

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EARLY AMERICAN IMAGES OF CHINA

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What follows is an attempt to raise some questions about the formation of early American images of China, to compare and contrast the three papers on this topic, and to relate the issues to some of the important developments in China and the United States. In other words, this essay is intended less as a discussion of the conclusions of these papers on their own terms than as an effort to put the whole question of bicultural images in the context of a larger, historical perspective.¹

What is reality and what is shadow? What is image? Like the meaning of a word that Humpty Dumpty told Alice ("It means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less"), an image is the result of an interaction between the viewer and the view, with the viewer usually in command. Each image is not a creature of pure fantasy but represents the effect of someone's experience, the "truth" of his perception. Yet too often we are captives of irrationality. We see one another through viewpoints shaped out of our experiences and expectations, our fears and our hopes. However fleeting, every image is still an encounter of some kind between the perceiver and

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¹ For a succinct historical survey of Sino-American relations, with particular emphasis on non-governmental activities, see Kwang-Ching Liu, *Americans and Chinese: A Historical Essay and a Bibliography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963). For a recent summary with special reference to political implications, see John K. Fairbank, *Chinese-American Interactions: A Historical Summary* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1975).

the perceived, one of that endless succession of interlocking observations that seem never quite tell the whole story.

From cultural, commercial, and religious perspectives, these papers have covered three major aspects of the formation of early American images of China from the colonial period to 1860. They represent well-balanced viewpoints and interests. Mr. Jonathan Goldstein stresses the role of Chinese decorative arts in *America*, Mr. Jacques M. Downs emphasizes the *Chinese* perspectives of the opium trade, and Mr. Murray A. Rubinstein focuses on the *mechanism* of transmitting missionary image from China to the United States and on the role of one individual who developed this mechanism. The three panelists also have different emphases. Culturally, Mr. Goldstein's concern is *influence*; commercially, Mr. Down's focus is *origin*; in the religious field, Mr. Rubinstein's emphasis is *process*.

Their approaches are similarly different. Mr. Downs uses the business records to support his central theme that the early American-China trade played a crucial role in forming American policy toward China. Drawing on widely scattered sources, including those of exhibition and archaeological discoveries, Mr. Goldstein convincingly demonstrates that Chinese decorative arts in American conveyed a romantic image up to the first half of the nineteenth century. During the second quarter of that century, however, American attitude toward China underwent a fundamental change, shifting from one of guarded admiration to one of contempt. In this and in related papers, Mr. Rubinstein, utilizing church archives and writings on mass media, argues cogently that the American missionaries played a leading part in bringing about such a change. He then painstakingly analyzes the mechanism and process of this change in attitudes by using theories of communications systems.

Indeed, the commercial relations can hardly be over emphasized. And it is evident even in today's U.S. foreign relations. In December 1978 President Jimmy Carter announced his decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, and this move was hardly motivated by commercial considerations. And yet soon after this announce-

ment was made, Pan American World Airways applied for a direct San Francisco-Peking flight, and Coca-Cola Company decided to establish a bottling factory in Shanghai. Secretary of the Treasury, William Michael Blumenthal, and Secretary of Commerce, Juanita M. Kreps, also made formal arrangements to visit China for business purposes.

These differences in emphasis and approach do not mean, however, that there is no common theme in these papers. Obviously, all of them deal with the formation of an American image of China, as our panel title suggests. But a closer look shows that this image was complex and amorphous. Admittedly, the overall image that the decorative arts of the old China trade conveyed to the American mind was one of romanticism, as Mr. Goldstein had demonstrated. Yet at the same time we can also detect certain elements of realism. The "Chinese Museum" of Philadelphia in the 1830's, for instance, included ten huge exhibit cases displaying life-size clay figures dressed in full costume representing scenes from everyday Chinese life: mandarins of rank, scholars in their study, ladies preparing their toilet, actors on a stage, a silk merchant in his shop, and agricultural laborers with a water buffalo pulling a plough. In order to enhance the vivid impression of his "China Retreat" in Pennsylvania at the end of the eighteenth century, the China trader Andrew Van Braam even employed eight Chinese to work in the establishment.² Thus, the influence was not a total "romantic vision" after all, for side by side with romanticism we also find plain realism.

