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*New York
before
Chinatown*

Orientalism and
the Shaping of
American Culture
1776–1882

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CHAPTER 1

Porcelain, Tea, and Revolution

ON THE EVENING OF JULY 9, 1776, impassioned New York citizens and Continental soldiers pulled down the two-thousand-pound gilded statue of King George III on Bowling Green, breaking off its head and mutilating its nose.¹ In the months to come, Manhattan, a half-evacuated trading port, would be the scene of the next battle of the Revolutionary War.

British general Sir William Howe's disciplined force, some thirty-two thousand militia, ten thousand sailors, and fifty-two warships, descended the coastline from Boston. Ragtag volunteers began arriving in all types of transports, many still dressed in their hunting shirts and leggings—nineteen thousand in all. These rebels slept on the floorboards of empty houses or in simple tents. As one observer recorded, "Hardship, exposure, unwholesome food, bad drinking water, improper sanitary arrangements, insufficient hospitals, a dearth of physicians, the general ignorance of the nature of diseases and the proper treatments, sent hundreds of poor fellows to the grave." Women and children were ordered to evacuate, as reports circulated that the city was to be burned if defeated.²

In the midst of this scene of chaos and deprivation, General George Washington made plans for New York City's defense. At the same time, under Washington's customarily close personal supervision, his New York City housekeeper, Mrs. Mary Smith, proceeded to furnish his New York home. Carefully kept accounts and receipts reveal the purchase of mahogany knife cases, a carpet, a damask tablecloth, a feather bed, pillows, a tufted, eight porcelain mugs, two dozen plates, and other miscellany. Pro-British Burling Slip merchants Frederick and Philip Rhinelander supplied numerous imported creamware dishes, sauceboats, plates, and fluted bowls,

including three, more costly, "china" bowls. And the Bayard Street retailer George Ball sold "burnt china cups & saucers" and other tea service items to the household.³ During this time the general and Mrs. Washington kept up "a high level of comfort in dining and furnishings," maintaining a "tolerably genteel" table.⁴ By September, major miscalculations had forced Washington's inexperienced troops to retreat. At great expense and trouble, the general's household was packed up and reestablished at the Morris-Jumel Mansion in Haerlem Heights.⁵

What explains this desire for luxury in the midst of war? It would be easy to ridicule General Washington's extraordinary attention to material wants at this moment of hardship. This enigmatic anecdote, however, offers fresh insights into this founding generation's efforts to formulate a cultural identity. While these details may appear trivial to traditional interpretations of early American history, they pose a question fundamental to this study: Why were tea, porcelains, and other representations of China so desired by the founding fathers and mothers of the United States?

"To Fix the Taste of Our Country Properly"

In 1777 a cache of tea was found concealed in some woods, and Brigadier General Nathaniel Heard wrote asking the commander-in-chief how to dispose of it. Washington personally wrote back ordering it "to be sent to the Quarter Master General for the use of the Army." When available, valued supplies were distributed to officers in a hierarchical manner. While based in West Point in 1779, Washington gave detailed instructions as to which officers, staff, and surgeons should be issued which supplies. Tea was to be distributed as follows: "Fifty pounds of the best quality for future disposal: one pound of the best kind to each General Officer; half a pound of the same to each field officer and head of a staff department and a quarter of a pound pr. man of the remainder to any other officer of the army who shall apply."⁶ The general's careful deliberations on the apportioning of tea exemplified his proper role as a patriarch rewarding his officers. In addition, his insistence on having Chinese tea sets, or Wedgwood queensware, certainly reminded him and his officers, in the heat of battle, of his status and authority. Such luxury items were particularly scarce during war, and their rarity made Washington's role in distributing tea all the more significant: it was a means of reinforcing the symbolic identity befitting a gentleman of his position and authority.⁷

Not of prosperous parentage, Washington was well aware of the divide between the haves and the have-nots of Virginia. Before the war he had witnessed firsthand the conditions of the poor in the frontier settlements he visited while working as a surveyor.⁸ Common people on the frontier still ate meals from a communal family bowl, often using their hands to scoop out the food. In more settled areas the poor were more likely to eat their porridge with spoons. Wealth was measured throughout the century by the number of chairs one owned, or by whether one had a frame bed or lived in a dwelling having more than one room.⁹ For those aspiring to differentiate themselves from the majority of Americans, it became important to recondition one's behavior and learn the proper use of such "instruments" as knives, forks, and spoons that signified luxury and elegance.

Described by historian Gordon Wood as an "autodidact," Washington too worked tirelessly at uplifting himself from his humble origins to the status of landed gentry (as distinct from farmers, whom he called the "grazing multitude").¹⁰ He constantly sought to emulate British elite culture. At the age of fifteen he wrote down a collection of maxims that he called "Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation." Drawn from a seventeenth-century etiquette book, they reveal a young man self-conscious about modifying his appearance and behavior in the company of his betters. "Loll not out the tongue," he reminded himself, nor "keep the Lips too open or too Close." And "in speaking to men of Quality do not lean nor Look them full in the Face."¹¹ Washington was not alone in his endeavors to remake the self; he was eminently representative of the outstanding offspring of this new nation, disciplining body, mind, and manners so as to become a gentleman. His tea-drinking and porcelain-collecting habits embodied these efforts. They further embodied the contradictory crosscurrents of the emergent Anglo-American revolutionary culture: they show Washington striving to be both a proper British gentleman and an American revolutionary.¹²

In 1755 Washington placed his first order for Chinese porcelains. Sending three hogsheads of tobacco, he prevailed upon London "chinaman" Richard Washington to choose a set of goods "agre[e]able to the present taste" and "good of their kind." (Eighteenth-century British porcelain merchants, male and female, were called "chinaman" or "chinawoman" and their goods "china" being sold in "china shops.") Introduced by a fellow planter, Washington had to place his trust in this unknown merchant. Desperately hoping to be treated fairly, he emphasized their shared surname: "I should be

glad to cultivate the most intimate correspondance with you, not only for names-sake but as a friend, and shall endeavour in all things to approve myself worthy your Regard."¹³ Such was the nature of the British Empire that a Virginia planter was at the mercy of a British shopkeeper.

Washington's material desires derived from European aristocratic culture as filtered to the middling class. Having gained a taste for the "baubles of Britain," many Americans would not be denied the pursuit of these luxuries. First coveted by European courts, furs from North America, sugar from the plantations of the West Indies, coffee and spices from Java, chocolate from the cacao plant in South America, and teas *ad infinitum* became available in domestic markets at more affordable prices. In eighteenth-century Europeanized America, less costly teas, nankeens, and inexpensive blue and white porcelains (often used as ballast on ships) began appearing in more homes. These once exotic consumables became attainable in everyday life.¹⁴

When they couldn't get the authentic goods, Europeans and some Americans made copies "after the Chinese taste." The French term *chinoiserie* referred to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century fashion for European-made imitations of Chinese goods. These were the creations of craftsmen who had no firsthand experience of a distant and highly romanticized "Cathay." Gold-embroidered tapestries of small people living in a willow-patterned world, elaborate gardens with "gossamer pavilions," architecture with pagoda-style roofs, faux porcelains, fantastic latticework, fanciful stage sets, lacquered furniture, and various other decorative notions formed the material expression of this European orientalism.¹⁵

Once elected president, George Washington moved to the first presidential "palace" at Pearl and Cherry Streets. Lady Kitty Duer remarked that it was appointed with the "best of furniture in every room, and the greatest quantity of plate and China that I ever saw before. The whole of the first and second Story is papered, and the floor covered with the richest kind of Turkey and Wilton Carpets."¹⁶ Included in the inventory of purchases were "Japan'd Tea trays," queensware, and a large order of "China."¹⁷ A Mrs. Robinson wrote, "There is scarcely anything talked of now but General Washington and the Palace." Dressed in the latest fashions from Europe, many made of Chinese silks, this "republican court" excited all (with the notable exception of what Robinson called "those styled Anti-Federalists").¹⁸

Washington wrote to New York merchant Gouverneur Morris, who was negotiating tobacco sales in Paris, asking him to shop for stylish porcelains. Morris wrote back, "You will perhaps exclaim that I have not complied with

your Directions as to Economy, but you will be of a different Opinion when you see the Articles. I could have sent you a Number of pretty Trifles for very little Cost, but . . . your Table would have been in the Style of a petite Maitresse of this City, which most assuredly is not the Style you wish." The gender and class implications of Morris's phrase "the Style of a petite Maitresse" must have persuaded Washington to accept a grander role. "I think it of very great importance to fix the taste of our Country properly," Morris continued, "and I think your Example will go so very far in that respect. It is therefore my Wish that every Thing about you should be substantially good and majestically plain; made to endure."¹⁹

A year later the Washingtons moved to even larger quarters at 29 Broadway, formerly occupied by the French legation, where more elegant and much larger teas, state dinners, and receptions were to be held. Belonging to the departing Count de Moustier, the legation sold to Washington a large service of fine, fashionable white Sèvres porcelain with simple gold decorative borders. Sèvres porcelain, like the Meissen ware of Germany and Wedgwood of England, represented France's most advanced efforts at emulating Chinese porcelain wares.²⁰

For a new nation in which dwellings were generally still humble and material belongings only modest, Chinese commodities signified what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has termed "distinction." French émigré La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt observed as late as 1797 "some good brick houses," but "in general" most dwellings were "mean, small and low, [and] built of wood." In New York, families engaged in certain trades worked and lived in sheds, shanties, and cellars along the East River, often sharing living quarters with boarders. Grant Thornburn, for example, rented a modest one-level wooden building at 22 Nassau Street that served both for setting up "housekeeping" and as a nail-making workshop. With his wife, he divided the six- by twelve-foot space into "a store, kitchen and bedroom which also served for our parlour." The living space was furnished with "a bed and bedstead, pine table (value fifty cents), three Windsor chairs, a soup pot, tea kettle, six cups and saucers, a griddle, frying pan, and brander." Notice that even in such a modest abode, Thornburn had a space he could call a parlor, equipped with six teacups and saucers. His status may have been that of a workingman, but his aspiration was clearly higher.²¹

Upwardly striving Americans not only wanted tea sets, porcelains, and tea. As historian Richard Bushman has illustrated, such desires also created a demand for housing that could show off the owners' wealth and accom-

moderate more and more personal belongings. Multistoried houses with hallway stair entry areas and separate rooms for entertaining, dining, cooking, and living came to set a new standard for genteel living.²² The tasteful display of passionately coveted things from the "Orient" and the "Indies" (and elsewhere in the non-European world) distinguished one moneyed space from the other.

