

The Lie In the Teapot:
China, China Export Porcelain, and the Construction of Orientalism during the American
Republic

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At the time of the American Revolution, China boasted a thriving economy and a booming population which was quadruple that of the United States. An elaborate welfare and taxation system, benchmarks the Constitutional Congress struggled to enact effectively, had been fully implemented by the time the first American trading ship reached China in 1783. However, the pervading narrative of China in the collective consciousness of citizens of the American Republic was that of an exotic fascination, instead of a developed nation-state. China was the subject of myth, having only ever been seen by a select and daring few, whose plunder and risk resulted in decadent spoils that adorned the homes of an exclusive American class. Of these spoils, Chinese porcelain was the most desired. Decorated with depictions of mountains, nature, delicate women and children, or intricate patterns, export porcelain was sometimes the only lens through which Americans formed their conceptions of China. A dangerous cyclical process emerged: the demand for typically 'Chinese' porcelain encouraged the production of essentializing depictions of Chinese culture. The increasing dispersion and popularity of this porcelain, in turn, reinforced the idea that China was static and undeveloped, confined to ceremony and the tradition of an Eastern empire. Rather than representing the start of a multifaceted relationship that led to cultural diffusion between America and China, the porcelain trade provided the basis for the misunderstanding of Chinese culture through essentialism and orientalism.

This paper will substantiate the previous argument in four sections. The first section will focus on American impressions of China during and before China export porcelain was popularized. This will be followed by a description of the trade expeditions to China, the impressions of the crews that interacted with Chinese merchants, and how these voyages shaped American knowledge of China. Next, there will be a description of the types of porcelain traded, the aesthetic preference of American porcelain demand, and how this differed from porcelain

that Chinese people used. Finally, an analysis of porcelain that was commissioned by Americans and the significance of this demand will be offered.

The historian Jay Dolin argues that, “Despite all the trade in Chinese goods...the average American colonist knew almost nothing about China itself—an imperial, exotic empire that remained shrouded in myth.”¹ The words most frequently used to describe China, which may have existed in the vernacular of the citizens of the American Republic, were that of China as an exotic “kingdom” with an imperial system that survived based on a despotic blood lineage of divine emperors. In reality, this perception could not have been farther than the truth, with China’s state being comprised of a vast and advanced bureaucracy that was regularly amended.² Perceptions of China in the minds of Americans also often emphasized the homogenous nature of China and Chinese people. This homogeneity is evident at the most basic level—the words used to describe relevant factors of the porcelain trade. Their views were so reductionist that Chinese porcelain merchants, “male and female, were called ‘chinaman’ or ‘chinawoman’ and their goods ‘china’ [were] sold in ‘china shops.’”³ While this rhetoric does not seem to be maliciously used, nor to convey racist sentiment, the incredible correlation that a specific item, porcelain, represented a culture at large is evidence in this verbiage.

Second, ideas about China were based on the impressions of very few. This was due to the fact that “no more than a handful of colonists, maybe as few as a half a dozen, had ever set foot in China.”⁴ Even these few “were men who had crewed on English ships and therefore were

¹ Eric Jay Dolin, *When America First Met China: An Exotic History of Tea, Drugs, and Money in the Age of Sail*, 1st ed. (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2012), 61.

² China’s bureaucratic functions were so impressive that since the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.) it had systematically collected taxes and conducted massive civil service examinations to select officials based on merit.

³ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the shaping of American culture, 1776-1882*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 5.

⁴ Dolin, 61.

not in the best position to comment on Chinese society.”⁵ As a result, Americans who wanted to learn about China had few avenues to directly observe Chinese culture. Though primary materials from sailors are abundant (ship logs, journals, and letters provide a view) they are partially distorted by the mercantile mission and education of the sailors.⁶ Similarly, the cannon of academic materials on China available to Americans during this period were works by scholars such as Voltaire, whose analysis focused on Chinese works in “morality, agriculture, political economy, and the arts,” rather than on first-hand interaction with the country itself.⁷ Indeed, Voltaire and other scholars who produced works on China never visited the country themselves. So, given the nature of the sources available, it is not surprising that the American impression of China would be highly influenced by Chinese porcelain. Compared with the accounts of merchants and with the limited scope of scholarly publications, porcelain was a tangible artifact that seemed to be an authentic, direct representation of China.

