

“THE PRODUCT OF THAT FINER MOULD”: THE ROLE OF CHINESE  
PORCELAIN IN THE MAKING OF EARLY AMERICAN IMAGES OF CHINA

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

May 2023

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to my family. To my father, thank you for cultivating my interest in history and for supporting me throughout this process. To my mother, thank you for your constant encouragement. To my grandparents, aunts, and uncles, thank you for reading this.

Thank you to my thesis advisor, Dr. Howard, for your guidance over the years, for exposing me to new opportunities, for writing numerous recommendation letters, and for always pushing me to do better both in class and throughout the writing process. Thank you to my readers, Dr. Stearns and Dr. Thilly, for all of your help. To my other professors, particularly Dr. Kruse and Dr. Cromwell, thank you for your enjoyable and rigorous classes, for your recommendation letters, and, to Dr. Cromwell, for coming to my thesis defense. To Dr. Ownby, who taught my father thirty years ago, it was a privilege to be in your class and to have you at my thesis defense. Finally, to my bosses and colleagues in Archives & Special Collections, thank you for four amazing years. Not only did you make work the highlight of every weekday, but you also helped me realize my career goals.

## ABSTRACT

EMILY HOSPODOR: “The Product of that Finer Mould”: The Role of Chinese Porcelain in the Making of Early American Images of China (Under the direction of Joshua Howard)

This thesis asserts that Chinese material culture, specifically porcelain, was instrumental in the development of American perceptions of China in the colonial period through the late 19th century. The first chapter examines how the quality, durability, and uniqueness of Chinese export porcelain led Europeans, and by extension American colonists, to view China as an advanced and abundant civilization populated with ingenious craftsmen. The second chapter addresses the emergence of negative views of China among American traders and scholars after the establishment of direct contact with China during the Old China Trade (1784-1844). In contrast, the third chapter demonstrates that Americans that did not directly experience China maintained colonial attitudes throughout the Old China Trade despite the growth of European and American porcelain industries and increasingly negative perceptions of China in American business and intellectual circles. However, the influx of information about China after the First Opium War caused the American public to adopt a more critical view of China in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER I: .....	7
CHAPTER II: .....	29
CHAPTER III: .....	47
CONCLUSION .....	61
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	66

## INTRODUCTION

When he reached China's shores in 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry was dismayed to find that the reality of China did not reflect the beauty and splendor that he had imagined. The account of a crewmember, Francis Hawks, stated that "the sketches of [Perry's] imaginative boyhood were...dispelled by the sober realities of maturer years," specifically the realities of the "filth," "noise," and "poverty" that he encountered in Canton.<sup>1</sup> Perry, like generations of Americans before him, had cultivated an image of a serene China that was disconnected from any credible accounts or empirical evidence about Chinese people and society. Perry's obvious disappointment upon his arrival in Canton begs the question: how could he have held such a positive image of a land that he knew almost nothing about? The answer lies in how the majority of Americans interacted with China in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Information about China was limited until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when Britain forced China to establish more treaty ports, exposing China's interior to Western eyes and influence for the first time in centuries. While concrete knowledge about China was not widespread in the West, it was especially restricted in colonial America, where bans on foreign trade eliminated the possibility of direct contact between China and the American colonies.<sup>2</sup> Even after the independent United States established a trade relationship with

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Haddad, "Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay: Constructing China with Ceramics, 1780–1920," *Winterthur Portfolio* 41, no. 1 (2007): 67, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/511937>.

<sup>2</sup> Li Zhiyan, Virginia Bower, and He Li, *Chinese Ceramics from the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2010), 580.

China in 1784, isolation and language barriers hindered the acquisition of knowledge about Chinese society.<sup>3</sup> With limited information about Chinese culture and governance, material culture played an outsized role in arousing Americans' imaginations and created an almost mythical image of China. This imagined China was prosperous and its people possessed unique powers of craftsmanship and creativity, and no form of Chinese material culture represented this idealized version of China better than porcelain.

To understand how porcelain influenced American perceptions of China, one must examine Westerners' first encounters with Chinese porcelain, as many of the accounts of these interactions influenced the development of early American attitudes. Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall's articles cover the production and dissemination of Chinese export porcelain, spanning from Marco Polo's travels to China during the Yuan Dynasty until the High Qing (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) when porcelain's popularity in the West reached a peak. Citing William of Rubruck, a Franciscan friar who resided at the court of Möngke Khan during the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, Gerritsen and McDowall assert that Europeans who visited China "defined [the Chinese people] by their ability to produce luxury goods."<sup>4</sup> This, in turn, led the European public to link Chinese goods with Chinese identity. This is especially true in the case of porcelain, as China's name became synonymous with the product.<sup>5</sup> While Gerritsen and McDowall do an excellent job demonstrating Chinese porcelain's

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques M. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784-1844* (Bethlehem, PA.: Lehigh University Press, 1997), 73-74.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other: European Encounters with Chinese Porcelain, ca. 1650-1800," *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41508052>.

<sup>5</sup> The use of the term "china" in reference to Chinese porcelain emerged before porcelain's arrival in the American colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as the first inventories of colonial homes that included porcelain listed it as "Cheenie" or "Chaney" wares, or some variation thereof. Li and Bower, *Chinese Ceramics from the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty*, 580.

unique ability to shape perceptions of China and how the positive perception it created endured in Europe for centuries, they do not extend this argument to early America.

One of the most influential recent books examining the relationship between Chinese material culture and colonial American perceptions is Caroline Frank's *Objectifying China, Imagining America*. Based on archeological finds and probate inventories in New England, Frank argues that the prevalence of Chinese goods, particularly porcelain, in the American colonies reflected sustained interaction in trade networks involving Asia and influenced colonial Americans' self-image. Although this thesis focuses on Americans' perceptions of China more so than Frank's investigation of Americans' self-perception, I incorporate three aspects of Frank's argument. First, Frank claimed that Chinese porcelain reinforced both masculinity and femininity as men and women engaged with it according to their respective societal roles, stating that "men were the producers of wealth and women the consumers."<sup>6</sup> I build on this by citing John Haddad's contention, addressed below, that their differing interactions with porcelain led to a divergence in perceptions during the Old China Trade, with male merchants, missionaries, and authors of travel accounts to Asia developing a more critical view of China through their experiences, while female homemakers cultivated a romanticized ideal of China known as Cathay. Second, Frank and I both assert that American misinterpretations of porcelain imagery led to misconceptions about China. We come to opposite conclusions, however, as I suggest that Americans' misreading of Chinese iconography led to an overly positive idealized image of China, while Frank claims these

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<sup>6</sup> Caroline Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 169.



misinterpretations negatively influenced American perceptions.<sup>7</sup> We also diverge in the time period we study. Frank concludes her narrative in 1800 while I continue my analysis up to the First Opium War (1839-1842).

Much of the scholarship addressing Chinese porcelain in America underestimates the evolution of perspectives that occurred during the Old China Trade, lasting from the 1784 voyage of the *Empress of China* to the 1844 Treaty of Wangxia. In his article, “Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay,” John R. Haddad notes that China was a “mystery to the West” and that Americans, particularly women and children, attempted to fill the void of information through porcelain imagery.<sup>8</sup> For instance, a popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century children’s author, Samuel Griswold Goodrich, encouraged children to look to porcelain to learn about the appearance and lifestyle of Chinese people.<sup>9</sup> Although it is true that there were few avenues through which one could acquire knowledge about China and that the available information was not widely accessible, one should not assume that sustained contact during the Old China Trade did not affect perceptions of China in the United States. Direct contact impacted American views of China, but its effects were largely concentrated in intellectual and business circles until the First Opium War. The traders and intellectuals who gleaned their knowledge of China from first-hand experiences or accounts departed from colonial attitudes, marking the beginning of the evolution of American perspectives on China that would permeate much of the American public by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Another landmark work examining trade with China and American perceptions is Gordon Chang’s *Fateful Ties: A History of America’s Preoccupation with China*. Like

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> Haddad, “Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay,” 54.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Goodrich, *Manners and Customs of the Principal Nations of the Globe* (Boston: Bradbury, Boden & Co., 1844), 342-43.

Caroline Frank, Chang treats the idea of “China” as central to the development of American identity. However, their arguments diverge regarding early American perceptions of China, as Chang asserts that Chinese material culture cultivated an image of a wealthy, advanced China that inspired Americans to pursue a trade relationship after gaining independence. While American interest in China did not recede during the Old China Trade, Chang suggests that the attitudes of American merchants, statesmen, and scholars became more critical. The discourse in intellectual and business circles gradually shifted from asking what Americans could learn from China to how they could aid in the “backward” nation’s progress.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of this change in perspectives, early Americans’ enthusiasm for China and the commercial and evangelical opportunities therein fostered an idea that America and China shared a “mysterious and unfathomable common destiny.”<sup>11</sup>

Many of the primary sources historians use to analyze American attitudes toward China or Chinese porcelain are correspondence from colonial statesmen or 18<sup>th</sup>- and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century accounts from American traders in Canton. One of the best sources for early American attitudes toward China is the Founders Online Database, an online collection of digitized documents written by colonial leaders initiated by the National Archives. Although the majority of the primary sources cited are the writings of traders and statesmen, excerpts from select newspapers and literature also reveal attitudes regarding Chinese porcelain and its land of origin. Furthermore, the accounts of early European explorers illuminate the roots of both the American affinity for porcelain and colonial Americans’ views of China.

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<sup>10</sup> Gordon H. Chang, *Fateful Ties: A History of America’s Preoccupation with China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

Building on scholarship that sees a direct link between trade, material culture, and cross-cultural perceptions, this thesis analyzes how Chinese porcelain influenced Americans' view of China in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I first examine how colonial Americans inherited their taste for porcelain from the British whose appreciation for its quality and aesthetic fostered a generally positive, almost mythical, image of China. This view of China assumed a more critical tone directly after contact with China in 1784 due to a combination of trade frustrations, a decline in the production value of Chinese porcelain, and the emergence of competing porcelain industries in Europe. By the end of the Old China Trade, European-made porcelain had effectively displaced Chinese porcelain in the American market, and the realization that the Chinese were not uniquely skilled in porcelain production led to both declining demand for Chinese porcelain and a loss of respect for Chinese craftsmanship. The growing doubt about Chinese productive abilities served as the foundation for later criticisms of the Chinese character and ideas about their predisposition for "sameness."<sup>12</sup> The contrast between the China of colonial imagination and the reality of China along with the deterioration of the quality and creativity of Chinese porcelain contributed to the dramatic shift in American perceptions of China beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff, *A Sketch of Chinese History: Ancient and Modern* (London: J.P. Haven, 1834), 44.

## CHAPTER I: “[A] PRESUMPTION IN THEIR FAVOUR”<sup>13</sup>

At midday on Monday, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1742, Benjamin Lay, the “Pythagorean-cynical-christian Philosopher,” set up a stall in a Philadelphia marketplace.<sup>14</sup> He brought a box of porcelain dishes with him from his home, which he placed on the stall prior to mounting it. The spectacle attracted a crowd, who observed Lay as he denounced the “vanity of tea-drinking.”<sup>15</sup> Then, to the audience’s surprise, he began to remove the dishes from the box and break them with a hammer. Lay’s destruction of the porcelain ended swiftly, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reported, as the onlookers intervened in the demonstration, seizing both Lay and the box before pocketing “as much of [the porcelain] whole as they could get.”<sup>16</sup> One might dismiss their conduct as opportunistic thievery, but such was not the case. Neither greed nor theft was a motive; some of those assembled had even offered to buy Lay’s porcelain beforehand. Rather, the desire to salvage the porcelain, described in the *Gazette*’s article as a “Sacrifice,” spurred the crowd to such an extreme.<sup>17</sup>

The incident manifests that American colonists highly valued porcelain, which reflects the popularization of Chinese decorative arts that swept the West in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Like their European counterparts, colonists were avid consumers of Chinese

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon H. Chang, *Fateful Ties: A History of America’s Preoccupation with China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 24.

