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The Dutch East India Company's tea trade with China, 1757-1781

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Citation

Liu, Y. (2006, December 6). *The Dutch East India Company's tea trade with China, 1757-1781*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/5421>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

CHAPTER THREE

THE PURCHASE OF THE “VOC TEAS” IN CANTON

Introduction

Before the establishment of the China Committee in 1756, the trade representatives of the VOC did their business in Canton on the orders of the High Government, which had organized the China trade for two decades since 1735. After the conclusion of their transactions in Canton, they would return to Batavia on the China ships. All this changed the moment the China Committee took control of the direct China trade in 1756. From that time on, the trade representatives were obliged to comply with the instructions of the China Committee. After the Canton trade had been fully institutionalized following the official confirmation of the Canton System in 1760,¹ the trade representatives were no longer obliged to sail back to Batavia but were permitted by the Chinese authorities to spend each off-season in Macao.²

Under these new conditions two significant changes in the China trade occurred. As a matter of course, the trade representatives in Canton now received their ultimate instructions directly from the China Committee in the Dutch Republic and in their turn reported back all the information on the Canton market more quickly than they had been able to before. Their local situation also changed for the better because, as the trade representatives no longer had to leave China on the China ships upon their departure, they were now supplied with more opportunities to negotiate the tea business with the Chinese supplying agents during the off-season. The most advantageous aspect of this new approach was that it made it possible for the trade representatives to sample and test a greater range of teas. Consequently their selection was much improved. Inevitably, the longer the trade representatives remained in China, the more closely they found themselves involved in the tea market. Ultimately this was of the greatest possible help to the China Committee when it was drawing up more apposite instructions for the purchase of the “VOC teas” in the next season.

The long and the short of the story was that the trade representatives’ business in Canton entered a more favourable conjunction which continued unbroken until the early 1780s when the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784) broke out and the British Commutation Act (1784) was put in effect greatly to the detriment of the Dutch. For the time being,

Illustration 2 Tea garden, tea plant, tea leaves, and tea products

Tea garden



Tea



Tea leaves



Tea products

Green teas



Black teas



Oolong teas



during this halcyon period, a well functioning mode of transaction was established between the trade representatives of the VOC and the Chinese tea-supplying agents in Canton.

The “VOC teas”

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, China remained the only major supplier of export tea to the world market.³ The tea exported from China for the world market can be divided into three general sorts: green tea; black tea; and oolong tea. At the beginning of the trade towards the end of the seventeenth century, China exported only green tea. This changed at the beginning of the eighteenth century when black tea, which can be preserved much longer since the moisture has been removed during the process of manufacture, began to claim a slice of the market in the wake of increasing demand by the European companies. With this kind of tea, spoilage would be avoided on the months-long homeward voyage to Europe. In later years oolong tea also emerged as a much sought after variety and began to claim an important role in the tea export of China.

All teas come from the same plant: *Camellia sinensis* (Illustration 2).⁴ After it is planted, the tea tree needs little care; and when it is three or four years old, it can be plucked three or four times annually, in other words, its production is seasonal. The first picking takes place in mid-spring; after two or three weeks, the second picking starts, and then follows a third and sometimes a fourth. All these pickings must be completed seventy to eighty days before autumn begins. The freshly plucked tea leaves must be cured by heating (under the sun to encourage fermentation, if it is for black tea), roasting, and rolling. Leaf-curing usually takes place on the night of the day the leaves are picked. The quality of the tea depends on whether the picking and curing are completed within a certain period of time. The best tea comes from the first leaf-picking as long as the harvest is cured on time.⁵ Green tea, also known as unfermented tea, appears green because the chlorophyll (or green-plant pigment) still remains in the tea leaves and retains some of their moisture. The primary processing of green tea includes *fixation*, *rolling*, and *drying*. Black tea is 100 per cent fermented during the process of manufacture, which includes four procedures: *withering*, *rolling*, *fermenting*, and *drying*. Oolong tea is a partially fermented tea with 20 to 50 per cent of fermentation, combining the best qualities of green and black teas. It encapsulates the clarity and fragrance of green tea, with the refreshment and strength of black tea. True to its merits, the processing of oolong tea includes no less than six procedures: *sunshine withering*, *tedding the fresh leaves*, *rocking green*, *stir-fry green*, *rolling*, and *drying*.⁶

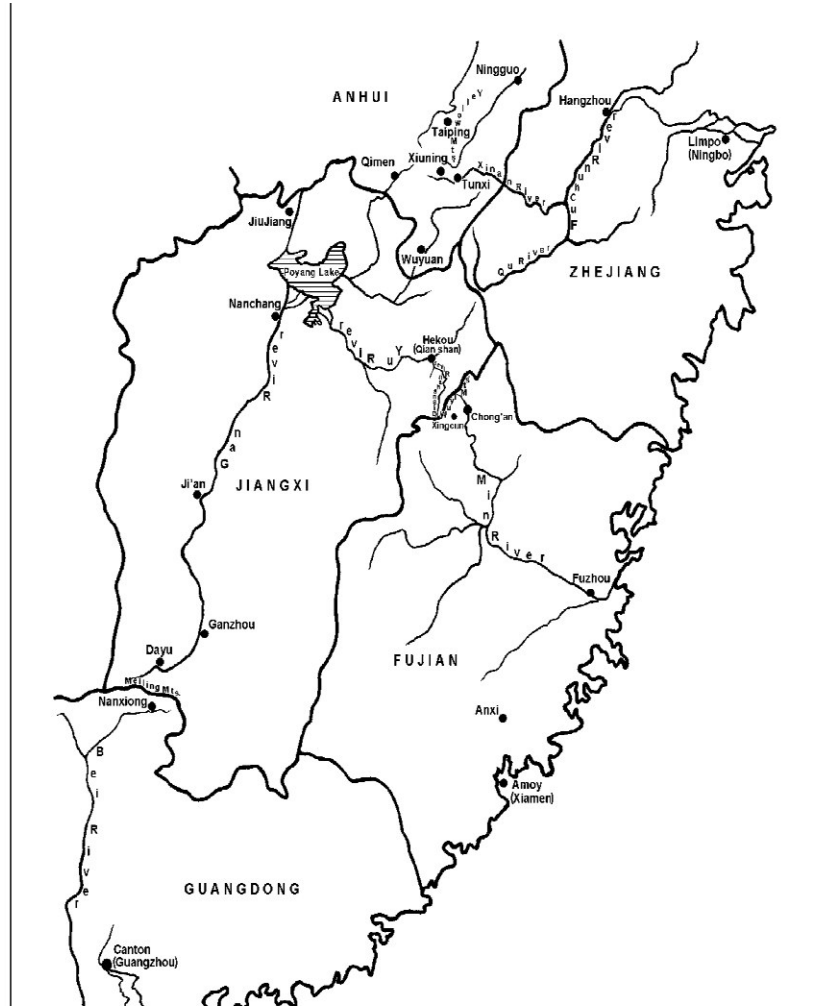
The teas purchased by the trade representatives of the VOC in Canton during the period concerned were the green and black teas of the afore-said three kinds. Their principal sources of supply were two regions, namely the south-easternmost part of Anhui Province and the Wuyi Mountains 武夷山 stretching along the border of the Provinces of Fujian and Jiangxi 江西.⁷

