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1. Xanadu: An Envoy at the Throne of a Monarch

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First, a success. On February 22, 1784, a rise in temperature finally melted some of the ice in New York's East River, opening this channel for commerce. At long last, the *Empress of China* was free to depart for Canton, and the American China trade was officially underway. Along with its cargo of ginseng and Spanish silver dollars, the vessel carried dreams—the dreams of American merchants who saw in the China trade vast potential for wealth accumulation. Their dreams were realized. When the *Empress* returned in 1785, it released a flood of merchandise onto the markets of New York and Philadelphia: tea, silks, nankeens, and porcelain. The ship did not, however, bring much information on China, as the captain and crew had seen very little of the country itself—only a small commercial zone on the Canton waterfront. The vessel was an importer not so much of knowledge as of dreams. Many of the goods were emblazoned with idyllic images of China, and so American consumers could savor the dream that China was a romantic land of great beauty. Since numerous American merchant vessels would embark for Canton in the wake of the *Empress's* success, the flow of images that amounted to a mere trickle in 1785 would grow into a torrential current by the close of the eighteenth century, as will be shown in chapters 2 and 3. ¹

Second, a failure. In 1794, Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest left Canton and traveled north to Peking to appear before the emperor inside the Forbidden City. Although Houckgeest was a naturalized U.S. citizen, on this particular embassy he was representing the country of his birth, Holland. The winter weather was formidable, but the Dutch American envoy was able to tolerate it because he too was possessed by a dream: to see and catalog China. Throughout the journey, Houckgeest's attention was fixed on the landscapes, the plants and animals, the countryside and towns, and the people. All of these provided inexhaustible sources of fascination. In Houckgeest's day, China stood as a colossal mystery in the Western mind. This dearth of reliable information resulted largely from the Qing government's restrictive policy toward the West. In 1760, Emperor Qianlong, whom Houckgeest would meet, had confined all Western traders to the southern port of Canton in order to keep China's intercourse with the outside world at a minimum. ²

Given these historical circumstances, Houckgeest knew that the Dutch embassy of which he was a part presented him with an opportunity few Westerners before him had enjoyed, and he was determined to take full advantage. While the embassy headed north, his pen remained in a state of perpetual motion as he endeavored to capture, in words and in sketches, everything that passed before his eyes. After moving to Philadelphia less than two years later, he combined these observations and images with his Chinese paintings, natural specimens, and cultural artifacts to form a grand Chinese collection that he temporarily exhibited in the city. Houckgeest's reconstruction of China on American soil was so thorough that visitors felt as if they had been magically transported to the Far East. Americans now finally enjoyed access to an educational venue designed to instruct them about a country they knew almost nothing about. At last, China had been demystified.

Or had it? The problem with Houckgeest's exhibit is that precious few people saw it. Not only was the exhibit of a transient nature, being open for just a few months in the summer of 1796, but its owner was not overly committed to educating ordinary people—guests at the exhibit consisted mainly of the city's scientific elite. The grand Chinese collection came and went, attracting scant public notice and achieving little lasting influence. This was indeed a pivotal failure. By neglecting to disseminate his knowledge, Houckgeest allowed images that were far more idealized to take hold of the popular imagination. In other words, the limited influence of his exhibit contributed to the proliferation of an idyllic, even fantastical image of China in the early nineteenth century.

A Trip through China

The epitome of eighteenth-century worldliness, Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest was born in Utrecht, Holland, in 1739. As a young man, he served in the Dutch navy and later lived in China for fifteen years while working for the Dutch East India Company. In the early 1780s he moved to South Carolina to represent his government as the Dutch consul to the American South. Finding the warm climate and the slower lifestyle of South Carolina to be increasingly agreeable,

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he decided that his seafaring days were finished and that it was time to settle down. Toward this end, he purchased a rice plantation, brought his wife and children over from Holland, and, in 1784, became a naturalized citizen of the young United States. ³ At the time his life might have seemed to be entering a happy period of productive routine and stability, but he would soon be in for a rude awakening.

Tragedy intruded on his bucolic bliss when a diphtheria epidemic claimed his four youngest children. To make matters worse, the state of his personal finances collapsed when he entrusted his money to an individual who turned out to be a "false friend." Filled with sorrow and on the verge of bankruptcy, Houckgeest could not bear to remain in South Carolina. When he received an offer in 1790 to return to China to occupy his former post with the Dutch East India Company, he bid farewell to his wife and sailed for Canton. There he would discover that the greatest adventure of his life was in fact not behind him but in the years just ahead. ⁴

While living and working in the great Asian port city, Houckgeest longed to see other parts of China. He chafed at the rigid restrictions imposed on him by the Qing government. Not surprisingly, when the opportunity arose in 1794 to accompany the Dutch ambassador on an official journey to Peking, Houckgeest seized the chance. In November of that year, the embassy commenced its lengthy journey to the north under the leadership of several Chinese officials. The early stages were accomplished on boats with little trouble, but in December the embassy encountered subzero temperatures that had frozen China's natural and man-made waterways. Abandoning the idea of water travel, the Chinese officials responsible for conveying the Dutch delegation presented each of its members with a palanquin and proceeded to hire teams of bearers. Grunting in unison, the bearers assigned to Houckgeest hoisted him into the air—no easy task, given his substantial girth—and the embassy resumed its slow trek to the capital. ⁵

