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7. The Cultural Fruits of Diplomacy: A Chinese Museum and Panorama

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On June 17, 1843, Caleb Cushing attended a dinner held at Faneuil Hall in Boston, the occasion being the dedication of a monument to be erected on Bunker Hill. The list of distinguished guests included the secretary of state, Daniel Webster, and the president of the United States, John Tyler. The president had recently tapped Cushing to lead a diplomatic mission to China with the following objectives: to meet with Chinese officials, to travel north to Peking to appear before the emperor, and to secure through negotiation a treaty comparable to what England had won through war. This treaty must grant the United States the right to conduct trade at the following four ports in addition to Canton: Ningbo, Shanghai, Xiamen, and Fuzhou. If Cushing were to fail there, England would possess an insurmountable advantage over the United States in the China trade.

As the evening wore on, the time came for Cushing to address the dinner guests. In a speech that combined humanitarian themes with bombast, he articulated what he believed was the overarching significance of the mission to China. Although civilization had originally flowed from the East to the West, the recent advances of the West had effected a reversal in the course, such that "knowledge is being rolled back from the West to the East." "We have become the teacher of our teachers," he said, and then turned to address President Tyler directly. "I go to China, sir, if I may so express myself, in behalf of civilization." In his closing remarks, Cushing considered the purpose of the new monument, which was to commemorate the Battle of Bunker Hill, and speculated as to the significance of a second, hypothetical monument. It would commemorate not military activity, he said, but rather "the accumulating glory of peaceful arts" that have brought "civilized life."¹

Cushing did not define either the "knowledge" that the West intended for China or the "peaceful arts" that had brought peace and prosperity to the United States, but in both cases he was almost certainly alluding to technology. In the 1840s, several important new technologies were reshaping American life: the telegraph, the daguerreotype, and the steam engine that powered trains and ships. Furthermore, in Cushing's home state of Massachusetts, the waterpowered looms of the new textile mills were producing cotton fabric with startling efficiency. With technology growing in importance in the United States, it not surprisingly occupied a central position in the Cushing Mission as well. First, the increasingly productive American factories sought foreign markets for their goods and now looked to Cushing to open up China for American commerce. Second, most American observers of the Opium War attributed the outcome to the large disparity in military technology separating British and Chinese forces. For this reason, American arms manufacturers and government officials alike believed that Cushing might encounter a country eager to revamp its military with assistance from the United States.

However, no one knew exactly what China would want from the Americans, if anything at all. Despite Cushing's rhetoric about America teaching China, his mission taught the Chinese surprisingly little about American culture. Yet the mission was not a total failure with regard to cultural understanding because, through the efforts of some of the young men attached to Cushing's legation, Americans learned new things about China. John R. Peters Jr., a brilliant young engineer, accompanied Cushing's mission in order to exhibit the finest fruits of American mechanical ingenuity before the Chinese. However, believing that his gifts of cultural explanation should flow in two directions, Peters also assembled a mammoth Chinese collection that he later exhibited in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. One might expect that an engineer would measure any given civilization according to its mechanical prowess, but Peters defies our expectations. He did not judge the Chinese harshly for their lack of technological sophistication and, instead, surprises us with his open-mindedness. In China he confronted what he believed was a remarkable civilization and told Americans as much through his museum exhibits.

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Joining Peters on the mission was George R. West, who served as the official artist. Instead of returning home at the conclusion of the mission, West took advantage of the new latitude given to foreigners in the wake of China's various international treaties. He traveled to the new treaty ports and their vicinities, sketching many places that Europeans and Americans had never before seen. On returning to the United States, he converted the hundreds of scenes in his sketchbook into a single colossal work—a panorama of China. Unlike Captain Kellett, Peters and West chose

to dissent against the prevailing construction of China; the educational venues they created provided a counterweight to the mockery and raillery that infected the mainstream view. Through their efforts, a diplomatic mission founded on the condescending notion that China needed to change ended up, ironically, bolstering the opposite view: that China possessed a rich culture in its own right.

Preparations

In the spring and summer of 1843, Caleb Cushing was inundated with letters. Although prominent political figures accounted for some of them, most came from people he did not know who wanted to ask him for a favor or make a request. A woman wrote to tell Cushing that a loved one had mysteriously disappeared in China. Would he attempt to locate this individual? ² A Harvard student studying Chinese wrote to complain that the college library was woefully lacking in Chinese texts; Cushing ought to procure some, he asserted, so that he would no longer have to practice by reading "tea chests!" ³ The *New York Sun* wrote Cushing because the paper wanted to publish his letters from Asia. ⁴ The owner of a powder mill wrote because he had heard that Chinese gunpowder, unlike its counterpart in the United States, was not prone to accidental explosions; he urged Cushing to learn China's secret. ⁵ A scientist wrote because he needed information on winds and storms in China as well as accurate atmospheric data. ⁶ The department of natural history at the National Institute wrote to ask Cushing to secure Chinese plant specimens for its herbarium. ⁷ A phrenologist wrote offering to stock Cushing's traveling library "with all the materials which Phrenological writers have contributed to science with respect to the natural characteristics of the Chinese." A strong background in phrenology would aid the mission, he argued, because "you will not have to wait to learn their [the Chinese people's] peculiarities." This gentleman had obviously neglected to read Cushing's article from 1839 in which he denounced phrenology as a bogus science. ⁸

Parents asking Cushing (and sometimes imploring him) to take their offspring to China accounted for many of the letters. A father wrote that his son was an excellent mechanic who would be of greater value to the mission than "a hundred politicians." ⁹ A mother asked Cushing to set up her daughter as the first female missionary in China, despite the young woman's "limited education." ¹⁰ Cushing sometimes read hard-luck cases, such as the poor fellow who had recently lost his wife and children and desperately wanted to escape his dreary life with a fresh start in China. ¹¹ And a father inquired whether his son could be added to the mission as a private secretary. The lad was "in delicate health," but the father assured Cushing he was "not consumptive" and would most likely survive "a sea voyage." His chances for acceptance were not high. ¹²

But the prospects of one group of young applicants were far more promising. Cushing received letters from young men possessing not just outstanding credentials but noteworthy pedigrees as well, and he was inclined to look favorably on them because he knew their fathers. He had already taken on Fletcher Webster, the son of Daniel Webster, to serve as secretary. In addition, John Kintzing Kane of Philadelphia, a judge in eastern Pennsylvania's district court and an acquaintance of Nathan Dunn, wrote to state the case for his son, Elisha Kent Kane, who had finished at the top of his class at the University of Pennsylvania medical school. Cushing appointed him to the mission as the official surgeon, a move that attained brilliance *ex post facto* when Kane went on to become an Arctic explorer and national hero in the 1850s. ¹³

Cushing also received the following letter from John Peters Jr., a young civil engineer from New York, who outlined a bold proposal for both the mission and his role in it:

I am desirous of being attached to the United States Embassy to the Empire of China, and respectfully solicit your approbation and appointment. The principal object of this request is to enable me to obtain the countenance and protection of the government in the enterprise of conveying, exhibiting and explaining models and specimens of American arts and productions under the auspices of the American Institute, and of obtaining whatever information may be practicable to acquire from the ancient nation for the benefit of our country. My profession is that

of a Civil Engineer and mechanic; and I should hope under your direction and counsel to be useful to the national objects of your mission in promoting the great interests of Agriculture and the Arts under the patronage of the American Institute of this city. ¹⁴

Peters believed the mission should effect a cultural exchange that would prove beneficial to both China and the United States. He proposed to demonstrate to the Chinese the virtues of various time- and labor-saving devices used in the United States; conversely, he aimed to discover tools and methods in China that might have practical utility for Americans. Fletcher Webster, who assisted Cushing in screening candidates, met with Peters in New York. "I did not give Mr. Peters much encouragement," he reported to Cushing after the meeting, "for it struck me that we have already machinery enough." While Peters seemed extraneous to the mission in Webster's view, he did add that the engineer appeared to be "a clever young man." ¹⁵

What Webster did not realize was that powerful forces were already aligned behind Peters. Influential men and organizations backed his application, including Robert Morris, the mayor of New York. "John R. Peters," the mayor assured Cushing, "is a scientific and practical civil engineer and mechanic of strict moral worth and character, a son of our worthy citizen John R. Peters." ¹⁶ Indeed, one of Peters's most helpful advocates was his own father, who was a successful businessman in New York, a former member of the Common Council that oversaw the construction of the Erie Canal, and a personal friend of President John Tyler. ¹⁷ While Cushing was considering young men for his legation, the elder Peters sent a carriage to pick up Cushing in New York, and the two men cemented their friendship over—appropriately enough—cups of "China Tea." ¹⁸

Most important, as the younger Peters's letter to Cushing indicates, the engineer was the choice of the American Institute of New York. T. B. Wakeman, who held a high-ranking position in that organization, wrote Cushing expressly to recommend Peters for the mission. ¹⁹ Founded in 1829, the American Institute was dedicated to the development and dissemination of technology in order to further the interests of American industry, agriculture, and commerce. The institution held annual fairs at which inventors congregated to display their new devices and to swap ideas with others engaged in similar pursuits. In fact, Samuel Morse had unveiled his telegraph at the institute just a few years before Cushing's mission. ²⁰

Advocates of the American Institute were incapable of modesty when it came to describing their beloved institution. Indeed, they conceived of a grand teleological framework in which the American Institute played a central role in bringing about the rapid ascension of the United States in the world. A writer for *Merchants Magazine and Commercial Review* used words that echoed those spoken by Cushing to commemorate the monument at Bunker Hill. In an article about the institute's annual fair, the author charted America's upward trajectory, from the period of colonization and then to the war for independence from Great Britain and finally to the present age, at which the importance of the military receded as the holy trinity of science, invention, and enterprise advanced. Development in these three areas, by increasing the efficiency and productivity of farms and factories, improved the quality of American life. "It can scarcely be denied," he asserted, "that this improvement has been, in great measure, advanced through the agency of the American Institute." The institute was successful, but the writer believed that it had yet to complete its great work: "We trust that they [the members of the institute] may go on and work out even greater benefits to the nation; that they may advance the public morals, elevate the national standard, and contribute to the real and solid glory of the Union." ²¹

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Similarly, a writer for *The American Review*, a Whig journal, credited the inventive spirit with driving America's rise to greatness. Though once "a vassal, kneeling at the feet of the Old World," the United States had "broken off the chain" and currently "stands up with a sublime aspect." "Her looms are sounding in a thousand villages" and "her streams are baptizing myriad wheels," and to these developments the nation owed much of her independence. Through industry and technology, the United States had effectively scripted "a second Declaration of Independence," which enabled it to become a free economic entity, not just a political one. As the embodiment of this inventive spirit, the American Institute took the vanguard position in a movement that many believed was transforming American life. ²² In sum, the institute's supporters held that, far from being sequestered from the mainstream of American life, the institute was an integral component of a divine mission to increase the nation's power,

prosperity, and morality through technological innovation. This organization had tapped John Peters to become its lone crusader to China.