<sup>14</sup> “Extracts from the *Gazette*, 1742,” *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 2, *January 1, 1735, through December 31, 1744*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961) 355–365, in *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0088> (accessed October 28, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

exports, including tea, fine silks, porcelain, and lacquered furniture.<sup>18</sup> Though it was but one aspect of a widespread fervor for Chinese products, porcelain was uniquely treasured. Benjamin Lay targeted the “vanity of tea-drinking” by confronting the public with the obliteration of a recognized symbol of luxury.<sup>19</sup> Notably, he chose to ruin porcelain, not tea, in his protest. Although tea was another Chinese import consistently in high demand in the American colonies, the extravagant appearance and cost of porcelain dishes embodied excess, which inspired Lay to destroy vanity symbolically by demolishing porcelain. Given the crowd’s reaction, this choice was perhaps overly effective. The audience’s disruption of Lay’s demonstration and scramble for surviving dishes reflected their fascination with porcelain.

Lay’s protest and the crowd’s frenzy illustrate the conspicuous consumption of Chinese porcelain among elites in the American colonies, a custom derived from the English adoption of Chinese décor. 18<sup>th</sup>-century writer Daniel Defoe attributed the popularization of porcelain decoration to Queen Mary II, stating that the practice soon spread to “lesser mortals and increased to a strange degree afterward.”<sup>20</sup> But the passion for porcelain emerged with early European explorers and had been widespread in Europe for centuries. By adopting the styles of European elites, American consumers sought to appear “sophisticated” and “cosmopolitan” to transcend their position on the periphery of the British Empire.<sup>21</sup> While porcelain consumption projected an aura of refinement abroad,

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<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Leath, “‘After the Chinese Taste’: Chinese Export Porcelain and Chinoiserie Design in Eighteenth-Century Charleston,” *Historical Archaeology* 33, no. 3 (1999): 49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616724>.

<sup>19</sup> “Extracts from the *Gazette*, 1742,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed October 28, 2022, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0088>.

<sup>20</sup> Leath, “After the Chinese Taste,” 50.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

it also signaled a family's wealth and status to other colonists. Thus, many influential families possessed large personal collections of imported porcelain. Remains of blue-and-white porcelain teapots found at Shadwell, Thomas Jefferson's estate, indicate that the Jefferson family adhered to the global elite culture that favored Chinese aesthetics.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, George and Martha Washington amassed a collection of "hundreds of pieces of Chinaware" to symbolize their wealth and refinement.<sup>23</sup> As Lay's example reveals, the desire to emulate social elites inspired an appreciation for Chinese porcelain in the American public. In this way, the recognition of porcelain as a status symbol led to its spread from European palaces to elite homes in Europe and the colonies, and, finally, to Benjamin Lay's stall in a Philadelphia marketplace. Longevity aside, the affinity for porcelain was significant because it was inextricable from Europeans' and colonists' images of China, playing a large role in shaping their perceptions.

Porcelain was only one part of the wave of Chinese exports to the West, but its intrinsic qualities decisively shaped American colonists' positive view of China. Its durability contributed to this perspective. The production process enabled porcelain dishes to "withstand the ravages of time and nature" that ruined textiles and damaged furniture and "surviv[e] centuries to tell their stories."<sup>24</sup> Porcelain's ability to endure the long journey from Jingdezhen, the land-locked production center of Chinese export porcelain, to American shores, as well as its ability to withstand the passage of decades rendered it an ideal heirloom, especially when compared to more delicate Chinese products such as silk.

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Kern, "The Material World of the Jeffersons at Shadwell," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2005): 234, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3491600>.

<sup>23</sup> Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall, "Global China: Material Culture and Connections in World History," *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41508049>.

Porcelain's durability gave it an advantage over other forms of Chinese décor and added to its appeal in the West. Moreover, the "malleability of the clay" used to create porcelain along with its "white surfaces" made it extremely versatile, so it was easily adapted to suit the tastes of the target market.<sup>25</sup> This versatility enabled the Chinese manufacturers to mass-produce customized porcelain for each region of export and, perhaps more importantly, allowed for consumer embellishment. In Europe, this took the form of mounting, in which European craftsmen added silver gilt mounts to porcelain dishes to "reflect European design history."<sup>26</sup> The final major factor in porcelain's popularity was the absence of comparable domestic alternatives.<sup>27</sup> Until German potters mastered porcelain production methods in 1709, China was the world's sole supplier of porcelain.<sup>28</sup> Once China lost its monopoly, the demand for Chinese porcelain diminished in Europe. Even after Chinese porcelain had to compete with European porcelain, it continued to be popular in the American colonies throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. An inventory of imports from 1772 to 1773, for instance, reported that "a total 200,000 pieces, 4,200 parcels, and 3 cases" of Chinese export porcelain had arrived for distribution in New York and Philadelphia.<sup>29</sup> Although porcelain was not the sole influence on early American perceptions of China or the subsequent evolution of those images, its quality and adaptability, as well as the mystery of its manufacture, made it exceptionally impactful.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Stacey Pierson, "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History," *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41508050>.

<sup>27</sup> Terrence H. Witkowski, "Colonial Consumers in Revolt: Buyer Values and Behavior during the Nonimportation Movement, 1764-1776," *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, no. 2 (1989): 219, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2489320>.

<sup>28</sup> Gerritsen and McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other," 105.

<sup>29</sup> Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America*, 118.

<sup>30</sup> Gerritsen and McDowall, "Global China," 5-6.

Early European accounts of China were similarly influential. American colonists' opinions of China and Chinese material goods were derivative of European perceptions, so defining the American view of China in the colonial period necessitates an examination of the European perspective. The European view originated with the accounts of early explorers in China who emphasized China's material abundance and the manufacturing skills of the Chinese people. In his description of his travels to China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Marco Polo identified Jingdezhen as the manufacturing hub of Chinese export porcelain, where one could buy "bowls of such beauty that nothing lovelier could be imagined."<sup>31</sup> He depicted how the craftsmen prepared the clay by leaving it exposed to the elements for three or four decades, which cultivated an image of the Chinese as a "patient" and "forethoughtful" people.<sup>32</sup> In particular, he wrote of the family tradition ingrained in the lengthy process of porcelain production, stating that "when a man makes a mound of this earth he does so for his children."<sup>33</sup> This description of porcelain manufacture as a tradition handed down through generations fostered the idea that the traits of these craftsmen, namely their patience and skill, were values inherent to the Chinese population. In this way, porcelain, its manufacture, and its trade were foundational aspects of the European perception of the Chinese people.

In subsequent centuries, material goods continued to mold European ideas about Chinese civilization and people. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts built upon these accumulated preconceptions and were similarly enthusiastic about China's material

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<sup>31</sup> Gerritsen and McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other," 92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.



advancement and abundance.<sup>34</sup> Spanish Jesuit Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza's *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof* was not a first-hand account, instead, it was a compilation of observations from his fellow Jesuits who had served in China for extended periods. Consequently, Mendoza offered fewer details than his contemporaries, simply stating that porcelain seemed to be of "fine and perfite crystal" and that "the finest sort of this is never carried out of the countrie."<sup>35</sup> To Mendoza's audience, this suggested that the splendor of China extended far beyond the luxury goods exported to Europe, as the highest quality porcelain was reserved for the Chinese emperor and elites. Moreover, he upheld Marco Polo's earlier findings about porcelain manufacture being a family trade, confirming that the "sonne shall inherite his fathers occupation" and that the children of these craftsmen are "brought up [in the trade] from their youth."<sup>36</sup> This supported prior assumptions that the capability and thoughtfulness exhibited by the manufacturers were inborn characteristics, as their children displayed the same traits and skills. Mendoza also argued that this system of family apprenticeship contributed to the quality of the porcelain, as the children's "curious[ity] in that which they do worke" was "plainlie seene in that which is brought thence to Manila, and into the Indies, and unto Portugal."<sup>37</sup> His association between the children's curiosity and the products they

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<sup>34</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, "Western Perceptions of China from the Late Sixteenth Century to the Present," in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>35</sup> Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza, *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the situation thereof*, trans. R. Parke, ed. George T. Staunton (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1853), 34.

<https://archive.org/details/dli.granth.86424/page/n1/mode/2up>. For more publications of travel literature, see: <https://www.hakluyt.com/hakluyt-society-volumes-in-print/>

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

produced with their families confirmed that porcelain was a reflection of the character of its producers.

Another Jesuit missionary, Alvaro Semedo, affirmed Mendoza's conclusions in his own writings on China in 1655. Unlike Mendoza, Semedo had extensive experience in China. Semedo began his mission work in China in 1610, and China entranced him for the following five decades, drawing him back despite two incarcerations and one deportation. During a brief intermission in Europe, he wrote an account of his observations on Chinese culture, politics, and economics, with particular attention paid to Chinese commodities. Semedo's *History of the Great and Renowned Monarchy of China* echoed many of the sentiments previously expressed by Marco Polo and Mendoza. His account included a description of the "Porsellane dishes" produced in Jingdezhen and disseminated globally, which he cited as evidence of the Chinese people's inventiveness and business prowess.<sup>38</sup> Semedo wrote that the "manufactures of China are sufficient to attest to its civilization," making explicit the connection between porcelain and perceptions of China.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Europeans characterized Chinese people by their ability to produce porcelain, which informed their perspective on Chinese civilization as a whole.<sup>40</sup>

The popularity of these volumes and the repetition of themes indicates that the aforesaid authors' assertions were representative of the broader European view. Polo, Mendoza, and Semedo's accounts were all translated into multiple languages to reach a pan-European audience, indicating that China aroused the European public's curiosity. Furthermore, these combined works featured recurring themes of abundance, technological

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<sup>38</sup> Gerritsen and McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other," 96.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 88.

advancement, and ingenuity, which both cemented material culture as an integral part of Europeans' perception of China and constructed a positive view of China across Europe.<sup>41</sup> The prevalence of these motifs across these accounts substantiated their claims, as later authors confirmed the findings of their predecessors. Though these are only three works from an expansive genre of European writings on China, they provide an insight into the impact of these authors' reports and illuminate the ways in which material culture became intertwined with European perceptions of China and the Chinese people. In doing so, they contextualize discussions of Enlightenment-era and colonial views and serve as a baseline of comparison.

Though European images of China remained largely consistent from the time of early explorers to the 17th century, the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a transitional period for European views of China due to both the emergence of domestic porcelain factories and the divergence in attitudes during the Enlightenment. The publication of the letters of French Jesuit missionary Francois Xavier d'Entrecolles in 1712 demystified the process of porcelain production for the European public, detailing how Chinese manufacturers used cobalt in porcelain decorations. While Chinese craftsmen had been importing and producing cobalt for design purposes since the Tang dynasty, the element was unknown in Europe before the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>42</sup> d'Entrecolles provided a description of the cobalt production process, allowing Europeans to study and replicate the Chinese methods. Louis-Daniel Le Comte, another French Jesuit, similarly revealed the secrets behind the glaze used on porcelain and encouraged his countrymen to experiment with reproductions. To

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

Le Comte, the “fortunate possession of natural resources,” not some unknowable skill, was the reason for China’s monopoly on porcelain.<sup>43</sup> Though it was French Jesuits who spearheaded efforts to observe and replicate porcelain production methods, Le Comte’s sentiments that Europeans could reproduce Chinese porcelain if given the necessary materials existed outside of France. Daniel Defoe echoed Le Comte in *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, in which he wrote that “if we had the same Clay, we should soon outdo them, as much as we do in other things.”<sup>44</sup> The popularity of the Chinese aesthetic and the expense of Chinese export porcelain drove European missions to support their states’ economic self-reliance by unlocking the secrets of porcelain manufacture. Thus, the investigation into the materials and methods needed to reproduce Chinese porcelain took on a patriotic tone.

As the French gradually accumulated knowledge about porcelain production from Jesuit accounts, Europe’s first porcelain factory was established in 1710 at Meissen, near Dresden.<sup>45</sup> The discovery of *kaolin* clay in Saxony and the subsequent development of a hard-paste porcelain formula in 1709 was the result of the combined efforts of Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus and Johann Friedrich Böttger. Like in other European countries, the pursuit of a hard-paste porcelain formula in Saxony was an effort to bolster economic self-sufficiency and limit the amount of money being spent on Chinese export porcelain, sums so great that von Tschirnhaus dubbed the Chinese as “Saxony’s porcelain bloodsuckers.”<sup>46</sup> Although the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory preceded the publication of French Jesuit accounts of the production process, it was the French Jesuits who made the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>46</sup> Li and Bower, *Chinese Ceramics from the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty*, 584.

secrets of porcelain manufacture known, even as the German potters attempted to corner the European market by carefully guarding their hard-paste porcelain formula.<sup>47</sup> However, the French quickly countered German dominance over the European porcelain industry by opening soft-paste porcelain factories, followed by the English after the discovery of kaolin clay in Cornwall in 1755.<sup>48</sup> The influx of knowledge and the development of porcelain industries across Europe undermined the prestige previously associated with Chinese export porcelain, and this glance behind the curtain coincided with a shift in European perceptions of China. While many Europeans remained impressed with China, the mastery of porcelain production methods in Europe resulted in “disillusionment” with both Chinese “porcelain manufactures [and] their producers” that increased throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many Europeans believed Chinese porcelain to be “equaled or even excelled by that of Dresden.”<sup>50</sup> Consequently, Europeans’ mastery of Chinese porcelain production methods eroded their previously positive view of China and Chinese ingenuity while simultaneously feeding the craze for Chinese decorative arts.

