In his preface, Paul A. Van Dyke sets out to defend writing yet another book about the Chinese merchants of the Guangzhou (Canton) and Macao-based China trade. As such a complex part of history, it seems to this reader that two scholarly books in twenty years could never be sufficient. The two major historical works that Van Dyke cites as specific to his field sit among several other books focused on different aspects of Guangzhou and Macao during the early height of trade there. This indicates that not only have few approached the trade history he does, but there is plenty of room for a variety of approaches and perspectives on this time and region. Whatever Van Dyke’s perception of this ratio of two in twenty, no other book out there is like his or does what his book sets out to accomplish.

Van Dyke reconstructs the activities of the eighteenth-century China trade at its terminal centers in Guangzhou and Macao. One can say he even completes some original construction because of his more complete scholarly approach, which moves beyond the familiar players and dominant established regional archives (the British and American sources, for instance) to include a thorough examination of all actors in the China trade to include the Dutch and Swedes, to name just two of his many. Bits of archival material found in China are put in dialogue with, say, multilingual contracts found in The Hague. His methodology of complete inclusion is clear and prominent and nothing if not impressive. The only assessment we can make of his approach in its exhaustive cataloging is this: how else can we know the many and changing facets of the burgeoning global China trade without tracking down all sources currently available—be they merchants with smaller stakes or seriously influential global traders? Van Dyke reveals what is historically and geographically distant in shockingly clear detail by tracing and following and uncovering. This attempt to find, dig up, recover, and put together the disparate individuals engaged in the China trade is most necessary in order to fully see the human machinations that facilitated the globality emanating from Macao and Guangzhou during the time that they were centers of global trade. Anyone who has researched or even read about the China trade can attest to the necessity of identifying and listening to the cadence of the voices of that time: cadences because the louder voices change along with changes in global positioning among emerging European powers and eventual empires. Furthermore, how can we understand the shifting
global field without recognizing and defining the complexity of locality in
the Guangzhou-Macao China trade: what is the relationship between fiadors
and compradors? Were Hong merchants Beaukeequa and Beau Khiqua the
same person? Were they relatives? What of Semqua and Samqua and Suqua?
Van Dyke systematically unravels and presents his international findings and
teaches us how to read and use the archives. Basically, he releases us from what
many might think of as transliteration hell.

It is in this presentation of his sources, and eventually articulated argu-
ment, that Van Dyke visualizes global history. In his unusual if not unique
commitment to show language research, textualizing actual documents and
paintings throughout the text, the reader sees the research and hence also sees
eighteenth-century Macao and Guangzhou. Just look at his sources: his far flung
archives, his languages, his translations, and his transliterations—all reveal
what we know but do not easily see in the history of the eighteenth-nineteenth
century China trade: a space of trade and relationship fluidity that pulled both
Chinese and foreign merchants together and apart in mutual, symbiotic ways.

In many ways, this work reads like a reference text: it is organized by com-
partmentalized sections that stand alone. It flows well as a text that includes
lists of different transliterations of family and familiar names, trading family
genealogy, trade practices, charts of export figures, contracts, junk destinations,
and appendices with exhaustive detail about the complications of the sources
which create a much more complete picture of the historical moment. All of
this is to say that one can use this text to fully understand a tremendous amount
about trading families, individuals, and networks of the eighteenth-century
China trade. In addition, the appendices and documents allow for primary
source analysis and could be used in classes relevant to this topic.

As a historical work, this text is slightly in between. It does not operate clearly
as a monograph since the historical argument (which is significant) emerges
secondary to the source and methodology emphasis. Nonetheless, Van Dyke's
compelling argument that Chinese governmental limits on Guangzhou and
Macao merchants impacted both European and Chinese trade shifts the cur-
rent analytical emphasis from suffering and limited foreigners at trade ports to
a more mutually similar trade experience at Guangzhou and Macao. Hence this
text opens up trade to further analysis but also makes us reconsider historical
works that scholars and students have been relying on for years. Furthermore,
Van Dyke confronts an “accepted truth” about the China trade: “Contrary to
what we generally read in history books, the Co-hong was put into place to
courage continual growth and preserve competition…. With the Co-hong
in place, the three-family consortium could continue its efforts to make
the trade more stable, but not to the point that competition suffered” (59).