While it is clear that these authors allowed a certain amount of hyperbole to infuse their rhetoric, America truly was becoming a leader in technology. And while Cushing set as his primary objective the securing of a treaty, he was also aware that, beneath the surface of the mission, technology was a driving force. For those "looms sounding in a thousand villages" of New England were now producing cotton textiles with startling efficiency; as a result, the continued expansion of the American economy depended on Cushing's ability to secure new markets in China for American manufactured goods. Before Cushing's departure, Daniel Webster wrote to him to explain the vital importance of the four new treaty ports:

These ports belong to some of the richest, most productive provinces of that empire, and are likely to become very important marts of commerce. A leading object of the Mission . . . is to secure the entry of American ships and cargoes into these ports on terms as favorable as those which are enjoyed by English merchants.

Although mostly optimistic, Webster did realize that wider access would bring scant economic rewards if the Chinese were to resist the introduction of machine-made goods.

In expressing his reservations to Cushing, he demonstrated the extent to which competing and contradictory constructions of China coexisted in his divided mind. On the one hand, he understood the Chinese to be "tenaciously attached" and "strongly wedded to their own usages." On the other, though, he perceived the race as "ingenious, acute, and inquisitive" and therefore capable of recognizing the value of new things. ²³ Himself ambivalent, Webster implied that the success or failure of Cushing's mission hinged ultimately on the attitudes of the Chinese. Were they averse to change, as many said, or could they use their ingenuity to appreciate what was new?

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Technology was also to the Cushing Mission also because it would arrive in China in the immediate wake of the Opium War. Most American observers of the war attributed the outcome of this conflict to the large discrepancy in military technology separating British and Chinese forces. The Tyler administration, assuming that the Chinese also understood their defeat in terms of technology, firmly believed that Cushing could achieve greater leverage in his negotiations if the Chinese were to perceive the United States as being in possession of the same technologies that had powered England's naval victory. Toward this end, the administration equipped Cushing with the *Missouri*, a state-of-the-art steamship. In a letter to Cushing, Tyler's friend John Peters (the father of the young engineer) explained the importance of the mighty vessel:

You have now . . . the glorious opportunity of proceeding direct to China in the most complete and splendid steam ship in the world. . . . The President remarked to me the other day that he had thought of the importance of showing her to the Chinese. . . . They inform me that . . . they consider her superior to any British steamer. . . . But the most important consideration is that the Chinese government & people attribute the frightful power of the British to their use of steam power, & considering that the French are sending a formidable embassy . . . is it not infinitely important that you should arrive in the most imposing manner? ²⁴

With the *Missouri*, Cushing could arrive in grand style and awe the Chinese with an impressive show of America's military capability. Of course, Cushing need not mention to the Chinese that, at present, the *Missouri* was the lone ship of its kind in the U.S. Navy.

American shipbuilders and arms manufacturers also considered technology to be at the crux of the mission. They expected that Cushing would find a Chinese government eager to revamp its entire national defense and to do so using outside assistance. These arms suppliers flooded Cushing with letters asking him to pitch their products to the Chinese. One audacious shipbuilder asked Cushing to hand-deliver to the emperor the following letter in which he proposed to supply the Chinese navy with iron warships:

Your Majesty will readily perceive the immense advantage to be derived from this invention, in enabling your seamen to cope with those of other nations who are farther advanced in naval tactics and architecture. It will be an overwhelming power in your hands; putting in your possession instruments which will without doubt destroy the most powerful ships built, without endangering the safety of your crew. 25

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The ship builder offered to disassemble one such vessel and send it piecemeal to China along with a crew of workmen who, after reconstructing the craft, would demonstrate its awesome capabilities inside a giant water basin before the emperor. Cushing never did meet with the emperor, but he informed Chinese officials that he was willing to act as a liaison between the Chinese government and American arms manufacturers. 26

Technology also provided the centerpiece of a scheme devised by a group of China traders but never implemented by Cushing. Since the U.S. government knew very little about China, Daniel Webster solicited advice from those who had experience working with the Chinese. The respondents included a consortium of prominent China traders from Boston and Salem, a group that included some of the richest men in America—Samuel Cabot, Robert B. Forbes, and Thomas Perkins. They advised Cushing to bring along models of steamboats, railroads, and cannons as well as “an Engineer who understands both Civil and warlike Engineering.” Their proposal had little to do with boastfulness or chauvinism and everything to do with America’s competition with England. “The Chinese . . . have a great fear of the encroachment by other foreign nations,” the consortium wrote, “and if we could in a quiet way, without impinging upon the courtesies of Great Britain, contribute anything to their means of defense against further aggression, it would open the eyes of the emperor to the value of an alliance with us.” In essence, the China traders conceived of a Sino-American alliance based on a transfer of technology: China would receive the ships and guns it needed to defend itself against British aggression and, in exchange, would look favorably on the Americans, presumably in matters of trade. The hypothetical alliance would improve the situations of the two countries involved while leaving Great Britain out in the cold. 27

With technology playing a vital role on several fronts, Cushing’s appointment of John Peters required little deliberation. The young man’s engineering prowess made him a valuable asset to the mission. Moreover, his father’s political connections, including a friendship with President Tyler, only made the decision that much easier. In the spring of 1843, Cushing formally offered the young man one of the highly coveted slots in his legation.

The position secured, Peters’s grateful father provided Cushing with a character sketch of his son, describing him as humble and unassuming, almost to a fault. He “lacks confidence and the disposition to trumpet his own fame,” the elder Peters wrote, “preferring to show his ability by his works.” Peters, his father wrote, was more comfortable expressing himself through his mechanical creations than he was through spoken words. That said, his father continued, “he possesses indomitable enterprise and perseverance in pursuing his profession.” 28 True to this characterization, the young Peters set about the task of preparing with a single-minded devotion his technological exhibits at the American Institute; as the date for departure drew near, he “occupied every hour to get his important models complete.” 29

While a system of political patronage had facilitated Peters’s appointment, he was nonetheless an engineer of considerable skill who understood the workings of the most complex technologies of his day. He could assemble a steam engine, design a locomotive, construct a system of telegraphs, and install the gas works necessary to light a city. In fact, every model in his collection had been assembled with his own hands. And so that he might demonstrate the most recent innovations, he even secured permission from West Point and the largest American builder of steam-powered engines to use their patented technologies in his presentations. In sum, Peters was prepared to astound the Chinese with a marvelous technological display. 30

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Cushing and Peters in China

Although working at a feverish pace, Peters failed to complete his models before Cushing’s

departure and so could not accompany the envoy as he had hoped. Instead, he ended up sailing in a different ship, the *Bazaar*, that left for China at a later date. ³¹ After a five-month journey, Peters arrived in Canton in early April 1844, a little over a month after Cushing had steamed into Macao. Since events proceeded slowly at first and an opportunity to display his models would not arise for some time, Peters and the other members of the American legation spent most of their time waiting in the company of the local American missionaries, Peter Parker, Elijah Bridgman, and Samuel Wells Williams. During this stage, Peters assisted Cushing's mission mainly by carrying official dispatches to Chinese officials, errands which the mission's artist, George R. West, had handled prior to his arrival. ³²

Cushing and Webster passed the hours engaged in intensive language study, Cushing learning Manchu and the Webster learning Mandarin Chinese. Undertaken to help the two men make a positive impression on the Chinese, the lessons were fraught with peril for Webster's instructor. ³³ Since the Qing government had yet to lift its ban on language instruction, Webster's Chinese tutor would at first teach the lessons only on the condition that the doors to the study remain locked. But even this precautionary measure was not sufficient to calm his frazzled nerves. After a few tutorials, he returned the money to Webster with the explanation that the stress had agitated him to such a degree that he had considered suicide. ³⁴

By precluding the creation of a pool of bilingual people, the Qing ban enlarged the role of missionaries in Sino-American negotiations. Indeed, without missionaries acting as linguistic intermediaries, China and the United States could not have enjoyed a dialogue. The missionaries, who had recognized that a proficiency in Chinese was sine qua non to their goal of spreading Christianity, were willing to disobey the Qing law and surreptitiously hire courageous Chinese instructors willing to offer them covert language programs. In this way, Williams, Bridgman, and Parker all learned Chinese, and the latter two handled most of the translating for the American mission.

To negotiate with the Americans, the emperor dispatched Qiying (the namesake of the junk *Keying*), who already possessed significant experience with foreigners, as he had previously handled the Treaty of Nanking. As his first move, Qiying sought to convince Cushing to abandon his request for a meeting with the emperor in Peking. Reluctant at first, Cushing agreed after Qiying assured him that doing so would substantially improve his chances for success in his other diplomatic objectives. With this matter settled, the two parties met in a temple inside the small town of Wanghia, just outside of Macao ([fig. 7.1](#)). Cushing, Webster, Parker, and Bridgman worked with their Chinese counterparts and eventually forged the terms and conditions of the Treaty of Wanghia (1844).

In addition to granting the United States essentially the same rights and privileges that the British had won by war, the treaty provided Americans with extraterritoriality. The relevant article stipulated that any case involving an American citizen accused of a crime in China was within the jurisdiction of American rather than Chinese courts. On this agreement, Cushing commented that "it was unwise to allow any control over the lives and property of American citizens in governments outside the limits of Christendom." ³⁵ And perhaps reflective of the participation of Parker and Bridgman in the negotiations, the treaty also granted missionaries the right to build churches, hospitals, and cemeteries in the five ports now opened to Western intercourse. ³⁶



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After the negotiations had closed, Cushing set his mind to other matters. Thinking of John Peters, he sent the following message to Qiying:

Your excellency is doubtless aware that all the modern improvements in the arts of war & navigation are adopted and practiced in my country quite as thoroughly and extensively as in Europe. That if your government is desirous of books on . . . engineering, ship-building, steam engines, discipline of troops, or manufacture of arms, or any other subject whatever, I shall be happy to be the means of placing them in your hands. I also tender to you models for the construction of the instruments of war as now used in Europe and America. Also the services of engineers skilled in these arts, to construct for your government ships, steamers,

cannon, & arms of all sorts, either in China or in America as may be preferred. [37](#)

Qiyong's letters to Cushing do not contain a response to this offer, and so we cannot determine when or if Peters presented his models in China. Before the ink had dried on the treaty, both parties became distracted by an unfortunate incident that tested the article of extraterritoriality. One evening, a mob of Chinese harassed a group of foreigners in Macao by pelting them with stones and brickbats. An American, feeling his life in danger, fired a shot that struck and killed a Chinese man named Lu Amun. Qiyong believed that the American was responsible for the fatality, but Cushing convinced him as well as Macao's magistrates to allow an American tribunal to try the case. The court ruled in favor of the American, finding that he had fired his weapon in self-defense in what was a case of justifiable homicide. [38](#)

The tragic incident may have had the effect of pushing John Peters and his assignment to the bottom of both parties' agendas. While the evidence is inconclusive, Peters quite possibly never received an opportunity to demonstrate his models before an audience of Chinese officials. But even if Peters did have that chance, his exhibition certainly did not have the same effect on the Chinese as a similar exhibition would have on the Japanese a decade later. As a part of Commodore Perry's expedition, John Williams, the brother of Samuel Wells Williams, prepared the models of locomotives and telegraphs that ended up captivating high-ranking Japanese officials. [39](#) And though not the direct result of this particular technology show, Japan's Meiji Revolution included a sweeping modernization program that brought about an infusion of Western technology into Japanese culture.

