

Intersecting spaces in 18th century Canton

18th century Canton was a major global trade hub. The actual area for foreign trade, however, was very small. It included a number of spaces, the access to which was limited based on combinations of factors such as class, ethnicity and gender. As feminist geographers have pointed out, spaces were not predetermined physical arenas where social interaction was confined. Rather, they were constructed in this interaction. Additionally, power negotiations between groups must be related to the simultaneous construction of the spaces and the groups themselves.¹ While the history of 18th Canton is by and large a peaceful one, it is nevertheless a history of power relations. These relations were constantly and closely intertwined with the construction of gender, ethnicity and class. Thus, the spaces of Canton did not only produce and reproduce perceptions of self and other, men and women, but were produced by them.

Based on travel writings and correspondence by foreign traders, this paper studies the spaces encountered and constructed by the employees of the Swedish East India Company during the second half of the 18th century in Canton. These spaces include the city, the factory and the water – the fluid in-between that delimited and connected other spaces. I analyse how these spaces were restricted and by whom, as well as their use and the movements between them from a social perspective. How was the social structure of the foreign community affected by spatial opportunities and restrictions, how did it shape the spaces, and how were the groups themselves constructed in relation to this process?

The City Space

By the time that the Swedes arrived in Canton, it was a city of one million. But the traders were only allowed to live and work in the small foreign quarters situated outside of the city walls, which were just a few kilometres long and wide. Furthermore, the sailors and most officers lived on the ship, meaning that the only foreign traders in Canton were the

¹ See for example Doreen Massey, *Space, place and gender* (Oxford: 1994). See in particular Sara Ahmed, *Strange encounters : embodied others in post-coloniality*, (London: 2000).

supercargoes (the officers responsible for the trade), meaning that the community of foreign traders was not more than a hundred men.²

The border of this space was obvious. The chaplain Gustav Fredrik Hjortberg's narrative from 1748 lingered on the city walls cutting them off from the city. He talked at length about its construction, height and width, and even walked the length of it – 1856 steps.³ Hjortberg was not alone in this fascination; many employees in the Swedish company described this wall.⁴ It might have summed up their experience of China: their movement was delimited, and beyond the wall was a Chinese world where they were not welcome, "lest a man wants to be regaled with stones, dogs, abuse and the throwing of sticks."⁵ The wall defined the border between 'them' and 'us', where 'us' was the foreign trade groups, sometimes including the Chinese merchants and within the foreign quarters, and 'them' was the bustling city of Canton, and the vast multi-ethnic Qing Empire.

Additionally, the wall functioned as a protection. The company employees felt threatened when they left their quarters.⁶ The chaplain Pehr Osbeck described how stones and sand were thrown at them, and stressed the vulnerability and fear he felt.⁷ The violence and threat of violence came from the Chinese lower classes. In the foreign quarters their safety was guaranteed, ironically, by other Chinese. Whenever he left the foreign quarters, Osbeck was forced to bring with him a Chinese escort, which he thought: "much lessened the pleasure and hastened the return trip."⁸ The guide embodied the restrictions of Canton.

No foreign women were allowed into the foreign quarters, nor were Chinese women allowed to meet foreigners. This was so that the foreigners would not settle.⁹ Gender separation made this space into what the Chinese officials needed it to be, a place solely devoted to trade, but this restriction was heavily criticised by the Swedish

² Paul A. van Dyke, *Port Canton and the Pearl River Delta* (Ann Arbor: 2002) 195-197.

³ Gustav Fredrik Hjortberg, *Ost-Indisk Resa 1748 och 1749 förrättad och beskrefwen af Gustaf Fr. Hjortberg*, M. 281a, The manuscript collection, The Swedish Royal Library (henceforth Manus, KB), 4.

⁴ Olof Torén, *En Ostindisk Resa* (Stockholm: 1961), 87; Pehr Osbeck, *Dagbok öfver en ostindisk resa åren 1750, 1751, 1752* (Stockholm: 1969), 139–140; Christopher Henric Braad, *Journal på min til Canton uti China, i Herrans namn tilämnade Resa med Swenska Osti-Indiska Compagniets Skeppet HOPPET som föres af Capitainen Friedrich Pettersson*, X389, Uppsala University Library, 60–70, 91.

⁵ Hjortberg, *Ost-Indisk Resa*, 53. My translation.

⁶ Israel Reinius, *Journal hållen på resan till Canton i China 1745 till dess Slut Åhr 1748* (Helsingfors: 1939), 297–298.

⁷ Osbeck, *Dagbok öfver en Ostindisk resa*, 208–212, 253.

⁸ Osbeck, *Dagbok öfver en Ostindisk resa*, 252. My translation.

⁹ van Dyke, *Port Canton and the Pearl River Delta*, 134.

travellers.¹⁰¹¹ The practice was construed as the Chinese men "imprisoning" their women, and was accompanied by examples of how badly the Chinese men treated their women.¹² This was an Orientalist tactic of vilifying the other through depicting the local women as mistreated victims, and the Europeans their champions.¹³ This separation demonstrated Chinese power over the foreigners, which opened for for a counter-reaction where the Chinese men were labelled cruel tyrants.