Finally, the foundations of a security competition already existed at the time of the first voyage to China and the porcelain trade only exacerbated them.⁸ As a result of the growing magnitude of the porcelain trade with China over time, General George Washington realized that China offered “all those [goods] in Europe with the addition of many in greater abundance...or not produced [in Europe] at all,” which made it critical to establish either cultural, economic, or

⁵ Dolin, 62.

⁶ Tchen, 122-125. Even if the crews of American and European trade ships had the opportunity to spend time in China, it is speculated that fewer than twenty Americans in total spoke any level of Chinese, making communication almost impossible.

⁷ Dolin, 61. For a contemporary account of compiled knowledge on China that 18th century Americans had access to, see Du Halde Jean Baptiste, *The General History of China: Containing A Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political and Physical Description of the Empire of China, Chinese-Tartary, Corea and Thibet, Including an Extract and Particular Account of Their Customs, Manners, Ceremonies, Religion, Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 4. Trans. Richard Brooks (London: Watts, 1739).

⁸ Dolin, 20-24. *The Empress of China* departed November 25, 1783 and was charged with the mission of bringing back the highest quality of goods China could offer and transporting the first official representative of America to be housed at the port at Canton.

military dominance to ensure sustained trade.⁹ That China's chief economic export was decorative porcelain made it seem as if China were one country that the tenuous American Republic could compete with. That a trade imbalance in China's favor had existed from the time of the first voyage to China in 1783 made essentialization of China's culture (through decorative depictions on Chinese porcelain), desirable and necessary in order to make the fact that China was an economic threat satiable.

As previously noted, by the very nature of the distance between China and the United States, China in the imagination of the American colonist was partly shaped by the observations of the sailors and traders that ventured to the British port at Canton. Chinese porcelain was channeled for export through the international trading port at Canton, China. Here, Western buyers would select from a vast array of porcelain that was produced at various centers throughout China. The export of China export porcelain became so mechanized and the volume of commissioned works so large that during the 19th century wares were sent to Canton unpainted, to be finished by local artists according to buyer specifications.

At the time of the American Republic, funding an expedition to China was still a risky endeavor. Robert Morris was one of the financiers of the first ship to China, *The Empress of China*.¹⁰ His papers shed light on the exploratory nature of this first voyage and suggest that the impetus behind opening trade was as much nationalistic as economic. John Ledyard, a prospective, though unsuccessful captain of the first China voyage, noted that "we have, at an earlier period than the most sanguine Whig could have expected...very pleasing prospects of a

⁹ Dolin, 64. Goods which saw expanded demand as the porcelain trade grew were diamonds, pearl, gold, silver, copper, iron, sulfur, potter's earth, cinnamon, peppers, indigo, vermilion, dragon's blood (a type of red resin), ambergris, etc.

¹⁰ Robert Morris, *The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784: November 1, 1782 - May 4, 1783*, ed. by John Catanzariti, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988).

very extensive commerce with the most distant part of the globe.”¹¹ While the scope of this paper does not permit a detailed discussion of all individuals involved in the initial voyages to China, John Green, John Ledyard, Robert Morris, Benjamin Etting, and others whose documents have been recovered shared the same attitude: a bold willingness to encounter what was sure to be a culture asymmetric with their own and a conviction that American access to this sphere of trade was key to the reputation of the United States and the only way that precious goods (most importantly porcelain) could be procured.¹²

The reality that Western crews encountered in China was different than what they had imaged. American sailors and captains expected the Chinese to welcome them with the fanfare and pomp they thought it was proper for a developing nation to display to the cultural superiority of the Western world. However, no such deference was paid. As Kariann Yokota notes in her book “Unbecoming British,” at certain points Chinese diplomats could not distinguish between American individuals. This is an ironic reversal of the myth of oriental homogeneity associated with Chinese people.¹³ Paired with this, the belief that China is inherently superior to the rest of the world is present in Chinese shared history. The lack of welcome and the fact that Europeans “had tried to breach the walls of China for centuries before establishing a stable beachhead in Canton” only to be “rebuffed” by traders meant that American sailors’ accounts of China were overwhelmingly negative.¹⁴

¹¹ Margaret C.S. Christman, *Adventurous Pursuits: Americans and the China trade, 1784-1844*, (Washington D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1984), 44.

