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All roads lead to Canton

The opening of the Canton trade fair yesterday may have lacked some of the attraction that this twice a year event once had, but it is still the show-window for Chinese industry and resources and no Western importer who wants to get to know the how, where, when, why and what price of trading with any part of China, can afford to give it a miss.

Conditions have admittedly changed a great deal in recent years with the opening and liberalisation of China. No longer do businessmen have to attend the fair because they are today able to go direct to provincial centres and to specific corporations at almost any time of the year. Many of the big traders have representative offices in China.

This has led to problems in China because of the internal competition and price-cutting it has generated. And as for many years there was inclined to be a stubborn uniformity in prices quoted at the Canton fair, many traders are exploring the options before committing themselves.

Thus the need for the Canton fair has diminished in importance over the years. But it is likely to remain a permanent feature of the Chinese trading scene for Canton has always been considered a pivotal centre for imports and exports, going back to the first days of Sino-Western contacts. The Co-Hong which monopolised this trade for China operated from Canton for many decades before the Opium War.

Hongkong's prosperity in recent years has if anything enhanced Canton's importance, for it has brought many people who see possibilities of doing business in both cities. Moreover, with the greatly improved hotel facilities in Canton, people are able to spend more time in greater comfort in the city.

Where once the Soviet-designed Dong Fong Hotel, opposite the exhibition centre, was the most favoured location in terms of convenience, many traders and businessmen today choose the greater luxury available at more distant hotels. And to that extent it is less of an ordeal and an obligation.

As Guangdong is the home province of many Overseas Chinese, it is a good time of year to combine business with visits to relatives and a little sight-seeing. Thus it remains a mecca for the businessman who finds in these days of floating currencies a need to maintain close contacts with suppliers. If Peking intends to cut down on so-called "parallel trade" it remains to be seen how this will affect pricing policy.

All in all, the trade fair means big business for China and provides an opportunity to show the world the many new products it makes as modernisation takes hold, joint ventures start up and new overseas expertise finds its way into the country. As a mass producer of light and medium industrial goods it remains an important port-of-call for businessmen all over the world. So today all roads still lead to Canton.