The Factory Space

In the foreign quarters, life and work for the Swedish East India Company employees were restricted to the factories. The factory dining room was crucial, since eating together played a central role in this social world.¹⁴ Within a week of arriving the Swedish employees had been visited by most Chinese merchants and foreign traders.¹⁵ They thereafter regularly invited each other.¹⁶ Special occasions were celebrated with common dinners, which were quite inclusive. A Swedish logbook noted the 31st of October 1760: "The coronation of the English king was celebrated in their Factory, where all European nations were present, except the French who were not invited."¹⁷ Normally, however, the dinners included less than a dozen men, to invite more was too big an operation in the 18th century's cramped quarters.¹⁸ Practical spatial limitations affected the social space.

The Chinese merchants were well aware of the spatial restrictions on the foreigners, and knew to make use of it. If a sticky situation developed, they could make themselves unavailable by going inside the walled city. The foreigners could do little but to

¹⁰ Reinius, *resan till Canton*; Torén, *En Ostindisk Resa*, 362; Johan Brelín, *En äfventyrlig resa til och ifrån Ost-Indien, Södra America och en del af Europa åren 1755, 56 och 57* (Stockholm : 1973), 51–52; Erik von Stockenström, *Beskrifning öfver kejsaredömet China*, M 270, Manus, KB, 8–9.

¹¹ Osbeck, *Dagbok öfver en Ostindisk resa*, 142.

¹² Osbeck, *Dagbok öfver en Ostindisk resa*, 171; Reinius, *resan till Canton*, 206.

¹³ Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid zones : maternity, sexuality, and empire in Eighteenth-Century English narratives* (Baltimore: 1995), 95.

¹⁴ Baron Carl Rappe, *Dag-Book För Skept. Rycksens Ständer på Resan til Surat och Canton Åhr 1760*, 61 & 62, M288, Manus, KB, 19.

¹⁵ Colin Campbell, *A passage to China : Colin Campbell's diary of the first Swedish East India Company expedition to Canton, 1732-33* (Stockholm: 1996), 94.

¹⁶ Campbell, *A passage to China*, 94; Paul A. van Dyke and Cynthia Viallé, *The Canton-Macao Dagregisters – 1762* (Macao: 2006), 100; Osbeck, *Dagbok öfver en Ostindisk resa*, 169; Torén, *En Ostindisk Resa*, 204.

¹⁷ Rappe, *Dag-Book För Skept. Rycksens Ständer*, 25. My translation.

¹⁸ *Diaries of Henry Hayne 1797-1828*, William R Perkins Library, Reel 19, Duke University, 122-125, 127–128; Rappe, *Dag-Book För Skept. Rycksens Ständer*, 17.

daily go and ask for them. This displacement tactic could buy the Chinese merchants days or weeks, and advantages in trade.¹⁹ When the supercargo Olof Lindahl described a conflict between the Chinese authorities and the European merchants during the 1780s, the isolation of the foreign traders is striking. The moment the conflict had escalated to the point where the Chinese servants and merchants stopped coming to the factory, that space changed from the centre of a bustling network to as isolated as a desert island.²⁰

The factories of course also affected the people living in them. The Swedish factory was for example used for lodge meetings for the masonic lodge St. Elisabeth from the 1760s and onwards. The tight quarters forced the freemasons in the Swedish East India Company "to ballot and initiate the candidate Gothéen who lived so close to the lodge room that it was impossible to work in full secret."²¹ It was difficult to enact any spatial exclusion in these quarters, even for a secret society. The factory was a contact space, which could be isolated, while still not allowing for privacy.

The Water Space

The harbour was an in-between environment, neither sea nor land. It was not only a meeting of the land and sea, but also its own space, which was neither one. The water, constituted both a connection and a border.

The ship was a shifting space even while unmoving in the harbour. The company ships were used for freemason meetings and company dinners.²² Although the ship was at the anchorage a few kilometres from Canton, it could overlap with the factory space. The ship was, just like the factory, an international meeting space, with Chinese craftsmen and workers on board. The ship and the factory were meeting spaces for different classes.²³ But the two most commonly noted Chinese on board were the Chinese

¹⁹ Rappe, *Dag-Book För Skept. Rycksens Ständer*, 19; Paul A. van Dyke and Cynthia Viallé, *The Canton-Macao Dagregisters - 1763* (Macao: 2008), 35.

²⁰ Olof Lindahl, *Ett superkargkrig i Kanton 1784*, M 285, Manus, KB, 5.

²¹ *Minutes of meetings of St John's Elisabeth General Lodge in Canton on 30th September 1788*, The collected papers of Christopher Haffner, VSW 166 LOD, The Library and Museum of Freemasonry, London.

²² Van Dyke and Viallé, *The Canton-Macao Dagregisters - 1762*, 100; Osbeck, *Dagbok öfwer en Ostindisk resa*, 169; Torén, *En Ostindisk Resa*, 98; Israel, *resan till Canton*, 204.