Why did Peters fail to have any effect on China? Why was he not greeted enthusiastically by Chinese officials who, after the defeat to England, might have made an overhaul of the Chinese military a high priority? Contrary to American assumptions, the various groups of princes, officials, and literati that constituted the Chinese government did not achieve a consensus with regard to the meaning of the Opium War. In fact, according to historian James Polachek, not all factions within the government even conceded that the Chinese had lost the war at all. In the war's aftermath, a myth emerged that, in Guangdong Province, Chinese forces had dealt the British several defeats. Those who believed that was what happened attributed the Chinese success not to Qing imperial arms but rather to local militias led by scholar-officials. Since any kind of nationwide modernization movement would necessarily need to radiate from the center outward, this notion of a victory in the south prevented the Qing government from finding the consensus it needed to act. Consequently, inertia rather than spirited reform characterized Qing policy in the ensuing two decades. [40](#)

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Political forces beyond Peters's control rendered him ineffectual as a spokesman for American technology in China, but he would enjoy greater success teaching Americans about China. After Cushing departed Macao in August of 1844, Peters lingered for several months, during which time he set his mind to a new task with the same single-minded devotion that had characterized his earlier preparations at the American Institute. As his father informed Cushing, he was busy assembling "a more complete collection than Dunn's." [41](#) Like his precursor from Philadelphia, Peters could not achieve his goal without a substantial amount of help. Therefore, he enlisted "the aid of Chinese, and of the American Missionaries," two parties he had worked with extensively while fulfilling his responsibilities on the mission. [42](#)

Both groups were inclined to help because each believed that a museum that cast China in a positive light was certain to further their interests. Missionaries knew that Americans would contribute neither their money nor their time to evangelical efforts designed to uplift a people believed to be, in the word of Samuel Wells Williams, "unimproveable." [43](#) And the Chinese who assisted Peters undoubtedly knew that for the American public to be favorably predisposed toward the Chinese could only have a salutary effect. If Americans thought highly of China, they would be more apt to purchase Chinese commodities, and that would bolster a Chinese economy devastated by the ill effects of opium. Moreover, Americans would be less inclined to adopt a self-superior view that could potentially give rise to jingoism. In this way, the Chinese collection, though the brainchild of John Peters, would reflect the interests of China.

The Chinese Museum

While Peters was busy forming the collection, back in the United States his father made arrangements for its exhibition. In Manhattan, the elder Peters bought a plot on 539 Broadway and commenced building a structure large enough to house the collection. Since construction would not be completed by the time his son returned home, he also traveled to Boston and rented the Marlboro Chapel, a building on Washington Street, which would serve as the collection's temporary home. To ensure success for the grand opening, he invited Cushing not only to attend but "to present it [the collection] as a part of the fruits of your mission." The elder Peters knew that the mission to China enjoyed popularity in Cushing's native New England and that the diplomat's presence was sure to lend prestige to and generate publicity for his son's cultural endeavor. When John Peters returned home on the *Bazaar* with what one magazine called "the largest collection of Chinese curiosities ever brought to this country," he did not need to concern himself with either financial considerations or the need to find a physical structure large enough to accommodate the sizeable collection. He could focus solely on the business of hanging pictures on walls and arranging objects in cases. [44](#)

When the museum opened in the autumn of 1845, China and Cushing's mission were much discussed topics of conversation in Boston society. "Within a few years past," John Peters wrote, "attention has been particularly directed towards China" and "information is now eagerly sought after." [45](#) To meet this demand for information, Fletcher Webster was in town in late October to deliver a series of lectures on China before heading to New York to do more of the same. Cushing himself lectured on China at about the same time. [46](#) Both men adopted a respectful tone in their remarks about the country. Cushing opened by admitting that, on first landing in China, he found everything to be strange—the clothing, the gongs, the ceremonies, the customs. However, if one were to accept this "cursory view" and neglect to penetrate beneath the surface, "injustice will be done to a great and polished people." [47](#)

Webster also stressed the importance of moving beyond the simple and obvious perception that China was different. For example, he noted that, although the costume of the Chinese "appears ridiculous to us," if "we examine the weather we shall see that in that country ours is the inconsistent form of dress." In short, the Chinese customs that Americans habitually labeled odd, strange, or bizarre seemed that way only because they were viewed outside their proper context. Both Cushing and Webster delivered lectures that were informative rather than judgmental. In fact, Cushing obstinately refused to "pronounce their morals of a higher or lower standard than those of Europe," because he "did not believe it the province of a transient visitor to do so." [48](#)

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John Peters's Chinese Museum also showed for China the same respect shown by Cushing and Webster and by Nathan Dunn, who had died the previous autumn. Like those three men, Peters elevated the aim of instruction and considered it his paramount objective. Toward that end, he subscribed to the same object-based epistemology as did Dunn. Peters described his own era as a "reading age" in which "books, periodicals and newspapers" have "multiplied" to the point where "sight" becomes "necessary to make a lasting impression on the mind." Along these lines, Peters quoted a Chinese maxim on the frontispiece of his catalog: "Words may deceive, but the eye cannot play the rogue." [49](#)

A reporter for the *Boston Daily Advertiser* picked up on Peters's philosophy, referring to it as "EYE EDUCATION." Of all the "systems of education," he wrote, the one that espouses the use of the "visual organ" to receive information "is in many respects the best, because the actual imprint of the objects to be remembered . . . is made upon the brain." The power of visual evidence, he wrote, had led to a proliferation of pictures by artists in both books and panoramas. But, while these images leave the "eye pleased," the brain is "almost uninformed" because the accuracy of these pictures depends on an untrustworthy painter, "whose imagination probably, had so alienated him from truthfulness as to affect the work." By displaying the objects themselves and not just pictorial representations of them, Peters ensured that his museum met his day's criteria for accuracy. [50](#)

Peters's adherence to the same educational philosophy championed by Dunn yielded an exhibit that, not surprisingly, bore a strong visual resemblance to that of his predecessor. In addition to the cases of objects, Peters displayed about sixty life-size clay statues that he probably commissioned from the same sculptors Dunn had employed. Like Dunn, Peters went to great lengths to situate the figures in accurate reconstructions of their natural settings in China. In one

diorama, the emperor Daoguang, seated on the dragon throne, is preparing to sign the Treaty of Wanghia, which Qiyong has just presented to him. In another, a dissolute man of leisure reclines on a couch to inhale opium (the catalog explaining in detail how the drug is consumed). In a court scene, a judge metes out a sentence to a criminal as a guard stands by poised to inflict a punishment with a whip. In a classroom, a student recites his lessons before a stern teacher seated behind a desk. In a facsimile of the domicile of a well-to-do family, a lady plays with her children in a very life-like scene. And out in the countryside, a farmer ploughs his field with the help of a buffalo. In yet another diorama, a laborer in the tea industry carries two crates of tea. Most impressively, Peters apparently had an exact replica of a two-story shop built in Canton and then reassembled in his exhibition space. [51](#)

Although on first glance Peters's museum resembled Dunn's, a visitor fortunate enough to see both would have noticed one major omission from Peters's: natural history. [52](#) Peters did not possess Dunn's background in Enlightenment science and therefore did not feel compelled to gather natural specimens. His collection methodology, though extensive, encompassed only the human realm. One journalist who had seen both compared them as follows: "The exhibition is much more *practical* than that of Mr. Dunn. It has not so many objects of *vertu*, but the collection contains more things which show the real character of the people." [53](#)

Consistent with this emphasis on human society, Peters hired two Chinese men, T'sow Chaong and Le Kawhing, to become a permanent part of his museum. The former spoke English and therefore could field questions from the guests. The latter had worked as a music instructor in China and would sing and play Chinese instruments before audiences. According to Peters, Le Kawhing had acquired an addiction to opium in China and had joined Peters because he hoped to break the habit by distancing himself from the purveyors of the drug in China. (A Chinese man had circulated through Dunn's museum too, but the paucity of newspaper stories that mention him suggests he graced the exhibit for only a short while. [54](#))

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Interestingly, the advertisements placed by Peters intimate his ambivalence about the exhibition of these two Chinese men. Having lived in New York, he probably knew from Afong Moy's success that the simple display of living Chinese people could provide a manager with a popular attraction. While Peters certainly wanted to attract crowds to his museum, he also knew that the two Chinese men could easily become a spectacle in their own right, capable either of siphoning off the public's interest in the collection or of upstaging it altogether. Therefore, in his advertisements, Peters insisted on giving top billing to the collection and devoting a smaller space to T'sow Chaong and Le Kawhing. Although living Chinese possessed greater sensational value, the collection possessed greater didactic value, and Peters apparently did not want to diminish the importance of the collection. [55](#)

To further his museum's educational purpose, Peters followed Dunn's example by writing a descriptive catalog that bore the rather lengthy title *Miscellaneous Remarks upon the Government, History, Religions, Literature, Agriculture, Arts, Trades, Manners, and Customs of the Chinese*. While brimming with information, the catalog is perhaps most remarkable for what is absent. As an apostle for technology, Peters fervently believed that the mechanical inventions now found in the West were truly remarkable, even revolutionary in their ability to improve the quality of human life. Yet he did not allow the dearth of modern technology in China to color his overall view of the country. Of course, he did discuss China's mechanical devices in his *Miscellaneous Remarks* and was, quite predictably, unimpressed by the antiquated pumps, waterwheels, and mills he observed. These, he wrote, were "designed to direct [human] labour, not to supercede it." [56](#) But, although many Americans in this optimistic age of steam power would have viewed the low level of technology in China as symptomatic of a larger cultural failure, Peters insisted on keeping the issue compartmentalized, and he found much to admire elsewhere in Chinese civilization

In fact, as positive as Dunn's construction of China was, Peters quite possibly promulgated one that was still more flattering. We can account for this by realizing that both men were reacting to a mainstream view they judged to be in error. In 1838, Dunn had attempted to use his museum to dispel the myths and fantasies that enveloped China in the American imagination. However, by 1845, circumstances had drastically changed. While many Americans somewhat naively persisted in associating China with willowware, tea advertisements, and the *Arabian Nights*, others now held the far more disturbing view that China deserved to be mocked and ridiculed for

its perceived backwardness. To combat this new adversary, Peters in his *Miscellaneous Remarks* adopted a stance that was more aggressively pro-China than even Dunn's had been.