Chinese black tea originates from the Wuyi Mountains. Originally, Bohea (the local pronunciation of Wuyi) 武夷岩茶 evolved in Chong'an County (崇安, Wuyi Mountain City in what is now Fujian Province) in the late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).⁸ Compared to other varieties Bohea was dismissed as a black tea of an inferior sort. Despite the disdain of connoisseurs, it still occupied the biggest part of the European purchases in Canton because of its cheap price. Souchong 小种红茶, a unique black tea of high quality from the Wuyi Mountains, had a fragrance of smoked pine which put it into an altogether different class to Bohea. The finest quality Souchong was made of large leaves of great succulence and extreme delicacy gathered in fine, clear weather during the greatest heat of the day.⁹ Congou 工夫茶 was a refined sort of Souchong, and was obtained from the fifth and largest leaf gathered from shoot tips of the branch of a tea tree. The processing of Congou, which required time and patience, was meticulously carried out, making sure to eliminate any dust, fannings, or twigs. Pekoe 白毫香红茶 was a very fine black tea, rivalling Souchong, and much sought after by the VOC.¹⁰ It was made from the leaves around the buds at the end of the stem. The unopened leaf was often covered with a silvery dawn for forty-eight hours after it opened.¹¹ Besides this range of teas, small quantities of Ankay 安红, a low-quality black tea from Anxi 安溪 County were also often bought by the trade representatives to blend with Bohea, Congou, or even Souchong, in order to maintain an even quality.¹²

The bulk of the green tea sent to Canton to be sold to the European companies was processed in two areas in the south-eastern part of Anhui Province. One was the district forming the shape of a reversed triangle with its apex at Wuyuan 婺源 at the southern tip of the province¹³ and its base extending from Xiuning 休宁 in the east to Qimen 祁门 in the west, where the teas known as Hyson 熙春茶, Hyson skin 熙春皮 originated. Hyson was processed in twisted, long, thin leaves which unfurled slowly to emit a fragrant, astringent taste. It has been defined as warm, sunny, and spring-like, reflecting both the colour and the season in which Hyson was harvested;¹⁴ Hyson skin was processed from the light, inferior leaves which were separated from the better quality Hyson by a winnower.

The other green tea area was a belt of territory stretching north-west from Tunxi 屯溪, located slightly south-east of Xiuning, through the Yellow Mountains (or Huangshan 黄山) and Taiping 太平 to the northernmost point at Ningguo 宁国, from where the teas of Songlo 松萝茶 and Twankay 屯溪绿

Map 3 The “VOC tea”-producing areas and the routes of transporting teas to Canton



derived.¹⁵ Songlo was one sort of green tea with a thick blade but a thin vein, which was produced since the early Ming Dynasty and was well-known for its dark green colour, lasting pure aroma, and strong but mellow taste.¹⁶ Twankay, which was compared to “Green Gold”, was developed on the basis of Songlo but was of a much higher quality. It was originally produced in the areas adjacent to Tunxi. Gunpowder tea (珠茶, *Joosjes* in the Dutch records) was known as “pearl” tea because it was rolled into small balls resembling gunpowder pellets of a dark green colour. It has a mellow but tangy taste.¹⁷ Imperial tea (宫廷贡绿, *Bing* in the Dutch records) had a stunning, distinctively bright green colour and an unusual spiky appearance. Its striking leaves emitted an enchanting floral aroma and an unexpected depth of flavour which “[...] can be crafted just once a year and only then if all aspects of climate, cultivation, harvesting and manufacture come together to produce just the right combination of conditions needed to produce the ultimate expression of green tea art”.¹⁸ Gunpowder tea and Imperial tea most likely originated from both areas with a long history.

The “VOC teas” in the period under study consisted of all the above-mentioned black and green teas. The origin of the names of the teas varied. Bohea, Ankay, Songlo, and Twankay were called after their production sites: the counties of Wuyi, Anxi, and Tunxi, and the hills of Songluo. Souchong (Xiaozhong, or “small sort”) and Congou (Gongfu, or “elaborately prepared tea”) were designated according to their different processing methods. Hyson and Hyson skin were named after the inventor of this method of processing green tea. Pekoe (Baihao, or “white hair”) and Gunpowder tea (Zhucha, or “pearl tea”) derived their nomenclature from their colour and shape. Imperial tea was acclaimed for its exceptional use – excellent-quality green tea worthy of being served to the Imperial family.

Before the teas destined for the European market arrived in Canton, they had already made a long journey from the tea-cultivating areas all the way to the south. The first stage of their travels began when the processed tea was collected by tea peddlers who went from village to village. They did so either on their own initiative or as intermediaries for the wholesalers. The collected tea was then sold to the latter, who also acquired supplies directly from the tea cultivators. It was the wholesalers who mixed, blended, and packed the teas in their stores in the tea-distributing centres. They sold the tea on to merchants who had contacts with the Canton-European market and who had their own guilds and special warehouses in Canton. Sometimes the distinction between the wholesalers and tea merchants was blurred.

When the teas were ready for transport, they were shipped to Canton along traditional as well as alternative routes (see Map 3). Along the tra-

ditional route, black tea was first transported by river raft from the market town of Xingcun 星村 in the heart of the Wuyi Mountains to Chong'an County, and then the porters carried it over tortuous mountain roads to the Qianshan River 铅山河 in the neighbouring province of Jiangxi. Via the Qianshan River, the tea was shipped down to Qianshan 铅山 (or Hekou 河口) and then on to Poyang Lake via the Yu River 余江. Crossing Poyang Lake 鄱阳湖, the tea boats sailed up to Nanchang 南昌 on the Gan River 赣江. From Nanchang, they sailed upstream to Dayu County 大余. From there, the tea cargoes were carried over the Meiling Mountains 梅岭 to Nanxiong 南雄 in the north of Guangdong Province 广东. At Nanxiong, the tea was again loaded on boats and shipped down to Canton via the Bei River 北江.¹⁹ Green tea was first assembled and transported to Wuyuan, the southernmost county of Anhui Province, and shipped from there to Nanchang, where it joined the transport network for black tea. This transport via the traditional route was a very arduous one as we learn from a complaint made by the green tea merchants in 1819:²⁰

[...] in transporting, seven times is it transhipped to different boats and at three different passes does it pay duty; on its way it passes thro' many dangers, and it has difficulties to surmount which make the removal of it from place [to place] a painful task.

