

Clean Politics: Race and Class, Imperialism and Nationalism, Etiquette and Consumption in the Chinese and American Revolutions

Sarah Schneewind

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“Why doesn’t this story stick when told?”

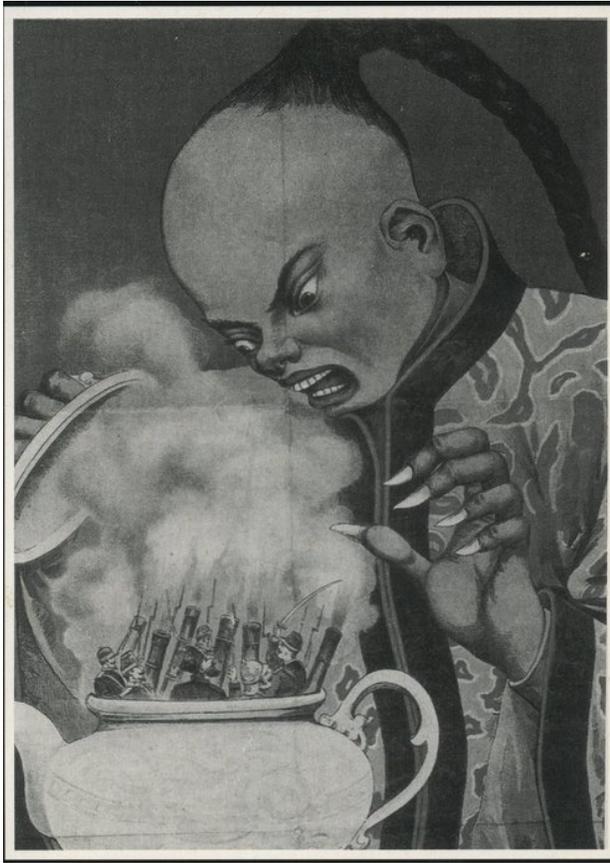
Clive James¹

Every generation of historians rediscovers and then forgets the history of Western views of China: the slow process in which the admiration of Marco Polo in the thirteenth century, Jesuit missionaries and other European visitors to China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire turned to contempt as nineteenth-century Europe gained the upper hand in world politics and economy.² Many negative perceptions - that China was weak; the government despotic and venal; the people supine, hypocritical, and dirty; and that nothing in China ever would change without European intervention - were inversions or new readings of material the more admiring Jesuits and others had put forward. To tie them to sharper observation of Chinese realities, as scholars do when they speak of the “revelation” of Chinese weakness, of “a new literature of hardheaded appraisal,” or of “new information” and “a fresh domain of realistic reportage,” is to buy into the discourse’s own representation of itself as

truthful.³



The genteel Chinese, portrayed in Athanasius Kircher, *China Illustrata*, published in Amsterdam, 1667



“The Miracle Teapot.” Russian cartoon, 1901

Did reality inform imagination or vice versa? In his history of the Chinese revolution, John Fitzgerald presents Defoe’s claim that “One *English, or Dutch, or French*, man of war of 80 guns, would fight and destroy all the shipping of China” as a result of the real experience of buccaneer Captain George Anson’s successful bullying of Canton’s officials to let him into the port proper, while merchants were limited to the outer harbor, on his way home loaded with Spanish gold in 1743.⁴ But Crusoe’s *Farther Adventures* had appeared in 1719 (and Defoe died in 1731). It is more likely that Anson’s presentation of himself as a firm, manly Britisher rightfully opposing the obstructionism of timorous Chinese officials with pathetically insufficient arms was shaped by Defoe’s fiction, and by the basically Sinophilic Le Comte. The French Jesuit’s letters on China (based on a

ten-years’ stay) had appeared in English in 1737, and included the observation that if only “Lewis the Great” were not so far away in France, he could easily conquer the Chinese empire, for the Chinese are “but mean soldiers.”⁵ Since Anson was specifically instructed by George II, when he set out in 1740, to come home by way of China if convenient, it is highly probable that his reference material included Le Comte’s book; indeed one of the early, unofficial accounts of his voyage drew heavily on it.⁶ Perhaps Le Comte’s observations and Defoe’s literary spleen were what gave Anson the confidence to confront the Cantonese authorities with the unequivocal demands to let him into the port – if that is even what really happened. For Anson’s bluster, expressed in his statement that “the *Centurion* alone was an overmatch for all the naval power of that Empire” is mitigated by the details of his account: his strident demands were accepted only after he had earned the Viceroy’s gratitude by helping to put out a fire.⁷



George Lord Anson

Fitzgerald writes that “no sooner had Anson succeeded in gaining his forced entry to Guangzhou than the picturesque edifice of earlier [admiring] Western representation of China came tumbling down.”⁸ This is too simple. First, negative portrayals had predated Anson, and positive portrayals continued to appear after him. Ronald J. and Mary Saracino Zboray find, for instance, that even in Boston right after the Opium War, an exhibit on China put together “in the heady context of a triumphal mission” to claim trading rights “demonstrated... that China had developed a refined and complex civilization.”⁹ Second, even the reports of the failed Macartney mission from George III to the Qianlong emperor (1793) mingle praise and blame, and Peyrefitte points out that Anson’s account led Macartney to the conclusion that bluff and bluster at the local level were not as good as going straight to the top and acting polite. Third, Fitzgerald relies on a biography that appeared almost a century later, in 1839, at the time of the first Opium War.¹⁰ Rather than by Anson’s actual experience or even contemporary accounts, Sinophilic representations were reversed by complex dynamics involving the later change in the balance of power between the Qing and the British empires and nineteenth-century accounts of events including Anson’s exploit.



