BRITISH EXPORTS OF RAW COTTON FROM INDIA TO CHINA DURING THE LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES

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The [Chinese] people are remarkable for industry and perseverance: they are largely engaged in the manufacture of cotton goods; and although the cotton shrub has long been cultivated in China, the extent of their consumption obliges them to import much of the raw material. It is the raw produce generally which meets with the best market in China.2

Introduction

In the five decades or so after 1760, but especially in the years after 1785, exports of raw cotton from British India to China increased to such an extent that in 1805 consignments amounting to an unprecedented 55.3 million lbs were shipped into the southern port city of Canton.3 The establishment of this major commodity flow added an important integrative element into the increasingly multi-centred Asian cotton textile industry, and its quantitative significance may be

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3 This figure is calculated from data in Hosea B. Morse, The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635–1834 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926–29), vol. 3, p. 2. Morse noted the import of 414,208 piculs of cotton in 1805 (1 picul = 133.5 lbs). Over 98 per cent of this cotton was carried on British-owned ships.
compared to that of the retained imports of ‘wool cotton’ into Great Britain which in the same year stood at 58.9 million lbs.\(^4\) The extent of this importation of large quantities of raw cotton into China during this period has not always been acknowledged by global economic historians,\(^5\) but just as the burgeoning British cotton industry was dependent upon overseas sources of raw materials so too many Chinese weavers and spinners came to rely upon supplies of cotton delivered across long-distance transoceanic commodity chains. The crucial difference, of course, was that Britain did not grow cotton of its own whereas for many centuries cotton had loomed large within the Chinese agricultural sector. But as far as China was concerned, external supplies were in many ways no less essential to the cotton industry because ecological constraints caused marked fluctuations in the output of different cotton-growing regions during the mid- to late-eighteenth century, and this recast if not severed altogether some of the traditional supply linkages that existed between growers and weavers.\(^6\)

While China’s degree of dependence upon external supply was never as complete or long-lasting as that of Britain, large-scale imports of raw cotton nevertheless served in the short term to sustain cotton textile production through a difficult period of agricultural dislocation. As a result, the output of the cotton manufacturing sector was able to meet the consumption needs of a growing local population as well as the steadily expanding overseas demand for the cheap, robust, and usually cream-coloured cloths known to the British as ‘nankeens’.\(^7\) It must be

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\(^5\) See, for example, Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 227. When comparing constraints on textile production and shortages of cotton fibre in Europe and China, Pomeranz writes that “The big difference for Europe, of course, was that beginning in the late eighteenth century it would massively increase its imports of fiber ….” As has been pointed out, however, this overlooks the fact that China did exactly the same in order to ease pressures on its land. See Prasannan Parthasarathi, “The Great Divergence”, *Past and Present*, 176 (2002), pp. 282–83.

\(^6\) There is only limited and patchy data on Chinese cotton growing during the late eighteenth century, but for shortages of fibre and estimates of long-term trends in different regions see Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, pp. 132–42, 227, 323–26, 334–37. For the general background see also Kang Chao, *The Development of Cotton Textile Production in China* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1977).

\(^7\) Much of the nankeen cloth imported into Britain appears to have been off-white in colour, even though the use of red and yellow thread produced a wide range of white, yellow, and pink cloths. The nankeen cloth sold in Britain was used in the manufacture