But this mode of transportation only posed new problems as the palanquin bearers kept deserting the party. Though Houckgeest speculated that the bitter cold had driven some of them away, he also believed that corrupt Chinese officials had pocketed government funds earmarked for the bearers. Whatever the true reason, the Chinese officials encountered great difficulty enlisting new men, and so the journey was prone to frequent and prolonged delays. Worse still, Houckgeest did not believe that the officials were equitable in distributing provisions. On days that he went hungry, he observed, they were "in want of nothing." ⁶ Though he could not condone their behavior, he understood corruption to be universal rather than a peculiarly Chinese problem. "But where is there a place in the universe without corruption?" he asked rhetorically. "Would it not be the same thing in Europe? Let us not then judge too severely the Chinese." ⁷

Though perturbed by the shortage of food, the cold weather, the corruption, and the slow progress, Houckgeest decided not to sit in his palanquin and pout. Instead, according to Moreau de Saint-Mery, a friend from France who later edited Houckgeest's account of this embassy, the Dutch American chose to capitalize on the rarity of this moment, when "a vast extent" of China was "laid open to his view." He used the extra time to sketch scenes and describe places that, as he claimed, "never yet were marked with the footstep of an European." This constant activity with the brush and quill, in addition to providing Houckgeest a much-needed diversion from the hardships of travel, brought him closer to the fulfillment of a personal ambition. He aspired to create the most accurate and complete depiction of the Middle Kingdom in history. ⁸

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Priding himself on his objectivity, he recorded only those stimuli that had passed through his own sensorium and refused to allow "a single line borrowed from any traveller or writer" to enter his journal. He was also aware of the subtle distortions of which the human memory was capable, and he therefore faithfully recorded all observations on the same day they were made. Sometimes he worked late into the night, despite frigid temperatures, to finish drawings and descriptions because, as he explained, "I thought it far better to lose a few hours rest, than to let a single remarkable object escape me." Thus, throughout the journey, his eyes were open, his mind was active, and his "pen and pencil were constantly employed." ⁹

As the embassy traversed the countryside, Houckgeest took in the surrounding scenery, most of which possessed a pastoral beauty that greatly appealed to him. "I can venture to say," he observed, "that in all the space my eyes could reach in every direction, there was not a single unpleasant point of view. . . . Externally every thing wore the appearance of prosperity and

happiness." ¹⁰ In a few isolated locations, the beauty of China was so great as to inspire genuine wonder. For instance, as he beheld the "astonishing spectacle" of "a valley situated between two ridges of mountains," he was so stunned by the beauty that he recorded in his journal, "I could not falsify my eyes." It seems the visual data processed by his eyes surpassed the limits of credibility established by his rational faculties. "Yes, I am sure," Houckgeest wrote of this valley, "that many people in Europe would go a hundred miles to enjoy a prospect so enchanting." ¹¹

Houckgeest was also impressed by the myriad ways the Chinese had improved on the natural landscape. For instance, by building pagodas on hilltops, the Chinese enhanced what was already "a very beautiful picture." In addition, they had inserted in their rivers waterwheels of a design superior to those used in the United States. These labor-saving devices, Houckgeest asserted, offered "proof of the industry and intelligence of the Chinese." And most remarkably, the Chinese had invented an ingenious way to create additional space for crops by terracing mountains: "The eye of an European is delighted at beholding the industrious application of the Chinese, who, rating difficulties at nothing, convert mountains into fertile fields." In sum, the Chinese had managed to maximize their agricultural output without diminishing—in fact, while augmenting—the aesthetic appeal of the landscape. ¹²

As Houckgeest's eyes consumed one amazing sight after another, he was constantly reminded that he himself had become a spectacle. For Westerners were not the only ones who demonstrated a strong curiosity for foreign peoples and cultures. Each time his embassy passed through a village, Houckgeest found himself besieged by "the incredible multitude of people who came crowding to see me." In fact, just to get through the dense crowds of onlookers, the delegation often required the assistance of the Chinese soldiers attached to the embassy, who would clear a path through the throng. Yet as the Chinese pushed and shoved to catch a glimpse of him, he continued to inspect them from his palanquin. Chinese women in particular attracted his attention. The women "who filled all the doors and windows" to watch him pass, he remarked, were often "pleasing" and sometimes even "beautiful." ¹³

The Forbidden City

As fascinating as his journey was, Houckgeest anxiously awaited his arrival in Peking. When the embassy finally reached its destination in January 1795, the envoy found that the streets of the capital offered still more novel sights: "This Spectacle, the noise of the carriages, horses, mules, and dromedaries; the assemblage of so many men and animals; the appearance of new dresses, manners, and faces; every thing, in short, put in its claim upon my curiosity, and captivated my attention." Yet Houckgeest was also physically exhausted; the once portly man discovered to his astonishment that the privations of travel had removed a full five inches from his waistline. He fully expected the food and lodging in the capital to be of a quality befitting an official guest of the emperor, but unfortunately it proved disappointing. ¹⁴ And so with weary eyes and with garments hanging loosely on his once ample frame, Houckgeest looked to carry out the embassy's mission, which, somewhat surprisingly, had nothing to do with Sino-Dutch trade negotiations. He had covered well over one thousand miles with no object other than "to congratulate the Emperor on his entry into the sixtieth year of his reign." Houckgeest, it turns out, was little more than a party guest. ¹⁵