The American traders' attitudes toward China were, as Mr. Downs has pointed out, very complicated. On the one hand, the ferocity of California mobs of the late nineteenth century may have originated in the disparaging words of early national China traders; on the other hand, Mr. Downs also finds that the American traders often had considerable respect for Chin-

² Jonathan Goldstein, "The Ideal Illusion: The Decorative Arts of the Old China Trade and Their Influence in America up to 1846," which is the first draft of his present paper.

ese culture and merchants. He then concludes, "I am not sure how to work this material into my interpretation. At best, it does not fit neatly." Similarly, in Mr. Rubinstein's paper and in his "The Northeastern Connection"* we can also detect the missionaries' ambivalent attitudes toward China. Members of the South China Missions sent home materials containing multiple images of China. In selecting them for dissemination, the Board of Missions demonstrated "the unusual mix of degradation and enlightenment," and "no one image of China emerged" in the pages of the *Missionary Herald*. Indeed, there existed at once many American images of China, and these images were often ambivalent and always complex. And they kept changing. Strictly speaking, there was no single American image of China, as the title of our panel may lead us to believe.

Another common theme of the three papers involves the driving force which helped to form the American images of China. Why were these images so illusive and far from representing reality? We know, thanks to Mr. Downs, that American merchants in China were quick to change their attitudes in order to maximize their profits. Other non-economic considerations, such as honor, patriotism, morality and legality, were by and large irrelevant. For example, when some American merchants stopped trading in opium, their attitudes toward the Chinese also changed. As Mr. Downs puts it, "the opium trade itself was a creator of attitudes."

In like manner, the way in which the Chinese decorative arts influenced American was motivated by money-making. As Mr. Goldstein has pointed out, much of the decorative arts, especially Chinese gardens and museums, performed essentially entertainment functions — for making money. While it is easy to understand the pecuniary motivation of the merchants who promoted the Chinese decorative arts in American and the old China traders whose sole aim in going to Canton was to make a fortune — "the business of Canton was business," as Mr.

*Murray A. Rubinstein, "The Northeastern Connection: American Board Missionaries and the Formation of American Opinion Toward China, 1830-1860" in *The Journal of the Institute of Modern History* (Nankang, 1980).

Downs puts it, — but how about the missionaries? Surprisingly, as Mr. Rubinstein has discussed, the American Board of Missions tried to raise money for missionary purposes by depicting the Chinese as perishing heathen.

Thus, it is clear that there existed a wide discrepancy between Chinese reality and American conception of it, and financial consideration played an important part in creating this discrepancy. Chinese reality was distorted romantically by the Chinese decorative arts in America. This was only natural, for who would be willing to pay his way to see poverty and misery in the entertainment-oriented Chinese gardens and museums in Boston and Philadelphia? Indeed, in today's United States, nowhere are the developing countries more romantically presented to the American public than one of the best attractions of the Disneyland, "It's a Small World."

Chinese reality was also distorted derogatorily. As Mr. Rubinstein has pointed out in this and in other essays the missionaries in China did not necessarily have a totally negative view of China. Indeed, they mentioned the beautiful Chinese landscape and its intelligent inhabitants. The missionaries occasionally even tried to be sympathetic. But it was the American Board who edited the missionaries' images of China and transmitted them to the American public. As a "gate-keeper," the Board chose to disseminate materials on China which were colorful and emotion provoking, and which often pictured the Chinese at their worst. The aim of the Board was to create a climate of interest in China as a missionary field, and the negative portrait of China could enhance fund-raising for it. The romantic distortion of China is understandable, for the purpose of business was to make money, whether in Canton or Philadelphia. But the derogatory distortion of China promoted by the religious institutions had a bit of historical irony. In theory, religion, in sharp contrast to commerce, should concern itself with the spiritual world. Yet the purposeful distortion of the American images of China by the American Board was motivated by money, the very symbol of materialism.

What is more, the American images of China were not affected by financial considerations alone, and we must examine it from a larger, historical perspective. After all, everyone tends to be culture bound. During the eighteenth century, thinkers of the Enlightenment lauded China for her secularism, enlightened despotism, and emphasis on reason and education. China was equally attractive to Gallicans, Deists, iconoclasts and physiocrats. China became an example and model even for Christians. It was in this intellectual milieu of sinophilism that the Americans formed, through Chinese decorative arts, the romantic and idealized image of China. Although the fascination with the exotic was partially rooted in the dissatisfaction with the exotic was partially rooted in the dissatisfaction this type of dissatisfaction from proper historical perspective.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, when the West was highly industrialized and dominated by such ideas as *laissez-faire*, rugged individualism and Darwin's evolutionary theories, China's social hierarchy, political absolutism, and lack of progress were criticized in the West. The predominant attitude was contemptuous, as testified by Condorcet, Herder, Hegel, and John Stuart Mill. Thus, the beginning of the nineteenth century saw a striking change in the Western attitude toward China. Under these circumstances, it was only natural that American image of China was shifted from one of guarded admiration to that of contempt.