²³ Johan Eric Morén *Skeppsjournal förd ombord å Ost Comps Skepp Freden Kapt. Morén under 1746-1747 års expedition*, M 286, Manus, KB; Samuel Ulric de Frese, *Utdrag af Journalen Hållen Ombord på Skeppet Gustaf den Tredje under Expeditionen till och från Canton Åren 1799, 1800-1801*, M 278, Manus, KB, 12.

responsible for the supplies, and the customs official. Only the supercargo and the captain ever interacted with the custom's official. When he first came to the ship to calculate the fees, his servants brought a table, complete with tablecloth and supplies, on board the ship, to demonstrate his position.²⁴ One could argue that he brought his office, and his authority with it, and changed the ship space. When leaving the ship, he took it with him.

The relationship between the spaces of Canton can be inferred from the movement between them. The logbooks meticulously recorded who was where at which point, and if they moved. The supercargoes generally stayed in the factories, and the captain on board. When the supercargoes went to live in the factory, they changed both the factory space and the ship space. Sailors and lower officers could move between these spaces if they got permission, but did so only for specific purposes and very rarely. Whenever a Chinese official, the captain or a supercargo was moving on or off the ship, or when a ship came or left, they were saluted.²⁵ Hearing the salute, one knew that the spaced had changed, and depending on who came or left they knew how.

The harbour of Canton was "covered with small boats, and innumerable trading and war junks – it was the only place we had seen in China where the boats were so numerous as to be anchored in streets and where whole families were residing."²⁶ It was a minority group, called Tanka, who lived on boats in the harbour.²⁷ Their home, the water space demonstrates that there was no strict delimitation between sea and land, ship and harbour. Some lived in the in-between. Part of this floating population was the women and men on so-called flower boats, which were floating brothels. The flower boats specialised on different groups, and boats that welcomed foreigners were not visited by Chinese. Additionally, there were different boats for officials, merchants, officers and sailors.²⁸ The

²⁴ Sven Kjellberg, *Svenska ostindiska compagnierna 1731–1813 : kryddor, te, porslin, siden*, (Malmö: 1974), 59.

²⁵ See for example *Diary for the ship Harrison*, East India Company Records, G/12/42, British Library; Van Dyke and Viallé, *The Canton-Macao Dagregisters – 1762*, 11; Erik von Stockenström, *Dagboksanteckningar under en resa till Ostindien 1767-1769*, M 270, Manus, KB; Rappe, *Dag-Book För Skept. Rycksens Ständer; Morén, Skeppsjournal förd ombord*; Johan Rundsten, *Skeppsjournal förd ombord å Ost. Comp. Skepp Prins Carl Kapten J Rundsten (död under resan) under expeditionen till China åren 1763-1764*, M 289, Manus, KB.

²⁶ *Diaries of Henry Hayne 1797-1828*, 130.

²⁷ Wolfram Eberhard, *China's minorities yesterday and today* (Belmont: 1982), 82–93.

²⁸ Paul A. van Dyke, "Floating Brothels and the Canton Flower Boats 1750-1930," *Revista de Cultura* 27 (2011): 31–50.

women living on Tanka or flower boats did not leave them; they were dependent on the men to come to them. Here, gender separation met ethnic and class separation.

Conclusion

The city, the factory and the water spaces in Canton all provided restrictions and possibilities, and all the spaces formed, and were formed by, social relations. Noting where someone was meant saying what he did there, since every space had an expected activity. This specificity of the spaces is central to understand the social relationships of Canton. The gender theorist Sara Ahmed argues that: "Strangers are suspicious because they have no purpose, that is they have no legitimate function within the space which could justify their existence or intrusion."²⁹ Foreign traders were uncomplicated as long as they were in the foreign quarters, and sailors while on the ship. It was the transgression of space, i.e. to break into a space in which they had no function, which was problematic. The will to keep the spaces clearly delimited forms part of the explanation why interaction with women was forbidden. Since they had no function, they were disruptive of the space. The power relations there were not only between Chinese and foreigners, but rather different ethnicities, gender and classes constantly interacted in these spaces, making the movement between the spaces – and the restrictions of this movement – part of the intersectional constructions of gender and ethnic regimes in Canton.

Furthermore, one can discuss who was the stranger in the foreign quarters of Canton, and when. Ahmed sees the stranger as a category *within* a community. As "the outsider inside," the stranger takes on a spatial function. A stranger is not a predetermined group, but rather an effect of a process of exclusion and inclusion.³⁰ In this context, that made the stranger, defined as the one not belonging, into a shifting group, which sometimes constituted of foreign women, sometimes of Chinese women. Sometimes the strangers were the European traders, and other times it was the seamen – or the Chinese merchants. The foreign supercargoes could form a common group, but in the moved from one space to another, for example into another factory or the masonic lodge, they could turn into strangers.

²⁹ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 31.

³⁰ Ahmed, *Strange encounter*, 3–6.