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Early in the morning on the appointed day, Chinese officials escorted Houckgeest and the Dutch ambassador to the Forbidden City, where they were to appear before the emperor. As his eyes scanned his surroundings, Houckgeest marveled at the "rich gilding," the "brilliant colours," the "rigid symmetry," and the "uncommon grandeur" of the architecture. ¹⁶ Yet he was not always pleased by what he saw. As he waited for the arrival of the emperor in the company of envoys from other lands (Tibet, Mongolia, and Korea), he was struck by the disorderliness of the scene. Instead of the expected model of order and civility, a "state of disturbance" prevailed "at the court of the Chinese Monarch." Thoroughly disgusted, he wrote that "one might have imagined himself in the midst of a savage nation, that had never entertained the least idea of civilization." Despite his disappointment, when Emperor Qianlong arrived in his yellow palanquin, Houckgeest showed his respect in the fashion demanded by Chinese protocol. Unlike George Lord Macartney, the ambassador of Great Britain who had elected not to kowtow before the emperor in 1793, Houckgeest prostrated himself in the ruler's presence and bowed his head to the ground three times. ¹⁷

Houckgeest was only the second-ranking member of the delegation, but a fortuitous event brought about the expansion of his role. After an illness incapacitated the Dutch ambassador, he turned to Houckgeest to ask him to perform the ambassador's official duties, which included making several visits to the Forbidden City to appear before the emperor. The ambassador's illness proved to be a blessing in disguise, as Qianlong took an instant liking to Houckgeest. The "old Monarch was very satisfied with us" and with "myself in particular," Houckgeest wrote, because "I had the good fortune to exhibit a physiognomy and a demeanor which captivated" his "good will." Qianlong, it seems, had studied Houckgeest's face and mannerisms and had approved of what he saw. [18](#)

Houckgeest further endeared himself to the emperor during his visit to the throne room. While attempting to perform "the ceremony of adoration," which involved bowing one's head all the way to the floor, Houckgeest's hat fell off. This comic moment elicited great laughter from Qianlong, who then proceeded to ask Houckgeest whether or not he could speak Chinese. When Houckgeest responded by saying "Poton" ("I do not understand"), [19](#) the emperor "laughed still more heartily," thinking it quite amusing that his guest had used the Chinese language to express his inability to speak Chinese. Thus, without trying, Houckgeest had become a favorite of the emperor, and poton, his inadvertently humorous expression, quickly gained popularity inside the Forbidden City. [20](#)

At this same meeting, Houckgeest and Qianlong also enjoyed libations of wine. After the envoy finished delivering his toast to the emperor, something remarkable took place that Houckgeest would never forget.

I afterwards finished my salute of honour; and when I rose to retire, the Emperor, having his eyes still turned towards me, kept looking at me with a countenance expressive of the greatest kindness. Thus did I receive a mark of the highest predilection, and such as it is even said no Envoy ever obtained before.

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Qianlong, it seems, had developed a special fondness for Houckgeest and had, with a mere look, conveyed his warm feelings of friendship. As the envoy journeyed back to Canton, he basked in the knowledge that he had formed a personal connection with the most exalted individual in the Eastern Hemisphere. [21](#)

Assembling a Chinese Collection

After Houckgeest returned to Canton in May 1795, he promptly met with two Cantonese painters and presented them with an important job—to convert his hastily executed sketches into complete paintings. However, the pictures that resulted from this assignment were not the first that these two artists had painted for Houckgeest. Years earlier, he had hired them to play a role in his grand strategy to circumvent the Qing government's ban on travel by foreigners. He knew that, since the restriction did not apply to them, they could become his eyes in the Chinese interior and see the "places which he had no opportunity of seeing." With this plan in mind, he had charged them with a task that was truly mammoth in scope: They were to travel "throughout the whole of China" entirely at his expense, "in order that they might collect views of everything curious and picturesque which that country contains." Their job, in short, had been to paint China. [22](#)

That the two painters had executed this objective to the best of their ability was evident in the large corpus of artwork they produced. In the end, they accounted for the vast majority of the two thousand paintings that eventually comprised Houckgeest's burgeoning portfolio. They were clearly its centerpiece, although he also gathered numerous other objects, both manmade artifacts and natural specimens, to represent China's culture and wildlife. And since the Chinese landscape had often entranced him during the long trek to Peking, he also purchased a physical model of a Chinese landscape that contained rocks, pagodas, human figures, flowers, insects, streams, and fruit trees. With dimensions measuring 3 feet high, 22 inches wide, and 26 inches long, the model could rest on a large display table. [23](#)

This impulse to record China comprehensively through objects, images, and written words grew out of Houckgeest's background in Enlightenment science. He believed that one could perfectly understand any country by placing into categories all observed phenomena from both the man-made and the natural worlds—native crafts, architecture, ceremonies, customs, criminal justice, agriculture, topography, climate, and natural history, among many others. Applying this scientific methodology to China, Houckgeest attempted to fill each category with the appropriate objects, pictures, or precise written descriptions. His efforts here were part of a grand aspiration that suffused his age and flowed from the utopian belief that total knowledge of the cosmos was an ascertainable goal for humankind. Theoretically, once Houckgeest had completed his extensive taxonomical endeavor, the world would possess an authoritative and systematic record of China; at that point, China as a subject for scientific inquiry would be officially closed. [24](#)