Instead of dismissing, as had Dunn, the Chinese government as despotic, Peters argued that the "happy, contented, and industrious population is a pretty sure indication that the government is . . . well administered." ⁵⁷ To support his argument, he allowed a Chinese voice to articulate China's greatest virtue:

I felicitate myself that I was born in China; it constantly occurs to me, what if I had been born beyond the sea . . . where the cold freezes, or the heat scorches; where the people . . . are ignorant of the domestic relations. . . . I should not have been different from a beast. But how happily I have been born in China! I have a house to live in, have drink and food, and commodious furniture. . . . Truly the highest felicity is mine. ⁵⁸

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The "domestic relations" to which the Chinese writer referred formed the basis of Confucianism, the social philosophy that, Peters and Dunn both agreed, held the country together. ⁵⁹ Of course, as Peters praised China for its stability in the 1840s, he could not have known that the nation was about to enter a period of upheaval in which a series of internal rebellions would threaten to depose the Qing government—the Taiping Rebellion in the south (1850–64), the Nian Rebellion in the north (1853–68), and the Muslim Revolts in the northwest (1855–73). In the 1840s, China seemed to epitomize national harmony and unity. ⁶⁰

Most important, Peters engaged those like Thomas Smyth, the minister from Charleston discussed in chapter 6, who derided the Chinese for maintaining a pride in their own cultural preeminence despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary provided by the Opium War. "The Chinese," Peters wrote, "have been ridiculed for assuming to be the only civilized nation in the world." He then proceeded to rebut China's critics first by insisting that the Chinese "are not to be judged by our standard" since they "live on the past, we on the future." In stating that the Chinese looked to the past, Peters did not mean to imply that the civilization was backward; rather, he was referring to the dearth of news about the outside world. He proceeded to attribute China's continued pride not to a pompous arrogance that was intrinsic to the culture itself but rather to the simple lack of information. Specifically, he cited advances in printing technology in the West that had only recently given the mass of Europeans and Americans access to worldly information. Ordinary Chinese, by contrast, lacked exposure to such news about developments outside of their own country. Consequently, Americans should not fault them for clinging to a self-image formed when China truly was "farther advanced in the arts of civilized life than any European nation." Even at the present, Peters added, the Chinese "are far in advance of the rest of Asia." ⁶¹

Peters also challenged readers to view the behavior of Western nations from the Chinese vantage point. From there, he argued, China's refusal to pass the mantle of civilization to the West would no longer seem arrogant or ludicrous:

Is it strange when they see the greatest European nation seize upon . . . India, and clandestinely flood their shores with a drug which destroys thousands . . . that they should look upon them as barbarians! Is it strange, when they saw the governments and merchants of foreign nations . . . perpetually quarrelling for the sake of gain, that they should look upon them all with suspicion . . . and call them . . . "foreign devils!"

Whereas Western standards for judging civilizations focused on wealth and military prowess, the Chinese emphasized morals. When measured against those criteria, the Europeans and Americans fared poorly in the Chinese mind, and justifiably so. In sum, Peters asked Americans to look in the mirror before casting aspersions at the Chinese. ⁶²

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Responses to the Museum

Peters presented a positive vision of China both through his exhibits and through the pages of his *Miscellaneous Remarks*, but ultimately the visitors decided for themselves how they would perceive China. It turns out that virtual travel played a major role in their experience, as it had in the case of Dunn's museum. One reporter wrote profusely about the opportunity to take a magical excursion to China.

Who would not like to visit China, walk through the streets of its cities, penetrate the mansions of its inhabitants, partake of savory bird's nest soup . . . or quaff real souchong [tea], from real China ware, in the company with real Chinese? There are none who, if circumstances permitted, would not desire to see the many curious things which distinguish that curious people. To us, whose business, time or means, forbid so long a voyage, there is now offered a most desirable opportunity. [63](#)

Another reporter expressed his astonishment at the realism of the exhibit. It was "as if some enormous boring instrument had scooped up a whole piece of a Chinese city," he wrote, "and it had been dropped carefully within the walls of the old Marlborough Chapel." [64](#)

A reporter from the *Mercantile Journal* was also enchanted by the illusion of travel afforded by the museum. His approach to the Marlboro Chapel he described as a walk in the mud along Washington Street. Yet at the entrance, which was elaborately decorated in the Chinese style, the dreariness of the real world evaporated, and magic seemingly seized control of his experience. "I saw a sight which at first I could not understand. The entrance to . . . the Chapel seemed to have been metamorphosed by some of the genii of the lamp, who existed in Aladdin's time." After entering the museum, he became instantaneously overwhelmed as he beheld the interior for the first time. "We gazed in wonderment at the strangely gorgeous scene which suddenly presented itself to our astonished optics." Glowing lanterns, colorful paintings, dioramas, real Chinese people, and a giant dragon hovering majestically above the entire scene—all these marvelous spectacles captivated the reporter, temporarily convincing him that he had journeyed to China itself. Simply through the act of wishing, he had been "transported . . . by enchantment . . . to his desired destination in the twinkling of an eye." Indeed, his sense that magic had played a role prompted him to invoke a familiar story: "It seemed . . . as though we had set upon the wonderful blanket, of which we have all of us read in the *Arabian Nights*." Although the visitor clearly relished his escapist fantasy, he did eventually engage the exhibits at a serious level. And while he disliked Chinese music (it was not exactly the "music of the spheres"), he enjoyed learning about Chinese culture and history in an educational venue that "has not a parallel, I believe, in the world." [65](#)

A reporter for the *Boston Daily Advertiser* claimed to have astounded and befuddled his wife and children by returning home one day and announcing the impossible: "Yes—we have been to CHINA!" He recalled how in childhood he had "stared in wonder and admiration at the Willow patterned plates, which to our childish eyes were so marvellous"; now he had "realized the visions of our youth." To his family's utter bewilderment, he related how he had spent time "hob-knobbing with Keying [Qiyang]," "taking snuff with Howkwa [Houqua]," strolling through the streets of Peking, listening to a Chinese musician (Le Kawhing) play his instruments, and kowtowing before the emperor as the latter signed the Treaty of Wanghia. "Yes," he proudly proclaimed, "I have been in China." At this point, his wife interjects, "are you mad? or drunk? You have never quitted Boston to my knowledge, and China is an outlandish place, far away, at least so Mr. Cushing and the newspapers tell us." To avoid incarceration in an insane asylum, the reporter divulges his secret: He has been to the Chinese Museum and promises to take his family the very next day for a "second trip" to China. [66](#)

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This same reporter also revealed the disappointing impotence of Peters in shaping visitors' attitudes toward China. Though effusive in praising Peters's ability to re-create China in Boston, the engineer failed to alter substantially his views on China itself. After touring the exhibits, he persisted in echoing many of the sentiments expressed by Smyth. He depicted the Chinese as "odd looking human beings" who possessed quaint and ridiculous habits; the women followed the custom of "pinching their feet into perplexed shoes," and the men sported "pigtailed" and grew their nails long. Furthermore, the arrogant Chinese, he wrote, possessed "the extreme impertinence to look down upon a free and independent people with contempt for our limited

acquirements." Evidently, he either neglected to read Peters's *Miscellaneous Remarks* or read it but refused to part with his preconceived notions. ⁶⁷

Yet plenty of evidence suggests visitors looked to Peters to provide them with an educational experience. "The splendid collection of Mr. Peters," the *Dollar Newspaper* reported, "will give an inquiring mind more real ideas of the social and political state of that vast empire, than can be gathered from a library of books upon the subject." ⁶⁸ Similarly, a children's book advised its young readers that at the Chinese Museum "the visitors could obtain a much better knowledge of many peculiarities of the Chinese, than from the readings of any books." ⁶⁹ A reporter for the *Boston Daily Advertiser* praised Peters's *Miscellaneous Remarks* for being "drawn up so as to make the whole Exhibition intelligible." "Every thing in the museum," he continued, "is the work of Chinese hands, and the collection is so extensive and thorough, that a well-informed person will get a better insight from it of the details of Chinese life, than would be acquired by a common visit to a Chinese port." ⁷⁰

This statement may seem like groundless hyperbole, but it was lent some credibility by the journal of a navy midshipman who later visited China, in 1853. While serving on Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan, Yorke McCauley found himself docked temporarily at Hong Kong and decided to set off to explore the area. "We walked 'till [we] were as tired as it behooved us to get, trying to observe something new or remarkable, but found that more was to be learned by a visit to the Chinese Museum, I saw in Boston, than could be seen . . . in trudging about promiscuously in Hong Kong." Later in Canton, McCauley reiterated his point that "you can get as good ideas of China" by "visiting the Museums in the U.S. as you can by going to Canton." ⁷¹

The museum remained in Boston for more than a year, attracting visitors from all classes and all age groups and taking in gate receipts that amounted to \$28,000. ⁷² In 1847, Peters packed the collection onto the *Suffolk* and shipped it to Philadelphia, where it would occupy the same building vacated by Dunn six years earlier. ⁷³ In early March 1847, the *Public Ledger* reported that, even though "sixty furniture car loads of curiosities" had arrived at the museum, more than half of the collection remained on the ship yet to be unloaded. ⁷⁴ In Philadelphia, the museum coexisted with other attractions, such as the "Ohio Mammoth Girl," an unfortunate twelve-year-old who weighed 330 pounds, and a man who could drink two gallons of water in one draught. ⁷⁵

Peters's true rival, however, was neither the Mammoth Girl nor the great imbibor but the lingering memory of Dunn's museum. But, from what we can glean from an article in the *Public Ledger*, it may have been that his following Dunn actually helped Peters. Instead of exhausting interest in China, Dunn's museum had stimulated the minds of Philadelphia's citizens and generated such a wellspring of positive feeling that many people were prepared to enjoy a second museum "of the same character." Even those who required novelty would have attended Peters's museum because, as it said in the paper, "it contains more articles than the former one, besides two natives of China, one of whom plays on several curious instruments and sings in Chinese style, which is altogether different from any other ever heard before." ⁷⁶ With a museum that resembled Dunn's yet possessed a greater number of objects and two living Chinese, Peters provided an attraction that was at once new and familiar.

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The museum also attracted those who were either unborn at the time of Dunn's museum or had been too young to enjoy it. In fact, Peters's museum forever altered the life of one precocious young boy who wandered through its doors. Though only about five years of age, William Elliot Griffis was as intellectually curious as many of the adults, and the exhibits made such a deep impression on him that more than sixty years later he recalled it as one of the formative experiences of his life:

I visited many times the great Chinese Museum in my native city, Philadelphia. . . . There were life-sized groups of human figures, male and female, picturing all classes, from emperor and mandarins to cobbler and beggars, representations of shops and crafts, and a varied collection of genuine objects of use and beauty, intelligently selected and brought from the Middle Kingdom. Two Chinese gentlemen, in silk and nankeen dress and bamboo hats, explained things. Even

then I longed to know more of what the Chinese thought and felt than of what they made, ate, bought, or sold.