The Opium War, 1840

Anson’s biographer was Sir John Barrow. As

plain John Barrow, he had been a member of Macartney’s mission in 1793, and he had published an account of the mission as *Travels in China* by 1804 (reprinted in Philadelphia the next year), and an account of Macartney’s public life shortly thereafter. As Fitzgerald narrates, Barrow was an adventurer-naturalist who rose to permanent under-secretary in the Admiralty, where he was a moving force behind the Navy’s systematic mapping of all coasts and waters and collection of rocks, plants, and animals from all over the world. Barrow’s arrogant and explicit imperialism was beyond the norm of the Colonial Office; in Fitzgerald’s words he sought “without apology to extend science and civilization throughout all of the newly charted lands of Asia and Africa under the exclusive dominion of the Union Jack... and he did his personal best to bring the [Qing] empire down.”¹¹ Barrow was advising the British government on the Opium War while he was writing Anson’s biography. Little wonder that such a man took Anson’s exploit and his “moral courage” to new heights.¹² The easy British victories in the mid-nineteenth century seemed to validate Anson’s bold claims in the mid-eighteenth, and gave weight to the imagined dichotomy of firm, manly Brit and timid, wimpy Chinaman.

Nonetheless, even Barrow did not thoroughly despise China, as later became fashionable. He describes the role of the fire in getting bold Anson into Canton, and both in *Travels in China* and in his autobiography he comments favorably on a variety of matters, including a Chinese doctor, individual officials, travel arrangements, and food. Barrow also drew analogies unflattering to England: forced labor was like impressment into the Navy. *Travels in China* ends with a story of how it was possible for an Englishman to obtain justice under Chinese government - contrary to claims deployed to legitimate the Opium War - and a plea for Englishmen to study Chinese.¹³ Even in the biography of Anson, Barrow notes that Chinese ideas of law and justice, as well as

their ignorance of international law, left them “puzzled [about]... on what principle a ship-of-war went round the world, seeking ships of other nations to seize them.”¹⁴



Antique dealers, c. 1868-72. Photograph by John Thomson

But Barrow apparently did crystallize one of the most powerful stereotypes about China to play into Chinese self-hatred and revolution. Asking why revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen, amid matters of national and international importance, paid such attention to the details of personal hygiene among the population, Fitzgerald answers that foreigners since Macartney had connected Chinese “personal ethics, hygiene, and deportment” with the failures of Chinese government and social organization. Sun Yat-sen, having lived long abroad, was, Fitzgerald reports, “acutely sensitive” to foreign reactions to Chinese people, and “came to regard his own countrymen much as Lord Macartney had done.”¹⁵ The Chinese people would not be able to rule themselves, Sun held, until they cut their nails, brushed their teeth, refrained from spitting and farting in public, and dressed neatly and cleanly. Historian Ruth Rogaski has picked up on Fitzgerald’s study of Chinese “awakenings,” to argue that cleanliness was fundamental to modern Chinese elite understandings of national weakness. Rogaski traces the process by which, beginning in the

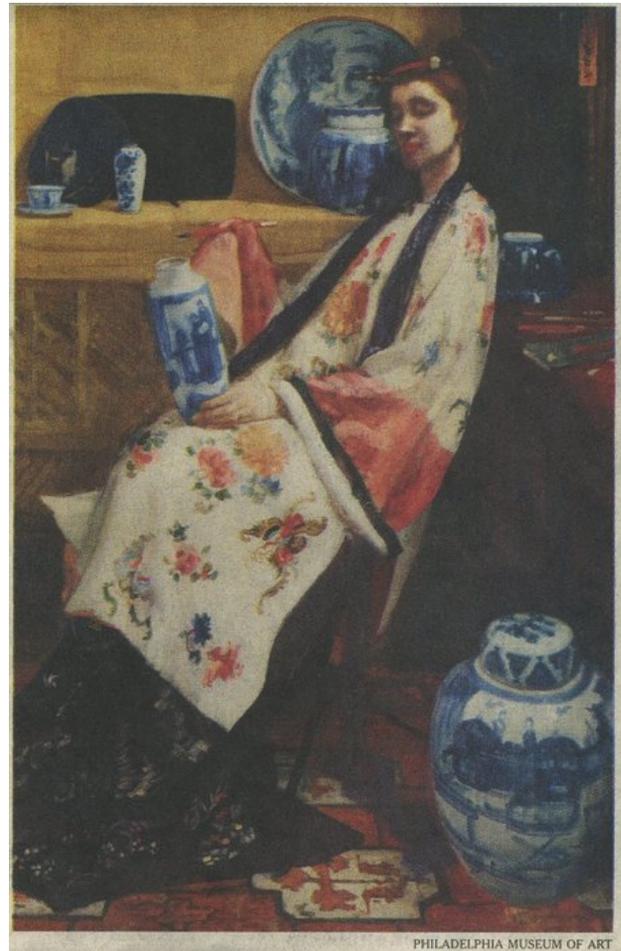
mid-19th century, and particularly in the wake of the Boxer movement of 1900, “hygiene became the most basic constituent of an indelible rhetoric of Chinese deficiency,” associated with questions of national sovereignty. Sun’s obsession appears as a midpoint in a process that began with post-Opium War settlement of Europeans in the treaty ports of China, was amplified by Meiji concerns, continued through (inter alia) Chiang Kai-shek’s faux-Confucian New Life Movement of the 1930s, and echoes today in ubiquitous posted injunctions against spitting in the People’s Republic of China.¹⁶

The European idea that Chinese people were dirty does not appear before Barrow, even in earlier accounts that mingled criticism with admiration. On the contrary, in the sixteenth century Pereira wrote of “the cleanliness of table manners of all people of China.”¹⁷ Slightly later, Gaspar da Cruz expanded on the observation, writing that “because they eat so cleanly, not touching with the hand their meat, they have no need of cloth or napkins.” He further noted that “there are some Chinas [*sic*] who wear very long finger-nails... which they keep very clean.”¹⁸ I have not found references to dirtiness and or disgusting personal habits in the other early sources. In *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Defoe paints a portrait of one “country gentleman” of “mixed pomp and poverty,” a “greasy don” in “dirty callicoe” and “a taffaty vest, as greasy as a butcher, and which testified that his honour must needs be a most exquisite sloven.”¹⁹ But Defoe does not defame “the Chinese” as a whole with this particular trait, as he does in other cases. The contemporary report of Anson’s encounter says nothing about dirtiness, nor does Le Comte in 1737. It was Barrow’s contribution.

