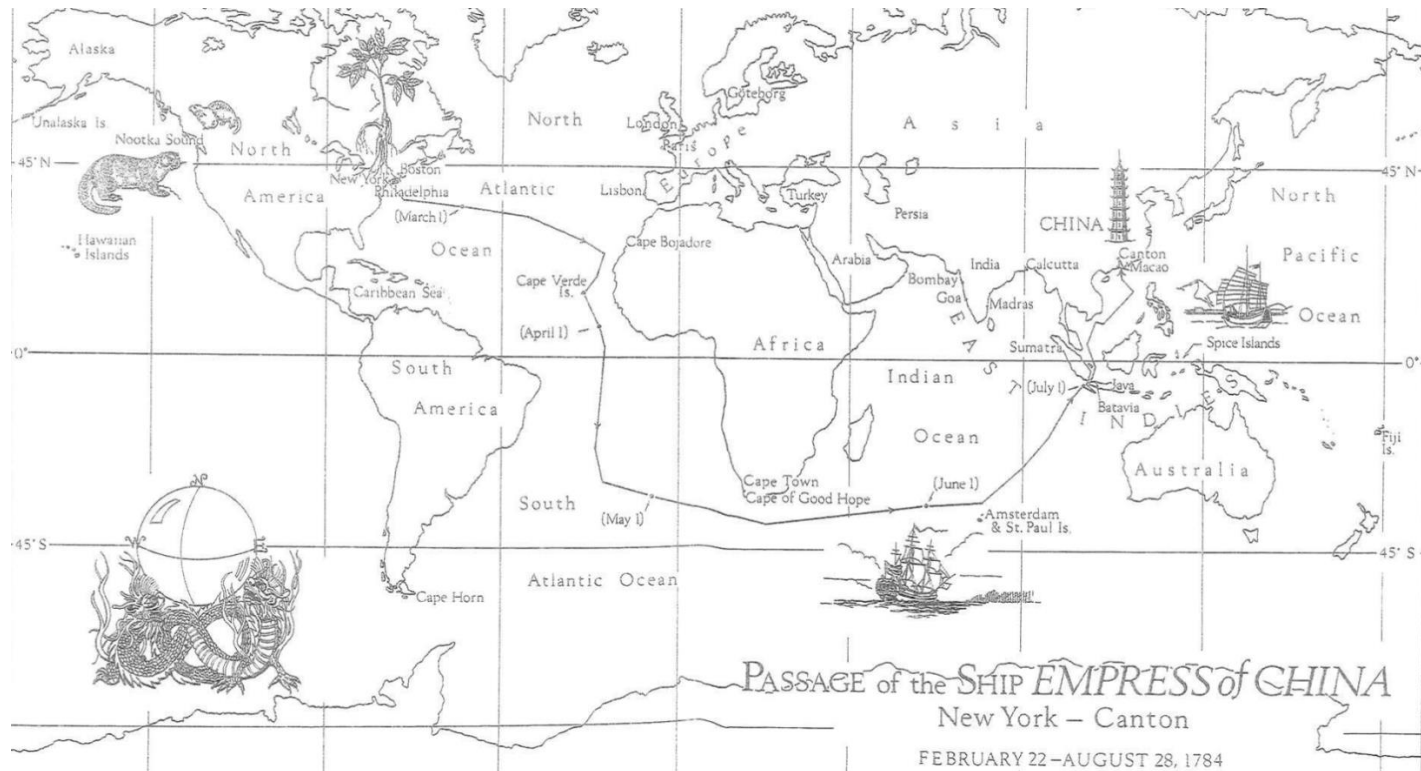


Voyage of the *Empress of China*:

Private and National Interests toward Foreign Policy in the Early United States

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Path of the United States ship *Empress of China* from New York to Canton, 1784.¹

¹Author unknown. *Passage of the Ship Empress of China New York - Canton February 22-August 28, 1784*. Scale not given. In Philip Chadwick Foster Smith. *The Empress of China*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Maritime Museum, 1984, back cover.

When the American ship *Empress of China* sailed out of New York City's harbor on February 22, 1784 on a voyage to Canton, China, the moment would come to mark the historical beginning of ties between China and the United States, and the assertion of the United States' power as a sovereign nation. Yet this seemingly national endeavor occurred during the period of the Articles of Confederation, in which the loyalties of citizens in the United States appear to have been highly fragmented. The actual facts of the voyage, and the results of the trade venture, are more complicated than what people at the time of the voyage and historians in the contemporary era have presented the event. The perceived nobility of the mission only came in time, and the effect of the voyage was not as large as some historians would suggest. Even so, the *Empress of China's* trip to China helped bring about further trade, making it a significant subject for inquiry. Furthermore, the event reflects deeper patterns within the development of America and the country's growing vision of a national future, as China was not simply a single destination, but a nexus that would link the United States with a diverse web of trade routes.

