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9. Traditional China and Chinese Yankees: The Centennial Exposition of 1876

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In 1876, the United States celebrated one hundred years of independence in grand fashion: The Centennial Exposition was held in Philadelphia. Eight million people, or approximately one fifth of the nation's population, paid fifty cents each to view the finest achievements of their own as well of the twenty-five foreign countries that accepted invitations. ¹ This world's fair is best remembered for offering the first major exhibition of the United States' technological prowess. Machines had been a visible part of the American landscape for decades, but after the Civil War the United States entered into a period of large-scale industrial growth. Quite fittingly, American machines seized center stage at the Centennial. The "superior elegance, aptness, and ingenuity of our machinery is observable at a glance," observed William Dean Howells as he toured America's mechanical exhibits. "Yes, it is still in these things of iron and steel that the national genius most freely speaks." ²

Along with machines, foreign exhibits provided the other great attraction. Bayard Taylor, visiting the fair to write articles for the *New York Tribune*, observed that some of the foreign exhibits drew more attention than others. He believed he had the explanation: "The exhibits which are accompanied by exhibitors of another race, at once recognizable in features or dress, have a double attraction to the crowd." ³ Taylor was correct. Foreign exhibitors had traversed oceans to arrange objects for public display, but visitors saw the exhibitors themselves as adding an intriguing ethnographic component to the exposition. In this way, foreign people became the unwitting participants in their nations' exhibits.

After touring the foreign exhibits, Bayard Taylor was most effusive in his praise for Japan's. Japan was enjoying a rapid ascendancy on the world stage, as two decades earlier he had predicted it would. Given his harsh views on China, he not surprisingly refused to so much as acknowledge the existence of the Chinese exhibit, which stood just a few feet away from the Japanese. ⁴ Shunned by Taylor, the Chinese exhibit nevertheless enjoyed resounding success, becoming one of the most popular venues at the world's fair. As visitors passed beneath the grand arching gateways, they felt as if they had been transported to the Middle Kingdom itself. Once inside, they relished the opportunity to inspect exquisite Chinese artifacts and meet genuine Chinese people.

The Centennial marked the first noteworthy exhibition of Chinese culture in the United States since the heyday of the Chinese museums in the 1830s, '40s, and early '50s. Indeed, some of the popularity of the Chinese exhibit can perhaps be attributed to this prolonged absence. Yet to fully understand the exhibit's attraction, we need to place it in context with the overarching theme of the Centennial: the celebration of technological progress. In the 1870s, the vast changes underway in the United States effected a curious resurgence in the myth of Cathay. Americans expressed a profound ambivalence about industrialization, harboring both unbridled exuberance for technological progress and wistful nostalgia for a bygone era that, in retrospect, seemed simple and pure. That China had not entered the machine age only lent its exhibit greater appeal. For in China, Americans saw a traditional culture in which skilled craftspeople continued to produce by hand objects of rare beauty. Of course, some proudly enjoyed China's lack of machinery, seeing it as helping to accentuate the technologically advanced nature of American civilization. For others, however, the Chinese exhibit offered an escape from a world that was changing too fast. Surrounded by a rich abundance of exquisite porcelain, fragrant teas, and colorful silks, guests could forget the cold, noisy, and forbidding machines and choose instead to luxuriate in timeless Cathay.

However, unlike the Cathay of old, this newer Cathay—Cathay redux—existed within restrictive boundaries. By 1876, nearly all Americans knew that China was not the pastoral paradise depicted on porcelain. They had followed China's various wars and internal rebellions in the newspapers, had read about the devastating famines that ravaged the countryside, ⁵ and had received Bayard Taylor's ugly version of China through his travelogue, lectures, and *Tribune* correspondence. But, although Americans could no longer naively equate the real China with mythic Cathay, in their minds China's enchanting beauty had not so much vanished as it had

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retreated to a smaller sector of Chinese society—the world of the elites. Americans understood that it was not so much Chinese culture that captivated them as it was Chinese high culture: sage mandarins, silk-clad merchants, delicate ladies with tiny feet, intricate carvings in ivory and jade, ornate porcelain vases, and elaborate pleasure gardens. ⁶ And since China appeared to resist modernization, Americans may have believed that this new iteration of Cathay, unlike the old one, would never disappear.