¹² For a the full accounts of these individuals see: Green, John. 1784-1785. *Logbook of the Empress of China*. Etting; Benjamin. 1822. *Journal of voyages to Canton*; and the formerly listed Papers of Robert Morris.

¹³ Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Dolin, 65. The behavior by Chinese merchants was probably not undeserved and prompted by the poor and lewd behavior of sailors. However, the result was a verbalized dislike of Chinese people.

Adding to this already negative view of Chinese people, sailors' skepticism of China was strengthened by the goods that were exchanged for porcelain. A unique species of ginseng was found to grow in Canada and was highly valued by Chinese people for both medicinal purposes and as an aphrodisiac. Ships to China almost always carried Canadian ginseng, which was traded for porcelain and tea. Other goods carried by the first American ships, such as silverware and pianos, were useless to Chinese people. As a result, sailors' impressions of the Chinese market seemed irrational. Spanish silver and a rare plant were the only goods Chinese merchants were interested in, and these impressions contributed to the larger sentiment concerning the otherness and foreign nature of China.¹⁵

As a result of only being allowed to enter Canton, American sailors left China with an extremely narrow view of the country. Wider cultural aspects such as religious beliefs and government organization were never observed because American crews were only exposed to the narrow commercial zone of Canton. The conveyed knowledge in the mind of Americans was clear: Irene Ayers, a Boston schoolgirl, summarized China as being "in the eastern part of Asia and it is noted for its Teas and Coffee, it is noted also for its porcelain ware.....The Chinese are a very timid race of people and very industrious, their dress is very odd."¹⁶ This view was circulated as a result of sailors' accounts of porcelain trading expeditions.

Greater variety in the decoration and style of Chinese porcelain exists than the narrow styles that were exported to European and American markets would indicate. Indeed, over 15 specific and extremely different types of porcelain were craved with variable intensity over the

¹⁵ Dolin, 15. Jonathan Goldstein, *Philadelphia and the China trade, 1682-1846: Commercial, Cultural, and Attitudinal Effects*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), 22.

¹⁶ Tchen, 155.

course of Chinese imperial history.¹⁷ Whereas “Americans commonly called every variety of porcelain or even pottery object ‘China Ware,’” what they were actually referring to was a narrow selection of Chinese porcelain, which was exported as it suited American and European aesthetic demands. Specifically, “‘Chinese export porcelain’...[identified] wares produced in China especially for markets abroad and specifically for the United States.”¹⁸ This nomenclature demonstrates a significant dimension of the porcelain trade between China and the United States—that it had to be distinguished from the type of porcelain demanded by Chinese buyers, and that Chinese export porcelain was uniquely different than Chinese porcelain. The term “Chinese porcelain” refers to Chinese ceramics used by Chinese people.

Chinese porcelain is primarily classified by dynasty or by the Emperor reigning at the time the style was popularized. Chinese export porcelain, however, is classified by *famille*, with color being the primary differentiating factor. Famille verte porcelains were the earliest type of exported porcelain demanded, during the reign of Kangxi (1661-1722), the fourth emperor of the Qing Dynasty. Famille verte is primarily made up of *sancai* (which means ‘three colors’) porcelain, and called so because it usually features three colors.¹⁹ Figure 1 shows a *famille verte* Cafe-au-lait Ground Dish in the Kangxi style that uses this *sancai* color palette. Demand for this

¹⁷ For complete listing of Chinese ceramics see Carl L. Crossman, *The China Trade; Export Paintings, Furniture, Silver & Other Objects*, (Princeton: Payne Press, 1972).

¹⁸ Jean McClure Mudge, *Chinese Export Porcelain for the American Trade, 1785-1835*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1981), 63. Mudge in this text offers additional discourse on the etymology of Lowestoft porcelain, which was produced in England and is commonly confused as Chinese export porcelain. She also discusses the work of John Goldsmith Phillips, who analyzed Chinese export porcelain as its own type, instead of a subset of Chinese ceramics. His ideas greatly influenced how I conceptualized this style and implications of its export, leading to the thesis argued in this paper. For more on this, see his book, John Goldsmith Phillips and Helena Woolworth McCann, *China-trade Porcelain: an Account of its Historical Background, Manufacture, and Decoration, and a Study of the Helena Woolworth McCann collection*, (Cambridge: published for the Winfield Foundation and the Metropolitan Museum of Art [by] Harvard University Press, 1956).