Corrupting Virtues and Revolutionary Passions

While George Washington coveted Chinese luxuries, other revolutionaries argued that the consumption of luxuries corrupted virtue. While many New Yorkers envied, and emulated, the wealth and refinement of Chinese court culture, some radicals urged a complete boycott of foreign luxuries. They argued, with little support, that Americans could make their own tea from local flora. The love of luxuries from the China and Indies trade came to represent the antithesis of Anglo-American republican virtue; such things were deemed addictive and corrupting.

Earnest moralists read—and took to heart—the advice of the English radical Catharine Macaulay. In the New York edition of her 1775 address to the people of Britain, Macaulay observed that after a "long succession of abused prosperity" the British Empire had been lured into a "ruinous operation by the Riches and Luxuries of the East." Popular British novelist Tobias Smollet wrote that the "Roman Commonwealth of old" and other civilizations had been ruined because "Luxury and Profuseness" from the Orient "led the Way to Indigence and Effeminacy; which prepared the Minds of the People for Corruption; and Corruption for Subjection; as they have constantly succeeded one another, and will do so again, in the same Circumstances, in all Countries, and in all Ages." In America, Benjamin Franklin worried about new dependencies. In the *Columbia Magazine* he stated, "One is astonished to think of the number of vessels and men who are daily exposed in going to bring tea from China, coffee from Arabia, and sugar and tobacco from America: all commodities which our ancestors lived very well without."²³ Apparently, many believed that the East India Company and the new financial order were ruining "old England."²⁴

Procommerce political philosopher David Hume, among others, disagreed with such positions. Hume acknowledged that "all the Latin classics . . . we peruse in our infancy . . . universally ascribe the ruin of their state to the arts and riches imported from the East." However, such sentiments regard-

ing the corrupting effect of "Grecian and Asiatic luxury," Hume maintained, "mistook the cause of the disorders," which really proceeded from an "ill model'd government" and the "unlimited extent of conquests." In his view, luxuries refined the arts and the arts promoted liberty.²⁵ Yet the desire for "oriental" goods was stronger than the threat of "oriental despotism."

Indeed, the right to easy access to desired Chinese consumer goods threatened to overwhelm radical boycott positions. In England the freedom to consume such foreign items as tea, to wear what one wanted, or to set one's table with porcelains had long been subject to a tradition of social controls. To varying degrees of success, highly elaborated "consumption by estates" laws fixed standards of conduct and comfort according to social rank. British monarchs and the aristocracy sought to limit commoners' access to luxury goods and the display of wealth beyond their fixed status. Pride of apparel was deemed "an exemplarie of evill [which] induceth the whole man to wickedness and sinne."²⁶ Luxury-targeted tax codes especially imposed upon middling peasants further proscribed the popular consumption of foreign goods.

The Stamp Act of 1765 and the Townshend Act of 1767, levying a duty upon imported glass, paper, tea, lead, and paint, extended such sumptuary sanctions to the American colonies. These actions led to the organization of a popular revolt, or as T. H. Breen has noted, created a unifying issue for private consumers to rally around.²⁷ Boston merchants urged customers not to buy British goods, sloganizing, "Save your money and you can save your country." The New York Sons of Liberty resolved an even more dramatic position during the tea boycott: tea drinkers threatened "the liberties of America."²⁸ In the end, of course, boycotters and consumers both attained their goals, for the smuggling of tea continued unabated. Average Americans chafed at any sumptuary limits on consumables deemed foreign and therefore taboo. British East India Company tea may not have been acceptable to consume, but tea smuggled by Americans was.

As the Sons of Liberty learned, the popular desire for consumer goods could be used as a driving force for political independence. "Freedom," in part, was defined as unfettered access to the "baubles of Britain." After all, it was the British Crown's augmentation of the East India Company's power to control the consumption of Chinese goods that precipitated the various tea boycotts. During the New York Tea Party, held months after the Boston protest, Alexander McDougall, a leader of the Sons of Liberty, addressed his "Fellow Citizens" under the pen name "Hampden" in self-consciously Lockean terms: "The chief end of all free government, is the protection of

Property, from Injuries without it." McDougall explained that he used the term *property* "in the large sense, in which Mr. Locke uses it, as comprehending Life, Liberty, and Estate."²⁹ The letter spoke of propertied male citizens' "natural liberty" and their right to "defend themselves" against "the control and Tyranny of others"—ergo, their right to rebel against King George's despotic authority as wielded by the East India Company.

A letter signed "Scevola," published in the same newspaper as that by "Hampden" and addressed to the commissioners of the East India Company, defined what being "a free, independent, and determined people" in radical American terms meant. Americans would not allow "parliamentary despotism" or the East India Company to root itself in their country, nor would they be forced to swallow "the loathsome pills of slavery and oppression." The desire for Chinese goods was subject to the same rationale. As long as Americans worked hard for the material objects of their desire, why shouldn't they have the unfettered right to trade and consume such luxuries?³⁰

Elite Community Building

Chinese goods were not used simply to satisfy materialist desires, however. For Gouverneur Morris's fellow New Yorkers, the culture of consuming and giving luxury objects became intrinsic to the formation of a merchant-led patrician elite. Rituals of using, giving, and passing on Chinese objects were a means of community building.

As the elite practice of separating the workplace from the house became more commonplace in late-eighteenth-century America, women became responsible for "raising the standards of the quality of domestic life in the household, raising the standards for rearing and educating children, and assuming the moral guardianship of all family members and even of society as a whole."³¹ With the assistance of servants and slaves, the home became a vehicle for cultivating genteel moral virtue. Among other things of value, Chinese objects of distinction were critical to this process. Most notably, tea time and the family dinner were turned into secular rituals for social interactions between family, friends, and guests to take place.

The social practice of paying calls to private residences and having tea was a highly refined means of establishing one's worthiness and credibility, as well as a primary means of social mixing (including mixing across gender lines). Of a visit through North America in 1781, Abbé Robin noted, "The

greatest mark of civility and welcome they can show you, is to invite you to drink [tea] with them." Performed according to British and Continental standards, the serving of tea required the proper "Tea Geer": teapot, cups, saucers, tea table, tea caddy, caddy spoon, and other items. The more stylishly elaborate the "equipage," the more refined the server. The tea table, a specialized piece of furniture either imported from China or made in Europe "in the Chinese style," certainly augmented prestige. Ultimately one's true character was measured as much by one's refined possessions as by one's conduct and conversation.³²

Historian Thomas Bender has pointed out that eighteenth-century patrician life was highly community-oriented, constantly reinforced through personal and social ties. British guides of this period described verbal discourse as "the Cement and Soul of Society" or—the language of the marketplace beginning to transform all—"the greatest commerce of our lives."³³ Tea time was one way of pursuing this "commerce," of reinforcing these social ties. In sharp contrast to the time ordinary folk spent in common taverns—"the eternal haunt of loose disorderly Peoples," as John Adams called them—tea time represented a social space wherein one could demonstrate one's skills in the art of "Conversation" with others (particularly women) who displayed "Wit," good "Sense," and "Virtue." In his diary Adams described a gathering at which a woman talked about the awkward behavior some "People" had once displayed at one of her teas; her story, Adams reported, embarrassed some other members of the gathering, some "shoe string fellows that never use Tea." While he deplored the woman's indiscretion, Adams did not challenge the firmly entrenched notion that one's skills at having tea revealed one's sophistication and pedigree.³⁴

Indeed, in this Anglo-American world the lack of such refinement invited derision. A 1777 British cartoon of "The Old Maid" illustrates a dour, unsophisticated figure sipping tea from a dish along with her cat.³⁵ The social norms of the time were such that any well-aculturated patrician could appreciate the satire of the illustration and the humor of the ignorant error (taking "have a dish of tea" to mean literally to sip from a dish). Patriarchal disapproval sanctioned those who did not conform. Displays of refinement, by contrast, merited praise and reinforced chains of acceptable social relationships.³⁶ This core activity—the refined social interaction of tea time—generated collateral patrician activities such as reading and collecting, and the objects collected in turn afforded guests as well as hosts the opportunity to display their knowledge and etiquette.³⁷



Figure 1. The tea ritual, painted by Susanna Truax, 1730. The ritual of drinking tea was associated with elite status and material well-being. This stylishly dressed Hudson River valley woman is holding a sugar cube in a spoon, ready to plunk it into her teacup. (Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch © 1988 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington)

THE GREAT AMERICAN TEA COMPANY.