The Enlightenment period witnessed a fragmentation of European views. The positive view created by Jesuit accounts endured throughout this schism, as many Enlightenment-era philosophers studied at Jesuit schools.<sup>51</sup> Among them was Voltaire,<sup>52</sup> one of Europe’s most prominent Sinophiles. Voltaire’s attitude toward China was a product

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<sup>47</sup> Irma Hoyt Reed, “The European Hard-Paste Porcelain Manufacture of the Eighteenth Century,” *The Journal of Modern History* 8, no. 3 (1936): 276. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/eighteenth81537>.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>49</sup> Gerritsen and McDowall, “Material Culture and the Other,” 105.

<sup>50</sup> Lehner, *China in European Encyclopaedias*, 224.

<sup>51</sup> Ho-Fung Hung, “Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of East-West Differences from 1600 to 1900,” *Sociological Theory* 21, no. 3 (2003): 260, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108638>.

<sup>52</sup> François-Marie Arouet, the Enlightenment writer and philosopher.

of his education at a Jesuit institution, as he shared the long-held Jesuit belief that China was an advanced and abundant civilization that Europeans had much to learn from. He praised the Chinese for their “advances towards perfection” in “morality” and “the necessary arts of life.”<sup>53</sup> Voltaire’s commendation of the Kangxi emperor’s support of “useful skills and arts,” also reflects the Jesuit influence on Voltaire’s perception of China, as Chinese material culture, particularly porcelain and silk, had long served as affirmation for Jesuit accounts.<sup>54</sup> These Jesuit-derived views were evident in Voltaire’s critique of the Catholic Church’s involvement in European society, as he presented China as an example of a non-Christian nation that was both morally and technologically advanced, citing Jesuit accounts and Chinese material culture as evidence.<sup>55</sup> Voltaire’s example demonstrates that Chinese material culture remained a key component of the positive view of China in Europe in concert with the enduring impact of Jesuit accounts.<sup>56</sup> However, optimism about China was waning in Europe, and Voltaire was himself the target of criticism due to his attitude towards China.

Montesquieu<sup>57</sup> was one of the many intellectuals who disagreed with Voltaire and contributed to a genre of writings to “correct the mistaken Western view” of China.<sup>58</sup> A graduate of the Oration College of France, Montesquieu had Jansenist, rather than Jesuit, influences. In contrast to the Jesuit belief that God’s grace was a gift available to all of humanity, Jansenists believed that some people, namely Europeans, had greater access than

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<sup>53</sup> Colin Mackerras, *Sinophiles and Sinophobes: Western Views of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 37.

<sup>54</sup> Hung, “Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories,” 263.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *Chinese Roundabout: Essays in History and Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 81.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu.

<sup>58</sup> Spence, “Western Perceptions of China,” 4.

others.<sup>59</sup> Jansenist views on salvation shaped a competing perception of China that opposed the dominant, Jesuit-influenced attitude, which Montesquieu and his contemporaries claimed was undeservedly positive. Montesquieu targeted the primary traits ascribed to the Chinese people in his assertion that the laws which encouraged the Chinese people to be “hardworking and industrious” also drove them to be deceitful.<sup>60</sup> While China’s material culture remained central to Europeans’ praise of Chinese civilization and people, it was also central to their criticism, as Montesquieu demonstrated in his devaluation of Chinese ingenuity. In sharp contrast to past assessments, Montesquieu made the bold, yet totally unsupported, claim that the Chinese were the “most unscrupulous people on earth” due to their business practices, though he admitted that their supposedly self-interested behavior was often a means of survival.<sup>61</sup> He conjured an image of Spartan *agoge*, where pupils were encouraged to steal food to survive, stating that “in Lacedaemonia, stealing was permitted; in China, deceit it permitted.”<sup>62</sup> Though his comparison of the Chinese people and young Spartan cadets stealing food out of necessity demonstrates his understanding that some Chinese people would use fraudulent methods to fulfill their basic needs, it does not acquit them in the eyes of Montesquieu. As shown by this disparity in attitudes, the Enlightenment period saw the end of the previous centuries’ homogenous and favorable view of China.

It is no coincidence that this divergence in opinion occurred as porcelain manufacturing arose in Europe. From the establishment of contact with China, material

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<sup>59</sup> Hung, “Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories,” 258.

<sup>60</sup> Mackerras, *Sinophiles and Sinophobes*, 44.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

goods were instrumental in the construction of Europeans' opinion regarding China. Distinctive Chinese aesthetics, including blue-and-white porcelain, and Europeans' inability to reproduce Chinese porcelain created a strong association between porcelain and "Chineseness" in the minds of Europeans.<sup>63</sup> Simply put, porcelain was highly prized, at least in part, because it was unique to China, which in turn shaped European ideas about Chinese identity.<sup>64</sup> Prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the manufacture of porcelain was a mystery that endlessly baffled and enthralled Europeans, with one theory speculating that porcelain was made from "eggshells."<sup>65</sup> Chinese porcelain was valuable because it was unmatched by other varieties, which fostered respect for Chinese ingenuity and technological advancement. While the Chinese monopoly on porcelain contributed to its prestige, it also inspired a sense of envy in Europe that fueled the development of indigenous porcelain industries.

American colonists echoed Europeans' enthusiasm for Chinese decorative arts, with many purchasing porcelain to project their wealth and status. Porcelain was the "currency of social emulation among the aristocracy of every nation" that "spread down the social ladder" in Europe and, eventually, reached distant colonies.<sup>66</sup> Because of this top-down popularization of Chinese export porcelain, American colonists associated porcelain with European royalty and elites. This, along with its aesthetic qualities and durability, added to porcelain's appeal. The demand for porcelain arose in the American colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the Van Rensselaer family of New York ordering

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<sup>63</sup> Gerritsen and McDowall, "Global China," 5.

<sup>64</sup> Georg Lehner, *China in European Encyclopaedias, 1700-1850*, Vol. 9. (Leiden: Brill Publishing House, 2011), 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Finlay, "The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History," *Journal of World History* 9, no. 2 (1998): 172, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078727>.



porcelain as early as 1662.<sup>67</sup> Colonists' tastes continued to mirror those of the European elite in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For example, South Carolina Governor John Drayton wrote that wealthy Charlestonians "sought in every possible way to emulate the life of London society."<sup>68</sup> Many wealthy families, including those of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, ordered customized porcelain decorated with family crests, while households with more modest incomes purchased simpler wares.<sup>69</sup> Though finer porcelain was a luxury reserved for the upper class, the appreciation for porcelain was prevalent at all social levels, and this captivation contributed to the development of Sinophilia in the American colonies.<sup>70</sup>

Although Europeans and Americans shared a "sincere admiration...for Chinese decoration," relative isolation on the empire's periphery caused the 18<sup>th</sup>-century colonists' perceptions to resemble the traditional view of China put forth first by Jesuit missionaries rather than the more critical views of thinkers like Montesquieu.<sup>71</sup> When Europeans first migrated to the American colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they brought both their taste for porcelain and their preexisting view of China to North America. However, the English Navigation Acts of 1651 excluded the colonists from the profitable porcelain trade by prohibiting trade with China.<sup>72</sup> This ban on trade prevented contact between American colonists and China. Less than a dozen Euro-Americans had visited China prior to 1784 when the American merchant vessel, the *Empress of China*, entered Chinese waters.<sup>73</sup> The ban on trade also limited the information about China available in the American colonies,

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<sup>67</sup> Li and Bower, *Chinese Ceramics from the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty*, 580.

<sup>68</sup> Leath, "After the Chinese Taste," 49.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Spence, "Western Perceptions of China," 7.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 14.

so Chinese imports such as porcelain became many American colonists' only tangible link to China, molding perceptions of China perhaps even more than they had in Europe.<sup>74</sup> The thousands of remains of "colonial-era Chinese porcelain" attest to the prevalence of porcelain in the colonies.<sup>75</sup> Due to the lack of contemporary accounts, optimistic narratives from Marco Polo, Semedo, and other explorers dominated the Euro-American discourse on China, and the migrants' attitudes towards China were favorable as a result. The colonists' views on China remained essentially static until 1784, as the 1651 Navigation Acts forbade contact with China and insulated the American colonies from the schism in perceptions of China occurring in Europe. Without first-hand accounts from traders, colonists relied on tales from early European explorers that had influenced popular opinion in Europe for centuries as well as their experience with Chinese export porcelain. According to A. Owen Aldridge, though thinkers like Montesquieu were at the forefront of the discourse about China in Europe, their critiques "were not noticed" in the American colonies.<sup>76</sup>

The presence of European porcelain in the American market did not alter the desire for Chinese porcelain, instead, it gave Chinese export porcelain a new political relevance that heightened its appeal and buoyed American perceptions of China. In the decades prior to American independence, the Navigation Acts created a captive market for "English

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<sup>74</sup> Some Americans did have access to information about China, but it was "built on centuries of remote contacts" instead of recent first-hand accounts (Frank, 78). One of the relatively widely-held beliefs about China was that it had a harsh legal system, as evidenced by William Gibb's Coromandel lacquer screens. However, it is unclear whether Gibb's designs were original or copied from a Chinese artist. Furthermore, these images of punishment were potentially legacies of stories of impalement in medieval Eastern Europe, so this may be a perception of the East in general, not China specifically. For more details, see Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America*, 78-88.

<sup>75</sup> Li and Bower, *Chinese Ceramics from the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty*, 580.

<sup>76</sup> Alfred Owen Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle: The Presence of China in the American Enlightenment* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 20.

Rococo-style porcelains” that were “imported into America in large quantities for the more prosperous colonial homes.”<sup>77</sup> In addition, porcelain factories began to appear in the American colonies after the discovery of a kaolin clay deposit in Delaware, though American porcelain production did not take off until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>78</sup> Unlike in Europe, the inflow of European porcelain and experiments with domestic porcelain production did not diminish colonists’ desire to establish a trade relationship with China, nor did it detract from the prestige associated with Chinese luxury goods. On the contrary, American colonists favored Chinese porcelain, as English goods were seen increasingly as “symbols of oppression and dependence.”<sup>79</sup> Although colonists resented England’s strict control over the importation of Chinese goods, they remained more highly valued than those manufactured in Great Britain. Americans’ partiality to Chinese export porcelain is best observed in the post-Revolutionary period, in which American traders exercised their newfound freedom to trade as they wished through their pursuit of Chinese porcelain. The development of a porcelain trade with China also undercut the English porcelain industry by depriving it of its previous market. In this way, acquiring Chinese porcelain was a political act, as it reflected American pride in their newly independent nation.<sup>80</sup> The porcelain requested also made the political association explicit, with Americans ordering dishes depicting patriotic motifs such as the American flag.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the emergence of a competing English porcelain industry made America’s participation in the Chinese

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<sup>77</sup> Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen and Peter M. Kenny, “American Decorative Arts,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 48, no. 2 (1990): 63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3258958>.

<sup>78</sup> Li and Bower, *Chinese Ceramics from the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty*, 568.

<sup>79</sup> Kariann Akemi Yokota, “Transatlantic and Transpacific Connections in Early American History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 2 (2014): 216, <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2014.83.2.204>.

