Scandinavian companies almost ceases to make sense without taking into account private trade.'¹⁵⁹

9 Entangled Cities of the China Trade: Cadiz, Antwerp and Amsterdam

If we consider from where Charles Irvine drew his capital, we see a pattern that is worth pointing out. The bulk of loans that Irvine took up in 1736/37 (see Table 8), with the help of brokers at Cadiz, were signed by Irish and Dutch, but mostly Flemish, investors. Some, but not all, of Irvine's distant investors entertained more intimate connections with the smaller trading Companies as shareholders, directors or independent financiers – including Urbano Arnold, Jean-Pierre Henssens, Paul Charlé and Pierre Proli. Pierre Proli and Paul Charlé at Antwerp, who appear prominently in this list of Irvine's investors, both played a formative role in the Ostend Company.

Proli was one of the original directors of the Ostend Company. The Proli family, originally from the Duchy of Milan, remained active in the East Indies trade as financiers and directors over the entire course of the eighteenth century. Count Charles Proli, the son of Pierre (or Pietro) Proli, went spectacularly bankrupt in 1785 after an unsuccessful venture in the East Indies trade with the Triest Company, which he had founded together with the notorious

¹⁵⁸ Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters*, p. 285.

¹⁵⁹ Berg et al., 'Private Trade and Monopoly Structures', p. 137.

projector William Bolts. Charles committed suicide that same year. The bankruptcy of the Pietro Proli banking house caused a financial earthquake of unprecedented scale in Antwerp and affected creditors all over Europe.¹⁶⁰ Earlier in the eighteenth century, the Proli family had also been important backers of the SEIC. It had invested in both private and official trade. The widow of Pierre Proli, for instance, contributed 75,841 silver dollars to the Company stock of the *Drottning of Sverige* (1742–1744). The Company profits for this particular voyage were higher than usual, at 105 per cent.¹⁶¹ De Proli received 155,474 silver dollars for her initial investment, a handsome profit indeed.¹⁶²

The Antwerp merchant, Jean-Pierre Henssens, too, had already been involved in the Ostend venture as an investor. He lent rather large sums to Swedish Company servants at bottomry. Later, in the 1750s, he was also of vital importance for the financial backing of the Prussian East India Company – the last interloping venture in the ‘Ostend cycle’, as Dermigny has put it. In 1736/37, Henssens lent 13,000 florins to Charles Irvine at an interest rate of 37 per cent, while acting as a broker for several other investors in Antwerp, including three women investors: Madame Joffronive Prüggemans, Mademoiselle Joffronive van Havre and Franila Roisier Bois. Henssens thereby raised the additional sum of 22,000 florins in cash to be used by Charles Irvine for his private investments in Canton.

Another man, less known in the context of the interloping ventures of the Flemish *haute bourgeoisie*, is Urbano Arnold. Arnold hailed from Antwerp and became a key partner for British subjects in the SEIC, amongst whom we find Irvine, Captain Kitchin and Colin Campbell. As a merchant banker, Arnold was involved in the private bottomry business. Yet he was also chiefly concerned with financing the SEIC’s silver cargoes, sometimes in partnership with the Proli family. The bottomry bonds that have survived in the Irvine records make clear that Arnold operated as a broker as well as a lender. Between 1737 and 1740, he seems to have stayed in Cadiz for some time to look after his business there. Irvine must have met him in person on his way to China in 1737 and once again in 1740, when he borrowed in total 32,000 florins from Arnold.

Urbano Arnold was a merchant with an extremely wide portfolio. In addition to his involvement in the silver and loan business, he operated also as a

160 See Lindemann, *Merchant Republics*, pp. 287–289.

161 *Ibid.*, p. 288.

162 *Ibid.*, p. 299.

wholesale merchant for Chinese and colonial goods.¹⁶³ The financial connection between Arnold and Irvine soon developed into a more complex agency relationship. On 24 December 1743, for instance, Irvine sent him an invoice for sixty-six cases of fine teas that had been landed at Ostend, which Irvine hoped Arnold would sell at Antwerp on behalf of Colin Campbell and himself.¹⁶⁴ Parts of the cargo were intended to be smuggled to Scotland by Irvine's nephew, James Rose. Rose, who was helped by Irvine to a position as an officer in the SEIC, was regularly accompanying shipments of contraband tea to the north of Scotland. Rose undertook this dangerous work of selling contraband teas for a number of Scottish-Swedish interlopers from 1743 onwards.¹⁶⁵ On 22 April 1743, he reported that he had arrived at Montrose 'after a very good passage and ... sold the goods I carried and shall dispose of what came by Mr. Elphinstone'.¹⁶⁶ Arnold was expected to sell the remaining teas by public auction or straight from his warehouse when the market permitted it, a service for which he charged a commission.¹⁶⁷