IMPORTERS AND JOBBERS OF TEAS. 51 VESEY STREET, NEW YORK.

Sell ALL their TEAS in ORIGINAL packages at TWO CENTS PER POUND above COST.
BELIEVING THIS TO BE ATTRACTIVE TO THE MANY WHO HAVE HERETOFORE BEEN PAYING ENORMOUS PROFITS.
They issue a MONTHLY PRICE LIST of their TEAS sent FREE if ordered.

Figure 2. Great American Tea Company poster, mid-1800s. Manhattan businesses expanded as strivers to the middling class sought to cultivate genteel consumer behaviors. (New-York Historical Society)

In a comparable, but less public, manner the family dinner also became a highly ritualized activity. Coinciding with the separation of the workplace from the home, evening meals became the only time of the day at which all family members were guaranteed to be together: "This ritual was used for reinforcing family ties and inculcating family members, particularly children, with moral values."³⁸ And as already evidenced by George Washington's lavish table settings, fancier porcelains were used for the more prestigious gatherings.

General sociability, far more than specialized erudition, was prized; "things" Chinese had become one of the forms of currency for gaining cultural "distinction." Adapting the European elite's craze for Chinese export items and European chinoiserie, New Yorkers cultivated a taste for Chinese and Chinese-style luxuries. The rituals that surrounded these things and

the constellation of meanings associated with them created a powerful field of distinction and power.³⁹ In this Dutch-British island of strivers and self-improvers, desired luxuries played a critical role in expressing bonds of intimacy, friendship, identity, and power. As the demands of economic self-interest were increasingly framed in opposition to the more familiar social norms of love, family, trust, honor, and civic duty, and as old status hierarchies were destabilized by individual mobility, socializing and gifts became even more important in establishing and reestablishing personal ties.

Women had a more intimate, memory-keeping relationship to these Chinese things than did men. They were largely responsible for developing and maintaining bonds of sentiment.⁴⁰ The giving of valued gifts became an important means by which networks of sentiment were woven. The giving of gifts created a shared sphere of meanings, power, and hierarchy. In the process, sentimental values were consolidated between the givers and the receivers. In effect, the process of giving helped to reinforce the authority of certain traditional core values.⁴¹ This paradox of "keeping-while-giving" can be amply demonstrated by the manner in which New York patricians used their most prized porcelains. Important life-cycle events were marked by the giving of gifts to bring those with established wealth and the *nouveau riche* together into a shared civic society.

A Chinese enameled punch bowl given to Alexander Hamilton and Elizabeth Schuyler by her parents in 1780 to commemorate their marriage, for example, signified the Schuylers' acceptance of Hamilton into their family and social circles. The Schuylers' closet friends, associates, and often kin were the Hudson Valley Knickerbocker elite: the Delanceys, Livingstons, Van Rensselaers, and Van Cortlandts. The marriage (and the bowl) thus marked Hamilton's rise in New York society. A year later General Washington offered him command of a battalion, and the following year he was appointed Continental receiver of taxes and admitted to the New York bar.⁴²

Perhaps the most important role of such valued gifts was their intergenerational effect. In elite families of this era, children had a familial obligation to learn and practice a world of behaviors and knowledge that would perpetuate their family's wealth and status. To this end, specially inscribed objects and toys, miniaturized from adult scale, were given to help acculturate children. Chinese objects such as toy porcelain sets would be passed down from generation to generation, and children were quickly socialized into the ritualistic behavior associated with the objects. For example, Mary

Clinton, the daughter of De Witt Clinton's brother, owned a blue and white tea set with her initials monogrammed into the design. And Martha Hicks, the daughter of Thomas and Martha Buchanan Hicks, prominent New York Quakers, had "MH" inscribed on each of her cups and saucers. Young girls playing with miniature tea sets learned how to emulate the behavior of their mothers at tea parties. Indeed, Chinese porcelains were so much a part of the adult world that one handmade dollhouse dating back to 1834 prominently displayed a tiny Chinese blue and white platter and tea set in the dining room. The set was given by New York's Governor and Mrs. Joseph C. Yates to their granddaughter Susan Daniel Watkins.⁴³

The governor and Mrs. Yates's gift expressed their love and their wish that Susan should carry on their legacy. Through the medium of the dollhouse and the tiny play porcelains, they were communicating their desire that their grandchild be properly cultured. If the patrician boy's obligation to his family was to master the constantly destabilizing world of commodities and the symbolic knowledge necessary for that work, the patrician girl's obligation was to master the conversion of things into a world of stable and meaningful human relationships that would provide the family with a sense of secure identity.⁴⁴ In this way Chinese export porcelains became Americanized by family crests, designs, and added sentimental meanings.

For this Anglo-American society the range of objects reflecting the social self became quite broad. For George Washington it certainly included his land, slaves, house, and the material embodiment of his service as a general and president. For Hamilton it included his achieved ambitions. And for Susan Watkins it probably included her dollhouse and her relationship to her grandparents. These possessions became so inalienable to one's personal sense of self, William James pointed out in another context, that their loss represented far more than the actual material object, for "there remains, over and above this, a sense of the shrinkage of our personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness."⁴⁵ By implication, the loss of access to such sentimentalized things, from the Orient and elsewhere, was an important concern.

Teas, porcelains, and other such luxury goods played a key role in the formation of this hybridizing Anglo-American identity. The founding fathers were socialized in a universe of British symbolic meanings. Freedom, happiness, property, individuality, rational self-interest, corruption, tyranny, despotism, and so many other concepts were part of ongoing debates about

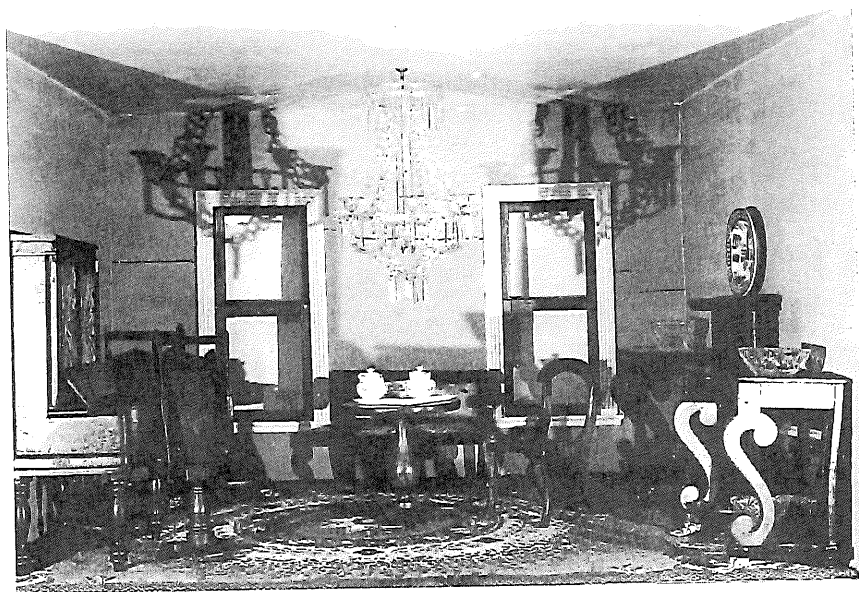


Figure 3. Miniature blue and white porcelains and dollhouse of Susan Daniel Watkins, 1834. Play was one way in which sons and daughters were socialized in the values of their parents. (John P. Papp, photographer, courtesy of the Schenectady County Historical Society)

how one tamed wild passions, harnessed them via self-cultivation, and became a gentleman without overindulging in luxuries and becoming "effeminate" and corrupt.

How Did China Become Wealthy?

The founding generation of European Americans sought to abstract lessons from what had been written about China's Confucian-based civilization. They were fascinated by extant translations of the great sage's linkage of personal virtue with the affairs of the state. The maxim that the morality of a civilization's patriarch-leader was responsible for the general well-being and wealth of his nation appealed to revolutionists and republicans alike. Jesuit priest Jean Baptiste Du Halde's influential book *The General History of China* credited such centralized moral and civil authority with the creation of the Grand Canal, the Great Wall, the civil service system, and national taxation, and with the benevolent management of natural resources in balance with national trade. In addition, the well-regarded writings of

Voltaire, Quesnay, and associated political economists (now referred to as physiocrats) celebrated China as a stable and prosperous agricultural civilization that should be emulated in the West.⁴⁶

Such books and thinkers had a significant influence on the ways in which Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom had spent time in Paris, thought about how to make the new nation prosper. Franklin, for example, regularly noted a wide range of "useful" Chinese flora, fauna, crafts, inventions, and practices adoptable in America, such as windmills, mulberry trees and silk production, rhubarb, rice cultivation, papermaking, and central heating.⁴⁷ The printer-philosopher-inventor's penchant for parables also illustrated his transcultural uses of Chinese knowledge. He attributed to "a certain Chinese Emperor" a saying that effectively reinforced the Puritan Protestant values of collective hard work: "I wil, if possible, have no Idlenes in my Dominions; for if there be one Man idle, some other Man must sufer Cold and hunger." Indeed, an indicative passage appears in the introduction to the first volume of Franklin's American Philosophical Society journal: "Could we be so fortunate as to introduce the industry of the Chinese, their arts of living and improvements in husbandry . . . America might become in time as populous as China."⁴⁸

Jefferson, meanwhile, owned a copy of Du Halde's book (which he later sold with the rest of his collection to form the Library of Congress), spoke authoritatively about a Chinese play, and planned on having a miniaturized Chinese pavilion (modeled after one in Kew Gardens) and Chinese temple built for his treasured garden at Monticello. More significantly, however, Jefferson translated Count Destutt de Tracy's *Treatise on Political Economy*, a work that extended the physiocrats' interest in Confucian moral statecraft. A central argument of this book, which Jefferson believed "should be . . . in the hands of every American citizen," was an exposition of the connection between virtuous individual will and its salubrious social effects. Destutt de Tracy linked utilitarian moral virtue with individual will and individual will with "happiness," defined as the possession of property. French thinkers had transformed translations of Confucian philosophic ideals into a pragmatic Lockean theory for generating individual and national wealth, and Jefferson became the school's major U.S. advocate.⁴⁹

In contrast to George Washington's love of porcelains, Franklin's practical curiosity, and Jefferson's sociophilosophical bent, Alexander Hamilton thought about China primarily as part of the global exchange of resources and goods. He paid careful attention to Malachy Postlethwayt's *The Uni-*

versal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce. The following entry was typical of Hamilton's notes:

Asia.