<sup>80</sup> Li and Bower, *Chinese Ceramics from the Paleolithic Period through the Qing Dynasty*, 568.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

porcelain trade after independence a transgressive act, elevating Chinese porcelain's status as an embodiment of American independence.<sup>82</sup>

Independence provided American businessmen with the long-awaited opportunity to create a direct trade relationship with China, satisfying both the increasing curiosity about China and the demand for Chinese goods. With the maiden voyage of the *Empress of China*, the first vessel outfitted by the United States for the China trade, Americans could finally interact with porcelain's mysterious land of origin. The *Empress of China's* successful journey to Canton in 1784 attracted the interest of the American public, as the majority of Americans had no experience with Chinese civilization or culture. Benjamin Franklin was an exception to this rule, as his French language ability and travels to Europe allowed him to gain insight into Chinese civilization that was unattainable to most American colonists. Though he was privy to the growing disapproval of China in Europe, Franklin sided firmly with Voltaire. An avid Sinophile, his admiration for Chinese civilization could be summed up by the views he expressed in the American Philosophical Society's newsletter: "Could we be so fortunate as to introduce the industry of the Chinese, their arts of living and improvements in husbandry, as well as their native plants, America might in time become as populous as China..."<sup>83</sup> This appreciation for Chinese industry extended to porcelain, as shown in a 1776 letter to Admiral Richard Howe, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl Howe, in which he described the British Empire as a "fine and noble China Vase" that he had attempted to protect.<sup>84</sup> This is a poignant metaphor, as Franklin and Howe had been

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<sup>82</sup> Yokota, "Transatlantic and Transpacific Connections in Early American History," 216.

<sup>83</sup> Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 87.

<sup>84</sup> "From Benjamin Franklin to Lord Howe, 20 July 1776," *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 22, *March 23, 1775, through October 27, 1776*, ed. William B. Willcox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 518–521, in *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-22-02-0307> (accessed October 16, 2022).

acquaintances for some time and had tried to formulate a peace plan to no avail. In this letter, Franklin uses the porcelain metaphor to express the esteem in which he held the British Empire, and his choice of metaphor indicates the value he ascribed to porcelain as well as the fragility of the colonial project. In his appreciation for Chinese porcelain, Franklin mirrored his fellow colonists even as his cosmopolitanism made him exceptional.

George Washington's attitude towards China more closely resembled that of the American public. He had a long-held appreciation for Chinese goods that resulted in a large collection of porcelain.<sup>85</sup> His passion for Chinese material goods inspired a fascination with China and excitement at the prospect of a trade relationship between China and the newly independent United States. After receiving a letter from Tench Tilghman in 1785 describing the appearance of the four Chinese onboard the *Empress of China*, Washington admitted that he assumed the Chinese, while "droll in shape and appearance, were yet white."<sup>86</sup> Though Washington expressed enthusiasm for the *Empress of China*'s return, his response to Tilghman's report of the Chinese people also highlighted his fundamental misunderstanding of China.

Washington's misguided view of China was the combined result of the popularity of high-quality Chinese goods like porcelain and the absence of accurate information about China. Though such a misconception seems almost impossible given Washington's zeal for China and Chinese imports, his mistake was the natural consequence of the previous ban on direct contact with China. With no direct diplomatic or commercial interactions,

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<sup>85</sup> Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 26.

<sup>86</sup> "From George Washington to Tench Tilghman, 29 August 1785," *The Papers of George Washington*, Confederation Series, vol. 3, 19 May 1785–31 March 1786, ed. W. W. Abbot. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 208–209, in *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0155> (accessed October 16, 2022).

knowledge about China in the American colonies was generally limited to European explorers' accounts and material goods. Washington's second-hand knowledge of China through Jesuit accounts and his personal collection of porcelain indicate that his view of China aligned with the traditional Jesuit school of thought, which cited porcelain as evidence of the ingenuity and skill of the Chinese people.<sup>87</sup> Thus, porcelain molded Washington's opinion of China as it had done for the generations of Europeans and American colonists before him, serving as a testament to an advanced and cultured society populated with capable craftsmen and merchants. This caused him to develop a particular interest in China while having little familiarity with the country.<sup>88</sup> Although porcelain led American colonists to develop ideas about the wealth and abilities of China and its people, it did not provide them with any insight into their cultural or physical characteristics. Thus, the colonists' perceptions of China, while primarily positive, were often misinformed.

As Washington demonstrated, the ignorance of Chinese civilization extended to the American concept of an Asian racial type, or lack thereof. This lack of awareness is more apparent when compared to Europe, where a wellspring of investigations into the origin and ethnic diversity of China emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Due to their prolonged contact with China, Europeans possessed first-hand knowledge of the physical, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of the Chinese people, which allowed for studies speculating about their origins. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the spread of rumors that the Chinese

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<sup>87</sup> It is possible that Washington's belief that the Chinese people were white may have stemmed from Mendoza's *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof*, in which he stated that those in the northern and interior regions of China were as fair as Germans or Spaniards. Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7t16j>.

<sup>88</sup> Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 26.

were of Egyptian, Roman, Greek, or Indian antecedents.<sup>89</sup> Unlike the discourse surrounding the Chinese people's origin, European accounts of the ethnic composition of China were more accurate, particularly after the founding of the Qing dynasty.<sup>90</sup> Jean Baptiste Du Halde's *Description géographique, historique, politique et physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* was the foundational text of this genre concerning the various ethnic groups within China, followed by later texts like the *Penny Cyclopaedia*, which described the histories and languages of "the Chinese, Manchu, Mongols, and Miao ('SengMiao-tsee' [sheng Miaozi] 生苗子)" along with "the Yi 彝 ('Lolo') and the Gelao 仡佬 ('Tchang-Colas')." <sup>91</sup> However, Europeans used their knowledge of these groups to emphasize the differences between the Chinese and themselves, contributing to the othering of the Chinese people in the minds of the European public.<sup>92</sup>

In contrast to the abundant knowledge of and scholarship relating to the subject of Chinese ethnicity and diversity, the American colonists had little concept of the ethnic origins and composition of China. Washington's assumption that the Chinese "were yet white" demonstrates how the Chinese people existed outside of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century American racial paradigm.<sup>93</sup> The American concept of race in the colonial period, broadly speaking, included white Europeans, enslaved and free Africans, and Native Americans. The forced isolation prevented American colonists from developing an orthodox concept of an Asian

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<sup>89</sup> Lehner, *China in European Encyclopaedias*, 166.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>93</sup> "From George Washington to Tench Tilghman, 29 August 1785," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed October 16, 2022, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0155>.

race or races that existed alongside the aforementioned racial categories. Not until after the development of trade with China did Americans begin to participate in the conversation surrounding Chinese racial origins and characteristics, as shown by the publication of minister Jedidiah Morse's *American Universal Geography* in 1796.<sup>94</sup> Though the nature of post-contact publications concerning the Chinese people's ethnicity is not pertinent to the discussion of colonial attitudes, it is worth noting that such works only emerged after direct trade was established. Washington's exchange with Tench Tilghman describing his prior assumptions illuminates the lack of knowledge about the ethnic origins and composition of China in colonial America. It is significant that Washington's limited knowledge about the Chinese people, which was based on their production capacity and craftsmanship, led him to categorize them as white. In an era characterized by endemic white supremacy, Washington's association between the Chinese people and whiteness provides evidence of his approval as well as his ignorance.

Chinese export porcelain played a unique and essential role in the development of colonial American perspectives on China, as its quality and ubiquity, especially among elites, led Americans to associate China with abundance and skilled craftsmanship. The connection between material goods and images of China was a legacy of European attitudes, which were similarly influenced by Chinese luxury goods. This fostered a generally positive view of Chinese civilization and people. The image of China, while positive, was not based upon fact. Consequently, Americans imagined an exotic and mysterious, while at the same time industrious and "civilized," China that was far different from reality. In the 1760s and 1770s, Chinese porcelain also took on a political connotation,

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<sup>94</sup> Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 36.



as it undercut the competing English porcelain industry; possessing it became, in part, a symbol of protest against metropolitan rule. Though the prestige of Chinese export porcelain waned in Europe as the European porcelain industry arose, the low production capacity and quality of the few American porcelain manufacturers and the political motivation to purchase Chinese porcelain instead of English-made wares buoyed the desire for Chinese porcelain in America. This spurred Americans to venture eastward to porcelain's mythic land of origin soon after achieving independence, and the departure of the *Empress of China* in 1784 commenced a direct relationship between China and the United States, one that bore portents of change.

## CHAPTER II: “[NO] ORIGINAL GENIUS”<sup>95</sup>

“She now her eager course explores, And soon shall meet Chinesian shores.”<sup>96</sup> This verse penned by Philip Freneau recounts the *Empress of China*’s highly anticipated departure to Canton on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1784. Freneau, who rose to prominence as the poet of the American Revolution, encapsulated the American public’s enthusiastic support of trade with China in a poem entitled, “On the First American Ship That Explored the Rout to China and the East-Indies, After the Revolution.”<sup>97</sup> While patriotism and American military prowess is the central theme of the poem, Freneau has multiple references to American attitudes toward China and Chinese material culture. China had long captured the imaginations of colonial Americans, and Freneau’s verses portray how Chinese export porcelain cultivated this interest and molded the American understanding of Chinese civilization. In addition, Freneau emphasized the riches to be acquired in Canton, celebrating the opportunity to share in China’s material abundance.<sup>98</sup>

The quality and unique aesthetic appeal of Chinese luxury goods earned China a reputation as a land of abundance and wealth populated with brilliant artists. Freneau alluded to this perception when he addressed King George III’s former ban on foreign trade in the first stanza, stating that the *Empress* could now explore the “golden regions” that

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<sup>95</sup> Josiah Quincy, *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw: the First American Consul at Canton* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1847), 198,

<https://archive.org/details/journalsofmajors00shaw/page/n9/mode/2up>.

<sup>96</sup> Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 101.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 17.

“George forbade to sail before.”<sup>99</sup> This line portrays an obvious excitement at the prospect of unlocking the bounty of this previously inaccessible “golden” nation, demonstrating how material culture drove public interest in the *Empress*’ voyage and, by extension, China as a whole.<sup>100</sup> Porcelain played a vital role in the development of Americans’ concept of China. Of the many types of Chinese material culture present in America such as silk and lacquered furniture, porcelain is the only one mentioned by Freneau. His tone was almost reverential as he described the porcelain “enchas’d in gold” that awaited the *Empress* in Canton.<sup>101</sup> Freneau went further, calling porcelain the “product of that finer mould,” at once demonstrating his appreciation for porcelain and wonder at its production process.<sup>102</sup> His praise of porcelain and neglect of other forms of Chinese decorative art implies that porcelain was especially treasured in America, which suggests that it influenced American perceptions of China to a greater degree than other commodities.

The acquisition of porcelain was not the sole or even primary motive for establishing a trade relationship with China, but its popularity and foundational role in the formation of Americans’ perception of China made it central to the early Sino-American trade. Robert Waln, Jr., a businessman and supercargo from Philadelphia, wrote in reference to this early period of trade that “the Porcelain of China...displaced the English ware hitherto in use...even the poorest families could boast at least a limited proportion of China Ware.”<sup>103</sup> However, this preference would not endure through the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as increased competition from European porcelain eroded the admiration that Americans

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Jean McClure Mudge, *Chinese Export Porcelain for the American Trade* (Wilmington: University of Delaware Press, 1962), 124.

had for the creativity of the Chinese craftsmen. In addition to the emerging European porcelain industry, the fact that American stylistic preferences, especially those of the upper class, were influenced by the tastes of the European elite meant that Europe was ideally positioned to compete in the American porcelain market. Previously, Chinese methods of porcelain production had been a closely-guarded secret for centuries, and the mystery cultivated an idea that the Chinese had unique manufacturing capabilities. Successful European experiments with ceramics and the emergence of European porcelain factories during the 18<sup>th</sup> century undermined the prestige associated with Chinese porcelain, which diminished respect for Chinese ingenuity in the West.<sup>104</sup> The rise of European porcelain also corresponded with a decrease in the quality of Chinese ware, as the pressure to meet the demands of foreign markets led Chinese producers to prioritize quantity over creativity and quality.<sup>105</sup> Thus, Chinese craftsmen struggled to satisfy Western tastes, and Americans' favor gradually shifted toward European porcelain. Chinese porcelain continued to shape American images of China after the *Empress'* voyage, but it was no longer the sole influence on these perceptions. Direct contact between the two nations prompted a negative shift in American attitudes towards both porcelain and its land of origin beginning with scholars and traders, as trade frustrations and cultural differences prompted the rise of Orientalism, the production of knowledge that situated Asian countries as inherently different and inferior to the West.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Gerritsen and McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other," 105.

