Tea Road Legacy of the 18th-19th century in America and China

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The exhibition’s name is Tea Road Legacy of the 18th-19th century in America and China. The curators are Youlin Guo, Sara Chuai, Lucky Zhou, and Daniel Wang. The exhibition’s theme is the marks of prosperous tea trade between America and China (especially Guangzhou province).

The exhibition has a portrait of a Chinese businessman, a sewing table, a teapot, and a punch porcelain bowl, and these four items are organized thematically. The order of these items argues that the development of the tea trade proceeded from the start of the tea trade, the interlacing and tailoring of the tea overseas industry, and the perfect mixing of different cultures and economic communication as the embodiment of early America and Chinese trading diplomacy.

The exhibition’s title conveys a position or perspective that the popularity and influence of the tea trade in 18th-19th century America and China is comparable to the Silk Road commerce thousands of years ago. The reminiscent display, detailed wall texts, the Peabody Essex museum collection of Asian Export Art, and the supplementary materials cooperate in narrating the story perfectly by connecting with the history of the tea trade between China and America from the 18th-19th century cohesively while help people emerge into the exhibit. They help the audience of the museum, who are native Bostonians or Chinese Americans who are interested in that period and the events that occurred to particularly Boston and Guangzhou. Americans that take the tour in this exhibition would be surprised at how much these countries’ economic and cultural development were closely related. Chinese-American audiences might learn more about their ancestors’ land and become more culturally confident with their origins and backgrounds.
At Guangzhou, a Chinese artist painted the oil painting on canvas around 1835, depicted Wu Bingjian, also known as Houqua. This oil painting was a gift of Rebecca B. Chase, Ann B. Mathias, Robert H. Bradford, and Charles E. Bradford, in honor of their mother and father, Rebecca Brown Bradford and Robert Fiske Bradford, in 1990. Wu Bingjian was the leading maritime merchant in Guangzhou. He established close relations with influential customers in Europe and the United States in business and has risen rapidly in foreign trade by relying on advanced operation principles. His firm had the closest connections with foreign business people and could find its way among the East India Company, bulk traders, and American traders. He has also ventured across the ocean to invest in railways, trade securities, and even insurance, turning Jardine into a veritable multinational conglomerate.
An artist made the Sewing table in Guangzhou, China, around 1837. It was created by lacquered wood covered by gold. There are boats and houses carved by gold inside the lid of the sewing machine, which implies the increasing oversea trade between China and foreign countries. The table is partially recessed with ivory tools in the middle, and there is a red silk bag replica adorns under it. The item is a gift from Mr. Francis B. Lothrop. While, its author was originated in Guangzhou, which implies the excellent relationship between Guangzhou and foreign merchants at that time. Around 1837, Guangzhou’s import and export trade to Britain increased, mainly the export of tea. The gold inlaid on the sewing machine and the ivory inside reflect the prosperity of the time. The sewing table is in this exhibition because it reflects the growth and development of Guangzhou’s foreign trade at that time.
Tea, a carrier of cultures, lifestyles, commercial trade, emotions, and thoughts in the historical period, plays a vital role in China’s maritime trade. As the most important and the only port in China in the early 19th century, Guangzhou dominated the world tea market. The silver and ivory teapot made by unknown artist in Guangzhou, China, in 1790-1810. The teapot in the picture is pure white and flawless, symbolizing the prosperous tea trade in Guangzhou before the Opium War and the recognition of Chinese tea by western countries. The teapot and the other three exhibits illustrate the rising world demand for Chinese tea in the early 19th century. For example, between 1843 and 1860, most of the tea from Guangzhou was exported to Britain. By the 1860s, 70 to 80 percent of China’s tea exports were still transported to the British market.
The porcelain punch bowl dated around 1800-1815 has an unknown Chinese artist. The bowl has a painting of a ship’s skeleton with four holders on both sides. There is a sentence written above the boat: “The strength and wealth of the nations.” The saying represents that states that develop overseas trade possess great power and fortunes. It suggests the profitable economic relationship which the international tea trade built at that time. “American merchants began to participate in ‘chain trade’ routes—the buying and selling of goods en route to Guangzhou” after 1815, and “the amount of porcelain exported” from China overseas is about “6,000 piculs per year around the 1820s.” (Wikipedia 2021) Since tea has always been the popular goods, the innovation of tea clippers led to greater yield and higher profits, so “in 1834, tea accounted for over 80% of the American trade from China.” (Dulles 1930)

The punch bowl is the last object in the exhibition because it represents the perfect cultural communication between Chinese specialty—porcelain and Western-style decoration as the harvest of global tea trading. The Chinese artist produces the items with English writing on it implies the foreign culture importation in China and tea’s international exportation in western countries like America.
Bibliography


2. Wall text, E82997, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.