It is not urban dirtiness that concerns Barrow; on the question, for instance, of sewage, he follows the sixteenth-century writers. Pereira commented that the trade in human manure was “good for keeping the city clean.”²⁰ Da

Cruz explained admiringly that “Even the dung of men brings profit, and is bought... to cleanse their houses of office... When they carry it on their backs through the city, in order to avoid the evil smell, they carry it in tubs very clean without, and although they go uncovered, notwithstanding it showeth the cleanliness of the country and cities.”²¹ Barrow echoes this treatment (which may or may not be accurate).²² What strikes him, rather, is personal dirtiness. As one of the section headings for *Travels in China* puts it: “Chinese an uncleanly and frowzy people.”²³ The section itself credits Swift with the word “frowzy” and moves from dirty footbinding cloths (known to Barrow only by report) to dirty underwear, public lice-catching, the use of paper instead of handkerchiefs, spitting (like Frenchmen), the lack of pajamas, total failure to bathe, and unfamiliarity with soap.²⁴

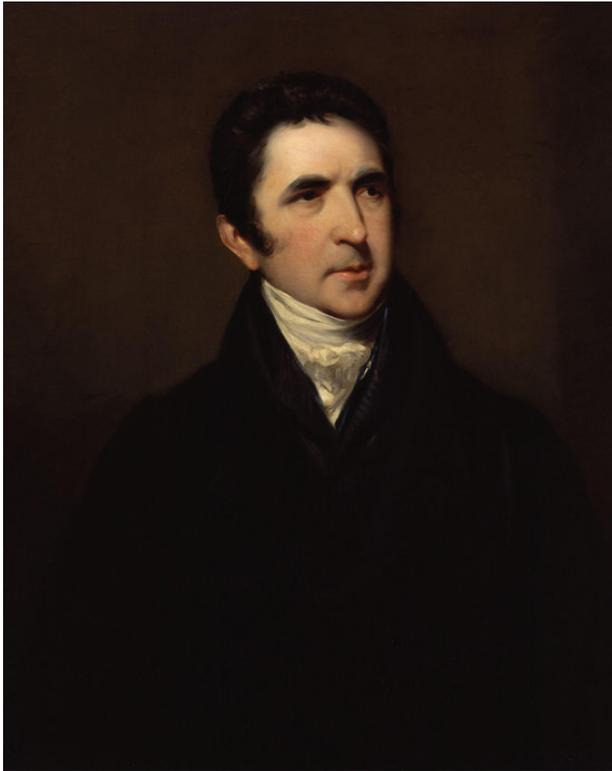
On Sun Yat-sen’s view that to prove themselves worthy of self-rule Chinese had first to prove that they could (in the language of the key Neo-Confucian text “The Great Learning”) “cultivate their persons,” Fitzgerald comments that “Sun was, as always, highly perceptive. From classical Rome to the age of modernity, the high culture of Europe [had] counted competent government of the body’s natural functions... as a necessary condition for competent government of the city.”²⁵ But if this was a *constant* in Europe, why did personal cleanliness suddenly emerge as an issue in relation to China in 1793, or in 1804? Why did it appear first in John Barrow, and become an important part of anti-Chinese racism from that point forward? To answer this question, and to properly historicize the connection of personal hygiene and politics in the Chinese revolution, we need to turn back to British history.



James McNeill Whistler, “Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks” (1864)

John Barrow was, on the McCartney mission, an Englishman facing Chinese people. But he was also a middle-class man working for an aristocrat, dealing with a great monarch and his high-ranking officials. Eighteenth-century British politics was dominated by about a thousand aristocrats, their children, and to a lesser extent the gentry, centered on 15,000 squires who rented out farmland, defined for purposes of qualifying as justices of the peace as “Anglicans worth above £100 a year.” These men were qualified for government by their “leisure” – that is, in historian John Rule’s words, “their ability to live from property without working, which was the fundamental mark of a gentleman.”²⁶ But their domination

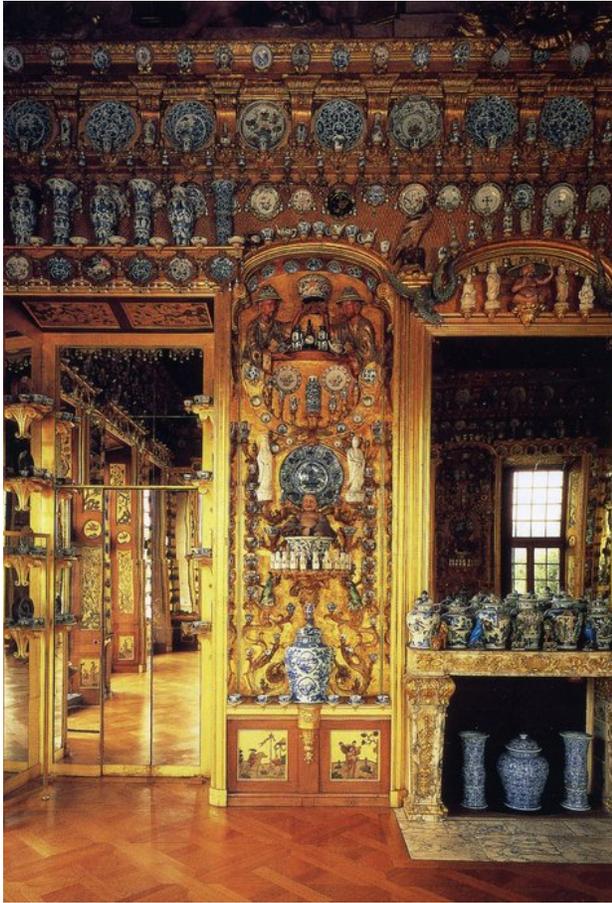
of political power was increasingly challenged by the professionals working for the gentry - lawyers, estate managers, stewards, and the like - and men in business as well. Increasingly, especially in the later eighteenth century, such middle-class men turned their own social and civic associations to political functions, supporting candidates who fought for more freedom of speech and a more inclusive political world.²⁷