While everything in the exhibit fascinated Griffis, he was most drawn to T'sow Chaong and Le Kawhing. For, although an object lesson in Chinese culture held some appeal, the young boy was really after a different kind of knowledge, one that no artifact could convey—"what the Chinese thought and felt." In the Chinese Museum, Griffis began a quest that would consume the rest of his life and would include a successful career as one of America's foremost Asian experts. He sought to understand the Chinese mind. [77](#)

After Philadelphia, John Peters moved the collection to New York and installed it in the brand-new building that his father had designed specifically to house it. When the museum opened on January 1, 1849, a little more than a year had passed since the departure of the Keying, and Peters hoped to change the tone of mockery that Captain Kellett had encouraged. However, toward this end, the collection alone would have to suffice, Peters apparently having lost the services of T'sow Chaong and Le Kawhing. [78](#) If accounts in the *Herald* offer any indication, New Yorkers drew a line of distinction between the junk and the museum, viewing the latter as a more sincere attempt to instruct. In an apparent slight to the Chinese junk, the paper claimed that the museum afforded New Yorkers "a better opportunity than ever before to become acquainted with the 'Celestial Empire.'" Choosing words that it had never used to describe the junk, the *Herald* called the museum a "highly intellectual and rational scene of amusement, eminently calculated to illustrate the manners and habits" of the Chinese. Kellett's junk had effected the Barnumization of Chinese culture, and Peters was intent on restoring China's respectability in the eyes of New Yorkers. [79](#)

"He is an enterprising fellow"

At some point in 1849, Peters became unable to manage the museum, perhaps owing to an illness. In late October 1849, an advertisement in the *Herald* exhorted "all those who never expect to see the Celestial Empire" to go visit the museum while they still had the chance. The museum closed its doors on November 5, 1849, with the final day's ticket receipts donated to a charity. [80](#) John Peters died some time between 1849 and 1853. In a transaction laced with irony, the collection was sold in early 1850 to P. T. Barnum ([fig. 7.2](#)). [81](#) Possessing no expertise on China, Barnum chose to buy the rights to Peters's *Miscellaneous Remarks* instead of writing his own catalog. Keeping the words of the late John Peters largely intact, Barnum (perhaps thinking of Dunn) renamed the booklet *Ten Thousand Things on China and the Chinese* and expunged from it any trace of the former owner. [82](#)

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Peters's collection attracted Barnum for several reasons. First, he had probably wanted to operate a Chinese museum after witnessing Dunn's remarkable success in London. Second, in the early 1850s, Barnum was making a conscious effort to upgrade his public image. Not coincidentally, the purchase of the Chinese Museum coincided with the arrival of Barnum's most prestigious act: Jenny Lind, the famous "Swedish Nightingale." That

Peters's museum enjoyed a strong reputation in New York only added to its luster as far as Barnum was concerned. [83](#)

Third, Barnum understood quite well Americans' romantic curiosity about the outside world in this age of exploration. To feed their hunger for information and stimulation, he had always organized his American Museum around a quasiscientific agenda. In the fields of ethnography and natural history, Barnum claimed to give his audiences access to the infinitely diverse and fascinating world. "He [Barnum] despatched [sic] agents to Europe, Asia, Africa, and the interior of our own continent," according to a section added to the end of the revised catalog, "for the purpose of securing any and every rarity to be obtained." As the result of this effort, "curiosities flowed in from every quarter." In this context, the acquisition of a Chinese collection made complete sense. It fit perfectly into Barnum's overarching ambition to present all that was "wonderful" about a world now opening up to the West. [84](#)

Fourth, that T'sow Chaong and Le Kawhing, who had worked in the museum in Boston and Philadelphia, did *not* make the move to New York with John Peters also enhanced the value of the collection in Barnum's mind, for the following reason. By the time Barnum had purchased the collection in 1850, it had received visitors for an entire year. Although the Chinese objects themselves were no longer novelties, New Yorkers had yet to experience the synergistic combination of a museum inhabited by living Chinese people. Thus, simply by hiring Chinese people, Barnum knew he could make the Chinese Museum novel *a second time*. And so, before reopening it under his own management, he secured the services of a "Chinese family" that included Pwan Yee Koo, whom he promptly dubbed the "Chinese Belle." With this addition, Barnum was able to arouse the curiosity of Ezra Beach, a young boy of thirteen. "I went to the Chinese museum," he wrote, because "I had never [seen] a chines [sic] and I thought them quite a sight." Beach described the Chinese as "a harmless set of people" who "wear their hair so long as to touch the ground" and sometimes "have little feet."⁸⁵

That Beach recalled the Chinese people but not the Chinese objects does not come as a surprise. John Peters had worried that the presence of actual Chinese people could overshadow his collection, but Barnum had no such reservations about displays of live people. Under Barnum's stewardship, the Chinese collection became little more than a colorful backdrop for Pwan and her retinue. And to call attention to his latest attraction, he directed the full force of his substantial marketing abilities to generating publicity for the Chinese Belle.

In promoting the Chinese Belle, his first task was to cope with the lingering memory of the Chinese Lady, Afong Moy. In the shadow cast by Moy's recent appearances in New York, Pwan was hardly an original attraction. For this reason, Barnum needed to find a way to discredit Moy in order to increase the novelty of Pwan. Since the Chinese Lady's status as Chinese was beyond dispute and therefore unassailable, Barnum instead attacked her credentials as a lady, as a woman of wealth and status. In a small addendum to Peters's catalog, Barnum wrote that Pwan "is the first Chinese *lady* that has yet visited Christendom," as the "only other female ever known to have left the 'Central Flowery Nation'" was of "apocryphal reputation and position in her own country."⁸⁶ Interestingly, as recently as 1848, Afong Moy had shared an exhibition space with Tom Thumb, who was then still under contract with Barnum.⁸⁷ This unusual pairing leaves open the intriguing possibility that Moy had moved under the Barnum umbrella at some point in the 1840s. If so, by assailing Moy's credibility, Barnum was essentially cannibalizing his own exhibit, one that had served its purpose, to bestow vitality on a new one.⁸⁸

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Whether Barnum did or did not sacrifice the Chinese Lady to ensure the success of the Chinese Belle, he did employ his prodigious promotional talent to draw New Yorkers to the latter's exhibition. Part of Barnum's genius lay in his adroit handling of the press. To generate publicity for his attractions, he had forged a mutually beneficial relationship with the *Herald*, much as Captain Kellett seems to have done as well. In exchange for Barnum's purchases of advertising space, the *Herald* agreed to print as legitimate news the brief blurbs that Barnum wrote to excite the public's interest in his attractions.⁸⁹ With this arrangement guaranteeing him a small rectangle of space in almost every issue of the *Herald*, he unleashed a barrage of stories about Pwan, most of which were almost certainly fictitious. Unlike Kellett, Barnum was a true marketing genius who had wit at his disposal; he seldom needed to deploy cruel stereotypes about, for instance, a reputed Chinese love of rat-eating in order to generate humor.

Many of his news items revolved around the issue of class—both Pwan's class and that of her audience. Barnum portrayed Pwan as an aristocratic lady, stating repeatedly that she was "a splendid specimen of the Chinese upper ten," a person "of superior birth, position and education, besides being really pretty."⁹⁰ While promoting Pwan, these small news items simultaneously spoofed the New York press's new obsession with covering high society: balls, soirées, fashions, and outings to the opera.⁹¹ He invented a wonderful yet absurd fiction that situated Pwan at the center of New York's haute culture. In this imaginary role, Pwan became the arbiter of good taste, able to set fashion trends for the entire city just by showing a preference for a particular style or color. After she showed a fondness for a lady wearing a pink bonnet, Barnum announced that "pink, therefore, must become fashionable."⁹² Barnum would even insert French phrases into his blurbs, all to maintain the notion that a trip to see the Chinese Belle was a form of upper-class entertainment:

FASHION RULES THE WORLD—The curious lead and the crowd follow. A while ago and no one was *comme il faut* who did not go into raptures about the opera; now, no one is considered genteel whose carriage is not seen in front of the Chinese Museum, where the Chinese beauty holds court, and bewitches every visitor. She and her *suite* are all the rage. ⁹³

Of course, this idea that the city's elite citizenry arrived at the Chinese Museum in their carriages and attended Pwan's exhibition as they would the opera was absolutely ludicrous—but very effective. For Barnum knew that his true audience was the middle and lower classes, and he understood that the surest way to attract them to lowbrow entertainment was to characterize it as distinctly highbrow. In this way, he masqueraded a popular entertainment in the garb of aristocratic exclusivity. After announcing Pwan's upcoming engagement in London, the showman proceeded to doff his cap to himself. "Barnum," he wrote, "is an enterprising fellow." ⁹⁴

Perhaps the only part of the advertising blitz that Barnum did not fabricate was this trip to London. Seeking to capitalize on the Crystal Palace Exposition of 1851 and on the fascination for foreign cultures that it was sure to stimulate, Barnum asked one of his agents to accompany Pwan and her "suite" to London. ⁹⁵ In London, they appeared alongside Dunn's Chinese Collection, which had returned from its tour of the provinces in time for the international exposition. ⁹⁶

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George West in China

At the conclusion of Barnum's catalog, the showman wrote, "Thus ends our Panorama—as, indeed, it may be called—of China and the Chinese." ⁹⁷ Of course, he did not mean panorama here in the most literal sense of the word in which it denotes a giant painting. Yet a few years after the opening of Barnum's Chinese Museum, New Yorkers were invited to gaze on an actual panorama of China that, like the collection, also had its roots in the Cushing Mission. In addition to John R. Peters, Fletcher Webster, and Caleb Cushing, one other member of the U.S. Mission to China chose to convert his diplomatic experience into a cultural production on returning home—George R. West, the mission's draughtsman.

West's primary responsibility during the mission was to sketch Chinese scenes and important diplomatic occasions, but he appears to have spent much of his time in the same capacity as Peters—delivering messages from Cushing and Webster to Chinese officials. ⁹⁸ But he still found plenty of time to escape the diplomatic community and experience China for himself. West loved to roam about by himself with his sketchpad, looking for scenes of beauty or interest. On finding them, he recorded his impressions with quick but thorough sketches made on the spot, and they would later become the basis for finished watercolor compositions. West eventually produced, in 1844, 124 paintings and sketches that, being government property, are currently held at the Library Congress. ⁹⁹

Through a twist of fate, at the conclusion of Cushing's mission George West would remain in China for six more years before finally returning to the United States. After Cushing had secured the treaty and embarked for New York in August of 1844, West remained in China with Peters, perhaps to add watercolor views to his portfolio. Unlike the wealthy Peters, however, West was a man apparently of limited financial means. He had just enough money in his possession to pay for his passage home, and in his calculations he did not account for any unforeseen complications. In December 1844, he was still in China, writing to Cushing to explain his plight. He had left Macao for the United States on the *Moslem*, only to discover in Manila that the ship was "rotten or defective in her timber." He returned to Macao to await the departure of the next available ship, during which time his "money became so reduced as not to leave sufficient [funds] to pay passage home." Finding himself stranded, West headed for Canton, where he could earn his fare by employing his skills as a painter and daguerreotypist. Presumably, foreign and Chinese clients would commission him either to paint their portraits or to use the new technology to generate photographic images of themselves. ¹⁰⁰

While the details are not clear, we know that at some point West shifted the purpose of his work. Instead of using his artistic abilities to earn the money for passage home, he elected to place them in the service of a far more ambitious plan. He would take advantage of the new mobility accorded to Americans by the Treaty of Wanghia and accumulate a pictorial record of the parts of China that had previously been forbidden to Western eyes—the recently opened treaty ports and the countryside surrounding them. He would become the first American since Houckgeest to capture visual images of these once restricted parts of China.