Or so his reasoning went as he set sail from Canton in 1795. His ship, the *Lady Louisa*, was heavily laden with all that he needed to reconstruct China in the United States: nearly two thousand paintings, a vast collection of objects, and—astonishingly—five living, breathing Chinese people. "Never, I will venture to assert," Moreau wrote, "did a foreigner leave China with a like treasure." [25](#) In contrast to Houckgeest's lofty scientific objectives, his behavior in the realm of human interactions was often far from commendable. On the way home, the vessel dropped anchor at the Cape of Good Hope, where Houckgeest enjoyed an affair with the teenage daughter of his wife's sister; he was more than three decades her senior. Furthermore, under the pretext that the young lady required future instruction, he brought her along when he embarked for Philadelphia. [26](#)

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Constructing China in Pennsylvania

The *Lady Louisa* arrived in Philadelphia in late April 1796. [27](#) Houckgeest, who had amassed a small fortune while trading in Canton, immediately began to pursue a profligate lifestyle with monomaniacal zeal. He purchased a plot of 430 acres outside the city for double its actual value, commissioned an architect to design a pagoda-topped mansion, and then paid the workmen twice the going rate to build it. [28](#) When construction on his property was finished, Houckgeest retired to his new home and promptly started to demonstrate how much his experience in China had altered his identity. He renamed the road leading up to the mansion "China Lane," dubbed the entire estate "China's Retreat," and directed his Chinese servants to use the Chinese collection and decorate the mansion's interior according to the Chinese style. And since he was joined by his wife's niece, who had now become his mistress, he had also apparently embraced a custom practiced by many affluent Chinese males, that of taking on a concubine. (He was still married to his wife, who had moved back to Holland.) As Houckgeest strolled across his grounds, he could observe with tremendous satisfaction that the sinification of an American space was complete, and he proceeded to live in a fashion befitting the world's only self-proclaimed Euro-American Chinese mandarin. [29](#)

Not surprisingly, he immediately became something of a local celebrity. Wherever he went, he would take his carriage with his five Chinese servants because he relished passing the crowds who would stop to stare at the novel sight. He was also fond of entertaining the visitors who would frequently stop by the estate to receive a guided tour from the eccentric gentleman they called the "Chinese Ambassador." [30](#) A skilled storyteller, Houckgeest would thread his amazing narratives through his belongings, causing the once inert objects to come to life. Guests were pleasantly astonished, even dumbfounded, as China in all its splendor unfolded before their eyes. And with their imaginations stimulated, they began to feel that they had not just seen one man's Chinese collection but had actually journeyed to China itself. "Everything at Mr. Van Braam's reminds us of China," observed Moreau. [31](#)

America's First Chinese Exhibit

During the summer of 1796, while China's Retreat was under construction, Houckgeest placed his enormous collection on display in Philadelphia. [32](#) Inside the exhibition space, he entertained a group of individuals who were curious about the world. Moreau referred to them as "amateurs of the sciences." As these guests inspected the collection, met the proprietor's five Chinese servants,

and listened to his spellbinding stories, they felt as if they had been transported to China. "It was even impossible to avoid fancying ourselves in China," Moreau wrote of this exhibit, "while surrounded at once by living Chinese, and by representations of their manners, their usages, their monuments, and their arts." ³³ Houckgeest presented guests with what must have been a completely novel experience—that of virtual travel.

Indeed, with his Chinese objects, Chinese paintings, Chinese anecdotes, and even Chinese people, he had seemingly reconstructed China itself. Of course, what Houckgeest really offered was not the real China but rather his own construction of it. Although few specifics about this exhibit are known, we can, by piecing together what information we do have, gain some understanding of the sort of cultural presentation Houckgeest offered to his guests. His version of China was conditioned by the historical circumstances he faced in China, the Chinese with whom he interacted, the ideology to which he adhered, and his desire to overturn an earlier intellectual construction of China.

Two major historical circumstances played a role in shaping Houckgeest's construction of China: the Qing government's confinement of foreigners to Canton and the celebration commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of Qianlong's ascension to the throne. For Houckgeest, these two circumstances worked in tandem, like a lock and key. While the former effectively sealed off most of China from a foreigner's view, the latter allowed Houckgeest special access. And with that access, the Dutch American was able to provide detailed information on two areas previously enshrouded in mystery—the vast Chinese interior and the majestic Forbidden City itself. And there is yet another reason why the Qing ban and the Dutch embassy were so crucial in shaping Houckgeest's re-creation of China. These two historical circumstances enhanced the importance of the next factor contributing to this re-creation, and that was the participation of the Chinese.

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During his embassy to Peking, Houckgeest could not roam freely about the country making sketches and observations. Instead, Chinese officials dictated his every move, deciding where he went, what he ate, whom he met, what he saw, and even how he interpreted what he saw. According to Moreau, Houckgeest was attentive in observing "all that he was *allowed* to see of China" [emphasis added], but he was not permitted to see everything. Similarly, on reaching the capital, Houckgeest was aware that his access to forbidden places depended entirely on the whim of his Chinese hosts. And so he was elated when he heard that "the old Monarch was very satisfied with us." This encouraging report "assured us that we should have an opportunity of seeing things that no foreigner as yet had ever beheld"—the "internal parts of the palace." Indeed, by the time of his departure, Houckgeest estimated that he had seen three-fourths of the Forbidden City. Yet that Houckgeest had special access to rare sights did not mean he necessarily understood what he saw. When questions occurred to him, he invariably turned to the Chinese to supply the answers. In this way, the Chinese fed Houckgeest much of the information that he later used to construct China in the United States. ³⁴