Although there are some indications of nationalistic intentions and government backing for the *Empress of China's* voyage, closer analysis indicates that the mission was ultimately for private profit. As a result, the lack of considerable profit in the venture limited the extent of American trade with China during the later years of the Articles of Confederation and the beginning of the United States of America. Even so, closer analysis reveals relatively widespread interest among Americans of Chinese culture and products, with China symbolizing a larger transpacific and Asian market. In reaction to British economic pressures and growing nationalism, the relative success of the *Empress of China* in beginning American trade with China further fueled America's involvement in international trade. This, therefore, explains the high level of public and government interest if not direct support for the voyage, and shows that

while the *Empress of China* individually appears to have had limited historic effect, it represented and encouraged national growth in economic and foreign affairs.

For much of the United States' history following the *Empress of China*'s voyage to Canton, there has been surprisingly little direct research into the *Empress*'s history, despite the clear role it had in America's trade. Certainly many books on America's international trade and politics, particularly those concerned with China, mentioned the *Empress* in passing, and emphasized the significance of its mission. Furthermore, most books covering American relations with China use 1784 as the starting point. The issue is that these histories only briefly note the *Empress* in a paragraph or page before moving forward with the historical narrative.² In fact, of the ships in this time period, the *Empress of China* is the one that has received the most attention, with other voyages only occasionally gaining direct notice. What is surprising is not that the *Empress of China* has not received adequate historical attention, but rather what has made it nevertheless the subject of historical inquiry. There have been many trade voyages throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but only rarely are individual voyages seen as important. Yet, the existing literature on the *Empress of China* reveals a higher degree of attention, one that deserves further investigation.

A few historians such as Philip Smith have written focused accounts of the *Empress* specifically, but usually the ship comes up in discussion of larger subjects. Some historians have been interested in the economic growth of the United States, and point to the *Empress of China* as an important stage in international commerce.³ Still more have pointed to the *Empress*'s

² Philip Chadwick Foster Smith, *The Empress of China*, xv.

³ Jane T. Merritt, "Tea Trade, Consumption, and the Republican Paradox in Prerevolutionary Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 128 (2004),

voyage as the beginning of America's warm ties with China.⁴ However, current studies challenge the previously rosy vision of America's "bond" with China by pointing out the prejudices and the notions of imperialism in the early interactions. In his 2003 history thesis, graduate student Min Wu argues that the *Empress* carried opium among its cargo, thus suggesting that the opium trade had earlier origins;⁵ he further argues that the imperialistic goals reflected national visions for the future. Such histories,⁶ often written by American scholars of Chinese descent, demonstrate not only changing views on ethnicity, but also the importance in understanding to what extent the *Empress* and other early voyages were individual ventures or national endeavors.

At first glance, the *Empress of China* can be seen to have embodied national support from both the US public and federal government. Public writings of the time portrayed the *Empress* as part of a larger, national movement that would bring wealth to the United States. In a commemorative poem about the successful expedition, poet Philip Freneau proudly wrote,

"No foreign tars are here allow'd
To mingle with her chosen crowd,
Who, when return'd, might, boasting, say,
They show'd our native oak the way."⁷

117-48; Thomas Etzold, ed., *Aspects of Sino-American Relations Since 1784* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1978); Jonathan Goldstein, *Philadelphia and the China Trade* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1978); Kariann Akemi Yokota, "Transatlantic and Transpacific Connections in Early American History," *Pacific Historical Review* 83 (2014): 204-19.

⁴ Berthold Laufer, "Sino-American Points of Contact," *Scientific Monthly* 34 (1932): 243; Foster Rhea Dulles, *The Old China Trade* 9[1930](New York: Ams Press, 1970); Francis Ross Carpenter, *The Old China Trade* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1976); Edward D. Graham, *American Ideas of a Special Relationship with China, 1784-1900* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988).

⁵ Min Wu, "The Kingdom of Darkness: China in the Rise of the American Empire, 1784-1844" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2003), 38.

⁶ Wu, "The Kingdom of Darkness"; Dong Wang, *The United States and China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

Freneau's words reflect a sense of national pride in the mission, with the emphasis on "our native oak" suggesting that the ship in fact served America as a whole. Indeed, many newspapers saw the voyage as something significant for the nation. The *Pennsylvania Packet* saw the ship as guided by "the hands of Providence, who have undertaken to extend the commerce of the United States of America to that distant, and to us unexplored, country."⁸ In this manner, the public viewed the *Empress* as not an independent merchant ship that happened to come from America, but rather as a ship that served to represent the United States in foreign affairs.

