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### **A Merchant Naval Captain**

G. Chinnery (?), ca. 1830, oil on canvas, 285x242mm

National Maritime Museum, London

BHC3169

I want to start in the bottom right hand corner of this painting. It shows two ships rounding the corner of a land mass, sails billowing and hulls tilting into the water in a way which suggests high speed. These ships, with their prominent vermilion livery, symbolize what I think is the key theme of this portrait, which is mobility, or perhaps, instability. It is this theme that links various aspects of the portrait: its physical qualities, its emphasis on traveling as an activity, the exotic location of China (Canton) which the background represents, and the life of the merchant captain who is the subject of the portrait. As I interpret this portrait, all of these elements combine to suggest the particular theme or problem of mobility; this thematic emphasis, in turn, says something significant about the man depicted in the painting.

The existence of the painting is itself testimony of the intention to record something about the sitter. The obvious main feature of the painting is the man standing in its foreground, and that this is a painting of a specific individual is indicated by the detail of the facial features (which allows precise identification), and the absence of a narrative role for his presence (he is not, for example, stepping into a battle, or swearing an oath). What it means for the man to represent himself is a complex question which I think could be answered in many ways, but I will attempt only one. I will attempt to understand the **Merchant Naval Captain** by interpreting the details of the painting - its symbols, its composition, its colours, technique, size, and the (probable) date and the place of its making, to try and understand something of what the people involved in the creation of this portrait must have meant in making it. So while the sitter will remain unknown, the painting of him may be understood much better.

What the painting is, is somehow opposite to what the painting shows. While the function of the painting is to fix or render permanent an image, what it depicts is motion and travel. In the pictorial parlance of 19thC British painting, the combination of hilly islands rendered in blue against a blue sea, and the Chinese sailing ships (or junks, distinguished by their bamboo rigging) signify the port of Canton, the sole Chinese trading port open to westerners in the early nineteenth century. This

background appears often in the works of George Chinnery, a British painter who worked in Canton in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and to whom this portrait is tentatively attributed by the National Maritime Museum. Chinnery had many imitators (including Chinese 'export painters' who painted for Western patrons in a western style) and it seems just as likely that the portrait came from one of their hands. Whoever was the author of this particular painting, the resemblance of the background to Chinnery's Canton scenes allows us to connect it with reasonable certainty to the China coast, and to the world of international marine commerce in which Canton figured.

The portrait of the Merchant Captain is one of a great body of portraits of western men and women produced in China in the first part of the nineteenth century, and this specific example has much in common with most portraits from its period. This example, however, contains a distinctive difference from others of its type, which is its setting. Formal portraits in the European tradition were often set in imaginary locations which are half indoor and half outdoor - a partial view of a landscape or seascape is contrasted with drapery or furniture of an interior setting. In the case of Chinnery's portraits of sea captains reproduced in Patrick Conner's book, the sitters are instead shown in entirely indoor settings, probably the room in his house that served as a studio. In the case of the Merchant Captain, however, the painting is set wholly outdoors, and apparently on board a ship. Rigging for sails, shown in the left foreground, has replaced the more conventional velvety drapery; more than a compositional device, however, the rigging - which runs through pulleys attached to what can only be the hull of ship - is fully functional.

We can only now speculate about the painter's reasons for choosing the shipboard setting. One possible reason is that the sitter asked the painter to show him on deck - although if the Merchant Captain particularly wanted the ship to feature in his portrait then I would expect the painting to show more of the ship, and more interesting or distinctive aspects of it. I think it is more likely that the painting has a shipboard setting because the painting was in fact painted on board ship. The relatively small size of the painting - roughly the size of an A4 or Letter sheet of paper - would be suitable for storing and working on in cramped quarters, and a long sea voyage would provide ample time, and the boredom, to encourage work

on a substantial project such as is involved in the painting of a portrait. The portrait is well-executed but not expert - the hands for example seem out of proportion with the body - which might suggest that the artist was inexperienced, and may have wanted practice. If the portrait was painted during a voyage, then this portrait does not only represent a traveller, but is itself a traveller.