Why did the emperor allow Houckgeest to see so much? Quite possibly, by granting substantial access to the Dutch envoy, Qianlong was pursuing the interests of his country. With Houckgeest in his presence, the emperor made no secret of both his favorable impression of the Dutch and his strong distaste for the English, with whom he had met less than two years earlier. Indeed, Houckgeest felt certain that the "praise" he had received from the emperor came "at the expense of the English." ³⁵ Just two years earlier, in 1793, George Lord Macartney had both refused to honor Qianlong with a kowtow and unilaterally presented the emperor with a list of requests intended to reduce England's trade deficit with China. ³⁶ In contrast, the Dutch envoys had willingly prostrated themselves before the emperor and had elected not to bother him with trade-related issues during their visit. By rewarding the behavior of the Dutch, Qianlong was simultaneously sending a signal to the English: The demeanor of their diplomats was not sufficiently respectful and British insistence on pressing the Chinese government to change its policy was not an effective way to achieve a desired result. In other words, the emperor was quite shrewdly utilizing perhaps the most effective tactic in the Chinese arsenal for dealing with foreigners—playing the interests of one nation against those of another.

In addition, Houckgeest's lack of painterly skills led him to further forfeit to the Chinese the control over his construction of their country. He was an amateur with the brush and, since visual representations were integral to his grand ambition to record China, he was compelled to hire the two native painters mentioned above. As a result, although he formulated his own vision of China, he was not able to transfer it directly into his collection of paintings. That vision had to

pass first through the two Chinese artists, who, if they so desired, could make subtle alterations to the vision before finalizing it on multiple canvasses. Furthermore, the nature of their assignment was such that they worked with considerable independence. When Houckgeest sent them on an extensive journey across China, he of course provided them with instructions as to the kind of scene they should reproduce. Nevertheless, when the time came to select specific views, the two artists necessarily made decisions on their own without consulting their employer. Thus, much of Houckgeest's collection of paintings really offered a *Chinese perspective of China*. According to Moreau, this lent the painting more, not less, authenticity. "When we reflect that it is China that is meant to be represented, and that Chinese are the painters," he wrote, "we are disposed to believe that . . . this manner is not without its advantage," as "the more delicate hand of a European" would have robbed "the resemblance" of its genuine quality. ³⁷

The Chinese molded Houckgeest's construction of China in one final respect. At the exhibit in Philadelphia, visitors with questions could speak not only with Houckgeest but also with his five Chinese servants. According to Moreau, they were on hand to "attest the truth of what he [Houckgeest] has related concerning their country." ³⁸ Thus, in these several ways, the Chinese exerted substantial influence over a Westerner's attempt to portray their country.

Houckgeest's ideology also played a role in that his experience in China was structured by his faith in the ability of Enlightenment science to demystify the world. He was animated by what Moreau called a "rational curiosity which seeks to penetrate into mysteries under which it imagines useful truths to lie concealed." ³⁹ For Houckgeest, this ideology functioned as a mode of perception or a way of ordering the reality he confronted in China. It equipped him both with the principles he used to construct meanings out of what he saw and with a methodology that could guide his collecting effort. One visitor recalled being impressed by the number of categories exhaustively covered in the collection of artwork: "But what is the most interesting in all this collection is about 60 notebooks of Chinese paintings representing with the greatest accuracy their techniques in arts and crafts, their sciences, their agriculture, ceremonies, criminal code, natural history, botany, geographical maps, etc., etc." ⁴⁰ Without this faith in Enlightenment science, Houckgeest would not have assembled a collection so encyclopedic in its scope because he would not have felt compelled to fill so many categories.

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In sum, I see neither a high degree of unity among those who constructed China nor the presence of a consistently anti-Chinese message in their cultural productions. For this reason, I contend that the United States was not headed all along on a misguided course that would lead inevitably to the Exclusion Act of 1882. Instead, I see Americans as being engaged in a rich and lively debate in which presenters of China, their audiences, and the Chinese themselves each possessed a strong voice. Even when Americans seemed to collectively turn against China at the end of the Opium War in 1842, the Chinese were never without their defenders and were never completely silenced. Because of that debate, I do not believe that the Exclusion Act was inevitable.

Since Houckgeest viewed China through a particular ideological lens, he not surprisingly developed novel views. And like most of the individuals who constructed China, he was keenly aware that his views differed from those offered by his predecessors. In his day, most knowledge of China, what little of it there was, originated in the accounts of Catholic missionaries, written back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More often than not, these accounts depicted China quite favorably as a benign despotism ably governed by a ruling class of educated elites, or mandarins. For instance, in 1556, Gaspar da Cruz, a Dominican friar, augured success for the Christian mission in China because "the Chinas exceed all others in populousness, in greatness of the realm, in excellence of polity and government, and in abundance of possessions and wealth." ⁴¹

Although Houckgeest was enchanted by much of what he saw in China, he also found a lot to loathe, especially in Peking. In his published account of his journey, he aggressively contested the glowing descriptions left by the Catholic missionaries. "This picture will perhaps accord ill with the brilliant accounts that the Missionaries have sent to Europe of this capital," Houckgeest wrote, "but I paint what I see, and what (I repeat it again) I so little expected to see, that nothing but my own eyes have convinced me of its reality." ⁴² Convinced of his own objectivity and the soundness of his scientific methods, Houckgeest used his exhibit to refute the conclusions drawn by the Catholic missionaries. In the place of their largely exuberant account, he offered an assessment that mixed sincere praise with scathing criticism.