An alternative route for black tea went from Chong'an to Fuzhou 福州 via the Min River 闽江, and then onwards to Canton by sea along the coast. In the VOC time, this was not a frequent practice, as the then-existing laws banned the exportation of black tea via Fuzhou or any other port of Fujian Province.²¹ Another transport route for green and black tea followed intermittently in the Qianlong period (1736-1795) led to Hangzhou 杭州 via the Fuchun River 富春江, and from there to Canton by sea. Because in later years this route was often threatened by pirates lurking along the coast, the tea merchants had no option but to return to the inland route, which was also the most expensive, once again in 1797.²²

Both black and green teas fell into the category of "VOC teas", but the difference of the proportion between the two kinds was strikingly great. From 1760 until 1780, black tea consisting of four sorts (Bohea, Congou, Souchong, and Pekoe)²³ occupied of all exports 90.89 per cent on average. Lagging far behind, green tea of which there were five or six sorts (Songlo, Twankay, Hyson, Hyson skin, Imperial tea, and Gunpowder tea for a couple of years) only amounted to 9.11 per cent (see Appendix 4). As has been said earlier, because of its dubious honour of being cheapest, Bohea was the most favoured purchase of black tea for the Dutch, taking up 80.5 per cent of black tea. Congou, Souchong and Pekoe represented 13, 5, and 1.5 per cent respectively. The proportion of Bohea declined from

88 in 1760-1770 to 73 per cent in 1771-1780; while that of Congou rose from 7 to 20 per cent (see Table 1). Among the green teas, in the period 1760-1780 Songlo (48.7 per cent) and Twankay (21.6 per cent) together represented about 80 per cent of the exports, and the other 20 per cent was made up by various other sorts (see Table 2).

Table 1 Percentage of black teas purchased by the VOC in Canton, 1760-1780

<i>Type of black teas</i>	1760	1761	1762	1763	1764	1765	1766	1767	1768	1769	1770
Bohea	87.61	86.83	89.29	88.90	91.50	86.26	86.60	82.67	89.41	87.61	85.58
Congou	6.84	7.70	6.19	6.13	4.88	7.62	8.12	11.19	4.10	5.14	8.92
Souchong	4.60	5.10	4.22	3.78	2.95	5.33	4.50	5.01	4.97	4.70	3.87
Pekoe	0.95	0.37	0.30	1.19	0.66	0.79	0.78	1.13	1.52	2.55	1.63
<i>Type of black teas</i>	1771	1772	1773	1774	1775	1776	1777	1778	1779	1780	
Bohea	76.36	64.39	82.33	84.36	77.10	71.42	62.66	63.81	70.81	74.75	
Congou	16.65	27.53	10.88	9.20	17.43	24.03	30.43	25.44	19.74	16.01	
Souchong	5.73	5.69	5.33	5.11	4.43	3.11	4.50	7.91	6.74	6.54	
Pekoe	1.26	2.39	1.46	1.33	1.04	1.44	2.41	2.84	2.71	2.70	

Source: Appendix 4.

Table 2 Percentage of green teas purchased by the VOC in Canton, 1760-1780

<i>Type of green teas</i>	1760	1761 ¹	1762	1763	1764	1765	1766	1767	1768	1769	1770
Songlo	51.61	57.03	53.46	53.22	50.55	55.99	45.30	36.31	51.88	48.07	42.85
Twankay	24.81	21.81	23.79	16.30	23.82	28.00	18.69	30.22	18.92	20.37	28.29
Hyson	12.55	6.31	13.84	14.72	13.53	15.57	15.85	14.27	11.78	9.86	10.01
Hyson skin	7.57	10.37	6.71	11.25	9.05	—	18.86	13.85	15.59	19.48	16.19
Imperial tea	3.46	4.40	2.20	4.51	3.05	0.44	1.30	5.35 ²	1.83	2.22	2.66
<i>Type of green teas</i>	1771	1772	1773	1774	1775	1776	1777	1778	1779	1780	
Songlo	55.55	53.80	53.44	55.21	59.91	50.30	49.12	44.43	48.38	50.43	
Twankay	17.38	16.02	18.94	17.72	16.56	20.99	16.96	21.86	32.52	21.08	
Hyson	11.02	15.46	9.21	9.42	10.30	16.08	15.84	12.96	9.94	12.39	
Hyson skin	16.05	14.72	18.41	17.65	13.23	12.63	18.08	20.61	8.44	15.24	
Imperial tea	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	
Gunpowder	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.14	0.72	0.86	

¹ In this year the VOC also purchased 112½ pounds of Linchinsing tea which occupied 0.08 per cent of black teas.

² This 5.35% includes 3.81% for Songlo-Imperial tea and 1.54% for Imperial tea.
Source: Appendix 4.

The "VOC tea"-supplying agents

According to the Chinese regulations applying to the Canton System, tea merchants were forbidden to pursue their business directly with the foreign traders in Canton. As a result, in Canton there were three customary ways of delivering the teas into the hands of the VOC trade representatives: the tea merchants sold tea to either the Hong merchants (or *hangisten*); the shopkeepers; or even to the clerks (or *schrijvers*) of the Hong merchants; and they in turn sold the tea to the VOC trade representatives. Sometimes the tea merchants sold tea to the VOC trade representatives via the Hong merchants as intermediaries.²⁴

The Hong merchants, the security merchants of the VOC in particular,²⁵ were the principal tea-supplying agents throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. However, there was a change in the late 1760s, even more marked after 1772, when the Co-hong (or *Co-hang*) was dissolved.²⁶ From that point, more and more supplying agents, especially shopkeepers, took the opportunity to join the Hong merchants in supplying service on the Canton-European tea market. Most of the shopkeepers were proprietors of porcelain shops, to which Bohea had been sent, probably to be used as a packaging material for the porcelain during transportation. Besides these, some of the Hong merchants' clerks often took advantage of their position as intermediaries between the Hong merchants and the European supercargoes to do business with the European companies on their own account. They capitalized on the fact they could easily acquire information about the demands for tea from the supercargoes as they went about their legitimate business and could therefore conveniently compensate for the lack of some teas from their own supply.²⁷

Not all business required the intercession of go-betweens. What could be qualified as more or less direct deliveries by tea merchants and peddlers can be traced in the Dutch records of the years 1763, 1764, and 1776 at the very least. For instance, in 1763 a certain black tea merchant, Uhn-Sam-Ja, offered the Dutch supercargoes Bohea and Congou in the name of Tan Chetqua, via whom he also sold his tea to the English.²⁸ In 1764, the country people in the tea districts were said to have sent the best three-tenths of the tea for the Canton-European market on their own account and to have sold the worst tea to the agents sent thither by the Co-hong.²⁹ In 1776, in addition to these country people, a few tea peddlers also offered Bohea and Congou to the Dutch.³⁰

Not to be outdone, the Hong merchants also sent their own agents into the tea districts to purchase tea, in order to guarantee the tea supply for their own businesses, bypassing the tea merchants. It is known that Swetja annually sent his brother into the tea districts to purchase tea.³¹ In 1764, Poan Keequa, Tsja Hunqua, Chetqua, and Inksja (Swetja's successor), the

four chief Co-hong members (or *Co-hangisten*) at that moment, each sent two or more people to the Wuyi Mountains for the same purpose, and other small members of the Co-hong sent one man each at the behest of the Co-hong.³² On 28 January 1770, Tsja Hunqua informed the Dutch that his son had returned from the tea districts, after having spent a part of the capital of 100,000 taels which Hunqua had given him for the purchase of the new harvest. He claimed that Bohea was amply available in the tea districts this year, but since the quality was unsatisfactory, he had not purchased more tea than the 6,000 piculs contracted for with the VOC.³³

Now that we have classified the various types of the “VOC tea”-supplying agents in Canton, the right moment has arrived to introduce some of the outstanding tea-supplying agents (see Appendix 3).