¹⁹ Suzanne Von Drachenfels, *The Art of the Table: A Complete Guide to Table Setting, Table Manners, and Tableware*, (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 47. *Sancai* porcelain was also referred to as ‘egg and spinach’ porcelain, because of its use of white, yellow and green shades, though some *sancai* porcelain uses other colors.

type of porcelain was replaced by a new craving for *famille rose* porcelain, which began in the 1720s. *Famille rose* porcelain was characterized by softer colors, usually purples and pinks, and featured more intricate designs, such as flowers, human and animal figures, and insects (as shown in figure 2). Advanced craftsman techniques during this period offered the opportunity to depict figures in more detail. This led to essentializing dissemination of Chinese culture as Chinese nature scenes, Chinese women, and Buddhist gods became popular themes on *famille rose* porcelain.²⁰ Thus another source of danger in conceptualization of the Chinese emerged. Now, not only was the type of porcelain used by Americans incongruent with that used by Chinese, but also the decorative scenes depicted inauthentic characterizations of Chinese culture. The last wave of Chinese export porcelain, from the late 18th century until the early 20th century, was characterized by the popularity of ‘blue and white’ design and Canton export porcelain. Blue and white porcelain was just that—usually white or off-white, hard, paste pottery stained with a blue ink design and fired with a porcelain glaze. Unlike the previously two mentioned types of export porcelain, blue and white porcelain fit the taste and existed in the homes of many Chinese people (see figure 3).²¹ Conversely, Canton export porcelain was a subset of blue and white that exclusively featured scenes of the trading post at Canton.²² Canton porcelain featured scenes of intense contrast between the Chinese and Americans and Europeans, with exaggerated and distinctly oriental Chinese merchants often gazing upon approaching Western ships or interacting with finely clothed Western merchants. Figure 4 shows a depiction of Canton that has been influenced by the Western trade it enjoyed. The buildings reflect Western architectural

²⁰ Mudge, 161-182.

²¹ For this reason, blue and white is typically not referred to as ‘Chinese export porcelain’ and instead colloquially called ‘blue and white’ by traders and antiques dealers, even today.

²² Canton was associated with the British. While Canton export porcelain was usually blue and white it was not exclusively so, and many pieces of Canton export porcelain in *famille rose* and *famille verte* styles were sold.

features and Canton's accessibility is expressed through the open water surrounding each of these buildings.²³

If China export porcelain was not the type of porcelain that Chinese people used daily, what distinguished the porcelain that Americans and Europeans purchased and how does it differ from the types used by Chinese? First, highly decorative and intricate designs characterize Chinese export porcelain, as very few of the types of porcelain used by Chinese people were as decorative as Chinese export porcelain styles. Second, the shapes of ceramics produced for Chinese use differed entirely from the chargers, tea sets, soup bowls, and other products produced for Western purchase and use.²⁴ Figure 5 and figure 6 revealed this discrepancy, with Chinese tea sets (used by Chinese) featuring small cups about one third the size of China export teacups without handles for gripping. Overall, Chinese export porcelain was a good produced to satisfy Western demand, not one made to accurately reflect Chinese culture or for Chinese use. This, paired with the widespread dispersion of Chinaware in America, and the reliance on it as one of the few relics of Chinese culture that they came into contact with, made propagation of an inaccurate view of China inevitable.

In terms of works that were specially commissioned, the porcelain demanded by Americans departed from that which was demanded by Europeans. Whereas "Eastern or Western [European] features predominated according to the period, reflecting the changing position of one country with regard to another," porcelain demanded by Americans distinguished itself by being characterized by a desire for "Oriental forms, craftsmanship, and painting with the boldness of Western shapes and decorations...with American emblems."²⁵

²³ Crossman, 151-152.

²⁴ Mudge, 150.

²⁵ Mudge, 66.

During later commissions at the port of Canton, “two types of wares were ordered...by Americans: custom-designed objects whose motifs had been drawn up by Westerners; and items of distinctly Oriental pattern.”²⁶ That both of these categories of items were demanded proves the desire to sustain a vision of China as exotic. On the one hand, the popularity and class status of owning Chinaware created a desire to commission wares with strictly Western symbols. On the other, the desire to possess goods that were foreign, Chinese, and Sinofied drove demand for commissioned styles decorated with Oriental themes.