However, by 1876, the seeds for its destruction were already sown. Just as Americans were ambivalent about modernity, so too were the Chinese. In China, reformers and conservatives engaged in a great national debate that, quite interestingly, spilled over accidentally into the Centennial. As one of the programs initiated by reformers in the Qing government, a large group of boys was sent by China to the United States to study in New England schools. When these boys arrived at the Centennial purely as visitors, they became a de facto Chinese exhibit; for a brief period, fairgoers shifted their attention away from the timeless art objects of the official exhibit and to this group of boys in whom a striking cultural metamorphosis was taking place. The ease with which the boys were learning the English language as well as American customs, science, and technology impressed Americans and compelled them to revise their construction of China yet again.

Gathering, Transporting, Assembling

On receiving an invitation in 1874, the Qing government decided that China would participate in its second major international exhibition. ⁷ To Robert Hart, the inspector general of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, the government delegated the enormous task of transforming this desire into a reality. Hart, who was Irish, was an employee of the Chinese government, and he carried out his duties with the interests of China, not Britain, in mind. ⁸ The task before him was formidable indeed, consisting of three major stages: assembling the exhibit, arranging for its transportation to Philadelphia, and structuring its presentation there so as to attract and impress visitors. To assist him in this undertaking, Hart enlisted the aid of his subordinates in the Customs Office, who included James L Hammond, of Salem, Massachusetts. And since the venue was in the United States, Hart also deemed it prudent to appoint to the traveling Chinese Commission agents from the three largest American trading firms in China: Russell and Co., Olyphant and Co., and Knight and Co. ⁹

Although non-Chinese officials and merchants handled the logistics, the substance of the exhibit had to come solely from the Chinese, and several merchants from various ports volunteered to contribute their finest wares. While initial plans called for an exhibit of modest proportions, it rapidly grew in size as the list of donors lengthened. ¹⁰ One contributor in particular raised eyebrows when he announced his intention to participate. Hu Quang Yung, one of the wealthiest bankers in China, enjoyed world renown in collecting circles for his extensive holdings in Chinese art, both ancient and modern. Known in China simply as Hu Tuen Tzen (the Great Man), Hu conferred immediate prestige on China's exhibit when he agreed to display numerous items from his famous collection. Preferring to remain in his mansion in Hangzhou rather than suffer the hardships of Pacific travel, Hu dispatched his able nephew, Hu Ying Ding, to accompany the exquisite collection on its overseas journey. This second Hu, though only a young man, was himself quite accomplished, having already passed the state examinations required to become a government official. That he had also achieved proficiency in English meant he was well equipped to carry out his uncle's primary objective: to familiarize the world with the many splendors and the unique beauty of Chinese civilization. ¹¹ And so the Chinese exhibit was assembled in a spirit of joint cooperation, with Europeans and Americans lending their assistance to what was largely a Chinese effort.

However, just because the Chinese participated did not necessarily mean that the final exhibit would offer a comprehensive explication of Chinese culture. Li Gui, a customs official who would travel to Philadelphia with the Commission, explained that the exhibit was not a mere assemblage of "curiosities" intended only to be "pleasing to the eye." Rather, it was a collection designed "to increase knowledge." ¹² But with contributions coming almost exclusively from merchants, mandarins, and millionaires, the exhibit clearly emanated exclusively out of the powerful, wealthy, and learned ranks of Chinese society. It did not reflect a cross-section of life in China, because organizers clearly omitted objects that could be construed as representing laborers and farmers, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the country's population.

Yet Robert Hart and others could justify this arrangement for two reasons. First, organizers had to take Western tastes and expectations into consideration when forming the exhibit because visitors would come predominantly from the United States, of course, but also Europe, the host city being Philadelphia, on the Atlantic coast. Westerners would be the ones inspecting the objects and issuing a final verdict on the productions of China. Since most of them now believed that the beauty of China resided mainly in the possessions, costumes, lifestyle, and art of the rich and educated classes, organizers not surprisingly loaded the crates with silks, porcelain, paintings, ivory carvings, and fine teas. The inclusion of a display devoted to the poorer sectors of Chinese society was simply not a practical option. [13](#)

Second, this emphasis on China's high culture was also consistent with the expectations of the Centennial. Unlike an ethnological museum, an international exposition had no pretensions about being comprehensive. While both attempted to instruct interested parties about a different culture, expositions possessed in addition an overriding commercial objective: A nation attempted to attract international business by placing on display mainly those commodities that were unique to its culture. For example, although millions of Chinese citizens wore cotton outfits, they were omitted from the exhibit because the textile industries in England and the United States could mass-produce cotton fabric at a low cost, meaning that an international market for Chinese cotton did not exist. Instead, organizers emphasized China's specialties—those objects that, for various reasons, were singularly Chinese or could not be duplicated elsewhere: porcelain because it remained one of China's top exports; tea because Western nations did not possess the proper soil and climate to grow tea trees; paintings, scrolls, and wall hangings because the artists worked within an aesthetic that was distinctively Chinese; and intricate carvings in ivory, bone, tortoiseshell, and jade because the hundreds of man-hours that these pieces required precluded their production in Western countries, where the price of labor was more dear.