*Swetja*³⁴ (1720-1763, Yan Ruishe 颜瑞舍, but properly Yan Shirui 颜时瑞) was the first-born son of Texia (Yan Deshe 颜德舍, but properly Yan Liangzhou 颜亮州), one of the prominent Cantonese merchants in the 1740s. He owned and managed the Taihe Hang 泰和行 and died in 1751. Swetja took over the family business in 1751 and ran it over the next decade, with the help of his brothers. Swetja died in 1763 and was succeeded in his business and in the capacity of security merchant for the VOC by his brother Inksja.³⁵

Tsja Hunqua (d. 1770, Cai Ruiguan 蔡瑞官) was involved with the Jufeng Hang 聚丰行 and associated with the Shunli Hang 顺利行 and the Yihe Hang (probably 义和行), but he did his main business through the Yifeng Hang 义丰行. At least five of his sons were involved in his business, in the trade itself and helping behind the scenes: Anqua, Teonqua, Tayqua, Sequa, and Tsjonqua, some of whom sooner or later started their own business with the Europeans. Tsja Hunqua, in partnership with Semqua, did much trade with the Dutch, and became the leader of the three security merchants for the VOC until his death in May 1770.³⁶ In the eyes of the Dutch, Tsja Hunqua was: “The most upright of all the Chinese who have ever passed through this world” and “[...] has never misled us [the Dutch]”.³⁷

Tan Chetqua (d. 1771, Chen Jieguan 陈捷官) was another of the security merchants working with the VOC. He had the unenviable reputation for being known as an indecisive person who would take exception to even the smallest matter.³⁸ The name of his trading company was the Guangshun Hang 广顺行. Making his debut in 1742, Chetqua appears fairly consistently in the Dutch records, recording his trade with them.³⁹ He is thought to have taken over the family business sometime in 1758 or 1759, probably because of the advanced age of his father Tan Soequa (Chen Shouguan 陈寿官).⁴⁰ By 1758, it was obvious he was handling the Dutch trade by himself.⁴¹ From 1759, Chetqua’s name appears regularly

in the sources as a security merchant trading with the EIC, the VOC, and the Danish Asiatic Company (hereafter the DAC). In the 1760s, his youngest brother (Tan) Quyqua and another person by the name of Houqua served as his clerks.⁴² The management of the family business passed to one of his brothers named (Tan) Tinqu (Chen Dengguan 陈登观) after Chetqua died in late 1771.⁴³

Inksja (?-1792, or Yngshaw or Ingsia, Yan Yingshe 颜瑛舍, but properly Yan Shiyang 颜时瑛) was the second son of Texia (Yan Deshe 颜德舍). Inksja succeeded to the management of the Taihe Hang 泰和行 after Swetja's death in 1763, and became one of the VOC security merchants. In the eyes of the Dutch supercargoes, Inksja, even though he appeared younger than Tan Chetqua, was a man with a reputation of courageousness and resoluteness,⁴⁴ to whom all the companies with which he worked accorded great credit.⁴⁵ Inksja traded extensively with the EIC, the DAC, and the VOC, and remained active until late 1779, when the Taihe Hang went bankrupt. As punishment for his debts the unfortunate Inksja was then exiled to Yili 伊犁 in the far western regions of China, along with another merchant Kousia.⁴⁶

Poan Keequa (1714-1788, Pan Qiguan 潘启官, but properly Pan Wenyan 潘文岩) spent in his early years a considerable time in Manila with his father, where they were involved in the trade to Quanzhou, and where young Keequa learned to speak Spanish. Later, he began trading on his own account under the business name of Tongwen Hang 同文行, and the earliest appearance of his own business with the VOC was probably in 1751.⁴⁷ In the 1760s, Poan Keequa was appointed the head of the Cohong and held that position until it was dissolved in 1771. Despite the fact that all other Cohong members revolted against Poan Keequa in the 1760s, he made himself master of the European trade until his death in 1788.⁴⁸ Although Tsja Hunqua recommended him to the Dutch for a Bohea contract in 1764, he was rejected by the Dutch.⁴⁹ Therefore it seems that Poan Keequa did not start to sell tea to the Dutch until 1768.⁵⁰

Tan Tsjoqua (1706-1789,⁵¹ Chen Zuguan 陈祖官, but properly Chen Wenkuo 陈文扩) probably took over the Zhengfeng Hang 正丰行 from his father, "Mandarin Quyqua" (Chen Kuiguan 陈魁官), who was active on the Canton-European market from at least the 1720s to his death in 1742. Apart from his sales under the aegis of the Zhengfeng Hang, Tsjoqua also sold tea via the Yuanquan Hang (源泉行, or *Juun Suun Hang* as it is noted in the Dutch records). When he died on 27 March 1789, his eldest son, Locqua, succeeded to his business.⁵²

Tsjobqua (?-1776,⁵³ Cai Yuguan 蔡玉官) took over the Jufeng Hang 聚丰行 after his elder brother, Tswaa (Tsja) Suyqua (Ruiguan 瑞官), died in 1761. It was a thorny legacy as he inherited Suyqua's enormous debt. By 1768, he was even more deeply in debt to the European companies as

well. This was the year in which he stopped offering the “VOC teas”, and 1769 is the last year in which he is found in the Dutch records actively trading in Canton.⁵⁴

Monqua (?-1796, Cai Wenguan 蔡文官, but properly Cai Shiwen 蔡世文) was an interpreter (*linguist*) in Canton before his appointment as a Hong merchant in 1761 when his father, Teunqua, died sometime in 1760 or 1761. Monqua also assumed his father's debts. There seem to have been several firms affiliated to Monqua's branch, including the Yihe Hang 义和行, the Fengyuan Hang 逢源行, and the Wanhe Hang 万和行. Certainly, he regularly traded through the latter two businesses.⁵⁵ In 1767, his tea warehouse caught fire and he lost about 900 casks of tea which were lying ready for the Danes. Surmounting this blow, Monqua managed to survive as well as to circumvent the debt crisis which plagued the Hong merchants in the late 1770s. He was appointed chief Hong merchant in 1788 after Poan Keequa died.⁵⁶

Semqua (Qiu Kun 邱崑) was Tsja Hunqua's partner. He shows up in the 1730s and 1740s as Hunqua's partner “Felix” (or other spellings) and later adopted the name Semqua. He was active in the trade from at least 1729 to 1774. He, not Hunqua as is often mentioned in the foreign records, was the real owner of the Yifeng Hang 义丰行. The two men traded with this firm until Hunqua died in 1769, whereupon Semqua and Anqua (or Hanqua, Hunqua's second son) took over the business. The new partnership lasted for a couple of years, but then experienced financial difficulties. The firm not only took care of the Dutch trade in Canton but also ran the Portuguese trade in Macao. By 1774, the Yifeng Hang was deeply in debt, at which point Semqua transferred the rights of the firm to Hunqua's son Tayqua.⁵⁷