<sup>105</sup> Mudge, *Chinese Export Porcelain for the American Trade*, 125.

<sup>106</sup> Edward Said presents multiple intersecting definitions of Orientalism in his 1978 work on the subject. The third definition that he provides is "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient...by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, [and] ruling over it," and dates the origins of this phenomenon to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 3.

Similarly, favorable views of Chinese governance and morality declined among American merchants and scholars during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, American statesmen held China's government and moral philosophy in high regard, with Benjamin Franklin even suggesting China as an example to strive for.<sup>107</sup> This idealization of the Chinese government changed after direct contact, as American traders in Canton perceived the Chinese government as strict and despotic.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, Western scholars' writings about China revealed an inclination to view the Chinese as a homogenous group and betrayed an increasingly negative view of Chinese morality. Although American traders had increased access to information about China, misinformation remained prevalent due to isolation and linguistic barriers. The strict limitation of foreign traders' movements in Canton fueled the spread of rumors about Chinese society, some of which filtered back to their countries of origin. When Western traders did interact with Chinese people, language barriers led to mutual misunderstanding. The Chinese government wished to limit communication between Chinese people and Western traders, so "teaching Chinese to a foreigner 'was...regarded as one of the most offensive and dangerous [charges] that could be brought against a native.'"<sup>109</sup> While information about China remained limited, the Old China Trade saw traders' and scholars' movement away from blindly positive images of Chinese people, products, and civilization toward a more critical commentary generated by both material culture and direct contact.

Immediately after American independence, the *Empress of China*, the first vessel outfitted for the China trade in the new nation, set its course for Canton. Upon the *Empress'*

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<sup>107</sup> Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 23.

<sup>108</sup> Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America*, 207.

<sup>109</sup> Jacques M. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784-1844* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1997), 73-74.

return to New York in 1785, the reports of supercargo Samuel Shaw circulated among statesmen as one of the first accounts of the previously mysterious China. Interest in the reports of the *Empress*' crew ran high, as China and its exports had captured the imagination of colonial Americans for decades. While the objective of the voyage was to fulfill the overwhelming demand for Chinese tea and decorative arts, it was also an opportunity for Americans to satisfy their curiosity about these products' elusive land of origin. Crewmembers' correspondence constituted some of the first concrete knowledge of Chinese civilization and people in the United States, but Samuel Shaw's letter to statesman John Jay retelling the *Empress of China*'s maiden voyage, though generally optimistic about the prospect of future trade, portrayed a shift in his opinions of China.

The beginning of Shaw's report portrayed an idealized arrival in Canton. After a happy encounter with a French ship's crew and a successful introduction to the Portuguese governor in Macao, the *Empress of China* docked in Canton on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1784. There, according to Shaw, both Chinese authorities and European traders respected the American crew as citizens of a sovereign nation.<sup>110</sup> In particular, he described the Chinese as being "indulgent" towards the Americans, despite their initial struggle to grasp the distinction between the *Empress*' crew and English traders.<sup>111</sup> After hearing a description of the size of the American market, Shaw stated that the Chinese merchants were enthusiastic about the establishment of a new trade relationship.<sup>112</sup> The days following the Americans' arrival went smoothly and trade prospects seemed bright, but a conflict between English traders

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<sup>110</sup> "To John Jay from Samuel Shaw, 19 May 1785," *The Selected Papers of John Jay*, vol. 4, 1785–1788, ed. Elizabeth M. Nuxoll, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 96–101, in *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jay/01-04-02-0044>.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

and port officials disrupted this first encounter and revealed underlying tensions between foreign merchants and Chinese authorities.

Although Shaw asserted that the Chinese were friendly and amenable to trade with the Americans, his account of the *Lady Hughes* incident suggested that Chinese hospitality had its limits. He prefaced the narrative by stating how the “extremely strict” Chinese authorities controlled the movements of foreign traders in Canton, restricting them to a small area outside of the city. In the trading zone, a gunner aboard an English vessel, the *Lady Hughes*, misfired while saluting an officer and accidentally killed a Chinese sailor on the dock below. The police demanded that the *Lady Hughes* surrender the gunner to stand trial for murder, but the English traders refused, knowing that the gunner would be put to death if convicted. In response, the Chinese pressured the *Lady Hughes* by arresting her supercargo and threatening to block all trade. Foreign traders from other nations, including the Americans, had initially supported the *Lady Hughes* in her standoff with the Chinese authorities, but ended their support once trade was threatened. Without the backing of their fellow foreign traders, the English “were obliged to submit.”<sup>113</sup> The supercargo was released and trade resumed, but only after the English delivered the gunner to the police and publicly asked the magistrate of Canton for pardon. Although trade interests trumped solidarity in this instance, this conflict exhibited the tendency for western traders to unite against the Chinese authorities, a trend which would continue and strengthen throughout the following decades.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, Shaw’s account implied that his sympathies remained with the *Lady Hughes* despite his obedience to the Chinese government.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America*, 207.

<sup>115</sup> Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 123.

Though the Chinese were welcoming towards the Americans, this revelation about the officials' willingness and ability to exert their authority over foreign traders in Canton indicated that complete submission was the price of trade with China. The Americans entered into the Canton trade system in a contentious era wherein British traders' frustrations with the restrictions imposed upon them pushed the British government to alter the established dynamic. Less than a decade after the *Lady Hughes* affair, King George III sent his envoy Lord George Macartney to seek more favorable trade arrangements and to establish a diplomatic relationship with China. Until this point, the Qing had dictated the terms of trade and demanded complete submission from its foreign trading partners, and this power imbalance typified by the tribute system was an increasingly significant source of tension in China's trade relationships. The Qianlong emperor rejected the requests and underscored his demand for obedience in his letters to George III, writing, "It behooves you, O King, to respect my sentiments and to display even greater devotion and loyalty in the future, so that, by perpetual submission to our Throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country hereafter...Tremblingly obey and show no negligence."<sup>116</sup> While the American traders did not approve of the imbalance of power that they observed in the 1784 *Lady Hughes* incident and the failure of the 1793 Macartney Mission, trade with China was too lucrative to abandon. Enthusiasm about the new Sino-American trade relationship remained, but the *Lady Hughes* affair and subsequent demonstrations of Chinese power over foreign trade cast a shadow over the first decade of American trade with China.

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<sup>116</sup> Eric Jay Dolin, *When America First Met China: An Exotic History of Tea, Drugs, and Money in the Age of Sail* (New York: Liveright Publishing Co., 2012), 251. For analysis of the Chinese position, see Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Sextants of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000).



Shaw's reflections on this first contact both affirmed and contradicted colonial-era perceptions of China. Americans had long regarded China as a land of material abundance and the Chinese as capable merchants and craftsmen. In reports he intended for circulation, such as his letter to John Jay, Shaw encouraged further trade with China by confirming these preconceived notions, particularly Chinese business prowess and openness to foreign trade. His views on the Chinese as potential trading partners expressed in his private journals and correspondence were genuine, as he referred to the merchants he encountered as "intelligent, exact accountants, [and] punctual to their engagements."<sup>117</sup> But Shaw's writings also undermined prior assumptions about Chinese civilization and governance. Contrary to the admiration for China's government expressed by luminaries such as Benjamin Franklin,<sup>118</sup> Shaw pointed out the Chinese government's failure to provide adequately for its poor, stating that "the humanity of the foreigner is constantly shocked by the number of beggars."<sup>119</sup> His report on both the restrictions and fallibility of the Canton trade system and the Chinese government displays a more nuanced perspective of China that deviates from colonial views.

This departure from colonial perceptions extended to Chinese porcelain. Shaw recounted his experience commissioning an order of porcelain during his first visit to Canton. The porcelain Shaw ordered demonstrated the demand for ware with patriotic motifs, as he requested a design featuring the American Cincinnatus and Minerva (or

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>118</sup> "From Benjamin Franklin to Lord Howe, 20 July 1776," *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 22, *March 23, 1775, through October 27, 1776*, ed. William B. Willcox. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 518–521, in *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-22-02-0307> (accessed October 16, 2022).

<sup>119</sup> Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 129.

Athena) proclaiming independence to symbolize the Order of Cincinnatus.<sup>120</sup> The Order of Cincinnatus, also known as the Society of the Cincinnati, was a society created by officers of the Continental Army to honor the American Revolutionary War. The society's namesake, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, was a Roman statesman famous for his military prowess and relinquishment of political power, both of which made him the ideal emblem of a new nation that had won its independence from a tyrannical government.<sup>121</sup> The other figure in the design was Minerva, the Roman goddess of strategic war and sponsor of trade, another reference to the recent conflict and the newfound freedom of trade. As Shaw's design illustrates, the adaptability of porcelain made it a popular mode of patriotic expression. The decision to purchase Chinese porcelain instead of English ware was also a calculated demonstration of patriotic sentiments. Although Chinese porcelain offered Shaw the opportunity to express his patriotism, the reality of porcelain production that he witnessed in Canton diminished his enthusiasm for chinaware.

Americans treasured Chinese porcelain during the colonial period, but disappointment in the quality of Chinese ware eroded traders' opinion of Chinese craftsmanship, as suggested by Shaw's anecdote. The artist he solicited was recommended by locals and fellow traders alike, so Shaw had high expectations for the quality of his work. Shaw provided the artist with multiple model designs of Cincinnatus and Minerva, but the two figures were never pictured together. While he replicated the individual images exactly, the artist "was unable to combine the figures with the least propriety."<sup>122</sup> The artist failed despite his reputation as an expert which led Shaw to question the ability of Chinese

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<sup>120</sup> Quincy, *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw*, 198.

<sup>121</sup> "Our Story Introduction," The Society of the Cincinnati, accessed February 16, 2023. <https://www.societyofthecincinnati.org/our-story-introduction/>.

<sup>122</sup> Quincy, *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw*, 198.

porcelain manufacturers as a whole. He recognized that the artist's ability to produce a perfect likeness of the images provided demonstrated a high degree of skill. However, the artist's inability to synthesize these copies into one design proved to Shaw that the Chinese did not "possess any large portion of original genius."<sup>123</sup> This marks a departure from the perception of American colonists, who inherited their admiration for the Chinese people's ingenuity and unique skill from early European contact with China.<sup>124</sup> The decline in the quality of Chinese porcelain was not a figment of Shaw's imagination, as the demands of the market led to the mass production of copies, as Chinese merchants struggled to increase profits while lowering the per-unit margin.<sup>125</sup> Thus, the decline of Chinese porcelain was not the result of an absence of skill or creativity, but a lack of inspiration and also a business decision. In the following decades, many American traders' and scholars' opinions of Chinese porcelain would undergo a transformation similar to Shaw's, as dissatisfaction with Chinese craftsmanship and increasing competition from European factories slowly displaced Chinese porcelain as the preferred ware.

The numerous editions of Jedidiah Morse's *American Universal Geography* reflect the transformation of American scholars' perceptions of China and its porcelain in the decades after the *Empress's* journey. The evolution of Morse's attitude is notable, as the many editions of his *American Universal Geography* were popular resources used by students across the United States in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The 1789 edition exhibited an overtly critical view of Chinese people, including many falsehoods and generalizations.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Gerritsen and McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other," 91.

<sup>125</sup> Mudge, *Chinese Export Porcelain for the American Trade*, 125.

The Tartar race comprehending the Chinese, and the Japanese, forms the second variety in the human species. Their countenances are broad and wrinkled, even in youth; their noses short and flat; their eyes little, sunk in the sockets, and several inches asunder; their cheek bones are high; their teeth are of a large size and separate from each other; their complexions are olive, and their hair black. These nations, in general, have no religion, no settled notions of morality, and no decency of behaviour. They are chiefly robbers; their wealth consists in horses, and their skill in the management of them.<sup>126</sup>

Here, Morse painted an unflattering and inaccurate portrait of the Chinese people's appearance and character. This is a dramatic departure from the colonial period in which statesmen praised Chinese governance and the American public admired Chinese craftsmanship. While the absence of first-hand information prevented colonial Americans from formulating a nuanced view of the Chinese, the generalizations were largely positive. In contrast, Morse demeaned the Chinese, Japanese, and other unspecified groups as he "othered" them, presenting them as one amoral homogenous group. Notably, his conflation of the Chinese and Japanese people as members of one "Tartar race" with little significant differences is perhaps one of the first representations of an American concept of an Asian racial type.<sup>127</sup> It is not obvious which sources influenced Morse's views, but the above statements demonstrate the prevalence of misinformation about China. Knowledge about China reached American intellectual circles, but the information relayed by American traders was not always accurate. The Canton trade system restricted the movements of Western traders and forbade interactions with Chinese people aside from the *hong* (government-licensed) merchants, so traders had few opportunities to accumulate concrete information about Chinese people and civilization. The questionable reliability of

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<sup>126</sup> Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 37.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

information about China in the first years of the Old China Trade opened the door for dangerous generalizations like Morse's.