West left no records of his extensive travels through the cities, towns, and countryside of China, but we can obtain an idea of his activity from the account of B. L. Ball, an American physician who joined West on one of the latter's excursions. Like many Americans at this time, Ball longed to see the world, but he was exceptional in that he did not have to satisfy this desire by reading travelogues and visiting museums. Being independently wealthy, he possessed the means to travel almost anywhere on earth and selected China for the following reason: "I considered that China is a country as distant as any other; that it is as diverse from ours as any; that the people are as much our antipodes in dress, customs, religion &c., as in their geographical position." ¹⁰¹ For his grand tour, Ball craved difference not sameness, and in his mind China afforded the most dramatic escape from European-American culture.

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After arriving in China in 1848, Ball passed the first months interacting with British and American merchants and missionaries in the expatriate community at the new treaty ports. In Canton, he enjoyed the company of Peter Parker, Samuel Wells Williams (who had recently returned from his furlough), and Elijah Bridgeman, a former college classmate. ¹⁰² He also visited the various Chinese-owned shops, many of which catered to the foreign community. Inside one of these, he described the behavior of a man named Dr. Brooks, who exuded an almost childlike fascination with Chinese things.

There were a great many oddities to be seen in the shops, especially in "Curiosity-street." The doctor manifested much curiosity, and had many curious comments to make. When he came upon something particularly different from our American side of the globe, his countenance would light up, and, turning the article over and over, he would exclaim . . . "Well, isn't that curious? Don't you think that is beautiful? Isn't it capital?" and, holding a little further off, "It is superb! Well, I do think the Chinese are the most ingenious people at carving in the world. I must take one of these home." . . . The Chinese, in the mean time, laughed, and, observing the interest he took in their works, were delighted to show him all in the shop. ¹⁰³

Ball also enjoyed these shops, but he had not traveled all the way to China to marvel at objects. He wanted to see China itself. And so one can imagine his excitement when, after traveling north to Ningbo in the summer of 1849, he met a young man who did nothing but head out into areas never before seen by foreigners—George West.

"He is engaged in sketching various scenes about Ningpoo," Ball wrote of West, "learning as much as possible about places, people, &c." Since West was planning to leave Ningbo "for an excursion into the country" and Ball also "wished to make a trip into the country," the two "concluded to go together." ¹⁰⁴ Wanting to depart immediately, Ball and West made hasty preparations for their journey; they packed a bag of copper coins to pay for food, lodging, and transportation and hired three Chinese, two personal servants and a cook, to accompany them. Their travels took them away from the coast and inland to the Yangdang Mountains. Traveling on foot, by boat, or in hired sedan chairs, the two companions took in some extraordinary scenery as they made their way to several Buddhist monasteries and numerous small villages.

Wherever Ball and West traveled, they attracted the attention of local residents, most of whom had never seen Caucasian people before. Children would scamper to their homes and cling to their mothers in fear. Other villagers would follow the two purely out of curiosity. According to Ball, the sight of foreigners in these areas elicited in the people a sense of wonder and amazement: "They displayed as much marvellousness as we might have done at the appearance of an inhabitant from another planet." Ball described a man who would approach

him rather slowly, reach out his hand rather tentatively, and touch him to determine whether he was real or merely an apparition. Another man first rubbed his fingers on Ball's face then examined his fingertips "to see if the white color came off." [105](#)

The mere presence of two non-Chinese was by itself sufficient to draw a crowd, and West's quick and skillful sketching added to the spectacle. At a monastery, monks congregated around the artist to watch as a likeness of their temple gradually materialized on the white paper. One group of laborers, "in their eagerness to see him draw," besieged West and "inserted their heads directly between him and the view he wished to sketch." In a "good-natured manner," West tried to push them away. Such incidents occurred frequently because, according to Ball's account, West's sketching was almost incessant. Every time the duo approached a novel sight, West would immediately begin to capture it on paper. When the physician awoke from a nap or returned from a hike, he invariably found his companion busily engaged in sketching. Like Houckgeest, Dunn, and Peters before him, West was wrapped in single-minded devotion as he pursued his project. [106](#)

As West's portfolio thickened, a question must have loomed in the back of the artist's mind: On returning to the United States, how would he use his unique collection of sketches? One possibility he might have considered would be to submit a series of paintings to a publisher who could convert them into a handsome album of lithographs or engravings. Had West chosen publication, he would have entered a field of Chinese views that was almost devoid of competition. The British artist Thomas Allom had recently published four elegant quartos containing about 120 Chinese scenes. However, a review in the Chinese Repository judged the pictures "more beautiful than accurate" because, unlike West, Allom had never witnessed the places he depicted: "If Mr. Allom could have been present and observed with his own eyes the scenes he has attempted to portray . . . he would have avoided some gross blunders." [107](#) The other artist in the field, Tingqua, was highly regarded by Americans but worked within a geographic range that was more limited than that of the peripatetic George West. The talented Chinese watercolorist worked in his studio in Canton and never offered artistic treatments of the varied landscapes and communities that existed farther to the north. [108](#)

A handsomely bound picture album would have had some merit, but West opted against it. Its steep price would have rendered it cost-prohibitive for most Americans. Moreover, West apparently hoped to awe his audiences with a thrilling spectacle, and a book of pictures obviously could not generate that kind of effect. After arriving in New York in 1850 or 1851, he decided to convert his hundreds of sketches into a single painting of epic proportions—a panorama of China.

The Chinese Panorama

In the antebellum era, the panorama presented Americans with an attractive option for entertainment and instruction. This medium exposed Americans to scenic parts of the United States, natural wonders, famous battles, or views of foreign countries. [109](#) In fact, during the transitional period in which John Peters's collection passed to P. T. Barnum, the spacious Chinese Museum in New York was used to show Gliddon's panorama of the Nile River. [110](#) Audiences at these shows watched as a series of scenes glided past them while a lecturer concurrently supplied information. Panorama operators accomplished this feat first by rolling the lengthy canvas onto a large cylinder, 10 or 12 feet tall; during the course of the evening, they would slowly unwind the painting, which would become visible to the audience as it moved across the stage. A second cylinder, placed on the opposite side of the stage, stood ready to receive and roll the painting again. [111](#) The size of the panorama was crucial because, like today's IMAX theaters, a large canvas could provide the audience with the sensation of actually being present at the location depicted. As a result, some panoramas reached amazing proportions, measuring 12 feet in height and about a mile in length. [112](#)

Since the surface of West's panorama exceeded 20,000 square feet, its length probably extended more than a third of a mile. [113](#) Unfortunately, like nearly all panoramas, West's depiction of China has not survived to the present day. However, from the corpus of works he completed for the Cushing Mission, we can see the kinds of scenes West would have included and, from these, glean his overall view of Chinese civilization. Taken as a whole, West's pictures

offer a construction of China that is positive, uncritical, and often humanistic. A general fondness for China suffuses the entire body of work, but one would not characterize it as overly idealized; rather, West seems to have captured China as it appeared on a sunny day.

His *View on Canton River* offers a pleasant scene involving junks and sampans floating on blue water; the towering pagoda leads the eye of the observer from this peaceful river activity to the vast sky above (fig. 7.3). Puntingqua's Country Villa near Canton shows the scenic beauty—lakes, gardens, trees, and pavilions—enjoyed by a wealthy merchant (fig. 7.4).



West also turned his eyes to the working classes, where he cast a sympathetic light on their labor-intensive lives. *Chinese Blacksmiths* captures the smoky grit of a streetside occupation (fig. 7.5). And such works as *Chinese Ploughing* or *Irrigating* are imbued with a respect for those who subsist by dint of physical exertion (figs. 7.6 and 7.7). Of course, these paintings served the dual purpose of depicting the techniques and implements used by the Chinese, who were famous for their efficiency in husbandry. For this reason, West also painted any ingenious device used extensively by the Chinese, such as the abacus, that would appear novel to American eyes (fig. 7.8).



West also humanized the Chinese in such paintings as *Sampan Woman and Boat* (fig. 7.9). Beneath a blue sky filled with giant billowing clouds, this young woman breast-feeds her infant on board her sampan. Her facial expression conveys an emotion that animates nearly all women regardless of nationality or race—a mother's love and caring for her child. By selecting scenes that emphasized the universal or that transcended a specific culture, West was able to show what was human in his subjects in addition to demonstrating what was distinctly Chinese. In this way, he stood poised to make a substantial contribution to the American conception of the Chinese, and in the process he swam against two prevailing currents. First, whereas most constructions of the Chinese (even that put forward by John Peters) accentuated China's difference from Europe and America, West painted its similarity. Second, West's construction challenged a growing tendency to dehumanize the Chinese, to regard them as clownish buffoons who proudly adhered to bizarre and outdated customs. As pictures like this one reveal, West tried to reconnect the Chinese to the larger human family.



As he began this prodigious undertaking in the 1850s, China was starting to recede into the Asian background, as Americans increasingly shifted the collective focus of their gaze to Japan. In 1853, ten years after Cushing's voyage to China, Commodore Matthew Perry led another diplomatic expedition to Asia, this one designed to pry open Japan. For his official artist, Perry selected William Heine, a landscape painter originally from Dresden who was then working in a studio in New York. At the conclusion of the expedition, Heine returned to the United States with about five hundred paintings. ¹¹⁴ After meeting George West in New York, the two agreed to form a partnership. They would combine their experiences, resources, and artistic talents to form a single panorama, one that would whisk spectators off to both China and Japan in the same magical evening. ¹¹⁵

On January 26, 1856, West and Heine unveiled their panorama in Academy Hall at 663 Broadway. Its title, *Seven Years in the Celestial Empire and the Japan Expedition*, indicated the bipartite nature of the show. Of the 57 total scenes, which required about two hours to unfurl, West accounted for 33 Chinese scenes to Heine's 24 on Japan. ¹¹⁶ Choosing not to speak to the audience themselves, the two artists hired three lecturers, one for China, one for Japan, and a third, a Mr. Landers, who would speak during the intermission between the two presentations. ¹¹⁷

To entice people to attend, West and Heine employed a railroad motif in their advertising. They called each showing a "train," referred to audience members as "Passengers," pronounced themselves "Conductors," and labeled the entire experience "an excursion to China and Japan."¹¹⁸ A reporter from the *Tribune* explored this theme of virtual travel in his review:

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A series of Panoramic Views of any country where form, perspective, color, and size contribute to imitate realities, is the next best thing to seeing the original. Indeed, when we take into consideration the sea-sickness of a voyage, and the thousand disagreeable attendants of land travel, we much prefer the panorama to the veritable thing. . . . We felt all of this on Monday night in seeing the panoramic views of China and Japan, and hearing the lectures thereupon. . . . Here we have China and Japan without the trouble of a voyage.