Arnold's name also features among the buyers at the half-yearly auctions of the SEIC at Gothenburg. The Low Countries certainly absorbed a share of his purchases there, but tea was also sold on to smugglers, who frequented the sea route between Ostend and the Channel Islands or little-patrolled parts of the English coast.¹⁶⁸ Arnold's chief contact in Cadiz was Nicholas Langton, who had been born in Cadiz to an Irishman from Kilkenny and his wife, a member of another old Irish family in Cadiz, Francisca Carew. The case of Arnold presents a good example of how interconnected the worlds of high finance and wholesaling were in the China trade. Arnold's varied activities also reveal the close entanglements between different sites of interloping activities *within*

163 In 1750, Urbano Arnold and Comp. was established in Antwerp. By 1757, the firm dealt on a large scale in refined sugar and also ran five sugar refineries in Fiume (today's Rijeka in Croatia), employing about 1,000 workers there. See the document 'Urbano Arnoldt und Compagnie' (in German) at the auction house *Historisches Wertpapier Haus AG* lot no. 126, dated Vienna, 20 April 1757. See http://www.hwph.de/actions-obligations/losnr-auktnr-pa22-126_fr.html.

164 Copy letter, Charles Irvine to Urbano Arnold, 24 December 1743, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

165 From the surviving correspondence we know that Rose sold teas for Colin Campbell, Captain George Kitching, Arthur Abercromby, Archibald Duff and George Elphinstone, as well as Charles Irvine.

166 James Rose (Aberdeen) to Charles Irvine (Gothenburg), 22 April 1743, CIC, FBL.

167 Charles Irvine to Urbano Arnold, 24 December 1743, Letter Book, 1742–1743, Irvine Papers, FBL.

168 On tea smuggling, Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North*, esp. pp. 48–54.

Europe. Private trade geographies were made up not by one, but rather by many corridors and gateways. Yet, when seen from some distance, the pattern for the SEIC (and its British free agents) shows distinct clusters in Cadiz, Antwerp, Amsterdam and Gothenburg. For the French traders, other places must be added to the list, but Cadiz remained a crucial site for all China traders at the time.

Cadiz, in short, was *the* place where different interloping networks met and partly overlapped. The preceding analysis of the city's important and myriad roles in sustaining the early China trade has demonstrated why it is important to overcome a long dominant research perspective that was focused on the direct commercial links between various European East India Company headquarters and China. This bilateral perspective has left out significant aspects how the early Company and private trade with China was actually financed – and how it was connected to the wholesale communities of Europe, which supplied Canton traders with wine, fabrics and other goods. These, besides the American silver that since 1717 directly landed in Cadiz, were ultimately shipped to Asia, demonstrating the city's growing 'importance on the cross-roads of bullion and commodity flow'.¹⁶⁹

Putting a focus on Cadiz thus reveals an alternative geography of the private and Company trade with the Middle Kingdom. It allows us to expose how opportunity-seeking private merchants established and used the Spanish port city to their advantage. It equally shows how the Swedish East India Company profited from the money-raising activities of their servants. Through the use of mercantile instruments such as the sea loan and the commission system, private traders managed to organise their trade transnationally. The existence of a British expatriate community, of Jacobites and Catholics, facilitated the trade in silver and helped to secure investments. Cadiz was also the site of a flourishing trade in passengers to the East, and a place where new interlopers from Britain were channelled into the ranks of the Swedish East India Company. Hence, during the period under study, it functioned as a long-neglected but fundamental stopping point for the China trade that encouraged a wide spectrum of cross-Company dealings. Cadiz, with its international financial ties and diverse social composition, facilitated manifold cross-Company activities and ultimately allowed the trans-shipment of Asian goods across the Atlantic to the Spanish colonies in the West. The colonial trade with Spanish America had flourished for centuries, so that the burgeoning China trade in the early

169 Weber and dos Santos Arnold, 'Ports', p. 348.

1700s could profitably build on existing business and finance activities available to foreign traders, investors and other commercial brokers in the town – enlarging the vision, geography and ambitions of their established commercial portfolios.