At the same time, this change in attitude must also be related to some of the major religious-intellectual developments in the West, including the United States. The Protestant missionaries were generally narrow-minded and unimaginative. This was largely because the development of the Protestant China mission coincided with a period of conservatism in the history of Christianity in the West in general and in the United States in particular. This "Protestant crusade," as Professor Ray Allen Billington calls it, represented a swing away from the liberalism and Deism which had followed the American Revolution toward a rigid fundamentalism.³

No wonder, then, in sharp contrast to the humanism of the Jesuits, the American Protestant missionaries viewed the Chinese as perishing heathen. The Chinese were "children of darkness," condemned souls who could not muster sufficient determination to save themselves. For these Protestant missionaries in China, Confucianism was one of the "four great evils of paganism," and China was at best a "defective civilization."⁴ Some even went so far as to declare that the Chinese were Satan's conscious agents and that the devil invented the difficult Chinese language in order to prevent the prevalence of Christianity in China.⁵ It is indeed an unfortunate coincidence that among the "gatekeepers" of traders, diplomats, and missionaries, the missionaries had the worst image of China, and yet at the same time because of the totality and emotional quality of their criticism, coupled with the great efficiency in the dissemination of their views, the missionaries also had the greatest influence on the formation of American images of China.

This unfortunate situation was further complicated by the fact that a considerable number of Chinese laborers started to immigrate to the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. For their contribution to the early development of the American West, the Chinese deserved recognition and gratitude. Yet instead of laudatory remarks, one finds such popular stereotyped labels in American ascribed to the Chinese: "coolie labor," "tong wars," "opium dens," "highbinders," "yellow peril," and "unassimilable aliens." While the missionaries' derogatory distortion of China was unfortunate, their attitude was not the worst either. At least they endeavored to save the souls of the Chinese. For some Californians who were appalled at the number of the Chinese laborer-immigrants, however, the effort of the missionaries to christianize China

³ Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* (Chicago, 1964), p. 41.

⁴ The other three evils were Buddhism, Taoism, and opium smoking. Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (Berkeley, 1969), p. 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 70, 79.

was not necessary in the first place. A California attorney-general had this remark on record in print: "I believe that the Chinese have no souls to save, and if they have, that they are not worth the saving."⁶

Without denying the socio-economic reasons for such sinophobia, we must examine closely its roots in the social thought and intellectual controversies of the time. After all, anti-Chinese sentiment was not merely limited to Californians and organized labor, but was evident among leaders of the Catholics, the black and Irish communities, and the more radical groups. And many prominent easterners gave active support to the decision to exclude the Chinese. We must remember, then, that the Chinese arrived in the middle of the slavery controversy and were never able to shake the "coolie" label. The mid-nineteenth century was also a period in which a pseudo-scientific rationale for modern racism developed. American intellectuals in the 1850's were fervently debating whether the races of mankind had sprung from a single origin or diverse seeds. The fear of miscegenation and the germ theory of culture appear to have been important by-products of the controversy which helped to render the Chinese non-assimilable on biological grounds. For the sinophobes, their main task was to convince fellow Americans that the now familiar cultural threat of Chinese immigration outweighed any possible economic and religious gains to be derived from it. The warm glow of national pride that dominated the post-Civil War era made this task less difficult.⁷

Thus, the American images of China tell us far more about American than about China. For the Americans, their statements regarding China were more autobiographical than descriptive. The American missionaries did have a considerable impact on the American public, as Mr. Rubinstein has skillfully demonstrated, but I do not believe they were instrumental

⁶ Chang-tsu Wu, ed., *"Chink!" Anti-Chinese Prejudice in America* (New York, 1972), p. 3.

⁷ Miller, chapters 7 and 9.

in drastically changing the American conception of China. Actually, they only accelerated the tempo. In the same vein, although traders and news media played a part in the formation of new American images of China, as Mr. Goldstein has suggested, I think the role was only marginal. In other words, the change in attitude was more meaningful if we view it in a larger context.