In the late winter of 1876, the members of the Chinese Commission along with several carpenters set out for Philadelphia with 720 carefully packed crates, traveling first by steamer to California and then by train to the East Coast. For the second leg of the journey, their transit from west to east across the United States, they used the Transcontinental Railroad, completed just seven years earlier largely through the labor of their hard-working countrymen. [14](#) In a strange synchronicity, as the Commission made preparations to put Chinese civilization on display in Philadelphia, Chinese immigrants back in San Francisco were the subject of state hearings designed to weigh their usefulness against their potential menace to society. Members of both the Chinese and the white communities took the stand and offered sworn testimony on such issues as prostitution, gambling, blackmail, assassins, labor competition, opium dens, and the bribing of police officers. In stark contrast to the Chinese Commission, which carried a formal invitation from the U.S. government, Chinese immigrants found themselves defending their way of life, with a discriminatory immigration policy looming as a potential outcome. [15](#)

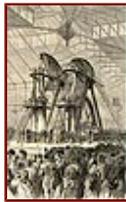
The Chinese Commission reached Philadelphia in early April and found the city festooned with banners, streamers, and the flags of participating nations. [16](#) On arriving in Fairmount Park, the site of the exposition, they beheld for the first time the Main Building—a vast parallelogram that measured 1,876 feet in length, 464 feet in width, and 184 feet in height. For its day, the Main Building stood as a marvel of modern architecture. With an imposing superstructure composed of wrought-iron columns and glass, the building was designed to be as edifying as the myriad exhibits it housed. It was also equipped with a steam elevator, a recent invention installed by the Otis Company, that could lift anyone desiring a bird's-eye view to a walkway raised 70 feet off the floor. Into this colossal edifice that itself symbolized technological progress, the Chinese Commission brought a collection consisting mainly of traditional handicrafts and works of arts.

Once inside, the Chinese, looking to establish their place at the Centennial, got off to an inauspicious start. First, they found that their allotted space in the southwest part of the building was adjacent to the exhibit from Japan; though they could not have known it at that time, this juxtaposition would ultimately yield unfavorable comparisons. Second, the Chinese discovered to their dismay that their square footage was not only significantly smaller than that allocated to Japan but also insufficient to display the contents of the 720 crates. [17](#) According to Li Gui, the shortage resulted not from any unfair treatment by organizers of the world's fair but rather from China's original plan to bring a much smaller exhibit. Lacking the space for all they had brought, the Chinese sent many pieces to a local auctioneer, who promptly put them on the block. [18](#)

Third, and worst of all, the Chinese discovered that they had arrived on the scene very late and would have to make haste if they were going to be ready by opening day, scheduled for May 10. For newspaper reporters looking for a story in the weeks preceding the grand opening, the Main Building offered a source of unlimited fascination. Just by roving the floor, one could find people from all across the world who dressed in their native costumes and spoke in languages never before heard by most Americans. It was a modern-day Tower of Babel.

Being among the last to arrive, the Chinese attracted much of this attention as reporters provided readers with updates of their progress. "China, the latest arrival," wrote one reporter, "has a small mountain of packing-cases on her territory." Yet despite the substantial task before them, "a dozen mechanics in shirt-like blouses, skull-caps, and pigtailed are putting things to rights with diligence and dispatch." Another reporter offered a less hopeful assessment: "Up to date of writing . . . the efforts of the Mongolians are alarmingly slow." To expedite the process, the Chinese hired American women to clean the objects after removing them from crates. When a vase worth \$1,500 slipped from one woman's grasp and shattered to pieces against the floor, the Chinese were heard to utter oaths, the essence of which was easily translatable into any language. [19](#)

On opening day, thousands of guests gathered to listen to Theodore Thomas's orchestra and to speeches given by important dignitaries, including President Ulysses S. Grant. They then moved to Machinery Hall to watch the president and the Brazilian emperor Dom Pedro turn the levers that activated the Corliss steam engine, an iron-and-steel behemoth that generated the energy for all machines in the building ([fig. 9.1](#)). According to *Harper's Weekly*, at the conclusion of these ceremonies visitors began "pouring in a constant stream through the Main Building" to witness the "picturesque commingling of nationalities and costumes" that had no precedent in the United States. Visitors who flocked to the Chinese exhibit, among the most greatly anticipated of the entire exposition, found to their dismay that it was still unfinished. [20](#)