The products that were commissioned to feature American iconography rarely exactly resembled the sketches provided by buyers. Instead, features of the Chinese aesthetic unintentionally found their way into designs. Figure 7, a toddy jug adorned with a portrait of George Washington, reflects one such instance of this unintentional cultural blending. Chinese facial traits, such as a broad, round forehead, lack of an epicanthic fold, and high cheekbone placement, appear in the facial constitution of George Washington.²⁷ These traits do not exist in other American or European artistic depictions of George Washington, indicating they are a product of the Chinese craftsmen that produced the jug. Ironically, this type of mistake made by Chinese artists represents a more realistic reflection of the Chinese aesthetic than works ordered to specifically feature ‘traditional Chinese’ themes. However, these mistakes did not go unnoticed by American consumers. Rather than attributing the difference to Chinese craftsmen incorporating facial structures they were familiar with, Americans attributed it to laziness and poor skill, part of the Orientalism myth that Americans subscribed to. As a result of commissioned works incorporating features of Chinese aesthetic, Americans “registered in turn

²⁶ Goldstein, 37.

²⁷ Epicanthic folds, colloquially referred to as ‘monolids,’ are not present in the facial and eye constitution of peoples of Asian—particularly Mongolian and Chinese—descent.

a deprecatory attitude towards Chinese artistic talents."²⁸ It was noted that "though [Chinese painters] can imitate most of the fine arts," they "do not possess any large portion of original genius."²⁹ From this it is clear that Americans demanded a good that was not Chinese and were dismayed when they received one that was. Americans did not want accurate representations of Chinese culture, but instead what they thought Chinese goods should be.

As a result of the ability to commission works, specifically those with family crests and monograms, this type of commission porcelain came to represent American cultural traditions more than Chinese. For example, "A Chinese enameled punch bowl given to Alexander Hamilton and Elizabeth Schuyler by her parents in 1780 to commemorate their marriage" demonstrated "Schuyler's acceptance of Hamilton into their family and social circles."³⁰ Chinese porcelain was an essential part of the most important American legacy; those with an impressive or noteworthy family could substantiate this with elegant Chinaware that featured the family's name, crest, or relevant icons.

China export porcelain, while beautiful, was a romanticization of Chinese culture that was dangerous. It cast China as something that it was not, and laid the foundations of a security competition. China could not be conceptualized as an emerging state because this was incongruent with the archaic and dainty patterns that adorned Chinese export porcelain. Chinese porcelain was never intended to and did not reflect Chinese culture, and was produced solely to satiate American demand. The unfortunate consequence was widespread misunderstanding of China and Chinese people.

²⁸ Alfred Owen Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle: the Presence of China in the American Enlightenment*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 115.

²⁹ Ibid, 115.

³⁰ Tchen, 14.

Appendix

Figure 1.



Fig. 1. *Chinese Famille Verte Cafeau-lait Ground Dish*, 1722. Porcelain, 28cm x 2cm. Amsterdam: Christie's Interiors, 2012.



Figure 2.

Fig. 2. *Chinese Eggshell Porcelain Famille Rose Soup Plate*, c. 1730. Porcelain, 21.5cm x 2cm. New Orleans: Cohen and Cohen, 2009.



Figure 3

Fig. 3. *Ming Blue and White Double-Gourd Vase*, c. 1550. Hard Paste Porcelain, 45cm x 15cm. London: Christie's Interiors, 2005.



Figure 4.

Fig. 4. *Two Chinese Export Porcelain 'Canton' Blue and White Octagonal Platters*, c. 1850. Hard Paste Porcelain, 47cm x 2cm. New York City: Christie's Interiors, 2010.

Figure 5.



Fig. 5. *A Chinese Export Porcelain Blue and White Tea Service*, c. 1785. Porcelain, 22cm x 36cm, New York City: Christie's Interiors, 2010.

Figure 6.



Fig. 6. *The Importance of Tea in China*. 1 Jan. 2014. personal photograph by Monika Wilamowski. Accessed 1 Dec. 2014. <<http://internchina.com/the-importance-of-tea-inchina/>>.



Figure 7.

Fig. 7. "Toddy jug with portrait of George Washington [Chinese for the American market]" Porcelain, 25.4cm. In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

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