Productions; all those in Europe with the adition of many either in greater abundance than there or not produced there at all—

There is a great abundance of diamons pearl coral gold silver copper, iron, sulphur red earth, salt-petre, allum quicksilver, potter's earth (of which is made the porcelain) raw silk cotton, tea, sage, coffee, nutmegs, mace cloves cinnamon pepper, indigo china-root, aquila-wood, rhubarb, musk, vermilion, sticklack borax, *lapis laxuli*, Dragon's blood, cubebs frankincense, saf-fron myrrh, manna, ambergrease and many other of the valuable drugs and gums.

Such notations not only marked what any given nation produced but also indicated what access that nation had to the Indies market and what made it wealthy. Rates of exchange and equivalencies, what Hamilton called "political arithmetic," fascinated the man. He wrote notes on the relative values of gold to silver in Europe and China, the labor needed to maintain a "hundred in all the necessities of life," and what America as the newcomer to global trade might offer to these markets.⁵⁰

These were some of the ways in which European thought about China came to be used in the new nation's quest for wealth and civilization.

Murphy's *Orphan of China*

In addition to the circulation of goods and books, cultural productions, such as plays, spectacles, and events, became important vehicles for the formulation of political concepts of American nationalism and foreign "others." The New York performances of *The Orphan of China* offer an unusual opportunity to gain insights into how this process worked.

The Orphan of China, a tragic play by British playwright Arthur Murphy, was based on earlier adaptations of a Chinese opera. Murphy's version appeared in 1759, receiving good critical reviews in England and periodic revivals. The play premiered in colonial New York in 1768; it was performed by British military actors in 1779, then again in 1787. In the next century, the play was staged in 1842 and, according to theater chronicler George Odell, "remained popular the rest of the century."⁵¹

In 1787 the play was staged at New York's John Street Theatre, one of the

nation's first and most important stages.⁵² The following lines opened the production:

Enough of Greece and Rome. The exhausted store
Of either nation now can charm no more. . . .
On eagle wings the poet of to-night
Soars for fresh virtues to the source of light,
To China's eastern realms; and boldly bears
Confucius' morals to Britannia's ears.⁵³

The fact that *Orphan* played at the John Street Theatre in New York before, during, and after the Revolution is significant. Despite the political divides between colonial Tories, British soldiers, and revolutionary patriots, the piece commanded continuing interest on the part of all. Indeed, they shared many cultural values.

The original play, *Zhaoshiguer*, is considered by Chinese scholars to be a "minor operetta" that was penned around 1330 by the Yuan Dynasty writer Chi Chun-hsiang.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, its translation by the French Jesuit Father Premare gave it significant visibility in the West. Thomas Jefferson confidently recommended the work to his brother-in-law as one of the classics of Chinese literature.⁵⁵ Though accepted as an "authentic" Chinese work, the Chinese opera was effectively transformed by Premare into a European tragedy. As this minor Chinese opera entered European intellectual circles, it was regularly retranslated, reinterpreted, and rewritten, with each version introducing significant changes to the characters, their names, and the story line.

The original was based on a historical event occurring in the middle of the Yuan Dynasty (fourteenth century). In five scenes, militarist Tu-ngan-cu plots to kill the entire clan of Minister Chao-tun, some three hundred people. A faithful family doctor, Ching-yng, saves the life of an orphaned male heir by concealing him and then sacrificing his own son, passing the heir off as his own. Through twists of the plot, the villain comes to believe that the family doctor has aided him in killing the orphan (actually the doctor's son), and he takes the real orphan under his protection. The boy is brought up without any knowledge of his real lineage until he reaches manhood some twenty years later. Ching-yng eventually reveals the orphan's true family identity. In the meantime, the emperor becomes wary of the military leader's growing power. Upon learning of the real parentage of the orphan, he commands the orphan to seize the villain, enabling the orphan

to take revenge on behalf of his decimated family. The play ends with the orphan and Ching-yng kneeling before the emperor, listening to the decree that rights the wrongs and rewards their Confucian virtue.⁵⁶

Intellectuals used various versions of *Orphan* to support different European concerns, ranging from the attempt to articulate formal universal principles of successful drama to more political matters.⁵⁷ Bishop Richard Hurd, for example, thought that he found in Premare's translation of *Zhaoshiguer* conclusive evidence of universal "common sense." Surely, Hurd argued, if such an isolated and ancient culture as China could recognize the rules of common sense, "what effects must it not have in more enlightened countries and times, where the discipline of long experience, and criticism (which is improved common sense) come in to the assistance of the poet?"⁵⁸

Voltaire used his version of the play, *Orphelin de Chine*, to respond to Jean Jacques Rousseau's pessimistic argument that art and science could not transcend moral corruption. He rewrote the piece to emphasize the victory of morality over barbarism. Revenge was deemphasized and philosophy foregrounded. Moral culture, Voltaire insisted, could triumph over politics.⁵⁹

Murphy greatly admired Voltaire, but unlike the French philosopher's Gengis-kan, who assimilated Chinese court culture, Murphy's tyrant Timurkan was an unrepentant Mongol to the end. His victims died, but Timurkan also fell to the sword of the triumphant orphan Hamet. Instead of keeping his orphan an infant, Murphy focused on Hamet as an adult, an individual "moral agent" capable of "revenging himself on the destroyers of his family."⁶⁰ In contrast to Voltaire's debate with Rousseau, Murphy was more concerned about the public responsibilities of the king. By further consolidating the dramatic action and filling his stage with a great deal of explicit violence and emotion, Murphy created a popular, liberal British play.⁶¹

The 1797 published version of Arthur Murphy's play reveals his attitudes toward China in a prologue and epilogue. While emphasizing the radical Whig preoccupation with the enlightened responsibilities of governance, he told his public to "set your hearts at rest," for British government and people were far superior to the Chinese.⁶² In British cosmopolitan culture, China was steadily losing its luster as "an exotic land of wonder" and wisdom and was taking on the new cast of a "provincial empire eager to clasp the British constitution to its breast."⁶³ As the British Empire expanded and became more self-confident during this era, other empires began to look less impressive and novel, and more arrogant attitudes gained currency.

In late-eighteenth-century New York City, in contrast, China had not yet

lost its attraction. As a minor and peripheral city of the British Empire, New York still welcomed what London perceived to be out of fashion. This context explains the success of Murphy's play. The play's periodic staging nevertheless warrants a deeper explanation. How could it please both British soldiers of an occupation army and American revolutionaries?

The rewriting, critical appraisal, staging, and restaging of the play in New York, via England and the Continent, help us understand the ways in which New Yorkers, while proclaiming their independence from England, continued to identify strongly with broader, deeply held European orientalist values. When audiences bought tickets to attend what they believed was an authentic Chinese play, what were they transacting? And whom were they buying this from?

Orphan simultaneously allowed for a critique of the British monarchy, gaining the legitimacy of Chinese civilizational precedent for American values, while also reconnecting U.S. cultural perspectives to an Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition. In a prerevolutionary New York context, *Orphan* could easily be received as a play that justified the War of Independence. As China had been tyrannized by a foreign despot, so had the colonies. The restoration of harmony and order meant not simply that Chinese once again ruled Chinese, but that the "public weal"—the popular mandate given by the people to the ruler—had been reestablished. In the American context, this interpretation easily justified and reinforced the rebellion of republicans over monarchists. Revolutionaries could enjoy *Orphan* as a play about the universal striving for "republican virtue." Self-sacrifice for one common good was not simply an American invention, nor simply part of the claimed Greco-Roman heritage of good Anglo-Saxons; it was also a universal truth, demonstrated by this play from a culture so different from the United States.