In addition, certain aspects of the voyage could suggest that the *Empress of China* in fact was operating as an official mission to China for the American government. The vessel departed on the birthday of George Washington, perhaps a coincidental occurrence but most likely as a symbolic gesture. As the ship sailed out of the harbor and passed the St. George garrison, "she [the *Empress*] fired, with great regularity, the United States salute, which was returned from the fort."⁹ The mutual salutes suggest a sense of official pride in the voyage, and that the ship was part of a larger action on the part of the United States. In addition, the crew of the *Empress* carried several documents obtained from Congress, ranging from the Declaration of Independence and official treaties to a letter from New York's governor.¹⁰ These facts together imply some degree of official support by the government for the voyage, making the *Empress* a national symbol. Later historians continued this assumption, with Magdalen Coughlin asserting

⁷ Philip Freneau, "On the First American Ship..." in *The Empress of China*, xiii.

⁸ *Pennsylvania Packet*, March 2, 1784.

⁹ *Independent Gazetteer*, February 28, 1784.

¹⁰ Daniel Parker to John Green, January 25, 1784, in *The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784*, ed. Elizabeth M. Nuxoll and Mary A. Gallagher (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 9:66.

that “the early hints of economic-political cooperation were evident.”¹¹

Furthermore, many of the key figures involved in the *Empress*'s voyage were historic patriots in the American cause. During the War of Independence, Captain John Green sailed many smuggling missions and raids against the British fleet.¹² Likewise, supercargo [manager of the ship's cargo] Samuel Shaw served as a major in the Revolutionary War, and George Washington wrote of him, “throughout the whole of his service, he has greatly distinguished himself in every thing which could entitle him to the character of an intelligent, active, and brave officer.”¹³ This leads Min Wu to argue in his dissertation that “Major Samuel Shaw was not a merchant, but a decorated war hero,”¹⁴ and suggest that his presence in the voyage highlights the national dimensions of the endeavor. Indeed, Shaw would come to represent in some ways the beginning of the American-Chinese connection, as not only do his journals remain the main source of information on the voyage, he eventually became the first American consul to China. Also, Green, Shaw, and five other members of the crew belonged to the Society of the Cincinnati, which supported the growth and independence of the United States.¹⁵ When combined, these facts appear to highlight a patriotic, government-backed vision behind the voyage.

Also of note among the individuals involved in the *Empress*'s voyage is Robert Morris,

¹¹ Magdalen Coughlin, “Commercial Foundations of Political Interest in the Opening Pacific, 1789-1829,” *California Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (March 1971): 16.

¹² Smith, *The Empress of China*, 52-55.

¹³ George Washington to Samuel Shaw, November 3, 1783, in *The Life and Journals of Samuel Shaw*, ed. Josiah Quincy (1847; repr., Cambridge: Metcalf and Company, 1970), 110.

¹⁴ Wu, “The Kingdom of Darkness,” 36.

¹⁵ Eric Jay Dolin, *When America First Met China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 18.

the first and key funder of the ship. The plans for the expedition began when the explorer and merchant John Ledyard proposed a transpacific voyage to Robert Morris.¹⁶ Even though Morris and his partners eventually decided to not use Ledyard's Pacific route, most writings on the subject agree that the project began with Morris hearing Ledyard's idea, as the planning for the Chinese voyage continued until the *Empress* was at last launched. Besides being a merchant, Morris is more notable for his role as a patriot. He signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and used his personal funds to finance the difficult war against Britain.¹⁷ When the *Empress of China* departed, he was still Superintendent of Finance for Congress. All of these facts demonstrate Morris's adamant patriotism, and have been used to argue that he had a larger vision for the voyage beside personal profit.

In his biography of Morris, Charles Rappleye writes that the *Empress'* voyage, instigated by Morris's efforts to strengthen the nation, "would expand the horizons of American commerce and match the global reach of the British Empire."¹⁸ Writing to John Jay about growing British economic encroachment, Morris assured him that "I am sending some ships to China in order to encourage others in the adventurous pursuit of Commerce and I wish to see a foundation laid for an American Navy."¹⁹ His words suggest that he was interested in not simply his own gains in the voyage, but rather the impact of the expedition on the American economy as a whole.

¹⁶ Kenneth Munford, *John Ledyard* (Portland: Binfords & Mort, 1939), 178-82.

¹⁷ Joseph P. Ellis, *The Quartet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 39.

¹⁸ Charles Rappleye, *Robert Morris*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 386.

¹⁹ Robert Morris to John Jay, November 27, 1783, in *The Papers of Robert Morris*, ed. Elmer James Ferguson, in the *University of Pittsburgh Press Digital Editions*, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/t/text/text-idx?idno=31735060482092;view=toc;c=pittpress>, 8:786.