What we might make of the portrait as traveller? Portraits are normally thought of as static objects, fixed in oil on canvas and often fixed in a place of display, like a pronouncement handed down from the past. But the portrait which began its life in motion, and which is small enough to be handed around like a photograph (or portrait miniature) belongs to a different scenario: it is an object of exchange or negotiation, rather than one of authority. The small scale of the image exacts scrutiny, and together with its smallish size means that the viewer's relationship with the portrait is an intimate one. The likelihood of the portrait arising out of a personal relationship - or at least one which endured the familiarities necessitated by a nineteenth-century sea voyage - again moves us into considerations that lie outside the portrait's purely formal function.

It is these escapes from formality or convention that intrigue me about this portrait. There are many qualities of the portrait of the Merchant Captain that slip out of the boundaries of the purely formal, particularly in the representation of the Merchant Captain himself. The persona which the portrait delivers up is at odds with itself: while much of the portrait represents a straightforward image of a white man, other of its elements compromise that status. For example, there is a mixed message in the Captain's clothing. While not a uniform, the clothing that the Captain wears seems to be intended for formal or ceremonial dress, for example in the epaulette just visible on the sitter's right shoulder. But where the dress may be formal, it is worn very informally: the Merchant Captain's neckwear is tied loosely, and his coat is unbuttoned. Similarly difficult to fix is the presentation of his body through the pose. His stance is familiar, and we recognize the gesture of holding the telescope as a signifier of his being ship's captain, but the emphasis on the head and face draws the attention away from his role and onto his personality and expression. It is not the personality and expression we might expect: the Merchant Captain's eyes are exaggerated in size and, particularly in relation to

his very elegant and diminutive hands, add a distinctively feminine and sensitive dimension to his portrait. Hardly the demeanour we might expect of a ship's captain! It is very hard to build a convincing account of the sitter from this portrait because it mixes the messages about him and his status.

It is this ambivalence that I think is the telling feature of this portrait, and what directs my thinking about the merchant captain. At this time that this portrait was painted, early in the nineteenth century, England's imperial and foreign engagements had been established as sources of wealth, and increasingly, status. Although the profits associated with foreign trade were neither as predictable nor as respectable as those associated with landed wealth, they were increasingly (and successfully) pursued, and increasingly making an impact on the social and economic organisation of domestic life in England. The Merchant Captain is an exemplar of a class of men (and sometimes their sisters, wives and daughters) who ventured into the risky but rewarding territory of foreign trade, to lead what were often itinerant and unstable lives. A portrait which adopts existing conventions of representing authority and status, but in a hesitant or compromised fashion, is a portrait of this itinerant, uncertain and fundamentally new way of living.

To emphasise this point I want to make a digression on the subject of the colours which the artist has used in this painting. I have already remarked upon the unusual rendering of the landscape in the same shade of blue as the water. I have also mentioned the bright red flags and decorations which appear on the junks. The junks, the blue hills, these are the elements of the painting which signify the China coast - they are the telltale signs of the exotic in this picture, and by 'telling' the exotic contribute much to the painting's overall statements and sense. But while the red on the ships is a betrayal of exoticism, it is also a sign of the domestic, and of 'Englishness'. The red is also the colour in the Merchant Captain's cheeks, nose, lips and hands, a red that makes a feature of the underlying whiteness of his face. The use of these colours to represent skin are not unusual: portrait painters of this era (including Chinnery) had distinct views on how to blend colours to represent various skin tones, the lightest of which was reserved for porcelain-skinned English women. A recent article has explored the prevalence of the porcelain skin in portrait painting of this era, and how exaggerated 'English Rose'

complexions helped to establish racial and national boundaries. In this painting, far from being a means of establishing a national boundary, skin colour has blurred it. The pink of the Merchant Captain's cheeks is a means of demonstrating his whiteness, and also a demonstration of his exoticism: in this portrait the red of his cheeks is linked with foreign shores and sea travel.

A worker in the role of gentleman; an Englishman abroad; a tender soul in a place of authority: all of these contradictory states are bundled here into a single painting. The Merchant Captain who must have been in nearly constant motion physically, economically and personally has been fixed in this portrait with very great care. The tension of that process - the difficulty of reining him into place - still resonates in this painting, and I think tells us something of the man who sat for it.

## Endnotes

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junk\\_%28sailing%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junk_%28sailing%29)

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