While aligning China on the side of Western notions of republican virtue, a damaging and countervailing message was emerging, echoing radical tea boycotters on the dangers of "oriental" goods bringing corruption. As long as China represented Confucian antiquity, it could be extolled as one with Western Enlightenment traditions. But as the British Empire's fortunes and power rose, the China of contemporary geopolitics came to be viewed as outdated, again subject to foreign rule. "Overzealous" monarchs in China were despotic, whereas "people's hearts" supported British monarchs. However, debt-ridden Americans could ill afford to take on such an imperious British attitude. For them China was still a place to be admired and envied, a source of luxuries and the hoped-for savior of the American economy. At the same

time, growing familiarity would soon breed contempt. European and Anglo-American theater both appropriated and subjugated Chinese difference into a realm of exoticized contrasts—for now, an orientalist “otherness” to be idealized and emulated. Murphy’s epilogue articulated what would become an American refrain about China: “They all are crippled in the tiny shoe.”⁶⁴ The gentry practice of binding women’s feet, thought to be ultra-feminine and erotic (and clearly a means of patriarchal control), was used to symbolize all of China. In this view, Chinese monarchs, and by inference all Chinese men, were de facto tyrants.

Patrician Orientalism

In this founding generation, different individuals with their different dispositions used Chinese and Chinese-style goods and ideas in various ways. George Washington sought distinction through his export porcelains and queensware. Alexander McDougall created a more radical, democratic America in revolt against tea and despotism. Alexander Hamilton sought wealth through his marriage and political arithmetic. Generations of Schuyler women gave valued gifts to forge bonds of sentimentality. Generations of John Street Theatre-goers used *Orphan* to sort out their feelings toward mother England, monarchy, and/or revolution. While each use of orientalism differed, such various practices wove together an everyday life that helped to define an independent occidental identity emulating China and drawing upon British patrician culture, but not tied too tightly to either. This patrician orientalism both helped to formulate order and hierarchy for a commonweal elite and was sometimes used to challenge the status quo. This varied generation of founders shared and shaped an elite, patrician-oriented culture. This elite culture embodied an underlying consensus that the trade of goods and ideas with the empire of China would be beneficial to the building of distinction, independence, development, and wealth, and to the governing of the new nation.

Perhaps this complex patrician orientalism was best embodied by New York merchant Gouverneur Morris. In addition to promoting a proper exemplary taste for the national elite, he helped to formulate and realize the nation’s early policy toward China. In 1783 Gouverneur Morris wrote a letter to the secretary of Congress supporting a trade scheme of Robert Morris, his friend and business partner. “Exchange for the superfluities of the East” should be promoted, he wrote, to “prevent the Europ Powers from

draining us as they now do of our Specie.”⁶⁵ The establishment of the China trade was presented as an act of patriotism, a part of nation building.

In late-eighteenth-century usage the term *exchange* was part of the lexicon of terms associated with the rise of capitalism and international trade. The word originally implied the reciprocal bartering of goods for goods, as distinct from the giving of money for goods, which constituted a “sale.” The ability to trade goods freely, in barter or with specie, denoted calculated mutual self-interest at work—assumed to be “fair bargains struck between . . . free individuals.”⁶⁶ Fundamentally different things had to be made equivalent in the negotiation process. And as evidenced by George Washington’s constant anxieties about his London china merchant, “unequal exchange is intrinsic to the exchange process itself.”⁶⁷

For the process of exchange to work, it was believed that the natural and man-made resources of the Orient should, as a matter of “natural rights,” be freely open to exchange. The term *superfluities* connoted excess from what was necessary, a superabundance. Merchant and national wealth, therefore, was contingent on either the taking over of established trade routes to the richest Asian lands and empires from European rivals, or the finding of new routes. Adam Smith proposed that a rising nation’s surpluses must then be “sent abroad and exchanged for something of which there is a demand at home.”⁶⁸ Demand drove exploration, wars, and the establishment of trade ports. By 1776 the British East India Company’s trade with Canton, only one port in glorious China, was surpassing all the trade of all the Indian ports on the Arabian and China seas combined. The rapacious quest for trade advantages and the taste for tea and other refinements became ways of measuring a nation’s greatness and a people’s cultural sense of entitlement.⁶⁹

Gouverneur Morris’s words carried meanings that were fundamental to the way in which patrician Americans understood and assessed themselves, their propertyless brethren, and all people, ideas, and things related to China, the “Indies,” and other parts of Asia. In actuality, Morris was articulating a complex set of socioeconomic exchanges. The foreign exchange of goods between individuals, peoples, and nations was understood within the daily domestic negotiation of social relationships. Those wanting upward mobility and more access to the “baubles of Britain” and the luxuries of China pressed for a loosening of prior elite controls. At the same time, revolutionaries sought to reestablish a society of order and deference. Both those in favor of and critical of the republican court and those in favor of and critical of republican simplicity implicated Chinese goods and ideas in some way

or another. Desired Chinese and Chinese-style luxury goods and ideas, imbued with symbolic meanings, were integral to the formulation of a new American individual and nation—an identity to be further reconstituted in the process of exchange itself. Before the Revolution, these beloved things became part of the driving force for social, political, and economic change. After the Revolution, such expectations propelled the consumer republic to seek its own trade routes. The solution to postwar malaise would be to trade directly with China.

The question of what China wanted was a key to early American wealth. The question of how China became wealthy was a key to how cultural nationalists formed their mythos of American destiny. Modernity was born of this new civilization, rising phoenixlike from the ashes of “old” despotic civilizations.

CHAPTER 2

What Does China Want?

WRITING AT THE Revolutionary War's end in 1783, Samuel Shaw, the secretary of the Society of the Cincinnati, lamented the national plight: “Is America prepared for the reception of the long wished for blessing? What system has she adequate to the government and prosperity of her rising empire?”¹ The scramble of individual self-interest severely tested republican virtue.

The nation confronted enormous challenges. As historian William A. Williams has pointed out, “Suddenly outside the British Empire, the thirteen free American states faced fundamental problems and clashing alternatives. Each could go their own way . . . [or] join close neighbors in a largely independent regional federation, compromise to form a stronger confederation, or create a new imperial system.”² How could a poor nation, victorious in defeating a great empire, now develop its own vision of wealth and destiny? Such was the challenge of the toast proffered on the eve of the British evacuation: “May an uninterrupted commerce soon repair the ravages of war!” Largely in response to these questions, the voyage of the *Empress of China*—America's first ship to trade with China—signaled the nation's confidence in international trade as the key to prosperity. This voyage, this “landmark in the history of American commerce,” initiated the rise of New York City as the major port of the nation, and the rise of the nation as a global maritime power.³

Once direct trade and its accompanying interactions had begun, unexpected paradoxes emerged. The closer Americans got to real Chinese, dispelling their imagined “Orient,” the more their respect for and emulation of Chinese civilization diminished. Americans believed that the creed of life, liberty, and happiness justified demands for “free” trade, and having over-

come British controls, they decried China's regulation of its trade and ports as "despotism." The confident revolutionary nation and the power it had broken with found a common antagonist in an "oriental" empire resisting the "Occident." Directly engaging China and the Chinese forever complicated America's occidental identity.

The Scramble

John Ledyard, celebrated by maritime historian P. C. F. Smith as a sort of Johnny Appleseed of oriental trade goods, believed that he had all the answers to the nation's questions.⁴ Ledyard traveled through the Pacific and learned what goods Chinese merchants wanted to trade and how to use that knowledge to the advantage of U.S. merchants.

Ledyard was one of two Americans who served with British captain James Cook during his explorations from 1776 to 1779. Searching for a quicker passage to Asia, Cook and his crew sailed the uncharted stretches of the Alaska-Pacific Northwest-California coastline, encountering Indians and "Asiatics," Russians and "Equisimauxs," who were engaged in the trade of otter and other skins. Ledyard was part of the "discovery" of what were to be called the Sandwich Islands (Hawai'i). Upon arriving in the Portuguese colony of Macao, the crew caught glimpses of the vast emporium of coveted goods Chinese artisans produced for the world market and discovered firsthand that Chinese merchants were willing to pay twice as much for furs as buyers in Kamchatka.⁵

In 1783 Ledyard rushed to rewrite and publish his journal of the voyage, *A Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage to the Pacific Ocean, and in Quest of a North-West Passage between Asia and America, Performed in the Years 1776, 1777, 1778, and 1779 (1783)*. It was the first book published in the United States to describe the people, places, and resources of the Pacific, thus marking the Americanization of direct Western knowledge of the Pacific world. Besides documenting the potential for the Pacific Northwest-China fur trade, Ledyard also expressed an unabashed sense of occidental destiny, his preface confidently asserting, "The following voyage among many others it is presumed will frame the praises of the civilized and enlightened world; the object was noble, it was gloriously concluded, and terminated happily."⁶ The book, however, was just the beginning of Ledyard's designs; he planned to fit out a suitable vessel to the Pacific Northwest coast from the Atlantic Northeast to purchase fur pelts for trade with China.⁷

Ledyard's vision interested a number of men associated with the Revolution, notably Robert Morris. Morris, in association with Daniel Parker and Company—comprised of the transplanted New England speculator Daniel Parker, the French entrepreneur John Holker, the influential New Yorker William Duer, and other "sundry merchants of Boston"—formed what one interested investor immodestly called "the American India Company": a privately owned version of the European East Indies companies.⁸ The "mad, romantic, dreaming Ledyard" thought he had found his financier, but he would soon discover, at great personal expense, the ruthless ethics that would become typical of the emergent trade.⁹ Morris used Ledyard's ideas for the China trade but backed off promises he had made regarding Ledyard's involvement. Ledyard left for France, hoping to find a backer there. Proud, persistent, and a failure, he later walked across Siberia, forever searching for his quick route to China, and exited from the historical stage.¹⁰

For Robert Morris, Ledyard's scheme coincided with the idea proposed by a close associate two years before. John Holker, who had key connections to such individuals as the French foreign minister, urged his sometime partner and boss Morris to form an American-style East Indies company. Seeking an alliance with the French in their intensifying rivalry with the British Empire, Holker believed that their mutual antipathy to England would make them a powerful challenger.¹¹ William Duer, John Holker, Daniel Parker, and Robert Morris would become the savvy merchant group behind the *Empress*. Robert Morris was the most important of the group. By 1781 he was acknowledged as the preeminent businessman in America, and as such he was appointed to the position of superintendent of finance in the federal government. By 1783 Morris was growing increasingly weary of his public position; the China trade represented a chance to reenter private business. He made this move with great caution and secrecy.¹² Given Morris's heavy governmental responsibilities and public criticism of profiteering, he had to be extremely careful in his business dealings.