What is more, the change in American images of China was not merely a reflection of the Western mind, for it also tells something about China. The rise and decline of the Ch'ing dynasty was an unmistakable testimony to the force of dynastic cycle. During the eighteenth century, the Chinese empire enjoyed unprecedented peace and prosperity. It was in this period of *pax sinica* that China produced a great variety of decorative arts whose quality was second to none. No wonder that it was in this prosperous period of the Ch'ing dynasty that the Chinese decorative arts had a favorable impression on the American mind. In this sense, such favorable impression embodied in all likelihood more realism than what we can find in Mr. Goldstein's paper. By the same token, American traders' image of China during the first several decades after their arrival in Canton in 1784 was probably more favorable than Professor Stuart Creighton Miller may wish to admit.⁸

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the Ch'ing dynasty's decline was clearly evident. What the American missionaries saw was a country besieged by economic distress, social disturbance, political corruption and spiritual degeneration. Under these circumstances, the earlier American romantic conception of China was changed to one of contempt. True, photography and news media played a role in bringing about realism of China to the American public, yet we must view this change in the context of Chinese dynastic cycle as well. In this

⁸ Miller argues that in the 1784-1840 period the majority of American China traders "regarded the Chinese as ridiculously clad, superstitious ridden, dishonest, crafty, cruel, and marginal members of the human race," Miller, p. 36. Based on my study of the American traders, however, I take exception to this strong conclusion.

connection, it is interesting to note that by the late nineteenth century, the American contemptuous image of China contrasted sharply to the American attitude of admiration toward Japan which had rapidly modernized.⁹

Thus, the American images of China – or any other country for that matter – were conditioned partly by the objective situation in China, and more importantly by the needs and experiences of Americans themselves. As time progressed, China appeared in different guises in the American consciousness. No wonder it is sometimes argued that the appropriate symbol of China is not dragon but the color-changing chameleon.¹⁰

All in all, the dynamic changes in the United States worked hand in hand with the dynastic cycle of the Ch'ing empire in bringing about the change in American images of China. There is a sense of historical tragedy in this change in attitude, for it was in exactly the same period when the United States experienced a phenomenal rise in power that China rapidly declined. Consequently, this change in image *per se* is not surprising; what is surprising is the speed and degree with which this change occurred. Indeed, bicultural images do not form in a vacuum, and we must examine them in the context a larger, historical perspective.

⁹ Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations* (New York, 1967), chapters 1 and 3.

¹⁰ Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization* (London, 1967), chapter 1.

美國早期對華看法

(摘要)

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這一組論美國早期對華看法的文章，原先是在一九七八年十二月二十八日美國歷史學會在舊金山舉行的年會中所宣讀的論文；其後由各作者修訂增補，送請美國研究發表。這一組論文，在時間上來說，包括了由十八世紀的殖民時代到十九世紀中葉的南北戰爭，是一段不算短的時期；就內容而論，牽涉到藝術、商業、和宗教各方面，可謂相當廣泛。

第一篇論文就藝術立論，檢討北美在十八世紀和十九世紀初葉對中國所持的浪漫主義式的態度，評估中國裝飾藝術（包括繪畫、瓷器、絲織品、建築、庭院設計等）對此一態度之形成，扮演何種角色。第二篇指出商業對美國外交政策之釐訂，有極其重要的作用。一般研究美國外交史的學者，多從官方資料入手；其實，商業方面的材料，也極為重要，尤以早期中美關係為然。第三篇討論美國在華傳教士在一八三〇年至一八六〇年間對其本國的影響。教會為了要便於在美國民間募款，乃將中國描繪成一黑暗的異教徒國度。此時美國對中國的看法，已從原先浪漫的而蛻變到悲憫的、甚至輕蔑的了。

在第四篇的評論中，我除了比較這三篇文章的異同之外，並指出此一態度的轉變和一般歷史發展趨勢之間的關係。我們知道，十八世紀的西方，受啓蒙思潮的薰陶，仰慕中國的現世主義（secularism）和理性主義，於是美國乃輕而易舉的經由中國裝飾藝術為媒介，對中國油然興起浪漫而理想的映象。迨十九世紀，歐美經工業革命的衝擊，自由經濟學說與社會達爾文主義，

風起雲湧；中國的政治獨裁和進步觀念之缺如，乃受到譏評。就宗教而言，美國由革命後自然神教（deism）漸變為狹義的保守主義。思潮方面，奴隸制度的爭論和所謂「科學的種族主義」的衍生，都使美國對華人的早期移民，抱着一種抗拒的態度。同時，滿清由十八世紀乾隆的盛世到十九世紀初葉嘉、道的式微，也使在華美人，耳目為之一變。此等歷史大勢，就美國對華映象之轉變而論，在在都有深遠的影響。至於美國大眾傳播工具的革新，例如新式報紙的風行和照像技術的應用等，倒是居於次要的地位了。