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The Canton Trade is based on Van Dyke’s PhD thesis awarded at the University of Southern California in 2002. It details the development of a global trading system involving European and American countries whose demand for tea and porcelain opened up the south China coastal region to a tightly regulated trading system where silver and a variety of European goods were exchanged for these items. Anyone interested in the history of the trade between China and Europe will find this an invaluable source of information, including researchers such as ourselves investigating the context in which Chinese Pidgin English developed. This review is largely written from the point of view of the sociolinguist, although it should be evident that there is a much wider potential audience for this work.

The book is divided into nine chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. In the introduction and chapter one, the author outlines the essentials of what came to be known as “the Canton trade” as China “opened its doors to the world” around the end of the 17th century. Of all the Chinese ports, Canton emerged as the clear choice as the principal centre for foreign trade because of a number of advantages. Canton officials had experience of dealing with foreigners at Macao, and the unique geographical properties of the city of Canton and the Pearl River Delta meant that controlling the movement of foreigners in the tidal waters left the Chinese authorities feeling more at ease with trading and security arrangements. Moreover, the Canton officials exhibited a flexibility in dealing with foreigners that was lacking elsewhere, and this led to a relatively stable and predictable system of tariffs and fees.

In chapter two, there are more details of trade during this period, roughly from the beginning of the 18th century to the abrupt end of the system in 1842. The roles of the traders, suppliers of essential items (“compradors”), pilots, “linguists” (mediators) and customs officials are outlined, along with the complex set of administrative procedures which evolved and which every foreign ship was expected to follow. The chief customs officer or “Hoppo” in Canton held a great deal of power, exercised through the agency of various subordinates, but the system was kept competitive by allowing the principal foreign traders (“supercargoes”) some choice in the merchants, pilots and linguists they worked with. The over-
riding concern was ensuring a steady supply of revenue to the Qing Emperor in Beijing.

The next chapter, “piloting the Pearl River Delta,” describes some of the practical issues involved in negotiating the shallow tidal waters between Macao and Canton. Only licensed pilots, usually from Macao, could perform the task of guiding ships to their destination, but their role included keeping a close eye on the foreigners. Nevertheless, a good deal of smuggling took place to put internal strains on the system, which was further seriously eroded when the advent of the steamship reduced reliance on the services of pilots.

Of particular interest to readers of this journal is chapter five, detailing the work of “linguists.” These were not linguists in the modern sense, although interpreting constituted part of their job. Their role was complex, but mainly involved acting as intermediaries between foreign merchants and Chinese officials. These Cantonese-speaking linguists needed to be competent first in Portuguese as well as Mandarin, the language of the officials, but as English-speakers began to dominate trade, (Pidgin) English became the crucial medium of communication. There was deep mistrust of linguists by foreign traders, as they were widely perceived as telling officials what they wanted to hear rather than attempt an accurate translation of the traders’ representations (see also Benson, this issue). As Van Dyke notes, “Their primary task was to mediate, so being able to effectively negotiate, persuade and pacify were skills more important to the linguists’ careers than being able to interpret foreigners’ actions correctly or translate their intentions accurately” (p. 78). Each ship’s captain had to use one of a limited choice of linguists, who became a kind of public relations person through which all negotiations were channeled. Because of the privileged information available to linguists, there was also widespread mistrust of their intentions, and indeed linguists were shown to be frequently involved in illicit deals using their inside information for personal gain at the expense of both foreign merchants and imperial revenues.

Chapter six explores the reasons for the weakening and ultimate collapse of the elaborately developed trade system. Here the author argues against some other historical accounts which suggest uncontrolled corruption as the cause of the demise, and gives an account of a variety of checks and controls which were attempted to keep the system properly regulated. In spite of these measures, weaknesses inherent in the procedures, for example, the discriminatory fees charged to smaller ships and difficulties Chinese merchants had in debt collection had already set in by the time technological and military advances of the foreigners hastened the end of the era. Some intimate details of trade in some specific items such as rice and opium follow
in chapter seven. A major feature of this trade was illegal contraband activities with attendant rampant smuggling and corruption of junior officials. At the same time, pirate attacks became more frequent, allowing foreign patrol boats to advance the opium trade while claiming to be countering piracy. Chapter eight deals with the Portuguese trade at Macao and its inter-connections with the Canton trade, which served to keep prices competitive and led to the growth of the capital market in Canton.

Chapter Nine looks back over the period, reviewing how trade, especially in tea became established, stabilised and controlled with a consistent set of regulations and cost structures, but also how internal weaknesses gradually tore it apart. This came to a head with the massive outflow of silver in exchange for opium and the eventual crisis point of the first opium war. This chapter alone is a useful overview of the whole period, and would be useful for a reader who needs a quick fix of information on the Canton trade but has not time to digest the whole book.

The conclusion continues this retrospective view of events. It is ironic that of the millions of documents such as daybooks, chops, inspection slips, customs ledgers, passes, reports etc, none survived in China; the few that do are all in the archives of European or American museums. This failure to preserve documentation is seen by the author as symptomatic of the failure of the system; by failing to preserve detailed accounts of its operation, those operating it hastened its demise. Lacking sufficient information about the nuts and bolts of the multifarious transactions constituting the trade, imperial officials attempting a belated correction of its problems found the decay too far advanced for effective remedies.

The book is clearly written, coherent and packed with fascinating details of the day-to-day operation of the trade. Its origins as a dissertation are evident in this wealth of detail and meticulous citation of sources, but fortunately the book is readable as a work in its own right and it has made the transformation much better than many ex-theses. Those who need chapter and verse for the sources cited can look up the unobtrusive footnotes and consult the copious notes for each chapter - in fact one third of the book consists of notes, sources and the index. Those who do not need such details can continue to read without interruption. 41 plates bring alive the realities of the trade by showing a wide variety of documents associated with the conduct of transactions at all levels.

Van Dyke challenges received wisdom in a number of areas, especially by attending to actual practices rather than policy formulations, and showing that the prevailing view of wholesale corruption by officials as the sole cause of all problems is too simplistic. He shows that previous historical analyses
have often depended exclusively on limited sources, such as East India Company records, while a great proportion of trade was in fact conducted by smaller companies and commission merchants. Such vital areas as the junk trade were also usually missing from EIC records. By careful attention to all available sources, the author provides a more complete and credible analysis.

It is slightly disappointing to sociolinguists that there is not more about the details of language used in the various trade interactions described, but this is hardly the fault of the author - few of the sources mention such matters, and it is left to researchers such as those of other papers in this volume to glean what little information is available in an attempt to reconstruct the origin and development of Chinese Pidgin English. In spite of this, the book provides a wealth of information about the daily interactions which constitute the cross-cultural milieu in which a pidgin language typically develops, and this is invaluable to illuminate the conversations described in works such as Tong King-sing’s *Chinese-English Instructor* described elsewhere in this issue. Van Dyke’s book is a fine achievement, carefully researched and clearly set out, and is highly recommended to anyone interested in any aspect of the history of this period.