Canton (Guangzhou), China, witnessed the earliest and longest settlement of English speaking Westerners in China. China confronted Westerners with an ancient governmentally integrated state that into the nineteenth century would have trade on its own terms. By Chinese Imperial decree, foreign residence was restricted to a set of buildings on the banks of the Pearl (Zhujiang) River known as the Shisan Hang, or Thirteen Factories. The factories initially reflected the utilitarian design of the surrounding Chinese merchants’ business premises (hang), and were in fact owned by the Chinese monopolists who traded with the West. Despite Chinese restrictions, however, Western merchants were not going to ignore the potential fortunes to be made there. The factories and their surrounding urban fabric soon adjusted in a number of ways, some small and some more profound, to accommodate the Western merchants, their social usages, and their aspirations. While foreign merchants became increasingly common and their residency prolonged during the latter life of the Thirteen Factories, their buildings continued to be at risk, either from accidental fire or intentional assault.

While the first Westerners to arrive in southeast China were the Portuguese who settled in Macau in the sixteenth century, the traditional hub of trade in the region was Canton, at the expansion of the Pearl River into a great delta. Other Western merchant nationalities began appearing in Canton regularly in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, with the French East India Company and the British East India Company each sending a couple of ships a year between 1699 and 1714.\footnote{Paul A. Van Dyke, The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 10.} Trade throughout the early eighteenth century was intermittent, and Dutch and English ships in particular attempted trade at various locations along the South China Coast. In 1756–57, English ships tried to set up a trading entrepôt on the Chusan archipelago, which prompted the emperor (out of concern
for national security and likely tax revenues) to restrict all foreign trade excepting with Russia and Japan to Canton. The 1750s therefore mark the beginning of a continued expansion of trade for the city. This is when more permanent residences for Western merchants were established in Canton, on the banks of the Pearl River. By the early nineteenth century, the city was a booming metropolis of perhaps a million people.

The European merchants who came to Canton in this period would be introduced to their new environment on a boat trip from the main deep sea port at Whampoa along the broad but busy Pearl River. The city the early traders encountered was the third most populous in the Qing Empire after Beijing and Hangzhou. An early Westerner’s perception of the city was recorded in the 1650s’ travel accounts of Johan Nieuhof:

[Canton is] surrounded toward the East, West, and North, with very Fruitful and Delightful Hills, and borderes toward the South so very much upon the Sea, that on that side there is no part in all China so commodious to Harbour Shipping… For three miles upon this River is the City of Canton walled in, and some places adorned with rich and populous suburbs.

The city that Nieuhof encountered, the traditional capital of the “Two Guangs” (Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces) had recently undergone something of a transformation with the change in dynasty from the ethnic Han Chinese Ming to the ethnic Manchu Qing. An engraving by Nieuhof [Figure 7-1] and a nineteenth century map [Figure 7-2] provide some understanding of how the Chinese regime managed to confine the physical space claimed by the Westerners, while their economic influence grew. The first drawing, a view from the Pearl River, shows in the foreground what seem to be warehouses, precursors of the foreign factories. Further back sits the walled city and two major landmarks: the bottle-shaped mosque minaret, the ‘Flowery Pagoda,’ and in the far distance on a hill, the Zhenhai Lou watchtower. Walls around Chinese cities of some standing served both as a defense and a platform for surveillance. Inside the walled city were the government offices as well as some religious buildings. The oldest section of the city, the largest area enclosed by

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2 Ibid., 16.
3 The estimate of a million was made in The Chinese Repository, 2 (1833), 307–08.
5 Johan Nieuhof, An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham (London: 1669), 36.