By 1796, Jedidiah Morse had moderated his views. His second edition of the *American Universal Geography* documents a significant change in his opinions. In the intervening seven years, he immersed himself in Chinese moral philosophy, altering his prior statement that the Chinese had “no settled notions of morality.”<sup>128</sup> Specifically, he read French translations of the *Ta hsüeh (Great Learning)* and the *Chung Yung (Doctrine of the Mean)*, which he referred to as “the most excellent precepts of wisdom and virtue, expressed with the greatest eloquence, elegance and precision.”<sup>129</sup> Morse's withdrawal from his previous extreme views portrays two important aspects of publications on China in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: the unreliability of information and the continuation of select colonial-era attitudes. Morse's sources led him to hold misguided beliefs about the Chinese which he perpetuated in his 1789 textbook. In contrast, the 1796 version showed a more measured perspective that shared elements of colonial American views, particularly the praise of the Chinese system of morals. Furthermore, this edition of *American Universal Geography* displayed Western intellectuals' propensity to treat the Chinese people as a homogenous aggregate and judge them based on their perceived adherence to the moral standards of Western Christendom.<sup>130</sup> Though the conclusions presented in Morse's 1796 textbook were generally positive, these tendencies led to the emergence of racial prejudice on moral or religious grounds in the following decades.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>130</sup> Stanford M. Lyman, “The ‘Yellow Peril’ Mystique: Origins and Vicissitudes of a Racist Discourse,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 13, no. 4 (2000): 687-88.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20020056>.

Morse introduced his commentary on Chinese export porcelain in the 1812 *American Universal Geography*. He began by emphasizing its significance to China, writing that it was China's "most noted manufacture."<sup>131</sup> While this statement displays porcelain's importance to the Chinese economy, it also implies that porcelain was the primary mode through which other nations consumed Chinese culture and that it was well-received in these countries. Morse continued by stating that Chinese porcelain had been "celebrated from remote ages," indicating its lengthy tenure as China's most influential form of material culture within the international arena.<sup>132</sup> However, Morse cited the earthenware of England, Saxony, Japan, and Persia as equal or superior to Chinese porcelain throughout the volume, demonstrating the number of sophisticated competitors that the Chinese porcelain industry faced in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>133</sup> The technological advantage that the Chinese had maintained for centuries was gone, and the prestige associated with Chinese porcelain manufacture disappeared along with it. Morse's list of porcelain industries that rivaled China's suggests that the question of the quality of Chinese porcelain introduced by Shaw lingered in the minds of American scholars. The 1789, 1796, and 1812 editions of Morse's *American Universal Geography* reveal that views of China and Chinese porcelain evolved to become more nuanced and critical during the Old China Trade.

Meanwhile, increasing tensions between American merchants and Chinese officials negatively impacted traders' attitudes toward China. American supercargo Robert Waln,

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<sup>131</sup> Jedidiah Morse, *The American universal geography, or, A view of the present state of all the kingdoms, states, and colonies in the known world* (Boston: Thomas & Andrews, 1812), 489-90.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> References to English, Saxon, Japanese, and Persian porcelain are listed in order. *Ibid.*, 64, 298, 527, 615.

Jr. documented the growing animosity toward the Chinese among American traders as well as a key conflict that influenced these views. In 1821, the Americans experienced an incident that was almost identical to the 1784 *Lady Hughes* affair. Francisco Terranova, an Italian sailor employed on an American vessel, threw a jar over the side of the ship which accidentally struck and killed a Chinese woman on the docks below. The Chinese authorities demanded that the *Emily*'s crew surrender Terranova to stand trial for murder. Although the circumstances of the *Lady Hughes* and *Emily* affairs were similar, the conflict of the *Emily* incident did not escalate as the Americans yielded to the Chinese officials, who tried and executed Terranova.<sup>134</sup> In his 1823 *History of China*, Waln described the heightened tensions between American traders and Chinese merchants that followed the event:

The estimation in which the Chinese are generally held by foreigners, is of such a nature as to require the most energetic and coercive [sic] laws, so as to prevent a wanton waste of life, and protect them from the most gross oppression. A Chinese, physically weak, and timorous in disposition, is looked upon with contempt, and treated with indignity by the smallest sailor in the foreign fleet. These feelings, indeed, are fully reciprocated by the weaker party, but self-interest, or a sense of their own weakness, in general, prevent their expression: it is only under circumstances of perfect safety, that they give vent to the sovereign disdain with which they regard men, who forsake their native country, and live in thralldom, for the purpose of gain. This constant and increasing state of irritation, and reciprocal contempt, have given rise to the most disgraceful scenes, in which foreigners, as proportionally the most powerful party, have generally been the victors, as well as the aggressors.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 124.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

This is one of the first descriptions of American traders expressing contempt for the Chinese and it alleged that this attitude was related to the restrictive Canton trade system. While the *Empress of China's* crew was not discouraged by the extreme display of the *Lady Hughes* affair, Waln's account suggests that Americans were less willing to operate within the established system four decades later, and this frustration informed 19<sup>th</sup>-century American traders' opinion of China and the Chinese people.

The writings of German Lutheran missionary Karl Gützlaff mirrored many of the attitudes that Shaw and Morse expressed regarding the creativity of the Chinese. Though Gützlaff was of German origin, his association with the American Philosophical Society furnished him with an audience of American intellectuals. His membership also endowed him with a degree of credibility, as its prestige was acknowledged throughout the nation. Thus, Gützlaff's English-language works influenced intellectual circles in the United States. In his 1834 publication entitled, *A Sketch of Chinese History: Ancient and Modern*, Gützlaff wrote that the Chinese were once renowned for their ware, but that their failure to innovate had allowed the European factories to surpass them in quality and prevalence.<sup>136</sup> This statement is both an observation of the displacement of Chinese porcelain as the preferred ware and an indication of Gützlaff's opinion of the Chinese people. Far from being the master craftsmen of colonial imaginations, Gützlaff portrayed the Chinese as artistically inferior to Europeans due to their perceived stagnation and lack of creativity. In the same piece, Gützlaff echoed many of the extreme views presented in the 1789 edition of *American Universal Geography*. In particular, he exhibited a similar tendency to generalize and "other" the Chinese people, portraying them as physically and mentally

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<sup>136</sup> Gützlaff, *A Sketch of Chinese History*, 56.



homogenous. “It is truly astonishing,” Gützlaff wrote, “that in so extensive a country as China...the inhabitants of the various provinces differ very little in their whole outward appearance [and] this characteristic sameness...extends [also] to the mind.”<sup>137</sup> His portrait of the Chinese echoed the 1796 *American Universal Geography*, in which Morse evaluated the morality of the collective. In striking comparison to Samuel Shaw’s earlier statements, he expressed that the Chinese were “ready to imitate, but slow to invent.”<sup>138</sup> Gützlaff’s attitudes toward the Chinese people’s mental capacities and Chinese porcelain were connected, as he thought the Chinese were incapable of individuality and, therefore, unable to produce any original porcelain designs. Gützlaff’s criticisms of Chinese craftsmanship reflected his belief that the Chinese were unable to match Western ingenuity due to their predisposition for “sameness,” a belief that began in 1784 with Samuel Shaw which opened the door to Orientalism in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>139</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an influx of European porcelain in the American market that threatened the status of Chinese porcelain in the United States. After extensive experimentation throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans mastered porcelain production techniques, ending China’s longstanding monopoly over the porcelain market. The novelty of Chinese porcelain contributed to positive perceptions of China as a wealthy land with expert craftsmen, and the development of European-produced porcelain undermined this view. Colonial America, and later the independent United States of America, continued to prefer Chinese porcelain due to the patriotic impulse to refuse English-made goods. However, as animosity with England diminished and trade frustrations with China

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 44.

intensified, Chinese porcelain was “relegated to a relatively minor status” compared to European ware.<sup>140</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup>-century sea captain Charles Tyng confirmed this phenomenon in his memoir, writing that “China ware was no longer shipped, English ware having taken its place.”<sup>141</sup> The displacement of Chinese porcelain was a dramatic break from the trend of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in which America imported approximately 70 million pieces of Chinese porcelain.<sup>142</sup> This disparity in the volume of trade demonstrates the rapid decline in traders’ respect for Chinese porcelain, as they deemed European ware as more worthy of sale. As demand for Chinese porcelain decreased, trade with China fell from 6 percent of all U.S. foreign trade to less than 2 percent over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>143</sup> Although the demand for Chinese porcelain endured, it lost the uniqueness and patriotic appeal that contributed to its popularity in the colonial era as competing ware emerged and the hostility to buying English goods decreased lessened. This negatively impacted perceptions of Chinese manufacturers’ capabilities and, by extension, the Chinese themselves.

While material culture remained influential during the Old China Trade, the initiation of contact altered the ways in which perceptions of China were generated. Colonial Americans had a preconceived notion of China that was overwhelmingly positive, and China could not live up to this unrealistic expectation of an abundant prosperous, well-governed civilization populated with highly skilled craftsmen. When confronted with the restrictions of the Canton trade system and the faults of Chinese governance, the colonial

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<sup>140</sup> Dolin, *When America First Met China*, 169.

<sup>141</sup> Charles Tyng, *Before the Wind: the Memoir of an American Sea Captain, 1808-1833* (New York: Viking Publishing, 1999), 75, <https://archive.org/details/beforewindmemoir00tyng/mode/2up>.

<sup>142</sup> Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America*, 99.

<sup>143</sup> Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 17.

era image of China that the *Empress of China*'s crew may have held began to erode, and their accounts of China reflect an almost immediate divergence from this pre-contact perception. This trend continued as trade increased, and so, too, did American traders' dissatisfaction with the goods that they obtained. They noticed a decline in the quality and originality of Chinese porcelain, which prompted them to look elsewhere to fulfill the high demand for ceramics. The search led them to the emerging European porcelain industries, and English and Saxon ware began to displace Chinese porcelain by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Respect for Chinese civilization and craftsmanship fell, and American intellectuals started to view the Chinese as unoriginal and stagnant. The tendency of influential authors to refer to the Chinese as homogenous in thought and appearance prompted Western scholars to apply this perception to the collective, which allowed for the rise of Orientalism that would define American attitudes toward the Chinese and actions in China in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### CHAPTER III: “AS NEAR FAIRYLAND AS ONE CAN GET”<sup>144</sup>

On October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1834, the *Washington*, a ship owned by brothers Nathaniel and Frederick Carne, returned to New York harbor after a voyage to Canton. Although her cargo was not extraordinary, one of her passengers generated a buzz in the harbor that soon attracted the attention of the media. The *New-York Daily Advertiser* reported, “The ship *Washington*, Capt. Obear, has brought out a beautiful Chinese Lady, called *Juila Foochee ching-chang king*, daughter of *Hong wang-tzang tzee king*. As she will see all who are disposed to pay twenty five cents. She will no doubt have many admirers.”<sup>145</sup> Other newspapers also announced her arrival, each printing different versions of her name, and remarked on her bound feet, possible elite parentage, and alleged first encounter with a left-handed person.<sup>146</sup> After allowing rumors about the young woman to circulate in the media for weeks, the Carnes brothers advertised an exhibition beginning November 10<sup>th</sup> where the public could view her at a price of fifty cents per person. A reporter for the *Commercial Advertiser* remarked on her instant popularity, writing that the woman, renamed Afong Moy, was “receiving more calls every day, than any other young lady of our acquaintance.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Haddad, “Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay,” 53.