Concerning the latter, he found serious fault with the closed nature of Chinese civilization, believing quite strongly that China could greatly improve itself by learning from the outside world. Having himself resided in Europe, North America, and Asia, Houckgeest had developed an unwavering belief in international exchange; when people, inventions, and ideas crossed borders, all countries involved benefited. In fact, when Houckgeest encountered a Chinese invention that could be applied in the West, he did not hesitate to apply it. For instance, after judging the Chinese waterwheel to be far superior to its American equivalent, he promptly introduced this technology to his adopted country after returning home. "I have introduced the use of them into the United States of America," he wrote, "where they are of great utility in rivers." Not surprisingly, he expressed a preference for the Cantonese people over their countrymen in other provinces because they had benefited the most from frequent contact with the Western world: "I will venture to say, that by means of their continual intercourse with Europeans, the Chinese of Canton are in general more civilized than the rest of the nation to whom that advantage is denied." ⁴³

Though liking the emperor on a personal level, Houckgeest directed most of his criticism toward the members of China's ruling class. In his estimation, their policy of self-isolation was so disastrous as to cause "the profound ignorance of the Emperor of China, and of the people he governs, as to everything that concerns the rest of mankind." After all, he would argue, the state of American waterwheels had undergone marked improvement only because he had been willing to cross national borders, expose his mind to new ideas and inventions, and introduce these in the United States. And yet a "miracle" must take place, he wrote, before "the idea of sending a Chinese as an envoy to other nations can enter the Chinese head." Why should China's rulers deny their people this same opportunity to improve themselves?

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They did so, Houckgeest believed, out of excessive pride: Chinese ignorance flowed directly out of Chinese arrogance. When presented with something new, their attitude was simply to ask condescendingly, "How, indeed, is it possible . . . to learn any thing, when we are convinced that our knowledge is already superior to that of the rest of the world?" And so, even in industry and the mechanical arts, where "our [Western] genius surpasses theirs," the Chinese refuse to take foreign inventions seriously. Though mechanical devices often provoke the "astonishment" of the Chinese, their "vanity" is so great that they "do nothing to imitate" the West, choosing instead to dismiss these wonders as mere "superfluities." ⁴⁴ If China continued to keep the outside world at bay, it would ultimately pay the tremendous cost of cultural and technological stagnation.

As harsh as Houckgeest's critique was, it is important to remember that he was not criticizing Chinese people or the culture so much as the rulers' decision to block any kind of outside stimulus that could help their culture and society evolve. It is also important to consider his condemnation of Qing policy in the context of China's Retreat, the mere existence of which begs an important question. Did Houckgeest truly believe in a China without walls, a China that could adopt the ways of the West? After all, China's Retreat existed only because one man possessed the driving ambition to re-create China in a rural Pennsylvanian setting. One could argue that the estate was nothing more than the physical embodiment of its owner's belief in cultural exchange. However, Houckgeest went to great lengths to transform his property because he yearned to luxuriate in the exotic opulence afforded by Chinese culture. He found this culture to be so seductive, irresistible, and intoxicating precisely because he perceived it as being intensely different from his own. And so he openly decried China's policy of isolation but simultaneously demonstrated a profound attraction to the rich cultural distinctiveness that the policy had preserved.

In sum, Houckgeest's actions belied his words in a manner that suggests he himself was truly divided, whether he realized it or not. Most likely, his exhibit in Philadelphia reflected his unresolved ambivalence. Guests were taken on a tour courtesy of a man who celebrated the ingenuity, beauty, and exoticism of Chinese culture, and at the same time they were treated to his excoriation of China's leaders for enacting measures that preserved the very way of life that he went to such lengths to put on display. ⁴⁵

Decadence and Demise

For about a year, Houckgeest led a life of opulence at China's Retreat. But it was not long before his extravagant and even wasteful ways soon caught up with him. He was living so far beyond

his monetary means that, by 1797, he had already depleted his fortune and fallen into arrears. Indeed, his debts grew so severe that authorities placed him in debtor's prison—a humiliation that the Caucasian mandarin regarded as an affront to his dignity. After his friends found the resources to secure his release, Houckgeest returned to China's Retreat for a brief period during which he learned that his wife in Holland, who had evidently learned of his mistress, had divorced him. [46](#)

While this downward spiral was in process, China's Retreat received a visit from Julian Niemcewicz, a traveler from Poland. The once ebullient Houckgeest, Niemcewicz reported, had given into despair and was now prone to incessant moaning over the dismal state of his financial affairs. Fearful that his host's despondent mood would prevent him from receiving the greatly anticipated tour of China, Niemcewicz wisely redirected the conversation away from depressing topics and toward a subject steeped in majesty and wonder:

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He spoke of it [his debt] with a heart wounded by grief, and his complaints would never have finished if I had not put him on the subject of the Emperor of China. Immediately his face became radiant. He began to tell us of the lunch to which he was invited by this prince; of the glass of wine and the preserves that the Emperor himself had sent to him, etc. He then showed us his house.