Sir John Barrow of the hamlet of Dragley Beck, painted by John Jackson before 1831

John Barrow was part of this movement. His parents had owned a cottage and three or four cows, and farmed oats and vegetables, in a remote village in Lancashire. Educated at the local grammar school, Barrow was recommended to a gentleman for some survey work, took ship for the South Pole, and then joined the Macartney mission as comptroller, librarian, and tutor.²⁸ A client of Lord Macartney, he struck out on his own and made

a political career, crowned with knighthood. His class (or rank) insecurities show in his writings. As Peyrefitte points out, he both emphasizes Lord Macartney's dignity and the Chinese arrogance that threatened it, and resented his own "temporary banishment" from the embassy when he was not taken to see the emperor at Jehol, but was left behind with the embassy's doctor and "two mechanics."²⁹ On the one hand, he is an Englishman like Macartney; on the other he was not the lord's social or political equal. That he, in Fitzgerald's words, "shared Macartney's disdain, in particular, for the personal habits and the administrative style of China's imperial officials - so 'ill agreeing with the feeling of Englishmen'" - was a status claim to partake of the gentility, as he partook of the Englishness, of Lord Macartney; and a claim ultimately to the right to contribute to the government of his own country. John Barrow's class anxieties around 1800 translated, in a process of intertwined violence and textuality traced by Ruth Rogaski, into Sun's racial anxieties a century later: a process that may look different if one examines and embeds the trail from Anson to Barrow to the later nineteenth-century thinkers, rather than lumping all of the West, and its attitudes to cleanliness, together.



Chamber in the Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin, built about 1710 by Elector of Brandenburg Frederick III to display Chinese and Japanese porcelainware and statuettes

To return to the question: How did middle-class Englishmen like Barrow make their claim to political power? Historians have traced how the battle was fought on various fronts, including, as mentioned above, new democratic ideas and organizations. (It might be worth noting that Barrow recorded both in *Travels in China* and his autobiography the mockery by Chinese officials of the British custom of allowing a mere child, whose merit could in no way be judged, to be a Lord. Did Barrow, not yet Sir John, agree?)³⁰ But another thread in eighteenth-century British and American history is the story of the new-conquered wealth of the colonies fueling a well-to-do

lifestyle for merchants, civil servants, and other professionals. Wealth was deployed in imitating patterns of elegant behavior that had belonged to the nobility, to create a new formation of “gentility.” Norbert Elias’s classic *The Civilizing Process* shows the slow replacement of a standard of knightly courtesy with one of civility, focussed on personal bodily habits and table manners, and notably featuring a concern with cleanliness.³¹ Picking up the story, Richard Bushman has argued that what he calls “genteel” behavior had finally reached the English court under the Stuarts, and after 1660 the English upper middle class began to imitate it. From 1690, the new patterns of behavior spread in the American colonies as well, so that by 1776, American “gentlemen” - meaning great merchants and planters, clergymen and professional men, and court and government officers like Barrow - were expected to live in genteel fashion. By century’s end, the middle class - clerks, teachers, small merchants, well-to-do farmers, etc. - were taking up the same habits, in a process that ended with gentility redefined as required for mere respectability.³² In claiming gentility, social groups also claimed a new political role.



Proudly displayed on a c. 1640 Kast in a Dutch merchant's home are these imitation Ming altar vases made in Delft in 1710. Defoe called the Dutch the "Carriers of the World"

Cleanliness was in Bushman's view part of the movement toward gentility: "Grease on the clothes, an inevitable result of eating with fingers without napkins, became a mark of lower-class rudeness" and manuals on "courtesy" instructed the reader to "Keep your Nails clean and Short, also your Hands and Teeth Clean."³³ In this late eighteenth-century British and colonial configuration, gentility - including cleanliness - meant political rights; so dirtiness signalled being subject to rule by others. This historical trajectory explains, I think, why Barrow focused, for the first time, on Chinese personal habits, as he strove to assert his own dignity vis-à-vis both Lord Macartney and the upper-class Chinese with

whom he dealt. Barrow's perception that Chinese people were dirty fit with his characterization of them as all slaves to despotism. Even the most exalted Chinese official, he wrote, was subject to flogging by the tyrant, so that their good manners, imposed by law rather than coming from within, indicated no sense of honor or good breeding, but were false and superficial.³⁴ Barrow's characterizations were reiterated in the literature transnationally, ultimately making their way, as Fitzgerald has shown, into Chinese concerns about self-government. But we should see Barrow's views in their own historical context, rather than as a "more realistic" assessment of China or as an eternal European mindset.



The tea ritual, a painting of Susanna Truax, 1730 by Gansevoort Limner (Peter Vanderlyn?). Sugar in her tay

There is a further twist. In the American revolution, historians have traced how, concurrent with their increasing political

activity, “the middling sort” of people also increasingly bought the consumer goods their betters made fashionable, so that gentility was based on ownership: as Rule puts it, “‘leisure’ came to be defined fully as much in terms of conspicuous consumption as in those of idle time.”³⁵ One might work for a living, and still be a gentleman with a claim on a political role, so long as one bought the right things, and interacted with them in the right way.