<sup>145</sup> John R. Haddad, *The Romance of China: Excursions to China In U.S. Culture, 1776 to 1876* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 117, <https://hdl-handle-net.umiss.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb99005.0001.001>.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

The story of Afong Moy illustrates the American public's enduring fascination with China throughout the Old China Trade. While American traders in Canton grew increasingly frustrated with the Chinese after years of prolonged contact, their countrymen in New York paid for a chance to visit Moy. There are two reasons for these disparate reactions. First, most Americans were not privy to the rising Sinophobia among merchants and scholars due to the unequal dissemination or censorship of accounts of China. Because 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans were typically isolated from the world of international trade, the ways in which they gathered information about China and the conclusions they reached were comparable to their colonial-era predecessors. Second, Americans controlled the terms of contact with Afong Moy. In Canton, Chinese officials restricted the movements of American traders and limited their access to the Chinese public, a frequent source of tension between the Chinese and foreign traders.<sup>148</sup> In contrast, Afong Moy was a young woman exploited by the Carnes brothers with whom members of the public could interact at will, provided they paid the admission fee. This form of contact did not erode the positive perception of China. In fact, Moy's immaculate dress and purported elite origins supported Americans' preexisting image of an abundant China.<sup>149</sup> The Carnes brothers emphasized Moy's "exotic" appeal by instructing her to display her bound feet, which one observer described as the "most novel and interesting feature of her appearance."<sup>150</sup> The audience marveled at the novelty of Moy's bound feet while denouncing the cruelty of footbinding, simultaneously exoticizing and denigrating this cultural practice. Though this event

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<sup>148</sup> Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 230.

<sup>149</sup> Haddad, *The Romance of China*, 117-120.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

reinforced the American public's fascination with China, it also foreshadowed the Orientalism that took hold in the late 19th century.

The movement away from Chinese porcelain had little impact on the American public's perception of China. While some scholars cited the poor quality of Chinese porcelain as evidence of European superiority, this was not a widely held viewpoint among the American public. Karl Gützlaff, a particularly unforgiving critic of Chinese productive abilities, asserted that the inferiority of Chinese ceramics proved that their "characteristic sameness...extends [also] to the mind."<sup>151</sup> American consumers acknowledged that European potters surpassed those of China in regard to painting and mounting, but that did not diminish their respect for China as porcelain's land of origin. In his 1852 *History of All Nations*, renowned children's author Samuel Griswold Goodrich stated that Chinese porcelain was "indisputably the original from which the similar manufactures of Europe were borrowed" and that the "better kinds have not yet been surpassed in respect to substance."<sup>152</sup> Here, Goodrich gives due credit to the Chinese as the inventors of porcelain and maintains that, while much of the export ware was of lower quality, Europeans could not match the composition of the best of Chinese porcelain. Even as chinoiserie, European ware that copied Chinese design motifs, flooded the American market and a domestic porcelain industry began to form, Americans held onto an almost mythical image of China portrayed in ceramic designs. This fictional China was called Cathay, a "realm of enchantment" featuring a mountainous landscape populated with "picturesque pagodas,

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<sup>151</sup> Gützlaff, *A Sketch of Chinese History*, 44.

<sup>152</sup> Samuel Griswold Goodrich, *A history of all nations, from the earliest periods to the present time, or, Universal history: in which the history of every nation, ancient and modern, is separately given: illustrated by 70 stylographic maps, and 700 engravings* (Auburn [N.Y.]: Derby and Miller, 1852), 469.

bountiful fruit trees, graceful willow trees, [and] exotic birds and fish.”<sup>153</sup> The lack of widespread information about China blurred the lines between the real and the imaginary in the minds of American consumers.

Thus, for most 19th-century Americans, Cathay and China were one and the same. Regardless of the increasing Sinophobia among sailors and select intellectuals, puncturing the illusion of Cathay was not in the best interest of those who participated in trade with China. This was especially true of the porcelain trade, as the sale of both Chinese porcelain and chinoiserie depended upon the maintenance of the idealized vision of Cathay portrayed in the designs. While the idea of Cathay was particularly influential among American women and children, it was prevalent across all levels of American society. The persistent mythology of Cathay paradoxically contributed to the Sinophobia among American traders, as it caused many of them to have an almost visceral reaction to the reality of China upon their arrival in Canton. The Old China Trade saw a shift in American perceptions of China in business and intellectual circles, but this change would not occur among the American public until after the First Opium War as porcelain continued to foster an unrealistic image of China.

Although porcelain’s level of influence remained consistent throughout the Old China Trade, the porcelain trade underwent drastic changes, the most important of which was the switch to chinoiserie. Chinoiserie offered a cheaper and higher quality alternative to Chinese porcelain. It first became popular among the middle and lower class, as the price for European imitations of Chinese style was less than that of genuine Chinese porcelain. In the late-18<sup>th</sup> century, conspicuous consumption drove the demand for Chinese porcelain,

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<sup>153</sup> Haddad, “Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay,” 54.

as purchasing an authentic piece or set of Jingdezhen-produced porcelain was a symbol of one's financial status and sophisticated taste. In the colonial and early republic periods, Americans adopted elite Europeans' taste for Chinese porcelain, and it soon became a way for wealthy Americans to identify themselves as members of the upper class.<sup>154</sup> Thus, the influx of the more economical chinoiserie into the American market allowed non-elites to participate in a global elite culture through imitation ware. The loss of the middle- and lower-class American demographic threatened China's dominance over the porcelain trade. In an attempt to compete with the emerging porcelain factories in Europe, Chinese producers ceased hand-painting in favor of an assembly-line system wherein Chinese potters mass-produced porcelain depicting three or four standardized designs.<sup>155</sup> Although European chinoiserie producers copied the Chinese aesthetic, the Chinese craftsmen examined which of the designs was most successful, then reproduced those already popular imitation patterns in an attempt to regain control of the market.<sup>156</sup> Contrary to Chinese manufacturers' expectations, this shift away from the time-consuming art of hand-painting porcelain harmed the reputation of Chinese porcelain, as the resulting decline in creativity and quality pushed foreign traders to purchase European chinoiserie. This shift in preferences was swift, and America became the leading importer of British ceramics by the 1830s.<sup>157</sup>

Fledgling American ceramics factories and the importation of European ceramics, tastes, and technologies reflect the end of Americans' reliance on Chinese porcelain and their emerging preference for European ware. While a few ambitious craftsmen attempted

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<sup>154</sup> Leath, "After the Chinese Taste," 49.

<sup>155</sup> Haddad, "Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay," 57.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



to establish a domestic porcelain industry during the colonial period, efforts to create ceramics factories in America increased after the turn of the century. An issue of the *Scientific American* published in 1853 documented two porcelain factories that had emerged in the preceding decades. The first belonged to two brothers from Philadelphia named William and Thomas Tucker. Their father, who had no prior training in ceramic production, began experimenting with hard-paste porcelain in 1826 and succeeded the following year, becoming the first American to do so with domestic materials. Like many other 19<sup>th</sup>-century American porcelain companies, the Tucker company likely only attracted local customers, as the dominance of European and Chinese porcelain left little room in the market for American ceramics at that time. After their father's death in 1832, the Tucker brothers continued the enterprise until 1837, when a global financial downturn forced them to close the factory. After the closure of his factory, Thomas Tucker instead imported European porcelain.<sup>158</sup> Notably, the porcelain produced in the Tucker factory imitated French designs, not the Chinese landscapes that were popular in the preceding decades, suggesting that Europeans were now the tastemakers regarding ceramics.<sup>159</sup> Although Chinese styles remained popular throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Tucker factory's emphasis on European aesthetics indicates that China was no longer the most influential porcelain producer.

The second factory mentioned was an establishment founded by English expatriate Charles Cartlidge in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Cartlidge, the product of a family of potters, brought his knowledge of English porcelain production technology to the United States.

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<sup>158</sup> "Manufacture of Porcelain Ware in America," *Scientific American* 8, no. 29 (1853): 226, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24935220>.

<sup>159</sup> Mudge, *Chinese Export Porcelain for the American Trade*, 126.

Although Cartlidge porcelain perfectly imitated the style and quality of English ware, Cartlidge & Co. closed less than a decade after its launch.<sup>160</sup> As the examples of the Tucker and Cartlidge companies demonstrate, the American porcelain industry did not experience the level of success that competing industries enjoyed in the early- and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, with many of the factories surviving for only a few years due to competition from more technologically advanced European and, to a lesser extent, Chinese factories. Regardless of the quality of American-made porcelain, the prevalence of imported ware from China and Europe left little room for a domestic ceramics industry to develop. Significantly, these stories also illuminate the prevalence of European porcelain in America, as Mr. Tucker and Mr. Cartlidge imported European ware and production techniques, respectively.

An 1848 issue of the same publication made the shift toward European porcelain explicit. This article prefaced its discussion of the infant American porcelain industry by mentioning that a “vast amount of money is expended every year for French and English china.”<sup>161</sup> Although the authors acknowledge that porcelain was a Chinese invention, they imply that European products have surpassed the quality of those from Jingdezhen, stating that “France, Saxony and England are...justly famed in manufacturing [porcelain].”<sup>162</sup> Here, the editors of the *Scientific American* echo both Samuel Shaw and the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French Jesuit Louis-Daniel Le Comte, both of whom were skeptical of the ingenuity and originality of the Chinese.<sup>163</sup> A long-time critic of China and Chinese products, Le Comte insisted that the sole advantage of the Chinese craftsmen was their natural resources, not

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> “American Porcelain,” *Scientific American* 3, no. 32 (1848): 251, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24926585>.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Quincy, *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw*, 198.

any particular skill, and believed that the European porcelain industry would surpass that of China provided they had access to the necessary materials.<sup>164</sup> By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Shaw and Le Comte's predictions had become reality, as the poor quality of Chinese porcelain and competition from European companies resulted in European ware displacing Chinese porcelain in the American market by 1841.<sup>165</sup>

Most American consumers maintained a positive image of China until after the First Opium War despite the displacement of Chinese porcelain in the American market. During the Old China Trade, the Canton trade system limited both the amount of information about China and the channels through which the available information could reach the American public. The little information that American traders obtained was largely restricted, as American importers of Chinese goods worried that unflattering accounts of China would lead to a decrease in demand. To be sure, scholars such as Jedidiah Morse and returned traders like William Wood shared their critical attitudes toward China through their writings. However, these publications had little impact on consumer tastes in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century because, as Wood explained, the "tediousness of detail" discouraged many Americans from purchasing these accounts despite their curiosity about China.<sup>166</sup> Consequently, many American consumers retained an idealistic concept of China even after the emergence of more negative accounts.

An analysis of American women's consumption of porcelain demonstrates how Americans disconnected from the worlds of trade or scholarship continued to view China through the lens of porcelain. Women experienced Chinese porcelain differently than men

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<sup>164</sup> Gerritsen and McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other," 102.

<sup>165</sup> Mudge, *Chinese Export Porcelain for the American Trade*, 127.

<sup>166</sup> William Wood, *Sketches of China: with illustrations from original drawings* (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1830), vii.

due in part to societal expectations of male provision and female dependence. In this traditional dynamic, it was men's duty to provide for their families, consequently, the obtainment of Chinese porcelain was the men's responsibility. From the colonial period, purchasing Chinese porcelain had been a statement of one's financial welfare, therefore, the conspicuous consumption of porcelain was a statement about a man's success as a provider. After the *Empress of China's* 1784 voyage, this male role of provider extended beyond the individual level to include the Chinese porcelain trade, and the long and often dangerous voyages to procure porcelain were masculine endeavors in which women did not participate. This was especially the case in the pre-contact era when merchants engaged in piracy and illicit trade. While men were the acquirers of Chinese porcelain, women were the consumers.<sup>167</sup> In general, their interaction with Chinese porcelain occurred when it entered the domestic realm to which they were confined, wherein it ceased to be the object of masculine pursuits and instead became the fuel for female imaginations. As direct contact caused perspectives of China to expand and evolve in exclusively-male circles of traders and scholars, material culture remained the primary influence on American women's concept of China.