While Niemcewicz was receiving the much coveted grand tour, he became so accustomed to inspecting inanimate objects that, when he unexpectedly encountered a living human being, he mistook her for a porcelain doll. "In truth everything was so much in porcelain," he recalled, "that I thought for a moment that his wife was made of the same material, she was so pale and still. This is his own niece, aged 18, that Mr. Van Braam has just married." With this observation, Niemcewicz pointed out the dark side of Houckgeest's mania for collecting. Consumed by his passion to own, classify, arrange, and display things, he had perhaps forgotten how to treat his youthful bride as a person instead of as one of his lifeless possessions. [47](#)

Niemcewicz also faulted Houckgeest's acquisitive nature for effecting his rapid demise. Indeed, the tour of the mansion convinced him that Houckgeest's grave pecuniary difficulties were largely self-inflicted. "If he brought us great riches and great curiosities from that country [China]," the Polish traveler wrote, "it seems that in return he has left there all his good sense and all his prudence." Rather than "conforming to the simplicity of the country," he has organized his life with no purpose other than "to flaunt an Asiatic luxury." [48](#) In making this criticism, Niemcewicz was of course correct; his host truly had fallen prey to his own excesses. In fact, shortly after granting this tour, Houckgeest sold China's Retreat and moved to London, where he auctioned off his collection. In 1801, he died in obscurity in Amsterdam. [49](#)

Conclusion

With his Chinese collection, Houckgeest was in possession of a rare jewel that, unfortunately, few people were able to enjoy. Interested mainly in delighting select gatherings of friends and travelers, Houckgeest kept the collection largely outside of the public's view. Though he did showcase his collection in Philadelphia while he awaited the completion of his Chinese-themed mansion, the exhibit was open for just a few months and appears to have attracted visitors primarily from the educated and aristocratic ranks of society. For this reason, ordinary Americans never enjoyed an excursion to Houckgeest's China.

While much of this failure was clearly his own doing, the era in which his Chinese collection appeared should bear part of the responsibility. For in Houckgeest's day, the printing, transportation, and market revolutions that would transform American culture in the nineteenth century had yet to happen. In the 1830s, important advances in print technology would increase the affordability of newspapers and widen their circulation. In the 1790s, though, newspapers were comparably more expensive, possessed a smaller readership, and were not written to appeal to a general audience. Thus, they were largely ineffective as organs for generating publicity, and in any case Houckgeest's exhibit apparently received no attention from the press. [50](#) Even if Americans had been aware of the exhibit's existence, the difficulties inherent to travel in the 1790s would have prevented most interested parties from seeing it. Before railroads, canals, and steamship lines revolutionized transportation in America, people who lived either in the

outlying areas of Philadelphia or in other cities lacked a convenient means to visit the exhibit. And finally, the exhibit also appeared well before the market revolution of the Jacksonian era brought about the expansion of the middle class. In Houckgeest's day, most Americans possessed neither the disposable income (in the event an admission fee was required) nor the leisure time to patronize museums, no matter how educational and entertaining the experience promised to be. In short, Houckgeest made his cultural offering in an economic climate that was not yet conducive to success.

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This is not to say that any museum erected in the 1790s was doomed to failure; after all, the museum of Charles Willson Peale was flourishing in Philadelphia at this very time. For this reason, much of the onus for the failure of Houckgeest's exhibit must rest squarely on his own shoulders. Moreau was quite fond of his eccentric friend. Nevertheless, he believed that Houckgeest had squandered a wonderful chance to disseminate knowledge through the establishment of a permanent exhibit that could, in time, reach a wide audience. "[I]f Mr. Van-Braam had only exhibited his numerous drawings," he stated, "China would be better known by them alone than by all that has been written concerning it till the present day." ⁵¹ Niemcewicz also recognized the enormous educational potential of the paintings; he believed that Houckgeest should have published a book that combined illustrations of China "with a text by a man who has been there." Such a work, he was sure, would supply "precise information on these people so ancient and interesting." ⁵²

By failing to spread this "precise information," Houckgeest left a gaping void that allowed carriers of imprecise information to enjoy greater influence. Without his guidance, Americans did decide to construct China in the early decades of the nineteenth century, but they did so in an unsupervised fashion—by gathering images from disparate sources and stitching them together into a crazy quilt of oriental fantasy. Most of these images came not from a specific individual with real expertise but rather from impersonal economic forces. Indeed, through channels created by the vast Sino-American trade, idyllic images of China streamed into the United States, appeared on dinner tables and in store windows, and stimulated lively but bored imaginations. As a result, many Americans came to understand China less as a geographical reality and more as an oriental fantasyland. In this way, Houckgeest's failure to instruct had a profound effect on Americans' conception of China. One wonders, for instance, if anyone who had visited his exhibit and seen a substantial portion of his two thousand paintings could possibly continue to believe that the real China resembled the simple blue-and-white pictures found on porcelain. As the next chapter shows, many Americans did exactly that.

Notes:

Note 1: For a thorough account of this ship's voyage, see Philip Chadwick Foster Smith, *The Empress of China* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Maritime Museum, 1984), 3–5, 220–34. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), 121. [Back.](#)

Note 3: As an act of allegiance to his adopted country, Houckgeest dedicated to George Washington the account of his embassy to Peking: "I cannot show myself more worthy of the title of Citizen of the United States, which is become my adoptive Country, than by paying a just tribute to the Chief, whose principles and sentiments are calculated to procure them a duration equal to that of the Chinese Empire." M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Mery, *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company, to the Court of the Emperor of China in the Years 1794 and 1795 . . . Containing a Description of Several Parts of the Chinese Empire, Unknown to Europeans; Taken from the Journal of André Everard Van Braam* (London: Lee and Hurst, 1798), 1:vi. [Back.](#)