Any subsequent disappointment, however, disappeared when guests realized that the unfinished exhibit actually afforded as much stimulation as a complete one would have done. Here before their eyes moved the living, breathing denizens of China, all decked out in their native costumes, busily constructing "an epitome of the Flowery Land out of . . . a medley of red and gilded beams, matting and bamboo" ([fig. 9.2](#)). One writer wondered whether the exhibit's unfinished state "was not really an advantage" since "visitors could see at once the workmen and their works." He added that, although China stood at "the opposite extreme of what we call civilization," the Chinese worked with "military precision and aplomb."

[21](#) Indeed, the crowds gathered around the unfinished Chinese exhibit were apparently so large and boisterous that Centennial organizers felt compelled to deploy a "special policeman" to prevent any disruption of the work. [22](#)

A few reporters did not hesitate to use the unfinished state of the exhibit to make sweeping generalizations about China's national character. One journalist construed the exhibit as symptomatic of China's lack of "goaheadativeness." This critical flaw, he argued, prevented China from joining the family of forward-looking nations, the most recent member of which happened to be China's closest neighbor in the Main Building:



The Japanese Department . . . lies side by side with the Chinese. The oldest of Oriental Empires is thus placed in close contrast with the newest addition to the disciples of Western progressiveness. . . . Here is slow old China, with the bulk of her exhibit unpacked. The goods . . . are mainly porcelain. China is represented by china. . . . She would have made quite as good a show in this line in 1776, or even in 1476. . . . How different is it with the ambitious, striving, progressive Japan! She is all ready and obviously anxious to be seen. . . . On this side of the aisle all is life; just across the way, the almond-eyed Celestials have learned little since the days of Confucius. [23](#)

Indeed, the dynamic in East Asia had undergone a dramatic shift in the quarter of a century leading up to the Centennial. Before Commodore Perry's expedition to Japan in 1853, European and American whalers shipwrecked on Japanese shores had been caged, tortured, or forced to trample on a crucifix. But in Perry's wake, this hostility to foreigners rapidly diminished, eventually giving way to a new spirit of openness. In a surprising reversal, Westerners were now invited to come to Japan in order to share their expertise and inventions with the Japanese people. As a result, the country began to rise along a steep trajectory toward a level of modernization previously found only in the West. ²⁴ In 1876, to announce their ascendancy to the world, the Japanese brought to the Main Building a wonderful exhibit that dwarfed those of all its neighbors, including China.

If this exhibit were not spectacular enough, the Japanese also erected on the fair grounds two examples of authentic Japanese architecture, a bazaar and a traditional dwelling, both of which were so popular that only the Corliss engine attracted larger crowds. ²⁵ One impressed visitor admitted that the exhibit had forced him to "amend his ideas" of Japan: "We have been accustomed to regard that country as uncivilized, or half-civilized at best, but we find here abundant evidences that it outshines the most cultivated nations of Europe in arts." ²⁶ A burlesque of the Centennial written for the stage sought to lampoon Japan's swelling self-confidence. In the play, an arrogant Japanese delegate rudely dismisses one from China: "Here, off with you, Chinaman! You know nothing. Japs everybody here." The Chinese delegate, who fears the same progress of which Japan boasts, is too afraid to even enter the Otis elevator, exclaiming, "Oh, me big scared!" ²⁷ Intended only to evoke laughter, the scene reflected Americans' perception of a shifting power structure in Asia.

The Importance of Clothes

One might expect that most Americans would encounter difficulty differentiating between Japanese and Chinese, but that was not the case. According to one reporter, "There are not a few individuals from these Oriental nations scattered through the mass, some in native pigtailed, and some in foreign stove pipes." In making this observation, he clearly had the Chinese and the Japanese in mind. ²⁸ As much as the exhibits themselves, the attire of the exhibitors from Asia elicited commentary from Americans. The Chinese dressed in a traditional fashion, with outfits of brocaded silk robes, petticoats, and wooden shoes; these along with their queues prompted one journalist to note, "They do seem to be a queer folk." In contrast, that same journalist observed, "You scarcely see a Jap now who is not as elegant in European clothes as anybody on the grounds." Li Gui, who closely watched his Japanese neighbors in the Main Building, observed that "were it not for their black hair and yellow skin, I could not tell them from the Westerners." ²⁹