Tayqua (?-1775) was Tsja Hunqua's third or fourth son. He and his elder brother, Anqua, in conjunction with their father's partner Semqua, used to go to Macao to supervise the trade with the Portuguese.⁵⁸ From 1752 until his death in 1775, Tayqua shows up frequently in the Dutch records. From 1763 to 1774, he sold various teas to the VOC on his own account. Tayqua died in 1775 and his youngest brother, Tsjonqua (Cai Xiangguan 蔡相官, but properly Cai Zhaofu 蔡昭复), took over the reigns of the Yifeng Hang. Tsjonqua managed to keep it limping along for a few more years, but it finally failed in the early 1780s and was closed by order of the Emperor.⁵⁹

Consciens Giqua (?-1765, Ye Yiguan 叶义官), also known as “Conscientia” Giqua, was from the Ye family, which had been active in the trade in Canton from the very early years of the eighteenth century. Consciens Giqua shows up in the companies' records connected to three different businesses, the Guangyuan Hang 广源行, the Houde Hang 厚得行, and the Fengjin Hang 丰晋行.⁶⁰ After the Co-hong was estab-

lished in 1760, he became one of the small Co-hong members and seemingly also was a tea-supplying agent for other Europeans, such as the EIC and the DAC.⁶¹ Consciens Giqua died in 1765 and his son Huyqua took over the family business until his death on 3 July 1775, when the Guangyuan Hang was closed as well.⁶²

Kousia (Zhang Tianqiu 张天球) succeeded his brother Foutia (Zhang Fushe 张富舍) as a Hong merchant when the latter died in 1761. The name of his business was the Yuyuan Hang 裕源行. Kousia was also landed with a sizeable debt by Foutia, which was a burden to him for many years. Kousia first appears in the VOC records selling porcelain in 1764 and selling tea and other goods from 1772 to 1779.⁶³ In the 1770s, Kousia was also the partner of a member of the Yan family, Limsia (Yan Linshe 颜琳舍). In 1773, Kousia's warehouse, which was located at Limsia's factory, caught fire and the damage was supposedly estimated at about 7,000 taels. He gradually began to fall behind in his obligations after this, and by the late 1770s his business was foundering in serious trouble. In 1779, another fire broke out which set him back an additional 10,000 to 15,000 taels. At the end of that same year, he was declared bankrupt. His business was then closed, and as punishment for his debts he was exiled to Yili with Inksja.⁶⁴

Pinqua (Yang Bingguan 杨丙观, but properly Yang Cengong 杨岑龚) was the owner of a porcelain shop, trading with most of the European companies in Canton during the 1760s and 1770s. The name of his business was the Longhe Hang 隆和行, and he also sold his porcelain through Consciens Giqua's Guangyuan Hang 广源行. Besides porcelain, Pinqua also sold black tea, mostly Bohea, to the VOC. In 1782, he was appointed a Hong merchant, and after that he traded in a wide range of products of which tea was the most important. Two years later, he had to assume part of the huge debt of the failed merchant Tsjonqua. As part of the settlement, Pinqua was obliged to purchase the Dutch factory from Tsjonqua. By 1791, Pinqua's business was in serious trouble. He was indebted to several foreign companies, and was also in arrears to the tea merchants. In 1792, his business collapsed.⁶⁵

Apart from Pinqua, the other small porcelain shops with which the Dutch contracted in the 1760s included: Lisjoncon (Li Xianggong 李相公, but properly Li Zhengmao 李正茂), Quonsching (Guangsheng Dian 广盛店), Quonschong (Guangchang Dian 广昌店), Habjak (Heyi 合益), Houqua (Guangyin 广益), Pontonchon (Tongchang 同昌), Neyschong (Yichang Dian 裔昌店), Tonchon (Yaочang 徭昌), Soyschong (Juchang 聚昌), Suchin Kinqa (Liangchang Ciqi Dian 良昌瓷器店),⁶⁶ Soyqua (Xiuqua 修官), Conjac, Taxion, Boohing, Tonhang, Winschong (Yongchang 永昌), Tongfong, Konqua, Hapwoa, Jauqua, Chonqua, Pouwchong, Echong (Yichang 义昌), Exchin (Yisheng 益驛), Manuel

Corree, and Affu.⁶⁷ The porcelain shops which were involved in the VOC tea trade during the 1760s and 1770s were Pinqua, Suchin Kinqua, Lisjoncon, Conjac, Exchin, Echong, and Foyec (see Appendix 3).

The "VOC tea" procurements

As we know, collecting the "VOC teas" in the tea districts and transporting them to Canton for the Canton-European market was a laborious business, which occurred totally out of the hands of the Dutch trade representatives. After the teas arrived in Canton, there was yet another taxing process, which was partly under control of the Dutch trade representatives. This was the rigmarole of the purchase of tea before the commodity was eventually loaded aboard the Company ships. This was the "VOC tea" bring-and-buy transaction between the Chinese tea-supplying agents and the Dutch trade representatives. The latter had three options to collecting the "VOC teas" from the tea-supplying agent. The first was to conclude a deal by off-season contract. The second was to make off-season purchases after the departure of the Company ships.⁶⁸ Finally there was the additional trading-season purchase on the free market.⁶⁹

Most "VOC teas" were supplied through contracts concluded with the tea-supplying agents, of whom the Dutch trade representatives' regular trading partners, mainly their security merchants, formed the majority; some small Hong merchants made up the minority. As far as the Dutch were concerned, there was plenty of hard work involved in the whole process from the negotiations with the tea-supplying agents to the loading of the teas purchased aboard the Company ships. The handling of this business can be divided into five steps: the negotiation of a contract; the conclusion of the contract; the examination of the tea samples; the packing of the teas which were ready; and the loading and stowing of the teas bought-in on the Company ships.

The negotiation of a contract was the most strenuous task for both the Dutch supercargoes and their trading partners. It ordinarily began after the departure of the Company ships in the first quarter of each year, sometime in February or early March.⁷⁰ On paper it seemed simple. During the process of negotiation the trading partners presented the tea samples with their asking price, and then the Dutch supercargoes put in their bidding price after checking the samples. Finally both parties came to an agreement and fixed a price. But in practice, it was an extremely protracted process and there was a great deal of ostensibly polite to-ing and fro-ing between the two parties, which was a true mirror of Chinese and Dutch commercial astuteness and shrewd trading.