Conclusion

I began this account of the China trade with Charles Irvine, whose career, contacts, and commercial activities invited me to view the early China trade not through a corporate lens of separate monopoly trading Companies but through the eyes of individual traders. Step by step, I have introduced a larger set of actors – interlopers and entrepreneurs like Irvine who formed commercial connections to China proper, shaped the management of different trading Companies, and were busy building markets and expertise for Chinese goods across Europe. By tracing their different routes into the China trade, through studying their sojourning activities and willingness to change Companies in the relentless pursuit of greater commercial privileges and profits, and finally by tracing their wider networks and mercantile activities in Europe, this work has provided a rich picture of those individuals who helped to shape the very practices, conventions, and opportunities of the China trade during an early and highly dynamic phase of its history.

This study of private trade and interloping activities of British-born China traders demonstrates how this branch of commerce took root and expanded within a transnational European arena between 1700 and the 1750s. Interlopers, I have argued, played a highly integrative role for the development of European markets for Chinese goods and the networks of supply and capital that underpinned the trade. Canton supercargoes (and interlopers in particular) operated in the European marketplace. They did so not merely as collective importers of Asian consumer goods, but also as independent merchants. Their trade in Chinese goods ranged from wholesale buying and selling to brokering and smuggling. Interlopers also fulfilled a wide range of special commissions for clients dispersed across Europe.

This conclusion reviews those aspects that I maintain were essential to the logics and logistics of the Sino-European private trade. Taken together, the four preceding chapters have shown how the China trade flourished within a transnational arena open to cross-border and cross-Company endeavours. Each chapter has highlighted different elements of cross-Company collaboration and private enterprise. Both involved a much larger portion of European merchants, bankers and peddlers than were actually employed by the Companies themselves. By detailing the informal, unregulated, and private sides of Company commerce, this book contributes to a better understanding of the European foundations of a transformative trade. In contrast to the greater part of historical scholarship on the China trade, I looked at the ways in which personal access to Asian goods was negotiated and secured and how it helped

itinerant China traders to establish a key position within pan-European ordering networks and at public sales.

As I finish this manuscript, I realise a sea change in the field of Company studies that is important to acknowledge, partly because it confirms the directions and findings this book offers, and partly because it diverges from it in one key aspect.¹ Recent scholarly contributions have engaged with Companies and constellations that have received less attention in this book: first and foremost with the Prussian, Danish, and French corporate ventures. As is the case with the present work, this very recent and ongoing scholarship stresses the importance of bringing the private activities of Company servants into the centre of debate.² However, in contrast to my inquiry into the role that private trade played in creating European markets for Chinese goods and investments, researchers increasingly focus on the figure of the interloper as an *agent of empire* overseas.³

I am not sure if private enterprise, the workings of trading networks, and cross-cultural commerce should always be squared with European *imperial* expansion and planning. I certainly sympathise with the wish to bring order to the messiness of overseas trade, but multilateral capital flows and the itineraries of goods traded rarely followed an imperial logic – not only with regard to the China trade, but also in other major trades of the time.⁴ For the period of this study and for the China trade in general, I therefore maintain that talk of empire should be treated with particular caution. Early modern interlopers – such as the Scots that are so prominently explored in this book – were gazing at Canton as a place to do business, and clearly not to advance territorial expansion or political power: rather, the imperial power lay exclusively with the Chinese.

As this book argues, interloping developed in and was sustained by a multilateral trading system in which capital, goods, and expertise could be easily moved across borders and between Companies. Commercial links between Scotland, Amsterdam, Canton, Cadiz, and Veracruz, for instance, were established by individual traders by making full use of their wider networks of

1 Gottmann and Stern (eds), *Journal of World History*, Special Issue: Crossing Companies.

2 Adams and Reed, 'Coda: Crossing Companies'; Fatah-Black and de Windt, 'De ontbrekende schakels tussen compagnie en consumptie'.

3 See, for instance, Heijmans, *The Agency of Empire*; Antunes and Polónia (eds), *Beyond Empires*.

4 See the excellent intervention by Bohorquez, 'Linking the Atlantic and Indian Oceans'.

correspondents and kin.⁵ To remind us of the constellations involved: northern European textiles were shipped to Cadiz and from there to Veracruz, together with parcels of Chinese and Indian goods. Unregistered silver in turn arrived in Cadiz from the mines of Mexico and Potosí and was taken by private traders to China to pay for gold and consumer goods.