Even so, the goal of the *Empress of China* ultimately came down to profits, not necessarily for the nation but for the individuals and groups invested into the venture. Close analysis of correspondence among the crew and the funders indicates that the ship was intended for private profit. Although what exists of Morris's correspondence suggests that he believed in national goals for the *Empress*, he was only one of multiple financiers. Furthermore, his writings reveal that the China mission was separate from his government work, and rather part of the multiple private ventures he managed as a successful businessman. Morris became increasingly preoccupied with his duties to Congress, and wrote to Parker that "the want of time to Bestow on private Pursuits" would keep him busy "until I shall be so happy as to get clear of my present Troublesome and Disagreeable Office."²⁰ Given that Parker was one of the other main financiers of the *Empress*, the letter highlights the fact that despite Morris's notable role in the government, matters such as the China voyage were private business matters, and not part of national designs.

In addition, this meant that Morris did not have much time to devote to the project, leaving much of the planning to the other funders, who were primarily interested in personal profits. The multiple delays and changes in the exact course of the *Empress*, shifting from a westward voyage to an eastward one, stemmed from a variety of financial concerns, and the setbacks brought some of the internal tensions of the promoters to light, especially as other ships were preparing for their own trips to Asia. Holker complained about the delays to the *Empress's* mission, and that "we should by now have a China ship in this port" rather than lose a fortune to a competitor.²¹ He did not welcome other American merchants as allies in the American-Chinese

²⁰ Robert Morris to Thomas Russell, John Langdon, William Burgess, and Nathaniel Gorham, September 2, 1783, in *The Papers of Robert Morris*, 8:487.

trade, but rather as rivals in a race that the *Empress's* funders seemed about to lose out on. The financiers also became upset when the *Empress*, during its time in Canton, made a deal with the ship *Pallas* to sail with supercargo Thomas Randall to the United States with additional goods. "The very persons they had employed to trade in their best interests," Smith notes, "had undercut the limited North American markets for Oriental produce by bringing even more aboard a vessel of their own!"²² This contributed to lawsuits between the *Empress's* crew and funders over the money, demonstrating their individual interests in profit. That even Morris, who hurriedly met with Shaw to discuss this issue, would be concerned about competition highlights that the voyage was for the sake of business, not national ends.

The chartering of the *Pallas* also reveals that the crew of the *Empress*, despite their history as patriots, also saw the voyage as a money-making excursion, and made decisions based on the potential for their personal profit. In his memoirs, Shaw explains that the expedition was the result of "several merchants in New York and Philadelphia being desirous of opening a commerce with Canton."²³ Although he served valiantly in the Revolutionary War, Shaw ultimately saw the voyage as an opportunity for improving his and his family's finances; in a letter to his brother about the upcoming expedition, he wrote, "Things may take a favorable turn in the spring. If Heaven prospers my present undertaking, it will be in my power to help you."²⁴ The official documents procured from Congress did not necessarily make the vessel patriotic either. In his own study of the *Empress*, Clarence Ver Steeg argues that the documents were a

²¹ Michael D. Block, "New England Merchants, the China Trade, and the Origins of California" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 2011), 222.

²² Smith, *The Empress of China*, 226.

²³ Shaw, "First Voyage to Canton," in *Shaw*, 133.

²⁴ Samuel Shaw to William Shaw, in *Shaw*, 112.

means to an end: it was unclear how the crew would be received in China, so they requested the documents as insurance to assert their own right to trade.²⁵ With these aspects in mind, it becomes clear that, despite the apparent nationalistic connections, the ship was a private, profit-oriented enterprise.

Due to the direct focus on monetary gain through the voyage to China, the financial difficulties of the *Empress* prior to its departure and following its return hindered further funding. On the one hand, the *Empress of China* was a resounding success, as the ship brought back numerous goods from China that earned the backers high prices on the American market. The main problem lay with the high funding costs. As historian Eric Dolin notes, “a voyage to China was a major logistical and financial undertaking that only a relatively small number of merchants and ports were capable of pulling off.”²⁶ It had taken extensive time and effort to get the mission underway due to the problems with funding it. The Pacific fur trade element of the plan was scrapped to reduce the time of the voyage, and the plan for multiple vessels was cut down to just one. “Why send two ships,” William Duer suggested to Holker, “when your Capital is not Sufficient to load one up to Advantage?”²⁷ Furthermore, it eventually turned out that much of the apparent funds propelling the expedition forward were never there to begin with due to Parker’s embezzling. As a result, after the profits of the voyage were distributed, the financiers went their separate ways, leaving future trips to be individually funded.²⁸

²⁵ Clarence L. Ver Steeg, “Financing and Outfitting the First United States Ship to China,” *Pacific Historical Review* 22 (1953), 9.

²⁶ Dolin, *When America First Met China*, 89.

²⁷ William Duer to John Holker, December 3, 1783, in *The Papers of Robert Morris*, 8:870.