Understanding that West had gone to great lengths to observe China beyond the treaty ports, this writer praised the artist for showing what he called "penetralia," or "the inner life and natural scenery" of a country. He enjoyed the panorama tremendously, claimed that one could obtain from it a "better idea of these countries than any amount of ordinary reading" could provide, and highly recommended it to his readers: "All that is necessary for the viewer to do is to sit still, and the great canvas reels on, while the salient points of life and scenery . . . come like shadows."¹¹⁹

Considerable effort went into the project to promote the panorama as being able to simulate an actual trip to China and Japan, but it did not enjoy an auspicious beginning. The lectures on China appear to have been disorganized and hastily thrown together. On opening night, the gentleman responsible for China apparently apologized to the audience for his lack of preparation and admitted to having "but a day to prepare himself."¹²⁰ The *Times* liked neither the lecture nor West's artwork: "The illustrations of 'China' painted by Mr. West, did not strike us as very good, and the gentleman who explained it bungled it very badly."¹²¹ The *Tribune*, the *Times*, and the *Herald* all agreed that, in general, the lectures were too nationalistic. "The great drawback to this exhibition is the lecturer," wrote the *Herald*, "who tells funny stories in a very melancholy manner, and is spasmodically patriotic where there is not the slightest necessity for any such displays." The *Times* believed that Mr. Landers, who spoke after China and before Japan, was excessive both in his declamations on the Americanism intrinsic to West's accomplishment and in his unrealistic ranking of West's explorations of China with the Arctic expedition of Elisha Kent Kane (whom West knew from the Cushing Mission). The *Tribune* also took issue with the lecturers' assumption that the openings of China and Japan benefited those countries. In comparing China with the outside world that forced opium on to it, the paper wrote that the "man in the moon would be puzzled to tell . . . which was the heathen."¹²²

With the unpopular lecturers, West and Heine clearly had a problem serious enough to threaten the viability of their entire enterprise. Although for the most part their paintings were drawing positive reviews, the hired speakers persisted in making errors and offending people with their excessive nationalistic pride. In the face of this criticism, the two artists decided to act. They discharged the lecturers and immediately commenced their search for suitable replacements, which was no easy task. After all, how many people in the New York area were qualified to speak on either China or Japan, possessed strong oratory skills, and were able to lecture immediately, without needing time to prepare? In a remarkable stroke of apparent good fortune, they located an individual who not only met all these requirements but was qualified to speak on China and Japan at the same time. Bayard Taylor, a famous travel writer whom Heine had met on Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan, was then residing in New York.

At the urging of the *New York Tribune*, Bayard Taylor had sailed to China in 1853 to join Perry's squadron before it embarked for Japan. After Taylor's return, the travelogue that resulted from this experience and his earlier books on Europe and the American West combined to solidify his reputation as America's most beloved travel writer. A different country or a different age might have been unlikely to confer celebrity status on a mere travel writer, but antebellum America did so with enthusiasm. Indeed, that same national yearning to explore distant places that drove many Americans to Chinese museums also transformed Taylor into a national hero. During an extensive lecture tour that followed his return from Asia, he regularly appeared before packed auditoriums (see chapter 8).

For West and Heine, Taylor seemed like the ideal choice. His fame promised to fill the auditorium, his public speaking skills guaranteed a professional delivery, and his experience in both China and Japan lent him the credibility that the previous lecturers lacked. Heine approached Taylor and formally asked him to assume the position as lecturer. For Taylor, the offer was easy to accept because he had a lecture on China and Japan already written; he would only need to modify it slightly so that it could correspond to the scenes detailed in the panorama. And since he possessed a favorable opinion of the Japanese, his lectures probably complemented Heine's artwork quite well. But for West, the presence of Taylor behind the podium must have been bittersweet, because, while gate receipts surely rose, Taylor's views on China were not in alignment with West's own. Whereas West had looked closely at the Chinese and discerned their humanity, Taylor had observed only a glaring moral depravity, and he was not bashful about reporting his findings. As a result, audience members at the panorama must have recognized a gross incongruity between the audio and the visual. While watching beautiful pictures of China roll by, they concurrently listened to the speaker issue a complete denunciation of the entire Chinese race. [123](#)

After the panorama closed later in 1856, George West left New York and headed south to Washington, D.C., where a potentially large opportunity awaited him. In the 1850s, the U.S. Capitol had become a major construction site. Since the completion of the old Capitol in 1826, the nation had added sixteen new states, including California in 1850; the resulting shortage of space and strain on facilities had compelled the government to add extensions to the building. Montgomery C. Meigs, a captain of engineers trained at West Point, was overseeing the massive project. A lover of Raphael and Michelangelo, Meigs envisioned that the walls and domes of the new interior would be adorned with paintings and frescoes executed in the style of the Italian Renaissance. He must have viewed the immigration from Italy of Constantino Brumidi, a classically trained painter, as a gift from the heavens. [124](#)

However, since Brumidi could not by himself handle all of the numerous painting projects needed in the extensions, Meigs needed to recruit other artists. In 1856, he hired George West to paint, from sketches drawn by Brumidi, pictures of important naval engagements on the walls of the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs. Meigs hoped that the accomplished Brumidi might serve as a mentor to West, but he found West to be rather recalcitrant and unreceptive to supervision. Besides deeming himself underpaid, West apparently had an especially high opinion of his own artistic abilities and believed Meigs was slighting him by relegating him to this role of following instructions from Brumidi. A dispute between West and Meigs arose, after which the insulted artist proposed that he destroy the three paintings he had nearly finished. After the paintings were in fact obliterated, Meigs sent other artists to paint new compositions over the last remaining traces of West's work. [125](#)

As the frustrated George West prepared to leave the Capitol, he must have been perplexed at how rapidly his promising career had soured. He had staked his reputation on a grand panorama that, after receiving mixed reviews, was promptly forgotten amid the unceasing parade of popular attractions in New York. And as for his humanistic construction of China, it too had been lost when Bayard Taylor confused the audience by adulterating it with his anti-Chinese vitriol. Although posterity sometimes rediscovers the brilliance of an artist overlooked in his own day, West and his panorama would never receive a reevaluation. Unlike the permanency of a published book of engravings, the Chinese panorama was an ephemeral work of art; the depiction of China existed on a cheap form of paper that would disintegrate over time. Finally, West's stint as a government-commissioned painter of the U.S. Capitol, though holding out the possibility for a modicum of immortality, had ended tragically when the dispute with Meigs left the artist in the nightmarish position of destroying his own work in anger.

When this destruction was complete, George West walked down the Capitol steps in disgust. He then promptly proceeded to pass into artistic oblivion.

Conclusion

The Cushing Mission was organized to change China in two profound ways. It asked the Chinese to open more ports to American trading vessels and to open their minds to American technology. Yet this American thrust toward China triggered an unexpected reflexive action. Two of Cushing's

attachés, John Peters and George West, confronted in China a complex civilization that impressed them with its beauty, ingenuity, and longevity. Instead of changing China, the two men decided instead to allocate their time, talents, and resources to the effort to change popular opinion in the United States. On returning to their homeland, Peters and West, in defiance to the condescension towards China that then suffused the mainstream, created venues that cast the Chinese in a positive light. Yet despite their admirable intentions, both young men ultimately forfeited control of their creations to two giants of antebellum popular culture. And, although P. T. Barnum and Bayard Taylor did not alter the museum and the panorama, dramatically different constructions of China emerged when control over the presentation of these shifted into their hands.

Notes:

Note 1: Claude M. Fuess, *The Life of Caleb Cushing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), 1:414–15. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Caleb Cushing Papers (hereafter cited as CCP), box 40, folder 6–10 June 1843, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. [Back.](#)

Note 3: Folder 1–10 July 1843, box 40, CCP. Cushing did return with a large collection of books in Chinese. *Catalogue of the Private Library of the Hon. Caleb Cushing of Newburyport, Massachusetts* (Boston: Sullivan Brothers, auctioneers, 1879). [Back.](#)

Note 4: Folder 27–31 May 1843, box 39, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 5: Folder 6–10 July 1843, box 40, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 6: Folder 11–16 July 1843, box 40, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 7: Folder 17–21 July 1843, box 40, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Folder 16–26 June 1843, box 40, CCP. Caleb Cushing's "Delusions of Science" is discussed in chapter 5. *National Magazine and Republican* (March 1839). [Back.](#)

Note 9: Folder 11–15 June 1843, box 40, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 10: Folder 11–15 June 1843, box 40, CCP. As a result of the war and subsequent treaties, the Chinese government lifted the ban on Western women in Canton. [Back.](#)

Note 11: Folder 17–24 July 1843, box 40, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Folder 9–13 May 1843, box 39, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 13: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 14: Folder 27–31 May 1843, box 39, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 15: Folder 20–26 May 1843, box 39, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 17: The elder Peters alluded to his discussions with the president in letters to Cushing. Folder 1–10 July 1843, box 40, CCP. For Peters's position on the Common Council, see *Appendix, Containing an Account of the Commemoration of the Completion of the Erie Canal, by the Corporation of the City of New York* (New York, 1826), Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. [Back.](#)

Note 18: Folder 27–31 May 1843, box 39, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 19: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 20: Brooke Hindle, "The Transfer of Technology and American Industrial Fairs to 1853," in *International Congress on the History of Sciences, Proceedings, XIVth International Congress of the History of Science*, (Tokyo: Science Council of Japan, 1974), 3:146–48. [Back.](#)

Note 21: "The Fair of the American Institute," *Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review* (November 1844), 446. [Back.](#)

Note 22: "The Eighteenth Annual Fair of the American Institute," *American Review: A Whig Journal of Politics, Literature, Art, and Science* (November 1845), 542. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Folder 1–8 May 1843, box 39, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Folder 1–10 July 1843, box 40, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Folder 24–31 July 1843, box 40, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 26: Folder 15–24 July 1844, box 45, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Fuess, 1:417. Folder 23–30 April 1843, box 39, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 28: Folder October 1843, box 41. CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 29: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 30: Folder 11–16 July 1843, box 40, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 31: Folder October 1843, box 41, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 32: Folder 1–10 April 1844, box 43, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 33: Cushing was in Macao, where Chinese laws did not apply. [Back.](#)

Note 34: For Cushing's Manchu lessons, see the notebooks from his study, boxes 166–67, CCP. For Webster's troubles with his teacher, see folder 1–10 April 1844, box 43, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 35: Fuess, 1:438–39. [Back.](#)

Note 36: Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), 161. [Back.](#)

Note 37: Folder 15–24 July 1844, box 45, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 38: For an account of the incident, see Cushing's correspondence for late June and July 1844, CCP [Back.](#)