How much profit the tea-supplying agents could earn on average from

the fixed price is shrouded in obscurity, but, according to the Dutch records, the price of tea on the Canton market and in the tea districts was to a certain extent comparable. On 4 July 1765, the members of the Co-hong proposed the price of the new Bohea on board ship should be 18.5 taels per picul, as the price in the tea districts had risen to 15.5 taels per picul that year.⁷¹ The Dutch supercargoes finally paid 19.6 taels (of Spanish rials at 72 Chinese candareens) per picul on average to diverse agents (see Appendix 4). In August 1766, the Co-hong members asked the slightly lower price of 18 taels per picul for the new Bohea, and this was the price the Dutch supercargoes paid on average to the various agents. The marginal reduction was because the price which the Co-hong merchants paid in the tea districts had dropped to 14.5 taels per picul.⁷² The next year, the price of Bohea rose to 14.8 or even 15 taels per picul so the three security merchants of the Dutch claimed. In a knock-on effect they demanded 19 taels, of which 3 taels for their expenses in Canton and 1 tael for the charge by the Co-hong. Later, they themselves dropped the asking price to 18.5 taels, but with much difficulty the Dutch persuaded them to accept 18.2 taels (of Spanish rials at 72 Chinese candareens).⁷³ In 1768, the Co-hong fixed the price of new Bohea at 18 taels,⁷⁴ but Tsja Hunqua, the Hong merchant most trusted by the Dutch, thought the price was unreasonable and suggested it should be around 15.5 or 16 taels, as the price in the tea districts was only 10 or 10.4 taels.⁷⁵ All these examples give information about some of the detailed individual cases, and the whole gamut of the diverse prices offered by different tea-supplying agents for both old and new teas can be compared in the Appendix 4. One more example of the tedious negotiations between the Dutch trade representatives and their four trading partners in 1779 can be presented in the table below:

Table 3 Comparison between the asking, bid, and fixed prices (taels/picul) of several teas by the Dutch supercargoes and their trading partners, 1779

Tea	Asking price	Bid price	Fixed price
Bohea	13.5	12.5	12.5
Twankay	24.5	23	23.5
Songlo	22.5	21	21.5

Source: NFC 42, Resolution of the Trade Council, 1 February 1779.

Once the negotiations had got under way, the tea-supplying agents usually urged the Dutch trade representatives to accept their offer as early as possible. They hinted that the earlier the Dutch accept their offer, the better the quality of the tea the Dutch could obtain at a lower price and the

sooner they could pack up the teas. The Dutch took a slightly different view of the matter, reasoning the earlier they did so, the less opportunity they would have to put pressure on the sellers and the higher the price they would actually pay. This principle was also applied to the negotiations with other companies. Shrewdly, the tea-supplying agents also knew how to take advantage of their negotiations with other companies, above all the EIC, to urge the Dutch to take the plunge. The fear that their competitors would steal a match on them was the real reason the Dutch trade representatives hastened to conclude the negotiations, not so much because they were really satisfied with the Chinese offer, but more because they were acutely aware that other competitors also had their eye on the same goods or had already put in a higher bid price. In such a situation, he who hesitates is lost! In January 1763, the Dutch supercargoes agreed to take Souchong from Tjobqua at 32 taels per picul, as the latter swore that this sort of tea was always bought up by other companies without the slightest hesitation at 45 taels, and the Danes and Swedes had already accepted his asking price of 32 taels.⁷⁶ In February 1772, the Dutch supercargoes were unwilling to wait and made an agreement with Inksja at 18 taels per picul for Twankay, because the stocks of Twankay were very low and especially because the English had earlier paid that same price.⁷⁷ On 19 January 1775, after persistently trying day after day the Dutch failed to persuade Inksja and Tinquá to accept the price of 14 taels per picul for Congou, for which both the English and Swedes were offering 15 taels, and finally surrendered and decided to offer 15 taels.⁷⁸ Sometimes, in order to drive up the asking price, the tea-supplying agents even pushed their luck, for example in early 1764 when they were expecting the arrival of more English ships and insisted on not commencing negotiations with the Dutch until the English ships arrived.⁷⁹

Although it would seem that the Dutch were occasionally caught wrong footed, they often could surpass their competitors in their bids for the price of tea. The basic reason for this financial advantage was that the Dutch trade representatives nearly always possessed enough capital, including a sufficiency of cash brought from the Dutch Republic and left over from the former trading season in Canton (see Appendix 1), and this fortunate pecuniary position was bolstered even more by the ample supply of East Indies goods from Batavia, which they had at their disposal (see Appendix 2).⁸⁰

In some years, the price fixed by other companies appeared to be lower than that set by the Dutch but, as a matter of fact, taking into consideration all the additional terms of the contract, this was actually higher. For example, in February 1769 the Swedes and again the English in April of the same year contracted for Bohea at 13.2 taels (of Spanish rials at 74 Chinese candareens) per picul, while the Dutch paid Tan Chetqua 14

taels. Yet, since they also had to pay what amounted to a 20 per cent interest both from 12 February and from 7 April until 7 July respectively for the delay of payment, these doughty competitors actually paid 14.3.3 and 14.0.6 taels respectively in the end.⁸¹ Besides the competition from the Europeans rivals, for many years the Dutch and all the other companies also had to contend with another competitor, namely the operators of the Chinese junks destined for South-east Asia. According to Canton custom, such merchants could always easily obtain a lower price from the tea-supplying agents than their European rivals could. On 30 January 1764, for instance, the tea-supplying agents sold Souchong and Congou to the junk people at 20 taels and 17 to 18 taels per picul respectively, for which the Dutch paid 22.5 taels and 19.5 to 20.5 taels.⁸² Again on 9 January 1769, Tan Tsjoqua offered part of his Congou to the Swedes at 19.5 to 20 taels per picul and another part to the junk people at 17.5 taels, which to no avail he had earlier offered to the Dutch for 18 to 19 taels.⁸³

Besides the actual price of the tea, the means of payment for the purchase of tea was included in the negotiations of the contract as well. There were different detailed cases for each year during the period under study, but some conventions do seem to have been honoured. Because all the tea-supplying agents either had to advance money to the tea merchants in Canton or send this to those in the tea districts, not unnaturally these supplying agents in their turn desired an advance payment from the Dutch and the supercargoes of other companies. In their dealings with the small agents, who were always pressing for cash, the companies usually presented an advance payment of about 70 per cent in cash and 10 per cent in spices on the arrival of the first Company ship, and around 20 per cent in cash after the teas were on board.⁸⁴ When it came to dealing with the great trading partners, the VOC customarily agreed with them that an advance of up to 80 per cent of the payment should be handed over, of which one-eighth in spices at the Company prices and seven-eighths in cash, while they would accept the remaining about 20 per cent of the payment in tin, pepper or other Company goods (except the spices), at the market rate on the arrival of the Company ship.⁸⁵

Following the negotiations, on the basis of the demands for the quantity and assortment of tea by the China Committee, the Dutch trade representatives went ahead and concluded the contracts with their trading partners for much of the export order. This could be done as early as March, but more probably in April or May, before the departure of the Company servants for Macao. In the contracts, the amount and price of teas which were going to be delivered to the Dutch, the due date of delivery of teas by the trading partners, the means of payment by the Dutch supercargoes, and the compensation for breach of contract were meticulously noted. The following contracts concluded in 1763 and 1769 may serve as practical illustrations.