Therefore, the *Empress of China* does not appear to have had much direct effect on the American-Chinese trade other than being the first ship to reach Canton. The vessel *United States* independently departed for China only a month after the *Empress*,²⁹ so the *Empress*'s own voyage does not seem to have made a significant difference in encouraging the commerce. Neither did the government take an active role in affairs with China. In 1787, Congress turned down John Pintard's request for letters to support his ships *Lady Washington* and *Columbia*'s own voyage to China; the request was eventually granted, but the fact that they set it aside in favor of other matters indicates the lack of government interest.³⁰ In addition, the consulate post in China proved to be a somewhat empty title without salary,³¹ and the second consul to China actually went bankrupt.³² Furthermore, the American consulate and traders in China failed to firmly establish diplomatic and commercial recognition in China during the early years of contact, as there continued to be tensions with both the Chinese government and the European powers entrenched at Canton. The consulate position, historian Teemu Ruskola writes, "was purely unilateral and the Chinese government in no way recognized the consular post."³³ Similarly, despite reporting friendly encounters with European groups on his first voyage, Shaw

²⁸ Smith, *The Empress of China*, 233.

²⁹ William Bell Clark, "Postscripts to the Voyage of the Merchant Ship *United States*," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 76 (1952), 296.

³⁰ Scott Ridley, *Morning of Fire* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 18.

³¹ Samuel Shaw to George Washington, January 2, 1790, *Founders Online*, accessed October 3, 2015, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0345>.

³² Jacques M. Downs, *Golden Ghetto* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), 39.

³³ Teemu Ruskola, "Canton Is Not Boston: The Invention of American Imperial Sovereignty," *American Quarterly* 57 (2005), 865.

continued to face hostility in subsequent expeditions.³⁴ As a result of these indicators of lack of progress in the trade exchange, it is unclear if the *Empress of China* alone created the foundation for American-Chinese commerce and relations.

However, even as evidence shows that the actual motivations for the *Empress of China* centered on profits, there remains a strange paradox in the goals and effects of the voyage, as evidence also shows that the public clearly saw the voyage as a moment of national pride. Multiple newspapers crowded over the *Empress*'s triumphal return.³⁵ In addition, government officials from John Jay to James Madison to Thomas Jefferson expressed joy and pride at the occasion,³⁶ despite the ship functioning as an independent merchant vessel. Jay wrote to Shaw "That Congress feel a particular satisfaction in the successful issue" of the opening of American trade with China.³⁷ In fact, after the return of the *Empress*, the newspaper *Pennsylvania Packet* expressed hope that legislation from Congress would encourage American trade such that "the profits of this lucrative trade will rest entirely among ourselves,"³⁸ revealing both the public sense of national identity toward the independent voyages and an expectation that Congress, however indirectly, could contribute to the trade. The newspaper's view was later justified when, after the Constitution was ratified, Congress passed tariffs to support the American merchants to

³⁴ A. Owen Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 127.

³⁵ *Pennsylvania Packet*, December 29, 1785; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 18, 1785; Smith, *The Empress of China*, 224-25.

³⁶ Dolin, *When America First Met China*, 84-86.

³⁷ John Jay to Samuel Shaw, June 23, 1785, in *Shaw*, 341.

³⁸ *Pennsylvania Packet*, December 29, 1785.

China.³⁹ This stands in sharp contrast to other evidence that highlights the private nature of the voyages. Plus, although the *Empress* appears to have not had a considerable effect on the overall trade due to the risks involved, the number of American ships to China increased following the *Empress*'s success.⁴⁰ Therefore, further study of the *Empress* and of the culture of the United States during the Articles of Confederation is necessary to resolve this complication. The answer to the apparent conflict is that while the *Empress* itself could be seen as an individual, privatized venture that proved somewhat insignificant in the historical narrative, it stands as representative of a larger movement of American interest toward Asia.

Close examination of the American public reveals a larger preoccupation with China that surpassed concerns about the potential costs. For one, Chinese products were already important parts of not only the American economy, but also American culture. Tea was a popular drink for Americans; prior to the American Revolution, colonists are believed to have consumed between 5.7 and 6.5 million pounds each year.⁴¹ Similarly, porcelain works from China increasingly spread throughout the American colonies; in fact, many of the cups used to drink tea likely had Chinese origins. "By the 1730s," Jean Mudge notes in a history of porcelain in America, "newspapers refer to the china as a familiar staple,"⁴² revealing how chinaware had become a common product in the American colonies. Although some of these items were largely limited to the upper classes, their continual presence influenced American culture, and created not only a

³⁹ Coughlin, "Commercial Foundations," 16.