Holker had come to the United States in 1778. His British émigré father ran a textile mill in Rouen, and several important French companies commissioned Holker to represent them. In Philadelphia he became the official buying agent of the Royal French Marine and the French consul-general of Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York. Because of conflicting government and private interests, he was removed from both these positions. He had also entered into partnership with Morris on commodity speculation. Historian Clarence Ver Steeg has estimated that Holker's extensive

activities in shipping, privateering, commission business, lands, and speculation in securities made him one of the leading business figures of the time.¹³

William Duer—English-born and married to Lady Kitty Duer—had inherited a share of his father's extensive plantations in Antigua and Dominica. He also served as Lord Clive's aide-de-camp in colonized India and had been a delegate from New York to the Continental Congress. New York and national businessmen perceived Duer to be a leading light, even after he became embroiled in scandal. His pecuniary interests extended from New England to Pennsylvania; he owned a distillery, equipped the troops, speculated on land, and bought up New York State securities.¹⁴

The "American India company" plan was to have as many as six ships: two would trade with Europe, two would sail directly for Canton via the tried-and-true European route eastward around the Cape of Good Hope, and the last two would follow the more treacherous westward Ledyard route around Cape Horn, one traveling to the Pacific Northwest coast and the other to French Polynesia. Those ships would then go on to China with their cargo of pelts and other tradable goods. The men had to scale back their grand plans within a matter of months, however, and the fleet was reduced to two ships. Vaingloriously, one ship was christened the *Empress of China* and the other, the *Emperor of China*.¹⁵

Robert Morris invested his profits from the last days of the war in the China venture.¹⁶ Already involved in a business relationship with Holker while superintendent of finance, Morris appointed his French partner agent of marine. Holker later had to resign because of direct conflicts of interest.¹⁷ William Duer was to serve as the supercargo on the westbound ship. But Duer was wary of Parker. Writing to John Holker, Duer confided, "I must, my dear Freind, Confess to you that the Treatment I have received from some of the Parties makes me Undertake the Voyage with rather a heavy heart." Holker counseled him "to Sacrifice [his] Interests"—advice of classic republican proportions.¹⁸ Duer, claiming poor health, withdrew as supercargo.

Parker was unable to produce the promised Boston investors and, claiming that he had to advance large sums of his own money, asked all partners to invest more. Duer questioned Parker's honesty. Holker risked drawing bills from one of his prestigious French merchant-banking firm connections, who refused to market and insure the bills. Morris appears to have transferred U.S. government funds into his private account to cover his

share of the investment.¹⁹ Without consulting his partners, Parker hired Society of the Cincinnati secretary Samuel Shaw to serve as supercargo and further sweetened the deal by suggesting that once they were in Canton, Shaw could load a second ship for his private gain. Shaw agreed to serve, providing he could hire his friend and fellow society member Thomas Randall to serve as second supercargo. Over Parker's objections, the others hired John Green as captain.²⁰

The question arose, What does China want? Deciding not to undertake the risky Pacific Northwest venture proposed by Ledyard, the partners had to come up with a prized commodity other than furs for the China trade. The young nation had yet to manufacture anything the Chinese gentry would find desirable. Having plentiful natural resources and foodstuff industries of its own to draw upon, China had no need for American trade staples like salt fish, rum, flour, barrel staves, or lumber. Silver and gold specie were always valued by Chinese merchants but were scarce in post-war America. But to the wonderment and pecuniary delight of the French, Dutch, British, and now the American traders in North America, the Chinese wanted ginseng (*rensheng*) enough to trade their finest teas, spices, porcelains, silks, and other manufactured goods for it. Why the Chinese placed so much value on these fleshy tubers was not evident to European Americans. Its curative powers were unknown to the British and Continental medical traditions. Ginseng was an exchange item par excellence. It was a rare and highly valued medicinal food in China but in the United States was considered to be useless. Even though the Iroquois had used the root, it was never adopted by Anglo-Dutch-American medical or folk medical practice. The root grew in China but was subject, like salt and other items, to imperial monopoly, thus making the item prohibitively expensive. As part of a folk medicine and philosophic tradition of nutritional and spiritual well-being, it was a highly sought after preventive and restorative medicine, believed capable of treating cancers, rheumatism, diabetes, sexual dysfunction, and aging.²¹

The plant grew wild up and down the Atlantic coast, in the foothills of the Adirondacks down through the Appalachians. Father Joseph Francis Lafitau, a French missionary among the Iroquois, was in 1717 the first European to note its presence. Heeding the information that the Chinese valued this root, he searched for it in North America. After several months he came upon the plant, pulled it out of the ground, and showed it to an Iroquois he had hired to help him look. She confirmed it as a known medicinal plant. In

three years' time a company was established to gather, clean, and dry the root and ship it through France for trade with China.²² For European Americans and Indians living and operating in these foothill regions, ginseng became a reliable commodity to exchange with itinerant traders for needed goods. Once the China market opened up, male and female "sang diggers" of all ages and groups began digging for the root.

The extant letter and logbook of a Major Jelles Fonda, a self-described "Indian trader," offers an example of how the ginseng trade operated in New York. Writing from Caughnawaga in September 1774, Fonda told of being asked to buy ten thousand pounds of the root at two shillings a pound. His "Indian Book" log, covering 1762–76, recorded the receipt of ginseng for large quantities of rum and, interestingly enough, quantities of Chinese tea and porcelains for Indian and Dutch gatherers. "Christie Drunken Waries Daughter" (a name that reflected Fonda's biases) traded for a teapot in 1769. "Lydia, White Mouthed Brant's Wife," traded for a half-pound of tea and four cups and saucers later that same year, and more in the following months. Similarly, in 1800 Barent Sanders, his brother, and "a negro man named Jack" (a driver who was presumably a slave) traveled the Mohawk Valley near Albany to buy the root. Sanders's journal was grandly titled "Memorandum of the Proceedings of Barent Sanders respecting a journey and abode among the Indians to manufacture Ginseng Roots." In it he describes purchasing the roots by bushel measurements and hiring "squaws" to clean and brush the roots till they "began to shiny."²³ These examples suggest that the desire for tea and a proper cup reached far beyond the striving middle class of the metropolis.

The partners recruited Dr. Robert Johnston of Philadelphia to trade for the root in Pennsylvania. Johnston had served as a surgeon during the war and was a trusted member of the Society of the Cincinnati. He would also eventually sail on the *Empress* as the ship's surgeon. On August 28, 1783, while Ledyard was still negotiating with Robert Morris, Parker had placed an order with Philadelphia merchants Turnbull, Marmie, and Company for a huge amount, eventually numbering some two million roots. On September 3 Johnston received an advance to begin his search in the Appalachian hinterlands of western Pennsylvania and Virginia. After months of a grueling traveling schedule and constant problems with receiving sufficient cash to pay for his commitments, Johnston gathered more than thirty tons of the root that Turnbull, Marmie, and Company had shipped to New York. He paid anywhere from three shillings to five shillings per pound. Daniel Parker op-

timistically predicted that the *Empress* would arrive to "a great market" well before the European ships and garner \$15 a pound. According to the *Chinese Repository*, traders made as much as 500–600 percent profit on the ginseng.²⁴

The Empress of China

The black hull of a 360-ton Boston-made ship sat low in its berth, creaking and rolling as the sea pulled at its hemp moorings. Its forty-two-man crew had been ready to cast off and unfurl the ship's three sails for the last month. The cargo hold was packed with Spanish silver coins and barrels containing 57,687 pounds of ginseng. In all, a fortune was invested in this speculative venture. It had cost the partners \$120,000, an amount that would have purchased twenty-four thousand acres of prime land.²⁵

After months of planning for the maiden voyage, everything and everyone was finally prepared—all, that is, except whatever passed under the aegis of providence. It was the coldest winter in living memory; New York Harbor, chosen because of its deep all-weather egress, was frozen solid.²⁶ Further delay would mean financial disaster. In a detailed letter of instructions to Captain Green, the owners of the *Empress* expressed their concern: "It being of very great Consequence to arrive in Canton before any other Vessel which can go from Europe with fresh Ginseng, every attention has been paid, as you know, to procure a Ship particularly calculated, both for fast sailing and to encounter rough Weather."²⁷ This ship was now competing with those of powerful European empires. Yet the severity of the winter made even revolutionaries who had defeated the might of King George wait anxiously. Major Shaw knew from his artillery command in the Continental Army that timing was essential for the well-being of this impoverished fledgling republic. Battles with the king's banditti had been lost through inattention to duty and uncontrollable circumstances. And now, only a year after he had put away his officer's uniform, sword, and laced hat, a month, a week, a day, could still make all the difference between success and failure for his employers.