On 15 May 1763, the Dutch chief signed a contract with Tsja Hunqua & Co., Tan Chetqua, and Inksja for 9,000 pounds of Bohea at 15.4 taels (of Spanish rials at 74 Chinese candareens) per picul (namely 122½ pounds), under the following six conditions:⁸⁶ if the English were to contract at less than 15 taels with an advance payment of 10 taels at 72 candareens, the tea-supplying agents, who also did the business with the EIC, would demand the Dutch pay one penny (for which the Dutch always counted four maces) more than the English or anybody else would give. If the English, by such strategies as delaying the contracts or by seizing other opportunities, were forced to pay more than 15 taels at 72 candareens per picul, the Dutch would never have to pay more than the above-mentioned 15.4 taels at 74 candareens. The Dutch agreed to pay 8.5 taels per picul, or 76,500 taels in total, immediately and an additional 1.5 taels per picul, or 13,500 taels in total, on the arrival of the first Company ship, plus the interest on the 13,500 taels at 2 per cent per each thirty days. The intervening period from the date of receipt of the 76,500 taels until the payment of the 13,500 taels was considered as if the Dutch had paid 10 taels. If later the English could not advance 10 taels in cash in default of funds, the tea-supplying agents would compensate the Dutch 20 per cent for the interest on the money paid more in advance. The tea-supplying agents would agree not to pack the new Bohea for any other nation until the Dutch had completely packed three chests at the premise of each of the tea-supplying agents; the Dutch might then pack turn and turn about with the English until they had stored the 9,000 piculs of teas. The tea-supplying agents promised to pack the 9,000 pounds of Bohea in chests smaller than the usual containers,⁸⁷ at the behest of the Dutch provided that the Dutch compensated them once again with five maces extra above the price agreed the last year. Should only two VOC ships arrive in Canton in that year and the Dutch not be able to ship the whole quantity of 9,000 piculs properly, the remaining teas would be divided fairly into two parts, of which the Dutch should accept one part at their own risk at the agreed price for the next year, and the other part would be kept on the tea-supplying agents' account;⁸⁸ for their part, the tea-supplying agents would compensate the VOC the interest of the advance payment at 10 taels per picul for six months or 2 per cent per month.⁸⁹

On 18 March 1769, the Dutch trade representatives and the above-mentioned three merchants agreed on contracts for purchasing Souchong, Congou, Songlo, and Twankay (without defining the price exactly, agreeing to regulate it in the light of the current circumstances): The tea-supplying agents had 230 days, or until 4 September 1770, in which to fix the first shipment, and the other shipments of the teas demanded over 250 days, or until 24 September 1770: 570 piculs of first-grade Souchong; 730 piculs of second-grade Souchong; 650 piculs of

first-grade Congou; 1,140 piculs of second-grade Congou; and 2,240 piculs of third- or lower-grade Congou to be packed in whole chests and mixed with Bohea. For their part, the three Chinese merchants who were to deliver together the afore-mentioned teas promised to do so on condition that they would bear responsibility for the quality, according to the assortment; if on reception the Dutch judged the teas unsatisfactory or if the three Chinese pressed them to receive the teas as the first grade, while they were convinced they were second or even a lower grade, they were free to reject the teas; in that case, the Chinese should be obliged to furnish such money from their capital for the imported Company goods destined for them, providing that the Dutch judged it necessary. The tea-supplying agents should deliver 650 piculs of first-grade Songlo repacked in ordinary half chests at 22.2 taels (of Spanish rials at 74 candareens) per picul in two parts on the date as above-mentioned, on condition that the Dutch should pay them on account 14 taels per picul in cash on the arrival of the Company ships and 320 piculs of first-grade Twankay in two parts, which was to be sent in casks, at 24 taels per picul on the same condition as that of the Songlo.⁹⁰ Regarding the additional terms of the contracts, it was also agreed that the tea-supplying agents would guarantee completely against fire, water, and any other damage until all the teas had been loaded aboard the Company ships.⁹¹

These two illustrations are more than enough to show the standard mode by which the Dutch trade representatives contracted both black and green teas with their supplying agents. In these win-win contracts, how either side, the sellers as well as the buyers, should abide by the articles and how they would suffer if the contract was breached was stipulated in detail.

Except for the large shipments of tea which were contracted in the manner discussed above, the rest of the tea was mostly purchased during the off-season. After the ships of all the European companies had departed and their delegates had concluded their current business, there were usually still a number of "old teas" remaining unsold on the market. The trade representatives of the VOC, as well as those of other companies, seized the opportunity to buy these leftover teas at a lower price, not only from their individual trading partners but also from other small Hong merchants and sometimes even, indirectly, from tea merchants and peddlers (see Appendix 3). This kind of purchase, of course, had to be completed before their departure for Macao. For example, in view of the fact that they would have the opportunity to buy the remaining fine teas in mid-February 1764, earlier or later the Dutch purchased several sorts of "old teas" from the following Hong merchants in February, March, and April: Inksja (Hyson at 28 taels per picul); Tsja Hunqua (Bohea at 13.5, Congou at 17, and Souchong at 20); Tjobqua (Bohea at 13.5); Fet Hunqua (Congou at 18); and Consciens Giqua (Ankay-Souchong at 13).⁹²

Besides these opportunities, there was the possibility of the additional purchase on the free market during the trading-season. This purchase was governed by several factors. In some years, having accumulated the teas by contract and off-season purchase, the Dutch found themselves in a quandary as they were still unable to load all the homeward-bound ships fully. To solve their dilemma, they forced themselves to look for some surplus on the free market. In August 1765, the Dutch decided to increase the contracted quantities of Twankay from 40,000 pounds up to 90,000 pounds, and simultaneously to reduce the Songlo and Hyson skin from 240,000 and 60,000 pounds down to 184,000 and 30,000 pounds respectively.⁹³ The reason for the change was that the price of Twankay had risen considerably in Amsterdam and Middelburg in the past year;⁹⁴ while the supply of Songlo and Hyson skin to Canton was apparently scarce because of the fierce competition from the English and French and accordingly their prices rose sharply that year.⁹⁵ In November 1780, the Dutch agreed to buy an extra 833, 833, and 834 pounds of Bohea respectively from Tan Tsjoqua, Monqua, and Tsjonqua at 13.5 taels, instead of the 12 taels which they had bid, after protracted negotiations, in order to adapt themselves to the current circumstances.⁹⁶ But more frequently, at their own convenience the Dutch made additional purchases at local shops, especially the porcelain shops, in the second half of the period under study. As mentioned before, when the porcelain was delivered to the Dutch by the shopkeepers, a number of teas, mostly Bohea, was also included (see Appendix 3).⁹⁷ The quantity of this is not clearly mentioned in the sources, but the price must have tallied with those on the current market.

Irrespective of how the Dutch trade representatives purchased the "VOC teas", all the teas arrived in Canton in October and/or November. After having made their own preparations, the tea-supplying agents presented some tea samples from each chop of different kinds of teas to be tested by the Dutch. The examination focused on the aroma, taste, infusion quality, and the colour of the tea. In 1762, the Company ships arrived in Canton with an instruction to the supercargoes from the China Committee concerning tea: "[...] for apart from the fact that the quality of each particular type of tea must be of the very best and, as they say, of the first and finest leaf, because experience has taught that in this country a greater differentiation is made in types than in China, it must therefore be remarked which additional qualities are regarded as virtues in tea in this country and for which a higher price is paid by the buyers. According to the present taste of the buyers, it is regarded as a prime virtue in all types of tea that it is soft, smooth, and pure in taste, and moreover is clear when poured out, and that in this, the Bohea of some foreign companies has particularly excelled of recent years."⁹⁸ In 1765, the

Illustration 3 The packing of the “VOC teas” in Canton



Saucer and teacup, Chine de Commande, diameter of rim 12.8 cm, Qianlong period, c. 1750; decorated with overglaze enamels and gold, showing Dutch and Chinese merchant in Canton overseeing the packing of tea at a warehouse.
Source: Courtesy of Prinsessehof Leeuwarden/Nationaal Keramiekmuseum, inventory number: BP 79.