Capital investments in the China trade were pooled in places such as Cadiz. Local Spanish investors and a long list of merchant bankers and monied individuals in places like Antwerp and Amsterdam, for instance, granted maritime loans and advanced large sums of money to specific supercargoes and commanders for the duration of a return trip to China. As Chapter 4 has shown in detail, investors bore the commercial risk in case of wreckage. But they were also promised the handsome interest rate of at least 30 per cent in the event of the safe return of ship and cargo. For investors, it was of secondary importance for which of the Companies individuals officially worked for. Far more important was the station in which they were employed and whether they were to be trusted. An eminent supercargo such as Charles Irvine, who had acquired a reputation for honest dealings and who had many friends among the powerful in Sweden, France, Britain, and the Netherlands, could easily raise a million British pounds in today's terms for a single journey. As many more individual case studies in this book have revealed, the profits of the China trade were distributed widely in Europe and even across the Atlantic. Investments entered the trade not only through the buying of Company shares or through direct investments in the Company stock, but to no small measure also through the backdoor. Namely as investments in the private trade of individuals such as Charles Irvine, Colin Campbell, and Arthur Abercromby, who operated under changing flags.

The shadow economy of the China trade, which at the start of my PhD research I was still discouraged from engaging with by well-meaning colleagues for a purported lack of sources, has now turned our understanding of the maturing processes of the China trade right on its head. Private enterprise, when made visible through the engagement with merchant records and capital flows, takes shape and reveals how the China trade was capitalised and what a pivotal role mobile employees played for inviting investors, merchants, and outsiders to participate in a growing trade. The smaller continental Companies which flourished in the period of this study and were composed of a multinational band of merchant and mariners offered better terms for private trade than any of the larger Companies (the English EIC and the

5 A brother of Arthur Abercromby's was a resident of Veracruz. Charles Irvine profited from his friends' contacts to Spanish merchants and consumers in Cadiz and across the Atlantic on several occasions. See Chapter 4.

Dutch VOC). Individuals made full use of those privileges, not least by creating opportunities and access to a wider circle of actors, friends, and family, who in the case of the smuggling of tea and textiles managed to forge new markets in both provincial and rural areas.⁶ By avoiding taxes, tariffs, and official means of transport, they helped to spread and deepen the consumption of Chinese goods in society far beyond the traditional circles of elite consumers. Private traders were conscious of import regulations, Company restrictions, and sumptuary laws in the different places they hoped to sell their goods, and yet, they were willing to circumvent them for the prospect of profits.

What was at stake for individual China traders when a new interloping Company was forming is nicely summarised by one of Irvine's closest companions, Arthur Abercromby. By the time of his excited writing in 1751, he had already served two different Companies in key positions: the English and Swedish (a third, the Dutch East India Company, would follow late in his career as a Canton supercargo):

I am getting all the information I can of the Prussian Company for I am convinced that a Company in its infancy will be more advantageous than when they are come to some maturity. ... I doubt not but great many will go from this Place into that service ... the truth is they will be some years before they can raise up fiscalls and fellows to annoy their servants.⁷

This correspondence between two eminent interlopers highlights general truths about the workings of the Canton trade fleshed out in this book. China traders as insiders and experts followed closely the arising opportunities in what they conceived as an expanding labour market. Arthur Abercromby was not the only China trader who sought to shop around for Company privileges for private activity. As he predicted, among his fellow traders in the SEIC, 'many will go from this Place into that service'. Abercromby knew from experience that entering a Company at an early developmental stage had distinct advantages. The extract's 'fiscalls and fellows' refers to the law-enforcers of customs and Company as well as the small army of bookkeepers, with whom private traders always hoped to avoid any dispute. As the quotation makes clear, it was indeed the Companies who annoyed their swashbuckling, enterprising servants – and not the other way around, as an older literature had made us

⁶ MacKillop, 'A North Europe World of Tea'. On Scotland's access to empire, see Devine, *Scotland's Empire, 1600–1815*.