Tea tasters in a nineteenth century tea manufactory (Harvard Business School Archives)

And what were those things? There were many; three highlight the role of cleanliness and propriety in the formation of gentility. One was tea, English consumption of which increased fifteen-fold between about 1720 and 1800.³⁶ Tea replaced alcoholic beverages in the morning, then in the afternoon, then even after dinner for ladies, making behavior more sedate, more genteel. One Scot quoted by historian T. H. Breen remembered that around 1700 he would be offered a shot of whiskey even on a morning visit, while by 1729 “I am now ask’d if I have yet had my Tea.”³⁷ Tea was important on its own, as the Boston tea party alone should remind us, but as Breen points out it also “sustained a huge market in related imported articles such as china cups and tea pots. It had

become the master symbol of the new consumer society. By mid-century the tea service provided a standard of good manners and cosmopolitan taste.”³⁸



John Singleton Copley, “Portrait of a Lady,” 1771, in her silk gown. Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Tea required porcelain or other fine ceramic to be properly drunk: at first just a cup or two, but ultimately a whole tea-set of porcelain. Such sets were matters of immense consumer pride; and of distress on the part of those who found consumption by commoners troubling, such as a traveling minister upset by the “tea equipage” (stoneware not porcelain) he saw in a humble cabin in 1744.³⁹ But as Richard Bushman describes, porcelain went beyond tea-sets to express the new genteel concern with cleanliness. Offering hospitality to another disdainful traveler in British America in 1744, a ferryman and his wife scooped fish out of one “dirty, deep, wooden dish;” they had no bowl,

plate, spoon, fork, napkin or tablecloth. This was a practice once common, but dying out, as the drive to gentility, “including the wish to keep food clean, separated from dirt and fingers,” replaced a common vessel with individual plates of wood, then of pewter, and finally of smooth, easy-to-wash porcelain.⁴⁰ Benjamin Franklin recalled his astonishment as his wife set before him the new china bowl she thought his dignity required.⁴¹ Middle class families proudly displayed, as royalty had long done, collections of porcelain and other fine ceramics.

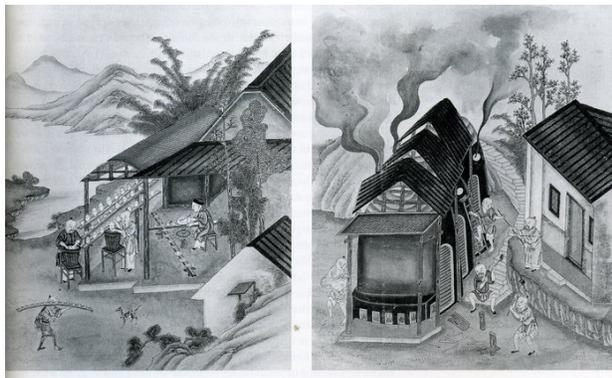
Porcelain was prized not just for its beauty, but for its cleanliness and smoothness. Smoothness was a traditional characteristic of aristocratic dress, too, Bushman explains; so silk was the most genteel fabric, forbidden to the lower classes in old sumptuary regulations, eagerly purchased by the upwardly mobile, and prominent in colonial governors’ reports of goods their subjects imported.⁴² Embroidering in silk was a pastime for British ladies; like Chinese ladies, they could do it because their hands, unroughened by labor, would not snag the silk.⁴³ Wearing silk required clean personal habits, as porcelain made clean eating possible and forbade slamming dishes about, and tea, over ale or gin, made for clean language and proper deportment.⁴⁴ All these goods required and thus signalled propriety and restraint of the kind Norbert Elias discusses.



Detail of silk shawl made in Canton, c. 1850 and owned by Queen Victoria

These three clean, decorous goods – tea, porcelain, and silk – share another feature. All came from Asia. Desiring Asian goods was perhaps the oldest European tradition. Sir Barry Cunliffe, the Oxford archaeologist, calls the sixth-century-B.C. importation of silk and chickens along the corridor giving “easy access from the Atlantic Ocean to the Yellow Sea” “a reminder that Europe is merely an excrescence of Asia.”⁴⁵ From at least 1500, Asian goods, in trading routes run by Asians and overseen by Asian states, were stuff of a vibrant and wide-ranging trade both within the Asian region and into Europe.⁴⁶ As the power balance began to tilt in Europe’s favor, tea was not just a social fact within Britain, but a driving force behind a new empire: the addiction that led to the drug trade as Britain attempted to even out the balance of payments by introducing opium in large quantities into China.⁴⁷ Porcelain had a longer history of importation, but in the eighteenth century alone Europe imported some 60 million pieces of Chinese porcelain, and the development of industrial processes by Wedgwood and others was driven by the desire to supplant imports.⁴⁸ And so with silk.

The key to industrialization, the British textile industry (beyond wool), was predicated on protective measures against, and perhaps even the purposeful destruction of, Indian competition in cottons.⁴⁹ The Spitalfields silk industry too was protected by the (imperfectly enforced) barring of Indian and Chinese silk fabrics from 1701, while raw silk and cotton were still imported.⁵⁰



Two of 23 illustrations from a manual on porcelain manufacture, 2nd half of 18th c., held in Saxony. Left, mixing the clay and throwing bowls. Right, chopping firewood and checking the kiln temperature. Wedgewood also studied such manuals.

These facts are well known. But scholarship on the new British and American consumer culture and its political implications frequently ignores them. In McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb's *Birth of a Consumer Society*, China appears in two ways. First, it appears as a counterpoint to progressive England: a place where fashions never change; where sumptuary laws, such as the unique right of the "Sons of Heaven" to wear yellow, are easily enforced; where even the invention of printing brought no social change, no possibility of spare-time self-improvement to commoners.⁵¹ None of these "facts" is true.⁵² Second, China appears as a consumer and admirer of Wedgewood's products, but only once as a producer of ceramics: an export ware with a radical political cartoon on it.⁵³ Imports from China

are invisible.



In 1752, the Dutch ship Geldermalsen sank on the way from Canton to Amsterdam, carrying some 150,000 pieces of blue-and-white.