Dutch trade representatives once again received a specific demand from the China Committee exacting that the quality of Bohea be accompanied by a reasonable good leaf as well as an absolutely pure taste, as this was always to be preferred.⁹⁹

In the ordinary run of things, the standard of examination was not only strictly complied with by the Dutch trade representatives, it was also respected by the tea-supplying agents. Incontrovertibly the Dutch supercargoes had to be very responsible in heeding the interests of the VOC, but inevitably should an agent's teas be rejected by the Dutch, this would bring great shame on him and count very heavily against him in obtaining future credit in the European trade. All these precautionary measures notwithstanding, accidents still might occasionally happen. Should the Dutch discover a breach of contract with respect to the quality of tea during their examination, they would take the necessary action in responding to this according to their earlier agreement with the tea-supplying agents. On 23 October 1764, for example, while examining the Bohea samples from Tan Chetqua, Tsja Hunqua, and Inksja, the Dutch rejected the samples of Hunqua and Inksja because of their inferior quality. They felt constrained to accept Chetqua's because his tea was somewhat better, and at that time Bohea was in short supply and all the tea offered to the Europeans was poor that year. Later, the Dutch selected some substitute canisters (or baskets) of Bohea from Hunqua and Inksja, but demanded a subsidy from all three merchants citing as their reason the unsatisfactory quality of all the Bohea received, for which the merchants were only willing to pay 6,000 taels. Eventually, after a long hard bargaining, a subsidy of 9,000 taels was agreed upon by both sides on condition that it remained secret and would not be disclosed to all other Chinese and Europeans.¹⁰⁰

After having carefully examined and tasted the samples, the Dutch decided on their purchase and agreed on what was known as the final price for each chop with the tea-supplying agents. Thereupon they had the accepted teas tared and packed, complying with the instructions in the demand stipulating how the teas were to be graded and packed (see Illustration 3).¹⁰¹ The majority of the teas purchased in these three ways (mainly the teas by contract) were examined, tared, packed, marked, and numbered on the premises of the tea-supplying agents, while the minority (mainly the teas acquired by off-season purchases) were stored in the warehouse of the Dutch factory awaiting the arrival of the Company ships for the next trading season. This was not the end of the story. What was known officially as the final price still could be changed. This could happen should the Dutch, who had the right to re-check the chests after packing and/or before loading the chests aboard the Company ships,¹⁰² once again discover some inconformity between the chops and the sam-

ples they had tested during the random re-checking. Theoretically, the price could be increased if the chests were superior to the samples after the re-checking. But, in practice, it seems that only inferior chests were encountered on a few occasions. In March 1770, for instance, the Dutch bought 450 chests of old Congou from Quyqua, one of Tan Chetqua's clerks, at 18 taels per picul, which became 433 chests by further allotment. After receipt, the Dutch found a great portion did not conform to the samples. They had no choice but to check all the chests one after another and consequently ascertained that 277 chests were eligible, but that 153 chests were of an inferior grade (there were also three chests missing). They resolved to demand a discount of almost two taels per picul on the whole chests. On the 31st, they succeeded in obtaining the discount at 2.2 taels per picul from Chetqua, and stored all the chests in the warehouse of their own factory.¹⁰³

This is an apt juncture to make some remarks about the tea packing under the supervision of the Dutch assignees. During this exacting work, the most pertinent duty of those assigned by the Trade Council had always been to ensure as far as this was possible the prevention of the adulteration of the tea by dust, particularly Bohea. To assist them in this task, since 1760 the China Committee had a set of regulations drawn up as guide to the weight of the Bohea chests following complaints by the tea-buyers in the home country objecting to the dustiness of tea.¹⁰⁴ Especially after it received a strong admonition by the China Committee because of the dustiness in Bohea chests in 1764, the Trade Council tightened up the regulations guiding its assignees' work. As resolved by the Council, the supervision of the packing and weighing of the chests was assigned each year to various supercargoes, assistants, and bookkeepers as a team supplied to each of the tea-supplying agents. Both in 1765 and 1766 three teams were sent to Tsja Hunqua, Tan Chetqua, and Inksja; in 1779 four teams were sent to Tan Tsjoqua, Inksja, Tsjonqua, and Monqua; and in 1780 three teams to Tsjonqua, Tan Tsjoqua, and Monqua respectively.¹⁰⁵ The supervision of the assignees appointed by the Trade Council was believed to be the answer to reducing the dustiness of the tea during the packing, although even by making a super-human effort it was impossible to prevent it completely.

After all the above-mentioned work had been completed, eventually, the tea chests were loaded onto sampans, which were ordinarily hired by arrangements made by either the Hong merchants or the interpreters, to transport them to the Company ships in the roadstead of Whampoa.

Year after year, by and large the afore-discussed series of transactions in the tea trade carried out by the Dutch trade representatives in Canton proceeded smoothly. This can be deduced from the large quantities of the teas the VOC purchased in this period. The VOC archival data reveal that

the quantity of the teas bought annually in Canton by the Company for the home market from the season 1758-1760 fluctuated from 2,500,000 to 3,000,000 pounds in the seasons from 1758-1760 to 1761-1764, and from 3,000,000 to 3,900,000 pounds in the seasons from 1762-1765 to 1778-1781 (see Table 6 in Chapter Five). In comparison with the previous thirty years the quantity of the teas sent every year from both Canton and Batavia only three times reached 2,500,000 to 3,000,000 pounds. In the last twelve years until 1794, the quantity never exceeded 3,011,706.25 pounds in as many as six years (see Figure 2 in Chapter Five and Appendices 4 and 5).

Conclusion

The period chosen for this study was an outstanding phase of the VOC tea trade with China. Three final remarks can be made on the transactions in the purchase of tea in Canton by the VOC.

The first of these concerns the sort of tea purchased. The “VOC teas” consisted mostly of sorts of black and green tea, of which black tea, in particular Bohea, was the firm favourite. The reason it seems was that the price of black teas was much cheaper, although their quality was inferior. This was a direct reflection of the demand on the home market: the low-quality tea with a low price catered to the mass of society, whereas the high quality tea at a higher price satisfied the more discerning palate of the upper classes.

The second and third points refer to the actual buying. During the twenty years studied three and later four principal tea-supplying agents acted as the regular trading partners of the VOC. The Dutch chose them because they were great Hong merchants armed with the essential capacity and credit. They were not the only parties involved. Small Hong merchants as well as local shopkeepers, and sometimes even the clerks of the Hong merchants, were also employed for two reasons: this could create some measure of competition among the Chinese and it could also make up for any shortfall in the supply.

Among these three ways of purchasing tea, contract purchase from the Company’s regular trading partners, who also were the chief recipients of the Company import goods, was the principal method which basically secured the stability of the quantity of supply and the purchase price. In the meantime, the two other ways were both indispensable complements to the first. The combination of all the three ways, allied with the Company’s ample supply of capital, coalesced to favour the success of the VOC delegates’ business in Canton.