⁷ Arthur Abercromby's letter to Charles Irvine, 6 August 1751, is quoted from Hodacs, 'Keeping It in the Family', p. 567.

believe. I have tried to take Arthur Abercromby and his fellow traders seriously, as they took themselves very seriously, by stressing their superior understanding of international trade and the state of national economies. This change of perspective from Company to the individual and from thinking in hierarchies to thinking in networks with their in-built principle of reciprocity was proposed and sustained in this work – while I am fully aware that not all members of these commercial networks were equally powerful, well connected, or financially secure. What opened up were the sophisticated business principles and practices that ruled that private side of the China trade: a world of commerce filled by people – their hopes, desires, alliances, and disappointments.

My first chapter looked in detail at the backgrounds, expertise, and motivations of British interlopers who joined the smaller ‘interloping’ East India Companies on the European continent. A group portrait produced insights and a wealth of new evidence for understanding the links between the China trade and other export businesses such as shipping, the trade in alcoholic beverages, textiles, and provisions. By tracing the maritime careers of British interlopers, it could for the first time be shown that interlopers in the period covered by this study changed their Company affiliations at least 1.47 times on average over the course of their lives, and some even up to four times. The chapter also made the point that it greatly mattered what training, trade specialisations, and areas of operation merchants had received and build up before they entered the Canton trade. Of much more than mere biographical interest, it was demonstrated that the unique composition of a trader’s private network and his links to various places on and off the map of established commercial centres decisively shaped the ways in which the China trade took root and expanded in Europe. Merchants and mariners, in other words, brought their specific expertise, contacts, and market insights into that developing overseas trade, and thus shaped through their own commercial idiosyncrasies the future direction and integration of Chinese markets. The chapter also analysed the landscape of risk that interlopers entered and acted in when they decided to switch official allegiances. This necessarily included discussing the issues of legality and illegality of their employment, common strategies to avoid discovery, and the need for interlopers to perform different identities at times with the help of documents and language skills – and their uncertain authority and acceptance under the critical eyes of port officials and fellow Company servants.

The second chapter focused on the close links between the wholesale trade and Company imports. It detailed in particular the co-dependence of sedentary merchants and mobile China traders in terms of information exchange and for the successful acquisition and distribution of Chinese goods in Europe.

Sedentary merchants, who kept an eye on local preferences, changing fashions, and the needs of specific customers, placed large orders with individual China-bound supercargoes. The latter, in turn, profited from the precise market information for their own purchases and decision-making – the principle of reciprocity ruled the day. The collaboration between specialised dealers and supercargoes such as Charles Irvine enabled a steady stream of models, drawings, and patterns to travel between China and Europe and back. As part of a give-and-take relationship, China traders informed their associates and interested correspondents, sometimes before the actual arrival of a ship in domestic waters, about the different cargoes that were assembled in Canton, pointing out what goods might be of special interest to each of them. What the analysis of the routine correspondence between Canton traders and merchant houses such as Pye & Cruikshank and Jean Cossart & Bouwer in Amsterdam has clearly shown is that having a personal connection and informant among the supercargoes was a great advantage for sedentary merchants, who could try and use that connection to cherry-pick specific goods. The annual auctions in Gothenburg (the SEIC headquarters) were predictable in the sense that Company directors, their bookkeepers, and a group of itinerant China traders – all insiders – figured prominently as buyers at their own auctions throughout the period of this study. Private traders secured some of their own imported goods and many more Company goods to engage in the profitable re-export trade. Cheaper varieties of tea, a speciality of the smaller Companies on the European continent, were bought up by British interlopers in large quantities and sold on to professional smugglers in places such as Ostend or Dunkirk, or were indeed forwarded by a string of kinsmen to the northern markets of England, Scotland, and Ireland directly – of course, untaxed.

As Beverly Lemire has argued in her book on *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures*, ‘it is imperative to assess the full canvas of activities within economic life’ if we were to understand the widening of local and global markets.⁸ She rightly stressed the many possible routes commodities could take and how extralegal systems were ‘crucially important in explaining the penetration of these commodities to the farthest corners and least auspicious consumers’.⁹ Extralegality, a term originally coined by the urban anthropologists Alan Smart and Filippo Zerilli in 2014, comes in three ways, all of which played a significant role in this book: ‘the illegal, the informal; and the not-yet-(il)legal’.¹⁰ A large number of activities that China

8 Lemire, *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures*, p. 141.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 141; Smart and Zerilli, ‘Extralegality’, pp. 222–38.

traders engaged in were not explicitly regulated by their employing Company, or simply became habitual practices that were tolerated because of their routine nature. The early and extremely dynamic phase of the China trade has lent itself particularly well to the investigation of innovative and sometimes transgressive commercial practices in the making – and their later formal prohibition, approval or de facto toleration. Indeed, commercial and Company regimes and privileges were defined and consolidated during the process of managing the ingenious schemes of private traders.