A newer work, T. H. Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution*, shows that as free-born Englishmen made themselves into Americans, rejecting the colonial yoke of the motherland, revolutionary sentiment was mobilized through a boycott of goods bought from Britain (as the revolutionary 1925 May Thirtieth movement in China would focus on boycotts of foreign goods). Tea, tea-sets and other "china" ceramics, and silk all loom large, although they were not the only goods at issue. Breen, following his patriotic sources promoting boycott, calls them all "Baubles of Britain" (the term occurs at least six times in the book) irrespective of their actual origin, even when his sources more generally (outside of the boycott context) speak of "East India Goods" and the like.⁵⁴ "Most of them," he reports, were "products of the new and ambitious potteries of the English Midlands."⁵⁵ But in some cases Breen has only lists of items, not the things themselves; it may well be, for example, that the "2 China bowls" of a certain inventory were not Wedgewood's, but from China.⁵⁶ The silks may all have come from Spitalfields, but Benjamin Franklin referred to "India Silks."⁵⁷ Defoe, whom Breen quotes as "a shrewd observer of the great circulation of

goods,” has Robinson Crusoe’s partner declare that “if he could vest [his capital] in *China* silks, wrought and raw, such as might be worth the carriage, he would be content to go to *England*... .”⁵⁸ Comparative literature scholar Lydia Liu has treated Robinson Crusoe’s firing of an earthenware pot as “a poetics of colonial disavowal,” and a claim that it could perfectly well have been a Briton working alone who invented porcelain, not generations of Chinese artisans.⁵⁹ But colonial apologist Defoe, in this comment on China silks and presumably in his attacks on chinoiserie mentioned by Liu, is perfectly straightforward.⁶⁰ It is the late-twentieth-century historian Breen who does not acknowledge Asia’s role at all, let alone its manufacturing virtuosity.⁶¹



The Qing empress holds a ritual to honor silk production by plucking mulberry leaves. This complements the emperor’s ritual plowing, imitated by Louis XV.

But perhaps, since all these goods were coming in on British shipping, their ultimate origin did not matter in the revolutionary dynamic. Did goods from farther afield have the same emotional and status associations as those from Britain itself? With respect to rugs, at least, Breen writes that “colonists had acquired a discerning eye for regional patterns.”⁶² Further, the colonists’ anxieties about overspending on luxuries had a precedent in British anxieties (dramatized for instance in prints by Hogarth) about overspending on

Chinese goods and chinoiserie, as David Porter has explored.⁶³ And the colonists themselves were fully aware of the worldwide nature of the trade that brought their “Baubles of Britain,” as a sermon on advocacy of “the Eastern Trade” and an advertisement of “A Fine Assortment of English and India Goods” suggest.⁶⁴ If “East-India Tea” was so important, might it not have mattered where it came from, and how the colonists understood themselves as consumers within the larger British empire?⁶⁵ Did this really never enter the discussion at the time? The speech by revolutionary David Ramsay with which Breen closes suggests that free trade with Asia was one of the colonists’ desires; the rhetorical identification of all luxury goods as “British Baubles” therefore seems as likely to have been a political move as was the selection of non-importation “as the preferred strategy of protest in an empire of goods” itself.⁶⁶



Toddy jug made in Canton for American Market, with portrait of George

**Washington, 1800-1820. 10" high.
Metropolitan Museum of Art**

In fact, five years before Breen's book came out, another scholar had addressed related questions directly. Beginning with an anecdote about General Washington simultaneously arranging for the defense of New York and ordering porcelain tea service for his headquarters there, John Kuo Wei Tchen's *New York Before Chinatown* argues that the Chinese and Chinese-style goods Americans desired, as well as ideas about China, were "integral to the formulation of a new American individual and nation" and that American "modernity was born... phoenixlike from the ashes of 'old' despotic civilizations."⁶⁷ Tchen may overstate the Chineseness of imported ceramics, and the importance of Chinese provenance in the desirability of Chinese goods; but Breen's silence is more disturbing, when every generation has had its scholars who tell how deeply China and the West have been linked.



Left, Qing porcelain tea-bowl painted in Holland in Japanese Kakiemon style, 18th c. Right, French soft-paste porcelain cream boat, Chantilly factory, c. 1735.

Yunte Huang finds that demeaning images of China appeared in American popular culture (Charlie Chan, for instance) at the same moment as American modern poets (Eliot and Pound, for instance) were studying and

drawing on Chinese poetry.⁶⁸ William Leach points out that "in the very years when the U.S. government was restricting the immigration of Chinese and Japanese people into this country, American cities were creating Japanese gardens in botanical parks...."⁶⁹ Similarly, the scholarship on middle-class gentility, consumerism, and political empowerment occludes the place of origins of the goods on which these developments centered: a place whose people, *at just the same moment in history* (c. 1800), the same British middle-class folk began to configure as dirty, backward, and despicably subject to despotism. Now, when Americans have bought so many Chinese goods that the Chinese government holds reserves of a trillion dollars of (largely) American debt, we get Breen's study of the foundations of American patriotism in a boycott of imported consumer goods. Fitzgerald confuses presentation with reality by failing to contextualize Sir John Barrow in English society. Breen confuses presentation with reality by failing to contextualize "the Baubles of Britain" in a wider trade with Asia, sidestepping their Chineseness as neatly as Brazilian choreographer Deborah Coler's dancers negotiate the rows of porcelain vases suspended above them in her piece "Vasos."⁷⁰ Western ideas and goods played a role in the Chinese revolutions of the twentieth century, and Chinese ideas and goods played a role in the democratization of Britain and in the American revolution. A dose of transnationalism would improve both Chinese and American historiography.



“Los Vasos,” by the Deborah Colker Dance Company.

*Sarah Schneewind, who formerly taught at Southern Methodist University, is Associate Professor of History at the University of California, San Diego. She has written [Community Schools and the State in Ming China](#), a study of the impact of Ming autocracy on local institutions (Stanford University Press, 2006). She had even more fun writing [A Tale of Two Melons: Emperor and Subject in Ming China](#), a study of the meaning, background, and changing presentations up into the 21st century of one odd little incident in the early Ming period, intended for undergraduates and the general public (Hackett, 2006). She wrote this article for *The Asia-Pacific Journal*. See her website, the [Ming History English Translation Project](#).*

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Notes

¹ Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts* (New

York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 456, on the repeated forgetting of Mao Zedong’s “evil” side. I would like to thank Edward Countryman, Prasenjit Duara, Charles W. Hayford, Mark Selden, and Bruce Tindall.