⁴⁰ Dolin, *When America First Met China*, 90.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴² Jean McClure Mudge, *Chinese Export Porcelain* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 123.

tentative economic link to China, but also a growing social link. While they were sometimes altered to fit Western requirements, the items, scholar Jean Lee writes, remained “in essence Chinese,”⁴³ and in time this would lead to Americans examining the patterns behind the artwork and products to better understand China. Americans’ chinaware continued to display images of Chinese artistic styles, and they and related artworks enhanced the American imagination of Chinese culture. As evidence of the prerevolutionary visions of China’s culture, scholar Caroline Frank points to a set of elaborate murals made for the Vernon House in Philadelphia which display American depictions of China; these art pieces, she argues, “demonstrate that Americans were actively and independently engaging with a Far Eastern aesthetic at an early date.”⁴⁴

Therefore, the American elite such as the Founding Fathers took great interest in learning more about Chinese culture, seeing it as a novel way to consider possible means of growth for their own nation. The Library Company of Philadelphia, founded in part by Benjamin Franklin, purchased multiple books on the culture and history of China in the eighteenth century before the *Empress* ever left harbor.⁴⁵ Moreover, important figures in American history ranging from Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Jefferson owned such books to further their philosophical studies.⁴⁶ For instance, in a letter to his daughter regarding his concerns about hereditary nobility in America’s emerging democracy, Franklin referred to the organization of the Chinese system

⁴³ Jean Gordon Lee, *Philadelphians and the China Trade 1784-1844* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 12.

⁴⁴ Caroline Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 61.

⁴⁵ Edwin Wolf, 2nd, *China on Our Shelves* (Philadelphia: Library Company of Philadelphia, 1984), 5.

⁴⁶ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 17.

of government to argue for “ascending” honor earned through actions rather than “descending” honor bestowed to posterity.⁴⁷ This interest in Chinese culture does not mean that Americans were as a whole knowledgeable about the matter. For one, the knowledge was limited to those who could access the written material. Second, Americans could not experience China themselves, and had to rely on European accounts for information. The postulations made on the limited information available, such as Franklin’s application of Chinese philosophy and government, were often flawed, but nevertheless the Founding Fathers and other Americans wanted to know more about China.

America’s desire to build direct contact with China was intensified by the restrictions imposed by the British government prior to and during the Revolutionary War. The British East India Trade Company held a monopoly over British trade, so that Americans themselves could not sail to China on their own. Not only did this limit the opportunities for Americans to learn about China, but it created increasing economic tensions. The Boston Tea Party was a reaction to the tax on tea goods, and such items could only be brought in from London rather than obtained at their true source in China. The War of Independence only heightened the matter, as Chinese products could only be obtained legally through British merchants. Yet, America could not simply let go of this trade. As Shaw would later note, “The inhabitants of America must have tea.”⁴⁸ Therefore, the solution was for the new United States to bring in tea, porcelain, and other items to the country on its own terms. While Revolutionary-aligned citizens continued to reject the importation of British tea and refuse shipments that arrived, smugglers would sell their own

⁴⁷ Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, 30.

⁴⁸ Shaw, “Second Voyage to Canton,” in *Shaw*, 231.

tea to many eager customers.⁴⁹ After the Treaty of Paris was signed, official trading could resume, but tensions still remained in the trade with Britain. As a means to reduce the United States' new autonomy, Britain restricted its commerce with its former colonies, and other major powers within Europe followed suit.⁵⁰ The continued issue of the China trade, with its importance in American economics and culture, strengthened American determination to take part in the trade directly, which the *Empress of China* would ultimately succeed in doing.

It is also important to realize that China embodied more than a single nation in the mindset of Americans, as it stood as the prime representative of Asia as a whole. After all, China encompassed a vast area, and considered neighboring nations to be vassals. Canton, Dael Norwood writes in his dissertation on American trade with China, “served as a hub for not only their trade with the Qing Emperor’s subjects, but also for all Western trade in ‘the East Indies,’ a designation encompassing all the territories between the Cape of Good Hope and that of Cape Horn.”⁵¹ When discussing China, American commentators in the eighteenth century would also refer to the “East” or “Orient,” signifying how China symbolized larger Asia. “The commerce with the East,” William Coxe Jr. wrote to Thomas Jefferson, “shou’d if it were possible be made common by all the powers of considerable influence in that country [China].”⁵² In his message urging diplomats such as Jefferson to challenge British influence in China, Coxe saw China as more than a single country, but as a fundamental link to the “East” as a whole. Therefore,

⁴⁹ Merritt, “*Republican Paradox*,” 146-47.

⁵⁰ Dael A. Norwood, “Trading in Liberty” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2012), 33.

⁵¹ Norwood, “Trading in Liberty,” 34.

⁵² William Coxe, Jr. to John Brown Cutting, March 1788, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956, 13:3-4).

Americans advocating trade with China were in fact favoring a larger system of exchanges across Asia.

The larger connections flowing from the China trade can be seen in the *Empress's* journey, as the voyage to China involved a number of stops along the way. Both Green and Shaw's accounts mention considerable time spent in Java and the surrounding islands, where they traded with locals for a variety of goods.⁵³ During one of his later trips to Canton, Shaw also traveled to Bengal and other parts of India,⁵⁴ thus showing how trade with China in fact encompassed a much larger scope for Americans. As a result, American economic and cultural interest in "China" did not angle singly on Canton, but instead became a network of vibrant trade links. Ships going to China might decide to instead trade with another part of the "East Indies;" such was the case with the 1784 voyage of the *United States*, which detoured from its planned Canton journey to Pondicherry, India.⁵⁵ Yet China, represented through the port at Canton, still formed a critical part of this commercial web, with the *Empress of China* being the first American ship to begin this trade linkage into Asia through China.