As a symptomatic case, Chapter 2 revealed the various strategies used by Company personnel to undermine the system of competitive bidding at Company auctions, not only in the Swedish, but also in the case of the English East India Company. Auctions are among the most poorly understood institutions of the trade in Asian wares. This is the more lamentable since these sales operated right at the intersection of the import trade and the world of wholesale and retail activities in Europe. Through the study of auction records, we are able to see what goods were sold in varying detail, and we learn something about the minimum prices they were supposed to fetch. In the case of the Swedish auctions, a particular focus of study in the present work, the large number of surviving catalogues provide the names of the buyers and the prices they agreed on to pay for a specific lot. Auction records also reveal which of the goods on offer belonged to private traders, and what kind of goods were imported on behalf of the Companies. Imported goods and qualities were usually shown to interested buyers during a fixed period of a few days before the start of any auction. However, as complaints by foreign merchants revealed, this was not always the case. It was evidently difficult to bid for a lot without knowing its precise contents. Access to warehouses and town houses, where musters were put on display, provided the only chance to assess the quality of the desired wares, because the auction itself took place on the basis of catalogue entries and short descriptions of the wares alone. Private traders in the EIC would draw up contracts with potential buyers before the auction started. In these contracts, both parties already agreed on a certain price and split the difference among them if another buyer were to pay more for the wares at the auction. At the same time, I showed how those China traders also bought up goods on behalf of their commercial contacts abroad who could not attend the auctions themselves.

Chapter 3 then shifted the focus to the established practices surrounding the buying and shipping of Chinese goods on Company vessels. With a close-up on the surviving records of Charles Irvine (who repeatedly travelled to Canton in the employ of the Swedish East India Company as head merchant, or 'chief supercargo'), the functioning of the special commission system was

thoroughly investigated. Most commissions of customised items were ordered and gifted among colleagues and within the larger circle of Company servants. Canton traders and their families were also studied here as avid and expert consumers of Chinese export wares – the wives, sons, daughters, and friends of commanders and supercargoes were all continuously exposed to new designs and Chinese products through these commercial mediators and arbiters of taste. Packing lists, correspondence, and sales catalogues, as well as images of the goods themselves, revealed what private traders bought in Canton and how they used the small living space of their private cabin to transport their precious cargo. A focus on private trade, the channel by which the largest variety of goods reached Europe, revealed a characteristic and important feature of the China trade, for which there existed no equivalent elsewhere at the time. This previously neglected feature of China trade goods was their attractive and easy-to-store packaging. This led to an explosion of symmetrically shaped containers, boxes, trunks, and cases (which could be stacked and fitted inside one another) and which consumers ingeniously transformed from carrying items made for travel into beautifully decorated, stationary pieces of domestic furniture – once their sea journey had ended. Private traders wisely refused to buy any bulky furniture that would take up too much space and could not be secured safely on board the ships. The preference for boxy shapes, purpose-built containers for fragile wares and for furniture in parts (such as planks for chair seats) dominated the design and logistic of the China trade.

Finally, Chapter 4, a case study on Cadiz, the silver city of Europe, revealed the various functions that the city had for the organisation of private trade in different Companies and the work of the interloper in particular. Cadiz was decisively more than a stopping point for fresh provisions: it developed into a vital place of exchange, financial coordination, and passenger traffic. Loans were made, silver, export goods, staff and provisions were distributed between Company ships, and private deals were forged. As became evident, Cadiz's foreign merchant communities were drawn into the Canton trade through their intimate connection with the supercargoes and captains of the different Companies. They were also arranging both third-party investments (in the form of sea loans) for individual Company employees as well as the supply of European goods and Mexican silver for journeys to China. Through the exemplary focus on Cadiz, my interest in commercial practices and the mobilisation of private-trade networks in Europe thus de-centred the traditionally headquarters-focused historiography of the China trade. The Company's official administrative and commercial centres now appear as still vital but certainly not the only significant nodes of commercial transaction and logistical support for China-bound East Indiamen.

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