² To give just three examples from different decades, Arnold Rowbotham, “The Impact of Confucianism on the European Thought of the Eighteenth Century,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 4 (1945): 224-42, cited in Porter (see below); Michael Edwardes, *East-West Passage: The Travel of Ideas, Arts and Inventions between Asia and the Western World* (London: Taplinger, 1971); David Porter, *Ideographica: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). The most comprehensive work is Donald Lach’s multi-volume *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965-1993). For a clear and polemical single volume, dense with facts, see John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). A short treatment appropriate for undergraduates is D. E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

³ Edwardes, *East-West Passage*, 107. Jonathan Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 42. Alain Peyrefitte, *The Immobile Empire*, trans. Jon Rothschild (New York: Knopf, 1992), 490, treats the increasingly negative evaluations of China in successive 19th-century reports on the Macartney mission as an increasing willingness to risk Chinese displeasure by *telling the truth*.

⁴ Daniel Defoe, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: Being the Second and Last Part of His Life, Written by Himself* (London: W. Taylor, 1719; reprint London: Constable, 1925), 266. John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 114. The textual conservatism of European writing about China is deep: Defoe asks about the Great Wall whether British

soldiers or engineers would not “batter it down in ten days” (*Farther Adventures*, 281): an expression echoed in the *Communist Manifesto*.

⁵ Louis [Lewis] Le Comte, *Memoirs and remarks...made in above ten years travels through the empire of China...* (orig. French pub., 1696; English trans. pub. London: J. Hughes for O. Payne, 1737), 73.

⁶ Pascoe Thomas’s 1745 account of the Anson voyage “uses Le Comte for many pages,” according to Percy G. Adams’s introduction to Richard Walter’s official *Anson’s Voyage Round the World in the Years 1740-44* (reprint: Dover, 1974), xiii. For Anson’s instructions from the king, see Sir John Barrow, *The Life of George, Lord Anson: admiral of the fleet, vice-admiral of Great Britain, and first lord commissioner of the admiralty, previous to, and during, the seven years’ war* (London: J. Murray, 1839), 29-35.

⁷ Walter, *Anson’s Voyage*, 390, 381-3. See also Peyrefitte, *Immobile Empire*, 51.

⁸ Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*, 113.

⁹ Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, “Between ‘Crockery-dom’ and Barnum: Boston’s Chinese Museum, 1845-47,” *American Quarterly* 56.2 (2004): 271-307, 275, 276.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*, 47. Readers may find useful John R. Watt, “Teacher Introduction and Study Guide to ‘Qianglong Meets Macartney: Collision of Two World Views,’” *Education About Asia* 5.3 (2000): 1-18.

¹¹ Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*, 47.

¹² Barrow, *Life of George, Lord Anson*, iv.

¹³ John Barrow, *Travels in China containing descriptions, observations, and comparisons, made and collected in the course of a short residence at the imperial palace of Yuen-min-yuen, and on a subsequent journey through the country from Peking to Canton* (London: A. Strahan for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1804), 186, 108, 59, 617-8. Sir John Barrow, *An autobiographical memoir of Sir John Barrow, bart., late of the Admiralty; including reflections, observations, and reminiscences, at home and abroad, from early life to advanced age*

(London: J. Murray, 1847), 75ff, 133.

¹⁴ Barrow, *Life of George, Lord Anson*, 77.

¹⁵ Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*, 11-12

¹⁶ Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 168 for quotation. It is curious that Rogaski explicitly places her work in relation to Fitzgerald’s (2), yet mentions neither his discussion of personal cleanliness nor Sun Yatsen, unless my eye has missed the references.

¹⁷ Galeote Pereira, trans. C.R. Boxer, “Certain reports of China ...” in Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century: Being the Narratives of Galeote Pereira, Fr. Gaspar da Cruz, O.P., Fr. Martin de Rada, O.E.S.A. (1550-1575)* (Pereira orig. pub. c. 1560; London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), 14.

¹⁸ Gaspar da Cruz, trans. C.R. Boxer, “Treatise in which the things of China are related ...” in Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century* (da Cruz orig. pub. c. 1570; London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), 142.

¹⁹ Defoe, *Farther Adventures*, 271.

²⁰ Pereira, “Certain reports of China...,” 8-9.

²¹ da Cruz, “Treatise in which the things of China are related,” 120-21.

²² Barrow, *Travels in China*, 98-9, 527. Rogaski points to a change in perceptions of Tianjin in particular: from the admiration of Sir George Staunton on the polite but vain Amherst mission, 1816 (Staunton had been a precocious language expert on the McCartney Mission), to the disgust of the triumphant Lord Elgin in 1858. Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*, 54-5.

²³ Barrow, *Travels in China*, table of contents.

²⁴ Barrow, *Travels in China*, 76, 349. For quotation and a discussion of this passage see Porter, *Ideographia*, 214.

²⁵ Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*, 11.

²⁶ John Rule, *Albion’s People: English Society, 1714-1815* (London & New York: Longman, 1992), 32-33, 40-41.

²⁷ Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century*

England (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 197-201.

²⁸ Barrow, *Auto-biographical Memoir*, 1, 5, 7, 17, 42.

²⁹ Peyrefitte, *Immobile Empire*, 20, 140. Barrow, *Travels in China*, 105, 117-8. The question of whether Macartney should kowtow to the Qianlong emperor was resolved by Macartney's going down on one knee. In his *Auto-biographical Memoir* (84), Barrow notes, after describing how he and the others followed suit, "I told Lord Macartney what we had done, and he said it was perfectly correct." Barrow also advised the later Lord Amherst mission on how to manage the problem (*Auto-biographical Memoir*, 116-7). This incident is often used to show the Chinese obsession with ritual; it shows the British obsession just as clearly. Both were still societies centered on rank.

³⁰ Barrow, *Travels in China*, 115. Barrow, *Auto-biographical Memoir*, 80. In Peyrefitte, *Immobile Empire*, 148-9

³¹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (1939), translated by Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1982; reprint 1994), esp. part II, "Civilization as a Specific Transformation of Human Behavior."

³² Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1992), xii-xiii. Thanks to Alexis McCrossen for this book. Parenthetically, Bushman notes a mid-19th century American obsession with tiny feet (p. 295). Does this account for American missionaries' obsession with Chinese women's bound feet?

³³ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 42.

³⁴ Barrow, *Travels in China*, 178-80.

³⁵ Rule, *Albion's People*, 41; McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *Birth of a Consumer Society*, 197-201.

³⁶ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *Birth of a Consumer Society*, 29.

³⁷ T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 22. On tea replacing taverns, see

Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 184-5, and John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 11.

³⁸ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 304. The Victoria and Albert museum's website has a funny [comic-strip video](#), consulted March 17, 2007. For just one later but vivid example of what tea could signify, see Wilkie Collins, *Basil*, (1852, 1862; reprint New York: Dover, 1980), 120-21, where a mysterious clerk becomes even more mysterious in his epicurean finickyness about his tea, "while other tradesmen's clerks... were drinking their gin-and-water jovially, at home or in a tavern." According to American historian George Brown Tindall, the tea at the Boston Tea Party was more likely Chinese than India tea (personal communication, 1997).

³⁹ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 34-5.

⁴⁰ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 76.

⁴¹ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 154. Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 184.

⁴² Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 71. Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 38-9. For silk and porcelain see Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol II, book 1, pp. 95-109 (with other textiles and ceramics); and vol. III, book 4, pp. 1602ff.

⁴³ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 265. Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 266-7. For a Western picture of a Chinese woman embroidering, see Shelagh Vainker, *Chinese Silk: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick: British Museum and Rutgers University, 2004), 193.

⁴⁴ For special soap to clean silk, see Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 63.

⁴⁵ Barry Cunliffe, *Europe Between the Oceans: Themes and Variations, 9000 BC - AD 1000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 43.

⁴⁶ Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita, and

Mark Selden, "Introduction," in their edited volume *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 year perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁴⁷ Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 112-117.

⁴⁸ Julie Emerson, Jennifer Chen, and Mimi Gardner Gates, *Porcelain Stories: From China to Europe* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum and University of Washington Press, 2000), 252. Moreover, Wedgwood's innovative division of labor was derived from his reading of Pere F. X. d' Entrecolles' (1664-1741) reports on the process of mass production of porcelain in China; see Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 100-101.

⁴⁹ Marks, *Origins of the Modern World*, 99, 108. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 294-5. See also Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2001), 312-7.

⁵⁰ G. Hertz, "The English Silk Industry in the Eighteenth Century," *The English Historical Review* 24.96 (1909): 710-727, p. 711.

⁵¹ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *Birth of a Consumer Society*, 36, 37, 266.

⁵² For the use of yellow, see for instance Vainker, *Chinese Silk*, 138-140. Even the vaunted "modern" practice of branding products to appeal to a mass market of consumers had appeared in Ming China: see Gary G. Hamilton and Wei-An Cheng, "The importance of commerce in the organization of China's late imperial economy," in *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 year perspectives*, edited by Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita, and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2003), 190ff. For a discussion of the trope in Western scholarship of fashionless China, and a consideration of the place of

material goods in claiming high social status in late Ming China, see Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 169ff. McKendrick *et al.* cite Braudel, on whom see Mark Elvin, "Braudel and China," in John A. Marino, ed., *Early Modern History and the Social Sciences: Testing the Limits of Braudel's Mediterranean* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2002): 225-254. On printing, see for instance Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 109-115.

⁵³ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *Birth of a Consumer Society*, 103, 127, 129-30, 139; 239.

⁵⁴ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*: "Baubles" 20, 62, 81, 199, 200, 329, tea: 26, "East India Goods" 39.

⁵⁵ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 45.

⁵⁶ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 51.

⁵⁷ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*: 80 on Spitalfields; 337, note 1, for Franklin.

⁵⁸ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 84. Defoe, *Farther Adventures*, 275.

⁵⁹ Lydia Liu, "Robinson Crusoe's Earthenware Pot," *Critical Inquiry* 25.4 (1999): 728-757. See 733 for the quoted phrase, 738. I am grateful to reviewer Prasenjit Duara for this and other references.

⁶⁰ Liu, "Robinson Crusoe's Earthenware Pot," 731.

⁶¹ For additional discussion of McKendrick and related scholarship, see Gary G. Hamilton and Wei-An Cheng, "The importance of commerce in the organization of China's late imperial economy," in *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 year perspectives*, edited by Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita, and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2003), 187ff.

⁶² Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 57.

⁶³ Porter, *Ideographia*, 186-192. See Porter for a series of representations of the Chinese emperor showing clearly the change in European thinking about China.

⁶⁴ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 111, 136. Historian Prasanaan Parthasarathi writes:

“Although the ‘India factor’ in European industrialization has largely eluded the gaze of the modern historian, eighteenth-century Europeans were keenly aware of it.” See his “Rethinking Wages and Competitiveness in the Eighteenth Century: Britain and South India,” *Past and Present* 58 (1998): 79-109, 108.

⁶⁵ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 329, 305-17.

⁶⁶ Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 330, 231.

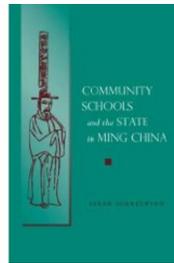
⁶⁷ Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, 3-4, 24.

⁶⁸ Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Displacement:*

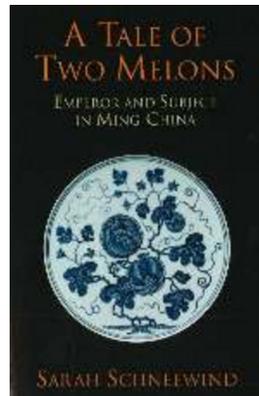
Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 115.

⁶⁹ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 104. Thanks to Alexis McCrossen for this source.

⁷⁰ Larry Rohter, “For a Brazilian Choreographer, Dance as an Obstacle Course,” *The New York Times*, Thursday, October 22, 2009, C5.



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