Furthermore, the trade with China and other parts of Asia intersected with other avenues of American trade, across both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The Atlantic route that the *Empress of China* took to China was already a vibrant commercial network, with merchant ships sailing to and from Europe, the Americas, and other parts of the world that connected with the Atlantic Ocean. The *Harriet*, a vessel that departed prior to the *Empress* and allegedly headed

⁵³ John Green, "The Journal of John Green," in *The Empress of China*, 138-40; Shaw, "First Voyage to Canton," in *Shaw*, 151-55.

⁵⁴ Shaw, "Visit to Bengal," in *Shaw*, 257-91.

⁵⁵ Clark, "Postscripts to the Voyage of the Merchant Ship United States," 294.

toward China before prematurely selling its cargo to the British, in fact had Cape Town at the southern tip of Africa as its goal from the start, as the cape served as a hub in itself for trade not only in the Atlantic but also in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁶ As a result, the *Empress of China* encountered other American ships en route to China and back, connecting the different threads of American trade together into a larger network of exchanges.

For instance, while returning from Canton, the *Empress* met with the ship *Grand Turk* from Salem, Massachusetts, and the captains' discussion of China encouraged Salem to expand its trade into China.⁵⁷ Also, while Ledyard's Pacific route ultimately did not determine the *Empress's* own path, it still served as the origin for the expedition, and later ships would expand on his concept to link China with American trade throughout the Pacific. In 1787, just two years after the *Empress* returned to America, the twin vessels *Lady Washington* and *Columbia* sailed to the Pacific coast, where they would follow Ledyard's vision and collect furs to then trade with China and other areas of Asia.⁵⁸ As a result, the *Empress* can be linked to multiple trade routes that would coalesce into a larger international market for the budding American economy.

With this larger cultural and economic framework surrounding the *Empress of China* in mind, the confusion regarding the *Empress's* goals and results become clearer. Although the *Empress* does not appear to have had a significant effect on the trade between America and China, it is important as representative of a larger national vision for the growing United States. Even if the voyage itself was determined by personal business goals, the *Empress of China* can be seen as part of the nation's ambition for growth, not overriding the emphasis on private profit

⁵⁶ Dolin, *When America First Met China*, 19.

⁵⁷ Smith, *The Empress of China*, 204-5.

⁵⁸ Ridley, *Morning of Fire*.

but nonetheless providing key impetus for the expedition now that Americans had the opportunity to take direct action in foreign trade. Just as smugglers bringing in tea could see themselves as patriots while also making a tidy profit, traders such as Green and Shaw could see themselves as serving their country by establishing contact with China while still focusing on their own profits as well. While driven by mercantile interests and the potential profits for himself and his family, Shaw nevertheless submitted a report of the expedition to the Articles of Confederation's new Minister of Foreign Affairs John Jay,⁵⁹ showing that he still saw himself as in part serving his country through this private initiative. In turn, while not taking a direct part in the events, political leaders such as Jay recognized the importance of the trade voyages, and gave vocal support for such initiatives. Therefore, while the *Empress* and related ships remained independent ventures, they still found themselves linked to larger national ambitions.

Most of all, the *Empress of China* was the first American ship to make economic and diplomatic contact with China, and that made a significant difference in the United States' relations with China. Therefore, the *Empress*'s success offered the first opportunity for Americans to directly interact with China, and proved that such ventures could be done, albeit with some financial risks. Many ships would depart for successful voyages to China and other parts of the East Indies in the years following the *Empress*'s return, and the trade connections with China would grow. As a result, study of the *Empress of China* can help historians understand both economic and cultural patterns emerging in the United States after the War of Independence, as Americans worked to demonstrate their newfound national pride through international trade.

Having studied the historiography surrounding the *Empress of China* and the early trade