Chinese porcelain, and later chinoiserie, informed American women's perception of China through their depiction of a hyper-romanticized ideal of China known as Cathay. The idealized image of China shown in Chinese porcelain offered a form of mental escape that was particularly attractive to female consumers, as it enabled them to transcend their domestic reality. For women in the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, these images allowed them to engage vicariously with the male-dominated spheres of exploration and trade, providing a

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<sup>167</sup> Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America*, 169.

window into the world beyond their prescribed domestic roles.<sup>168</sup> This window, however, portrayed an idyllic China that contrasted sharply with reality. Importers of porcelain profited from this unrealistic perception by catering to these preconceived ideas, with some traders, like Samuel Shaw, penning accounts that emphasized the positive attributes of the Chinese and understated their negative interactions.<sup>169</sup> This strategy was largely successful in preserving the concept of Cathay throughout the Old China Trade, with one young woman, Caroline Howard King, writing in the 1830s that these images were “as near fairyland as one can get in this workaday world.”<sup>170</sup> The idea of Cathay persisted despite traders’ rejection of Chinese porcelain and the switch to chinoiserie. Because of the particular importance of the design, these female consumers valued aesthetics over the authenticity of the porcelain they received, so European chinoiserie was able to fulfill their demand for ceramics featuring images of Cathay. Due to their separation from both the reality of trade with China and the tide of Sinophobia emerging in intellectual and business circles, the mythical Cathay continued to shape female consumers’ perception of China well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

While the impact of the idea of Cathay on perceptions of China is particularly observable in women, this concept similarly shaped children’s opinions. Though one may be inclined to dismiss this phenomenon as mothers influencing their children’s attitudes, media aimed at children encouraged them to base their concept of China on the images printed on imported ceramics. In his 1844 publication, *Manners and Customs of the Principal Nations of the World*, children’s author Samuel Griswold Goodrich introduced

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<sup>168</sup> Haddad, “Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay,” 55.

<sup>169</sup> “To John Jay from Samuel Shaw, 19 May 1785,” *The Selected Papers of John Jay*, 96–101.

<sup>170</sup> Haddad, “Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay,” 53.

China by first referencing the enduring mystique that the Chinese maintained by “systematically exclud[ing] foreigners.”<sup>171</sup> Goodrich then acknowledged how the inaccessibility of China hindered the acquisition of knowledge, but asserted that the “prying eye of curiosity” could overcome these barriers through the “drawings in their porcelain.”<sup>172</sup> He claimed that all Americans knew the details of the Chinese people’s appearance and way of life from the illustrations on ceramics, never questioning the accuracy of the representation. This indicates that at the end of the Old China Trade era, many Americans still considered porcelain a legitimate source of information about China and assumed that the illustrations were correct portrayals of Chinese civilization and people. For them, the image of the mythical Cathay was the real China.

Upon their return home, merchants who had lived in Canton bristled at the romanticized image of China that many Americans possessed. William Wood, for instance, described how he and his acquaintances experienced “considerable annoyance at the multitude of questions” they received upon their return, some of which Wood dismissed as “inconceivably absurd.”<sup>173</sup> By 1830, the year Wood published his *Sketches of China*, American traders knew that the real China did not match the image of Cathay that enchanted the American public. In the preface of his work, Wood recalled his disappointment upon arriving in Canton and, though he acknowledged that his account was limited due to the restriction of traders’ movements, concluded that the Chinese people did not “merit the extravagant praises which their...general talents have elicited.”<sup>174</sup> Wood’s report of his arrival in Canton illuminates the dramatic shift in perspectives that many

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<sup>171</sup> Goodrich, *Manners and Customs of the Principal Nations of the Globe*, 342.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 342-43.

<sup>173</sup> Wood, *Sketches of China*, viii.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

Americans experienced as they compared their imagined land of Cathay and the relatively disappointing reality of China. He recognized that the sources of the American public's curiosity about China were the absence of widely-accessible accounts and the fantasy of Cathay, as the mystique only added to the pleasant image of China illustrated on imported ceramics.<sup>175</sup> While there were published accounts of China disproving the accuracy of these illustrations, this information failed to reach much of the American public due to the unpopularity or inaccessibility of these works. As shown by American women's escapist fantasies about Cathay, American consumers relished the unknown and took pleasure in constructing an imagined China using whatever information they could, much of which they gleaned from portrayals of China in material culture. However, this interaction displays the contradictory urge to discover the true China that remained out of their grasp, provided the information was easily accessible.

Although negative accounts of China did not have a significant influence on the American public during the Old China Trade, a decline in the profitability of the Chinese porcelain trade and the outbreak of the First Opium War prompted Americans to take a more critical stance on China. The previously lucrative trade lost its appeal as the poor quality of Chinese porcelain and the rise of competitive European industries caused profits to plateau by the First Opium War.<sup>176</sup> Without a strong financial incentive to endure the restrictions of the Canton trade system, American traders became increasingly vocal in their frustrations, so much so that their views began to penetrate American politics. The American public, much of which was still sheltered from traders' complaints, largely believed that Britain had retaliated against China's justified attempt to stop the British

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 46.

opium trade, which was widely criticized despite American participation.<sup>177</sup> Thus, many Americans sympathized with the Chinese, whom they viewed as the unfortunate, though not entirely blameless, target of British aggression.<sup>178</sup> It was former president John Quincy Adams's 1841 address to the Massachusetts Historical Society that introduced another analysis of the conflict.

“It is a general, but I believe altogether mistaken opinion that the quarrel is merely for certain chests of opium imported by British merchants into China, and seized by the Chinese government for having been imported contrary to law. This is a mere incident to the dispute; but no more the cause of the war, than the throwing overboard of the tea in Boston harbor was the cause of the North American Revolution...The cause of the war is the kowtow! the arrogant and insupportable pretensions of China, that she will hold commercial intercourse with the rest of mankind, not upon terms of equal reciprocity, but upon the insulting and degrading forms of the relation between lord and vassal.”<sup>179</sup>

Though Adams understated opium as a cause of the war, his assertion that the First Opium War was a culmination of frustrations with China's tribute system represents the beginning of the shift in public opinion. While the overly idealistic image of Cathay dominated American imaginations, the First Opium War brought public attention to trade conflicts in Canton. The traders' critiques were no longer confined to published accounts ignored by the majority of Americans, and Adams's statements brought these sentiments into the mainstream. Though few Americans agreed with his views initially, the following years would see a rise in Americans adopting a critical perception of China as contact increased on both sides of the Pacific.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>178</sup> Downs, *The Golden Ghetto*, 140.

<sup>179</sup> Dolin, *When America First Met China*, 252-53.



Colonial-era views of China endured throughout the Old China Trade despite the shift in merchants' and scholars' views and the displacement of Chinese porcelain by European chinoiserie. The illustrations on Chinese porcelain created the idea of Cathay, a fictional ideal of China that bordered on utopia. Because of the limited available information about China, many early Americans did not distinguish the imaginary Cathay from the real China. While the idea of Cathay permeated much of American society, it was particularly impactful among women and children due to their isolation from business and intellectual circles. The influence of Cathay did not decrease after the American market shifted toward European chinoiserie, as the European potters incorporated the same pastoral motifs to profit from Cathay's exotic appeal. Similarly, the existence of accounts discrediting the accuracy of illustrations of Cathay did not erode Americans' positive view of China, as these writings were not widely available. It wasn't until the First Opium War that negative accounts of China garnered the attention of the American public, when John Quincy Adams's address thrust the problems of trade with China into the mainstream. His analysis did not have an immediate effect on American attitudes, but it marked a collision between the critical views of traders and scholars and the romanticized illusions of the public. The latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a decline in American views due to increased contact through American activities in China's interior and Chinese migration to the United States. Thus, direct contact replaced porcelain as the primary influence on American perceptions of China.

## CONCLUSION

The writings of Commodore Matthew Perry reveal the prevalence of the idea of Cathay as well as how this preconceived image eroded when confronted with the reality of China. After his arrival in Canton in 1853, Perry described his disappointment with the land he encountered. His expectation of China resembled the mythical Cathay that occupied the imaginations of American women, “a pleasing picture of beautiful floating domiciles...inhabited by a hundred thousand people in variegated costume.”<sup>180</sup> In addition, Perry may have read children’s books about China similar to Samuel Griswold Goodrich’s accounts that impacted his adulthood perception of China. This demonstrates that while American women were generally more inclined to maintain idealized images of China due to their separation from the masculine worlds of trade and exploration, the concept of Cathay spread beyond female consumers and permeated American society. Thus, porcelain’s depiction of China continued to foster an unrealistically positive image of China despite scholarship and published accounts of American traders’ experiences in China. The China Perry witnessed fell short of his unrealistic expectations and, in doing so, swiftly and dramatically altered his idea of China. Instead of the peaceful Cathay, Perry encountered a China that he described as wrought with “filth” and “poverty” occupied by “wretched half-clad people.”<sup>181</sup> It seems that the reality of China triggered an almost

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<sup>180</sup> Francis L. Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan, Performed in the Years 1852, 1853, and 1854, Under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy* (Washington, DC: Beverly Tucker, Senate Printer, 1856), 135, <https://archive.org/details/narrativeofexped0156perr/mode/2up>.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

immediate deterioration of Perry's previously positive image which, in microcosm, represents a continuation of the trend that occurred with American traders during the Old China Trade.

Though Americans still consumed ceramics depicting Cathay in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, these images were almost completely divorced from American perceptions of China. The demand for blue-and-white porcelain remained present across all social strata, and designs featuring Chinese landscapes maintained a degree of popularity regardless of the devolution of public opinion about China.<sup>182</sup> For American women, these images continued to inspire their imaginations, but they no longer mistook the fictional Cathay for the real China. Americans penetrated the previously unreachable interior of China after the First Opium War, and information about Chinese society, and the flaws therein, was more accessible to American consumers as a result. With this influx of information, ceramics were no longer the dominant influence on American perceptions of China, and consumers soon saw through the veneer of perfection portrayed in porcelain dishes. American women still maintained the fantasyland of Cathay, a feat only accomplished by actively ignoring reports of the many crises affecting China, including poverty and an opium epidemic.<sup>183</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese porcelain enjoyed a brief resurgence despite the downturn in attitudes toward China. This trend began when designer Clarence Cook, author of the interior design publication *House Beautiful*, recommended "antique...Asian" porcelain over the more popular white porcelain, as cheaper wares supposedly changed the

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<sup>182</sup> Regina Lee Blaszczyk, "The Aesthetic Moment: China Decorators, Consumer Demand, and Technological Change in the American Pottery Industry, 1865-1900," *Winterthur Portfolio* 29, no. 2/3 (1994): 127, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1181484>.

<sup>183</sup> Haddad, "Imagined Journeys to Distant Cathay," 55.

appearance of food to make it less appealing.<sup>184</sup> Though this blurb renewed public interest in Chinese-produced porcelain, few members of Cook's audience acquired any pieces of Chinese porcelain due to financial constraints.<sup>185</sup> Americans questioned the creativity and capability of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese potters, but no such doubts existed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Chinese porcelain was the ultimate symbol of wealth and status. Cook's emphasis on the age of the porcelain reflects the belief that older Chinese porcelain possessed a superior quality and aesthetic value, indicating how respect for Chinese manufacture had diminished throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This simultaneous demand for Chinese porcelain and suspicion of the quality of Chinese manufacture also demonstrates that the consumption of Chinese porcelain was disconnected from Americans' images of China by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Old China Trade marked a change in American perspectives of China, but this evolution of views primarily occurred among those with first-hand experience or a particular academic interest in China. The average consumer, however, did not have the ability or motivation to satisfy their curiosity through scholarly works or traders' accounts, opting instead to glean their knowledge of China from porcelain. The illustrations of a romanticized China fostered the idea of Cathay, a fictional ideal of China created by Chinese porcelain and reproduced on European chinoiserie. Thus, the displacement of Chinese porcelain had a limited impact on the attitudes of consumers, as the depictions of Cathay reinforced Americans' positive image of China. American women, who were generally relegated to the domestic sphere, were prolific in their interactions with Chinese

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<sup>184</sup> Blaszczyk, "The Aesthetic Moment," 128.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

porcelain and chinoiserie, as they used the imagery as a mode through which to travel vicariously to Cathay. The idea of Cathay extended beyond American women, and children's books instructed their young readers to draw conclusions based on porcelain's depictions, regardless of the ware's land of origin. Without accounts proving the contrary, the American public equated the romanticized Cathay to the real China, consequently, porcelain imagery directly influenced Americans' perceptions of China throughout the Old China Trade. The outbreak of the First Opium War threatened the predominance of the image of Cathay by bringing American trade frustrations into the spotlight. The following decades saw an influx of information about China through merchants' and missionaries' accounts and increased contact due to Chinese migration to North America. These combined factors made the inaccuracy of the concept of Cathay explicit, ending porcelain's tenure as the primary influence on Americans' perception of China.

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