Note 39: Samuel Wells Williams, "A Journal of the Perry Expedition to Japan," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (1910), 145–48; Peter Booth Wiley, *Yankees in the Land of the Gods: Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan* (New York: Viking, 1990), 364, 416. [Back.](#)

Note 40: James Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 137–41. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Folder 21–28 February 1845, box 48, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 42: John R. Peters Jr., *Miscellaneous Remarks upon the Government, History, Religions, Literature, Agriculture, Arts, Trades, Manners, and Customs of the Chinese: As Suggested by an Examination of the Articles Comprising the Chinese Museum* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber, 1847), 3. [Back.](#)

Note 43: Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Education, Social Life, Arts, Religion, &c., of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1848), 1:xv–xvi. [Back.](#)

Note 44: Folder 21–28 February 1845, box 48, CCP; and *Niles National Register* (7 June 1845). [Back.](#)

Note 45: Peters, 3. [Back.](#)

Note 46: *Boston Daily Advertiser* (17–18 October, 3–4 November 1845). Webster was still lecturing on the subject two years later and still receiving warm reviews: "All who heard Mr. Webster, can say that they know more now about the 'Flowery Nation' than they ever did

before." See the same paper (4 November 1847). Webster was later killed in the Civil War at the Second Battle at Bull Run. Fuess, 1:416. [Back.](#)

Note 47: *Niles National Register* (1 November 1845). [Back.](#)

Note 48: *Niles National Register* (15 November 1845). [Back.](#)

Note 49: Peters, 3. [Back.](#)

Note 50: *Boston Daily Advertiser* (13 October 1845). [Back.](#)

Note 51: See Peters's catalog. [Back.](#)

Note 52: Peters himself may have worried that his collection offered little that was new. As if to minimize Dunn's impact, Peters claimed in the catalog that his predecessor's museum was open only "for a few months" when, in reality, it was open for nearly three years. Peters, 7. [Back.](#)

Note 53: *Dollar Newspaper* (31 March 1847, emphasis in original). [Back.](#)

Note 54: Peters, 7. [Back.](#)

Note 55: *Boston Daily Advertiser* (4 September 1845). [Back.](#)

Note 56: Peters, 112–113. Being an engineer, he wrote in a reverent tone about the Great Wall and the Imperial Canal, the two great civil-engineering projects that had dramatically altered the Chinese landscape. Peters, 20–21. [Back.](#)

Note 57: Peters, 17. [Back.](#)

Note 58: Peters, 44–45. [Back.](#)

Note 59: Peters, 48. [Back.](#)

Note 60: Spence, 165–93. [Back.](#)

Note 61: Peters, 200–1. [Back.](#)

Note 62: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 63: *Dollar Newspaper* (31 March 1847). This reporter visited Peters's museum in Philadelphia. [Back.](#)

Note 64: *Boston Daily Advertiser* (13 October 1845). The correct spelling is Marlboro. [Back.](#)

Note 65: The article from the *Mercantile Journal* was reprinted in the *Farmers Cabinet* (18 September 1845). [Back.](#)

Note 66: *Boston Daily Advertiser* (11 September 1845). [Back.](#)

Note 67: *Boston Daily Advertiser* (11 September 1845). [Back.](#)

Note 68: *Dollar Newspaper* (31 March 1847). [Back.](#)

Note 69: *A Rapid Tour around the World; or, Young Peter's Remarks to His Cousins upon the Different Nations* (Amherst, Mass.: J. S. and C. Adams, 1846), 101. [Back.](#)

Note 70: *Boston Daily Advertiser* (6 September 1845). [Back.](#)

Note 71: *With Perry in Japan: The Diary of Edward Yorke McCauley*, ed. Allan B. Cole (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), 64, 77. Similarly, an American traveler in Singapore likened the architecture of a Chinese-owned house to what he had seen in "the celebrated Chinese Museums in our own country." "En Route; or, Notes of the Overland Journey to the East," *Southern Literary Messenger* (April 1854), 221. [Back.](#)

Note 72: *Dollar Newspaper* (31 March 1847). [Back.](#)

Note 73: *Public Ledger* (17 March 1847). [Back.](#)

Note 74: *Public Ledger* (10 March 1847). [Back.](#)

Note 75: *Public Ledger* (8 and 9 March 1847). [Back.](#)

Note 76: *Public Ledger* (17 March 1847). [Back.](#)

Note 77: William Elliot Griffis, *China's Story in Myth, Legend, Art, and Annals* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), vii. Griffis erroneously referred to the Chinese Museum as belonging to Nathan Dunn, when in fact he visited that of John Peters. Griffis was born in 1843, too late to have visited Dunn's collection in Philadelphia. The mistake would have been an easy one to make since the same building housed both collections. [Back.](#)

Note 78: Advertisements in New York papers, unlike those in Boston and Philadelphia, do not mention the two Chinese. [Back.](#)

Note 79: *New York Herald* (21 December 1848, 3 January 1849). [Back.](#)

Note 80: *New York Herald* (28 October, November 5 1849). [Back.](#)

Note 81: Barnum's publication refers to the death of John Peters without providing details as to the cause or the date of death: "About three years ago . . . [Barnum] placed among his world of curiosities the whole of the famous Chinese Collection, secured by the late Mr. Peters at a cost of \$70,000, in China, and exhibited by him with so much effect to such crowds of wondering people." *Illustrated News* (29 October 1853), 57. [Back.](#)

Note 82: P. T. Barnum, *Ten Thousand Things on China and the Chinese* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1850). [Back.](#)

Note 83: Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., et al., *P. T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 196. A. H. Saxon, *P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 99. [Back.](#)

Note 84: As the result of his worldwide collecting effort, Barnum asserted (with tongue firmly in cheek) that his museum compared favorably to two prestigious institutions in Europe, the Jardin des Plantes, located outside of Paris, and the British Museum in London. Barnum, *Ten Thousand Things*, 196–198. [Back.](#)

Note 85: "What do you know about China," Beekman Papers (Folder 2, Box 25). New-York Historical Society. [Back.](#)

Note 86: Barnum, *Ten Thousand Things*, 6. [Back.](#)

Note 87: Saxon, *P. T. Barnum: the Legend and the Man*, 152–53. [Back.](#)

Note 88: Arthur Bonner, *Alas! What Brought Thee Hither? The Chinese in New York, 1800–1950* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 1; and *New York Herald* (13 April 1848). General Tom Thumb and the Chinese Lady, who was dubbed "the greatest curiosity of the day," both appeared at 315 Broadway. The Chinese Lady would appear in Chinese costume, sing and count in her native language, and eat with chopsticks. [Back.](#)

Note 89: Saxon, *P. T. Barnum: the Legend and the Man*, 74–75. [Back.](#)

Note 90: *New York Herald* (22 and 26 April 22, 3 and 6 May 1850). [Back.](#)

Note 91: In 1837, James Gordon Bennett announced his paper's coverage of New York's social life. *New York Herald* (17 March 1837). Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 28. [Back.](#)

Note 92: *New York Herald* (19 May 1850). [Back.](#)

Note 93: *New York Herald* (25 April 1850). [Back.](#)

Note 94: *New York Herald* (13 June 1850). Another tactic Barnum used was to create a false sense of urgency by announcing at the start of almost every week that Pwan was commencing her last week prior to her departure for London. She did not leave for months. [Back.](#)

Note 95: Barnum was probably pleased to be relieved of the Chinese family. Behind the curtains he was far from complimentary. In one letter, he wrote of the difficulty he had encountered finding an interpreter who could also "manage them properly so that they behave themselves." *Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum*, ed. A. H. Saxon (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 99. [Back.](#)

Note 96: *Illustrated London News* (10 May 1851). P. T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs; or, Forty Years' Recollections* (Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1870), 366. *London Times* (26 October 1846). [Back.](#)

Note 97: Barnum, *Ten Thousand Things*, 196. [Back.](#)

Note 98: Folder 26–31 March 1844, box 42; and folder 1–10 April 1844, box 43. CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 99: Oversized box 2, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 100: Folder December 1844, box 47, CCP. [Back.](#)

Note 101: B. L. Ball, *Rambles in Eastern Asia, Including China and Manilla* (Boston: James French, 1855), 11. [Back.](#)

Note 102: Ball, 104–12. In Canton, Ball noted a sudden interest in a place called "Kalyporny" that was supposedly filled with gold. See 208, 235, 241. [Back.](#)

Note 103: Ball, 120–21. [Back.](#)

Note 104: *Ibid.*, 249–50. [Back.](#)

Note 105: *Ibid.*, 285. [Back.](#)

Note 106: In all, the author makes twelve references to Wood's sketching. Ball, 250, 251, 252, 260, 276, 277, 278, 279, 283, 284, 288. [Back.](#)

Note 107: *Chinese Repository* (May 1847), 223–24. [Back.](#)

Note 108: Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984), 25–29. [Back.](#)

Note 109: Although West could not claim to be the first artist to paint China in a panorama, he was the first to cover the regions that became accessible in the wake of the Opium War. Robert Burford's view of Canton, the only antecedent to West's opus, never toured the United States. Burford's panorama, entitled "Description of a View of Canton, the River Tigris, and the Surrounding Country," opened in London in 1838. See the New York Public Library for the program published for this panorama. [Back.](#)

Note 110: *New York Herald* (1 January 1850). [Back.](#)

Note 111: John L. Marsh, "Drama and Spectacle by the Yard: The Panorama in America," *Journal of Popular Culture* 10, no. 3 (winter 1976): 582. [Back.](#)

Note 112: Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 335. [Back.](#)

Note 113: *New York Tribune* (26 January 1856). The panorama probably measured 10 feet in height by 2,000 feet in length. [Back.](#)

Note 114: William Heine, *With Perry to Japan: A Memoir*, trans. and ed. Frederic Trautman (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 10, 19. [Back.](#)

Note 115: To assist them in painting such a huge canvas, West and Heine hired two other artists, J. Kyle and J. H. Dallas. *New York Times* (26 January 1856). [Back.](#)

Note 116: *New York Times* (26 January 1856). [Back.](#)

Note 117: *New York Tribune* (31 January 1856); and *New York Times* (January 28, 1856). [Back.](#)

Note 118: *New York Tribune* (1 February 1856). [Back.](#)

Note 119: *New York Tribune* (31 January 1856). [Back.](#)

Note 120: *New York Tribune* (31 January 1856). [Back.](#)

Note 121: *New York Times* (28 January 1856). [Back.](#)

Note 122: *New York Tribune* (31 January 1856); *New York Herald* (29 January 1856); and *New York Times* (January 28, 1856). [Back.](#)

Note 123: *New York Herald* (1 and 6 February 1856). [Back.](#)

Note 124: Barbara Wolanin, *Constantino Brumidi: Artist of the Capitol* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), 35, 38, 52. [Back.](#)

Note 125: Wolanin, 63, 68–69; and Benjamin Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers; New York: W. A. Houghton, 1886), 493–95. [Back.](#)

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