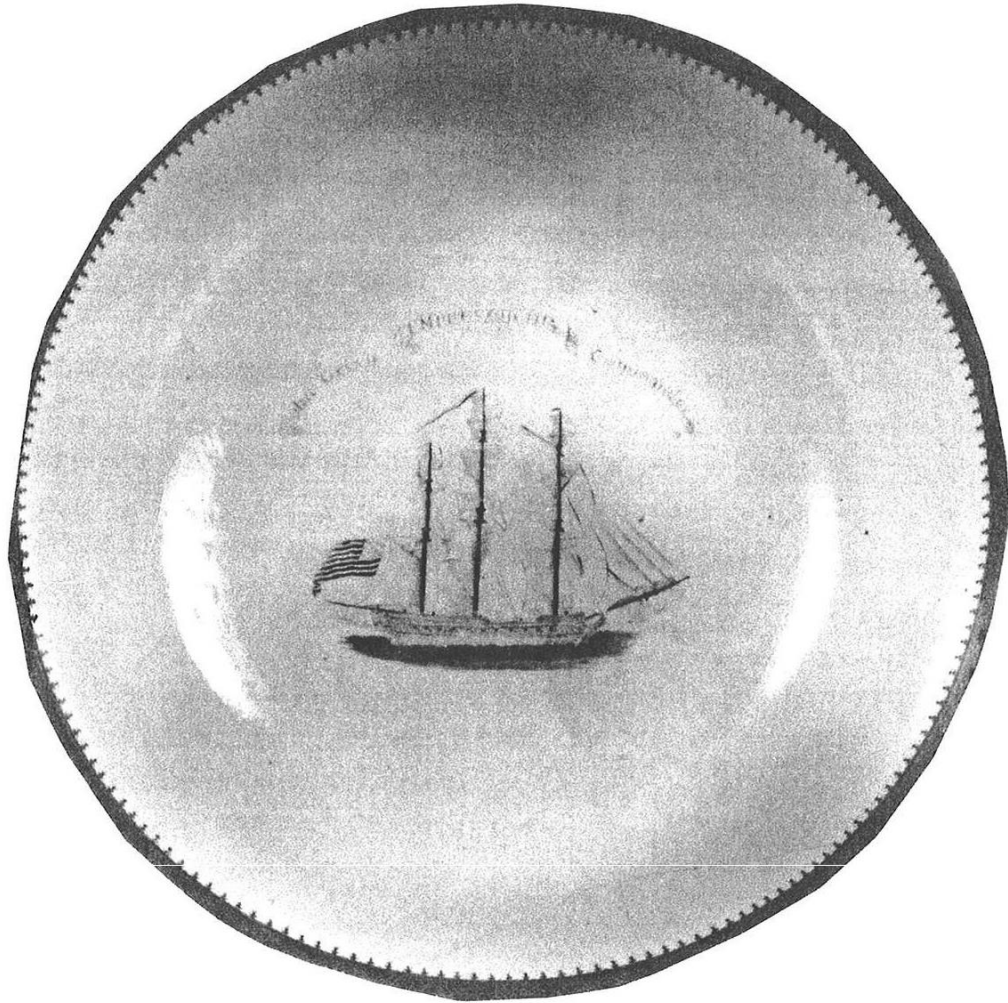
⁵⁹ Samuel Shaw to John Jay, January 1787, in *Shaw*, 342-52.

between the United States and China, and having then extensively researched the topic, it has become clear that there is currently an issue with the historical understanding of the early China trade. Many historians only fleetingly consider the role of American ships prior to the nineteenth century and, instead, focus their primary attention to later phases of the international exchange. On the other hand, the historians that do consider the emergence of the American-Chinese trade generally concentrate on single vessels and voyages, and elevate these individual stories to a higher level of importance than they warrant. Such has been the case with the *Empress of China*. While the ship's story is important in the history of American and Chinese trade as the first American vessel to reach China and open up trade, the direct effect of the ship by itself has sometimes been exaggerated, particularly by giving it a sense of nationalistic purpose when it was in fact focused on private profit.

Even so, when the *Empress* is linked with similar journeys and to growing nationalistic feelings during the Articles of Confederation period, the ship helps to reveal larger patterns in America's economy and culture. The complexity and seeming contradictions in the *Empress's* journey in a way reflects the mixed feelings within the United States during the Articles of Confederation, with actions that embodied both individualistic and national ideals. In addition, these voyages to China proved to be connected to larger trade networks expanding across Asia and the Pacific. This demonstrates the importance of the early American ships involved in the China trade, and warrants deeper investigation. Future historians will need to pay attention not only to single vessels, but to their combined stories so that they can better understand how the United States established its trading connections with China and became part of an international network of commerce, and how this growth can be linked with the national trends.

Because the *Empress of China's* efforts to initiate American trade with China stemmed

from personal interests, the relative lack of extensive profit in the endeavor limited the direct effect of the voyage on American trade. However, the high level of public and government interest in the journey suggests that the *Empress of China* in fact had a larger role in American history. The voyage of the *Empress of China* reflects deeper patterns of cultural and economic interest in China within the United States, and America's newfound freedom from British control encouraged personal and national efforts to expand trade into not only China, but into Asian and international trade as a whole.



China etching of *The Empress of China*, titled, “John Green EMPRESS OF CHINA
Commander.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ *Empress of China / John Green Bowl (top view)*, in Philip Chadwick Foster Smith, *The Empress of China* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Maritime Museum, 1984), 217. Reprinted by permission from New Jersey State Museum Collection, Trenton.

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