Shaw's journal entries provide some insight into the pressures experienced by these gentleman revolutionaries and the significance of their venture. Having reached maturity with the expectation of pecuniary rewards and success in business, Shaw was left feeling impoverished by his eight years of service in the Continental Army. His letters regularly lamented his

inability to keep up the necessities and appearances of his office. At one point he asked that half a dozen shirts and "cravats" be sent to him. On another date he expressed his worries over losing his horse in battle. The loss of a horse would diminish his authority, and it would take two years of military pay to replace the creature. While lamenting the "decay of public virtue" and increase in "avarice," he confided his innermost frustrations to a close friend: "If it did not look too much like self-applause, I might say that I engaged in the cause of my country from the purest motives. However, be this as it may, my continuance in it has brought me to poverty and rags; and, had I fortune of my own, I should glory in persevering, though it should occasion a sacrifice of the last penny."²⁸ Shaw was hardly impoverished compared with the majority of Americans with lesser family means, but his memory of wealth produced an acute sense of loss.

Shaw, like so many others of the revolutionary generation, had high hopes for the China trade. In a letter to his brother he wrote, "I shall sail for China by the 15th of January, from New York. The terms on which I go promise something clever, and I hope to shake you by the hand in two years. . . . If Heaven prospers my present undertaking, it will be in my power to help you [financially]."²⁹ The voyage was seen as the means of raising Shaw and his family to their rightful societal status.

But the American venture into the China trade was riven by corruption and competing self-interests. Upon inspecting Parker's cargo just before the *Empress* set sail, Shaw discovered that \$2,300 worth of the declared \$20,000 silver specie was mysteriously missing. He was responsible, as the business agent, for the missing bullion. He confronted Parker with the problem, and Parker promised that he would supply the money before sailing, never amending the bill of lading. However, once the *Empress* was headed to China, Shaw discovered that Parker had never restored the missing silver specie. At the same time, Parker's partners were pressing him to pay a growing number of creditors large and small, American and French. Their honor impugned, Duer took action. He filed suit for \$150,000 and sought Parker's arrest with \$20,000 bail. After dissolving Daniel Parker and Company, his partners pressed him to open his account books, whereupon they discovered that he had consistently falsified his entries; he had diverted nearly \$200,000 to his personal accounts. In July 1784 Parker fled to London, Amsterdam, and Paris, not to be seen again.³⁰

Upon learning of Parker's deceptions, Holker attempted to sell his share

of the cargo's profits even before the ship's return. This action precipitated a serious breach in his longstanding friendship with William Duer. Holker reported, bitterly, "I have mortgaged my personal Estate: & all these misfortunes happen me through your introducing to me D.P. as a worthy Character." The fractured relationship between Holker and Duer revealed the strains placed upon personal and collegial bonds by the market society. Holker continued, "In this situation you'll talk of engagements of honour, when I am honorably pledging every farthing in the world for the Company's debts, which I did not Contract, at the very time that you are so very largely in debt to me Personally, for heavy sums." Holker warned Duer that he needed some financial support, "if you sincerely wish to have any claim to my Esteem or friendship."³¹

Captain Green had his own challenges. British navigation restrictions had made it illegal for colonial subjects to engage in international trade, and few colonials had yet had the opportunity to visit the fantastic "Cathay" Marco Polo had written about. Many were not certain what to call the distant civilization. The generic term *Indies* had been in use among Westerners since the fifteenth century and loosely denoted "a region or place yielding great wealth or to which profitable voyages may be made." In 1776 Abbé Raynal defined the East Indies as including "all regions beyond the Arabian Sea and the kingdom of Persia." Mixing names and places, Captain Green labeled the flyleaf of his seagoing logbook "A Jurnal of An Intended Voyage on Board the Ship Empress of China Bound from New York to Canton In India."³²

For a sea captain who had never ventured beyond the Anglo-American corridor, Green's sailing directions were typically nonspecific. They were to arrive in Canton, with the aid of only a roughly drawn map, navigational instruments, and the following instructions: "You will make all expedition from New York to the Cape de Verde Islands . . . thence Eastward & Northward to the Island of Clote, thence to the Island of Java . . . thence thro' the Straights of Sunda to Macao, the Charts off that Coast with Dunns directions, herewith delivered to you, will afford usefull matter of instruction on the Subject."³³ With no previous direct experience, the venture moved ahead on desire and hope.

Finally, after fortnights of delays, the temperature gradually rose. The ice clogging the Narrows through which all ships sailed in and out of New York Harbor began to break. On February 22, 1784, as the ship *Edward*

cleared New York for London with the ratification of the Treaty of Paris and as George Washington celebrated his fifty-second birthday, the *Empress of China* sailed out of the port of New York. The ship enjoyed a rousing salute at Fort George and sailed past Sandy Hook into the Atlantic Ocean.

Oblivious to all the internal intrigue of the investors and the crew, commercial newspapers of the northern Atlantic ports were brimming with hope. The adjectives *youthfulness*, *intelligence*, *optimism*, and *vigor* that were used to describe the crew also clearly expressed the way in which journalists wanted to imagine the new nation. Besides any diplomatic activity the *Empress* would be engaging in, metaphorically the ship and its crew became closely identified with the fragile hopes of and for the country and its people. The *New York Packet*, published by a fervent supporter of Hamilton-style Federalism, cheerily reported:

Yesterday morning several vessels left the Wharves. . . . Among others was the *Empress of China*. The morning being pleasant drew a large party of gentlemen to the Battery. . . . All hearts seemed glad, contemplating the new source of riches that may arise to this city, from a trade to the East-Indies; and all joined their wishes for the success of the *Empress of China*, with thanks to the concerned who thus early and nobly stood forth the friends of commerce and their country.³⁴

Like Samuel Shaw and Robert Morris, the spectators hoped for an outcome that would combine what was good for the nation and what was good for their private interests as gentrified merchants.

Philip Freneau, patriotic poet and journalist, celebrated the departure of the *Empress* with an ode to "eastern gems":

With clearance from BELLONA won
She spread her wings to meet the Sun,
Those golden regions to explore
Where George forbade to sail before. . . .

To countries plac'd in burning climes
And islands of remotest times
She now her eager course explores,
And soon shall greet Chinesian shores,

From thence their fragrant TEAS to bring
Without the leave of Britain's king;
And PORCELAIN WARE, enchas'd in gold,
The product of that finer mould.

Thus commerce to our world conveys
All that the varying taste can please:
For us, the Indian looms are free,
And JAVA strips her spicy TREE.³⁵

A sense of liberation animates this poem. The desire to trade "where [King] George forbade" represented a type of maritime right many Americans had fought for. Further, the freedom to trade enabled Americans to indulge their taste for luxuries. American liberation became integrally tied to free trade and the possession of Chinese goods.

Transacting Cultures

The American foray into the China trade also produced a series of unanticipated consequences. In New York the business venture launched by members of the Society of the Cincinnati was plagued from the start by corruption and self-interest. In this new nation, relationships of deference and reciprocal responsibility were in constant flux. In Canton, by contrast, as Shaw discovered, American traders and missionaries found common cause with their former enemy Great Britain, among other European counterparts. Commercial desires united them. The exchange chains of the China trade linked people who were totally foreign to one another, making partners of former enemies and enemies of former partners. Having established the fact of political independence, patrician Americans' postcolonial experience in China was to remind them just how British and how European they truly were. Ultimately driven by the pursuit of luxuries and gain, these Americans located their allegiances with an occidental identity now increasingly juxtaposed against and not emulating the Orient.

Upon the *Empress's* arrival in the Portuguese colony of Macao, Samuel Shaw discovered a sociable community of European "gentleman" traders and military who welcomed the Americans. He specifically noted how cordial even the British merchants were. Indeed, one British officer visited "to welcome your flag to this part of the world." This camaraderie between Europeans and Americans arose, in part, from their common challenge of maximizing their trade interests with Chinese hong merchants. Just as significant, however, a European cosmopolitan patrician culture pervaded the settlement, bringing cultural harmony to trade rivals. Europeans and Americans exchanged dinners, visits, gifts. Henceforth, Americans became members of a convivial, albeit competitive, club.³⁶

American and Chinese merchants necessarily established barter rates and gift exchanges to conduct business. In this bargaining process Shaw found common sentiment with his competitors. Shaw echoed other European traders on the shrewd "knavery of the Chinese," pointing out how "the small dealers, almost universally, are rogues" who "will not scruple to offer one third of what is demanded for merchandise."³⁷ By nature the bartering of very different goods required a process of balancing subjective and uneven desires. Shaw regaled readers of his memoirs with one bargaining session in which the Chinese merchant communicated in what Shaw clearly cast as a childish, "pidgin" English, foreshadowing comic routines that would later appear on the New York stage:

One of them offered me for an article less than one half the price at which I valued it, and would come day after day and make the same offer. I treated him politely every time, and adhered to my first demand, which he finally complied. After the bargain was settled,—"you are not Englishman?" said he. "No." "But you speak English word, and when you first come, I no can tell difference; but now I understand very well. When I speak Englishman his price, he say, 'So much,—take it,—let alone.' I tell him, 'No, my friend, I give you so much.' He look at me,—'Go to hell, you damned rascal; what! you come here,—set a price my goods?' Truly, Massa Typan, I see very well you no hap Englishman. All China-man very much love your country."