Note 4: Charles H. Carpenter, "The Chinese Collection of A. E. van Braam Houckgeest," *Magazine Antiques* (February 1974), 338–40; and Moreau, 1:vii–xii. [Back.](#)

Note 5: Edward R. Barnsely, *History of China's Retreat: Paper Read by Edward R. Barnsley before the Bucks County Historical Society at Doylestown, Pa., May 6, 1933* (Bristol, Pa.: Bristol Printing Company, 1933), 6–7. [Back.](#)

Note 6: Moreau, 1:119, 132. [Back.](#)

Note 7: Moreau, 1:209. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Moreau, 1:xi–xii. [Back.](#)

Note 9: Moreau, 1:xi–xii. [Back.](#)

Note 10: Moreau, 1:91. [Back.](#)

Note 11: According to Stephen Greenblatt, one experiences wonder when the "shock of the unfamiliar" compels the mind to register simultaneously two incompatible reactions to a single stimulus: first, that the sight is so amazing that one cannot grant it credibility and, second, that the sight is witnessed firsthand and therefore must be trusted as real. In other words, a sense of wonder results when one cannot resolve the contradiction that something is at once "unbelievable and true." Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 2, 20–21. Moreau, 1:121–23. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Moreau, 1:74–75, 110–11. [Back.](#)

Note 13: Moreau, 1:102. [Back.](#)

Note 14: Moreau, 1:179–80, 183, 187, 192. [Back.](#)

Note 15: Moreau, 1: 2, 8. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Moreau, 1:197, 219, 228. [Back.](#)

Note 17: Macartney did, however, kneel on one knee, bow his head, and present a gift to the emperor. James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 1. Moreau, 1:188–90, 223. [Back.](#)

Note 18: Moreau, 1:202. [Back.](#)

Note 19: In Pinyin, *poton* would be *bu dong*. [Back.](#)

Note 20: Moreau, 1:238–39, 247. [Back.](#)

Note 21: Moreau, 1:239. [Back.](#)

Note 22: Moreau, 2:298. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Barnsely, 7. Moreau, 2:320–22. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Houckgeest's methodology was common for this period. One finds the same tendency to collect and classify in Lord Macartney's 1793 embassy to Peking. Hevia, 84–90. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Moreau, 1:xii. [Back.](#)

Note 26: Barnsely, 7. Houckgeest's wife was the daughter of the governor of the Cape of Good Hope. William Davis, *History of Bucks County, Pennsylvania*, 1:96–97. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Philadelphia Gazette, 26 April 1796. [Back.](#)

Note 28: Moreau, xiii. [Back.](#)

Note 29: For information on China's Retreat, see the following: "China Retreat, Advertisement for Sale of" (28 July 1801), Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Barnsely, 10; Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, *Under Their Vine and Fig Tree: Travels in America in 1797–1799, 1805, with Some Further Account of Life in New Jersey*, trans. and ed. Metchie J. E. Budka (Elizabeth, N.J.: Grassmann, 1965), 62–64. [Back.](#)

Note 30: Carpenter, 338. [Back.](#)

Note 31: Moreau, 2:324. [Back.](#)

Note 32: Moreau, 1:xiii. [Back.](#)

Note 33: Moreau, 1:xiii. [Back.](#)

Note 34: Moreau, 1:x–xiii, xxi, 202–3, 228. [Back.](#)

Note 35: Moreau, 1:204. [Back.](#)

Note 36: Specifically, Macartney sought the right to establish a diplomatic residence in Peking, the end of the restrictive trading system, and the privilege of conducting trade in ports other than Canton. All of these requests were denied. Spence, 122–23. [Back.](#)

Note 37: Moreau, 2:302. [Back.](#)

Note 38: Moreau, 1:xiii. [Back.](#)

Note 39: Moreau, 1:x. [Back.](#)

Note 40: Niemcewicz, 63. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Jonathan Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: Norton, 1998), 25. In this study, Spence provides an historical overview of the West's view of China, beginning with Marco Polo and ending with Kafka and Borges. His American coverage, which does not overlap with this work, begins with depictions of Chinese immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century. [Back.](#)

Note 42: Moreau, 1:192. [Back.](#)

Note 43: Moreau, 1:74–75, 246. [Back.](#)

Note 44: Moreau, 1:242–43. [Back.](#)

Note 45: Though generally in favor of international exchange, Houckgeest did see one possible drawback. The introduction of Western ideas and inventions into a non-Western society did not necessarily effect an overall improvement in the quality of life. After all, he asked, "are the people of the South Sea islands . . . more happy or more wretched, in consequence of their intercourse with Europeans for the last thirty or forty years? Alas! it is but too true, that we have given them a knowledge and desire of things which their country cannot produce. No doubt, the same cause would produce the same effect in China." Moreau, 1:244. [Back.](#)

Note 46: Carpenter, 340–41. [Back.](#)

Note 47: Niemcewicz, 62–64. [Back.](#)

Note 48: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 49: Carpenter, 340–41. [Back.](#)

Note 50: My search through Philadelphia's newspapers yielded no mention of Houckgeest's exhibit. [Back.](#)

Note 51: Moreau's statement seems to imply that Houckgeest did not include his collection of paintings in the temporary exhibit in Philadelphia. However, Moreau possibly meant that the pictures were so instructive as to merit, instead of the brief Chinese exhibit Houckgeest offered in Philadelphia, permanent display in a venue that would attract substantial numbers of visitors. Moreau, 1:xii. [Back.](#)

Note 52: Niemcewicz, 62–64. [Back.](#)

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