These lowly comical "rogues" were sharply differentiated from the elite "merchants of the co-haong" who Shaw and others believed were "as respectable a set of men as are commonly found in other parts of the world."³⁸ In the Anglo-American storytelling imagination of extreme characterizations, Shaw found two types of Chinese merchants: the lowly trickster Chinaman and the refined merchant gentleman, whom he called a "mandarin," adept at Western ways.³⁹

As was true with the European traders, a certain amount of socializing existed between the hong merchants and the Europeans; they exchanged niceties and gifts. Given the frequent episodes of indebtedness and bankruptcy experienced by Chinese and European merchants alike, some genuine acts of friendship did occur. For example, the editor of the New York-based *Merchant's Magazine*, Freeman Hunt, featured the story of a Chinese merchant helping his European brethren. Extraordinarily, the merchant forgave an English trader an \$870,000 debt! Furthermore, upon learning of the trader's death, he donated money to the man's two surviving children.⁴⁰

The voyage of the *Empress of China* did not simply represent the ex-

change of material goods; it also initiated the establishment of relationships between peoples of starkly contrasting cultures and sociohistorical systems. The tea pickers in China traded their teas to river traders, who transported the processed leaves to urban-based merchant middlemen, who sold their selected teas to one of a few hong merchants in Canton designated by the emperor to trade with Westerners. Likewise, the trading of ginseng linked thousands of people living on the peripheries of the Atlantic Northeast coast to the ports in which these processed roots were traded. In this sense, the roots were more than a simple object for trade; they came to embody a series of human relations and hidden labor in the "manufacturing" of the root. As with porcelains and teas, the value of this good, though fixed during any given transaction, was highly subjective and variable. Indians and "frontier" European American settlers harvested it, processed it, and sold it; itinerant peddlers traded it for goods and sold it to port-based merchants who bought it wholesale and then sold it for often spectacular profits. Each exchange in this chain brokered very different expectations and desires. American sang diggers and Chinese tea pickers now depended on this international process of exchange for subsistence.

However, any transactions between one individual at one end of the chain and another person at the other end were brokered by port-city merchants. These translocal social relationships offered the possibility of cross-cultural contact, communication, and understanding. Yet such interactions were necessarily limited by capitalist trade relations. Merchant traders in Canton and now New York controlled these global interactions and played a critical role in negotiating cross-cultural desires into commodifiable exchanges. Items seemed rarer when they assumed a new identity as long-distance trade goods. Prolonging the appearance of rarity depended on the ability of the exporting party to maintain a monopoly of knowledge about the item; in this period, control was held at the port of trade.

With the voyage of the *Empress*, what had been a peripheral colonial outpost became a hub of mercantile commercial capitalism. The ambitions of New York's port merchants necessarily implicated the people and development of the valleys and frontiers of the Hudson River. Ginseng, for the moment, became a cash crop for the China trade. Though powerful in the new nation, American port-city traders were still relatively powerless in Canton. The *Empress* partners had to pull their limited resources together and find common cause in this vulnerable first venture. Paradoxically, once the *Empress* had been launched, the cherished bonds that had made the rev-

olution possible frayed to a breaking point. The voyage of the *Empress* initiated direct U.S. involvement with China, a continuous cross-cultural process of interaction against which Western social, economic, and political values were constantly measured and contrasted.

American merchants came to form two parallel sets of allegiances, split along class and cultural lines, one bonding elite Chinese and American merchants, and the other bonding eager and often frustrated Western traders negotiating the Chinese system. Despite the camaraderie, power divided along a West-East axis of the balance of trade. The Chinese government constantly thwarted Western traders by limiting access to the goods they desired. Western traders felt manipulated and subject to tyrannical control and wanted more flexibility. Chinese officials confined Westerners to an international trading area and insisted on their adherence to Chinese customs and laws.⁴¹

Disdain and Deception

From the inaugural voyage of the *Empress*, returning American traders began to communicate a dramatically different representation of China from that of Jefferson. The emperor's control of all foreign trade infuriated merchants wanting access to the China market. The patrician orientalism of admiration began to shift toward disdain. "Their government is admirably well adapted to make them hypocrites and knaves," declaimed Erasmus Doolittle, a colonial merchant. Amasa Delano, another merchant and perhaps the one most sympathetic to the Chinese government, reported that there was "only one law in China, which will be condemned by the people of countries where there is more freedom enjoyed." According to historian Stuart Creighton Miller, who studied scores of traders' logbooks, "In the eyes of these traders, China was a huge pecking order in which each official terrorized those under him, which resulted in cowardice, corruption, venality, and deceit." "Despotism" was an "impure source from whence the black stream of vice flows to infect the whole nation."⁴²

In the American context "despotism" came to represent the opposite of the bourgeois individual ideal as articulated by Locke and Adam Smith. Slavish behavior, attributed to any outside limits imposed upon one's freedom in the liberal marketplace, was automatically thought to be a sign of despotism. Any sense of social responsibility was thought to be voluntary and to emanate from the free, rational, male individual. Locke emphasized

how different people from different environments and ways of life were made lazy: "Some . . . misemploy their power of Assent, by lazily enslaving their Minds, to the Dictates and Dominion of others, in Doctrines, which it is their duty to carefully examine; and not blindly, with an implicit faith, to swallow."⁴³ Despots were de facto the enslavers who controlled their subjects, happy or unhappy, whether by tradition, sacred tests, or the raw exercise of violence. Male despotic rule over women was perceived to be tolerated "without resentment."⁴⁴ And it remained an open question whether those who had been enslaved were capable of becoming free and self-possessed.⁴⁵ Shaw's first encounter with real Chinese in 1784 foreshadowed the contradictory but ultimately dehumanized way in which Chinese immigrants would be adjudged in New York and the nation in the following century.

Fifteen months after the *Empress* left the Narrows of New York Harbor, the ship and crew returned to their home port to a thirteen-gun salute. New York newspapers wrote jubilantly about the ship's full cargo of highly prized goods. Teas, silks, nankeens, porcelains, fans, and other items were unloaded. Besides bringing fanciers of Chinese goods what they desired, the successful voyage swelled nationalist pride and optimism. Indeed, the one voyage out begot two shiploads in. Second supercargo Thomas Randall stayed behind to hire and load a second ship of Shaw's and Randall's private "privilege" goods, the *Pallas*, in which he would soon return.⁴⁶ The *Empress's* cargo made a modest (though satisfactory) 25–30 percent profit to its investors, but it immediately took on a broader significance. A May 1785 issue of the *New York News Dispatch* predicted that the *Empress's* return

presages a future happy period in our being able to dispense with that burdensome and unnecessary traffick, which hitherto we have carried on with Europe—to the great prejudice of our rising empire, and future happy prospects of solid greatness; And . . . whether or not, the ship's cargo be productive of those advantages to the owners . . . it will promote the welfare of the United States in general, by inspiring their citizens with emulation to equal, if not excell their mercantile rivals.⁴⁷

This trade represented a chance to compete on a global scale and an independent means to distinguish Anglo-Americans from their former colonizing motherland.

While the press heralded the *Empress's* return, Shaw immediately went about seeking a resolution to the problem of the missing specie. The acids of

economic individualism had already eaten away the bonds of republican solidarity, and now Shaw was to find himself doubly disgraced in the eyes of the remaining partners. Besides being angry at his passive complicity in Parker's deception, they were shocked to discover the agreement that had enabled Thomas Randall to return from China in a second ship, the *Pallas*, carrying an additional \$50,000 of private merchandise. Having hoped to corner the market with their own Chinese goods, they couldn't believe that their own supercargoes had undercut their monopoly. They filed suit against Shaw and Randall. Shaw filed suit against Holker for his 10 percent of the cargo. Years of legal and court battles postponed any resolution. Finally, in 1791, Shaw managed to have Parker sign a letter admitting his deception. Parker also agreed to pay back Holker and the other partners, but as late as 1813, Parker had still not paid his debt.⁴⁸

The hoped-for solidarity of the postwar republican aristocracy, embodied by the Society of the Cincinnati, was not easily convertible to peacetime joint ventures. In contrast to a European aristocratic past of hierarchical, customary social relationships and government-sponsored trading companies, human relations in postrevolutionary America were, at core, quite brittle and were increasingly mediated by market-driven advantage and power. Parker's deceptive sincerity enabled him to operate in the guise of an honorable man who could massively profit from the partnership. His faked ledger book had the power to mobilize scores of people, dissolve partnerships, and ruin friendships. In this commercial marketplace, power exercised under false pretenses could result in far-reaching effects. Parker's warning to Captain Green that "the Chinese are very great Rogues" begins to assume an ironic aspect. A comment that would later become a widely circulated stereotype about the Chinese was in fact a truer description of Daniel Parker himself.⁴⁹

Contact with the realities of Chinese society, economic policy, and politics had soured the Jeffersonian and Franklinesque admiration for China, but the passionate coveting of refined Chinese things continued unabated. American traders were unable to understand and accept Chinese differences or suspend their ethnocentric judgments. Their notions of a proper universal human being were defined by behavioral norms that disdained the cultural differences they encountered. And as these exemplars of the rising U.S. culture distanced themselves from these foreign "others," so too they differentiated themselves from the not so distant Anglo-American republican heritage of a strong governmental hand regulating economic activity.

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