However, evidence suggests that the Japanese donned Western outfits not just to show how modern they had become but to avoid harassment from the crowds. According to one reporter, foreigners were repeatedly pursued by packs of idle boys and men who "hooted and hollered" at them as if they had been "animals of a strange species." In one case, a rowdy nearly tore the silken robes off the back of a Chinese official. The regrettable result of this malicious behavior, the reporter noted, was that many foreigners had shifted to the less conspicuous American dress. ³⁰ William Dean Howells, covering the Centennial for the *Atlantic Monthly*, found the Japanese metamorphosis disappointing because it robbed the exposition of some of its potential for color. "We saw but one Jap in his national costume," Howells lamented. "The other Japanese were in our modification of the English dress. . . . It is a great pity not to see them in their own outlandish gear, for picturesqueness' sake." As a solution, Howells proposed that exposition officials assign "a squad of soldiers" to each Japanese for his personal protection. ³¹

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Regardless of the true cause behind the change in Japanese dress, Americans perceived it as a Japanese attempt to imitate America. In one telling cartoon from the *Daily Graphic*, a Japanese father sends his son to the Centennial ([fig. 9.3](#)). In the first frame, he exhorts the boy, "Go, my son, go and study the civilization of the Occident." In the second frame the son has abandoned his Japanese clothes, rice-harvesting hat, and long sword in favor of a tuxedo, stovepipe hat, and cigar. He has also won the affections of an elegant young American woman, who has become his escort at the Centennial. "Dear Papa," he writes, "I am industriously studying the civilization of these Americans but it is very expensive. Please send me a bag of dollars." After

just a brief taste of American life, he had become a convert.

Many reporters, as they had done with the unfinished state of the Chinese exhibit, read deep importance into the wardrobes of the two Asian nations, interpreting modes of dress as external manifestations of national ideologies. According to the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, the Chinese "have not budged an inch in the way of conforming to our costumes and customs." They are "an odd people," he continued, who "live under the weight of all the ages. . . . But with all their wisdom, they might learn a thing or two, if they would open their eyes." He suggested they take note of the Japanese. [32](#)



Another reporter made what he believed were profound insights about China and Japan after merely making a few superficial observations:

The exhibitors . . . from the Happy Isles afford a strange contrast to those of the Flowery Kingdom next to them, for the former are dressed like Americans, bear themselves in a very gentlemanly and pleasant fashion, and for the most part speak English fluently. The latter are clad in their womanish robes of silk, wear long pig-tails, and speak little if any English. The former are progressive Mongols, the latter stanch conservatives, and it is queer to see them side by side, so alike and yet so different. This shows that, though nature is much, the impulse of direction is still more. Japan is bound to be more and more progressive, and China must be more and more conservative; nor will it be very surprising should she abrogate her treaties and close her ports even in this Centennial year. [33](#)

Whereas the Japanese appeared "gentlemanly" in their American suits, the silk robes and queues had a feminizing effect on Chinese males, in the reporter's view.

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From his observations about dress and English proficiency, he made the induction that the Japanese were "progressive" for their willingness to embrace Western ideas, while the Chinese were "conservative" for resisting the same. If this generalization were accurate, he also had strong evidence that learned behavior ("direction") supersedes innate "nature," which was determined by race, because both nations were populated by the same "Mongols." Relying entirely on the evidence of differing styles of dress, he decided the nature-versus-nurture question and could then move on to make his sweeping prediction: The Chinese would probably sever contact with the outside world. Such was the importance of clothes at the Centennial.

Other reporters, enjoying the color and the exoticism that the Chinese wardrobe provided, applauded the Chinese decision not to abandon their traditional costumes. "Look at that pig-tailed and gowned gentleman in the 'Empire of China,'" wrote one excited reporter. [34](#) Indeed, since China insisted on being itself and on not conforming to Western styles, William Dean Howells could still count on the Chinese enclosure to deliver the exotic experience he so coveted:

The Chinese, whom we found in disorder and unreadiness, pushed rapidly forward during our stay, and before we left, the rich grotesquery of their industries had satisfactorily unfolded itself. We were none the less satisfied that there should be still a half-score of their carpenters busy about the show-cases; their looks, their motions, their speech, their dress, amidst the fantastic forms of those bedeviled arts of theirs, affected one like the things of a capricious dream. [35](#)

Howells hoped the Chinese exhibit could transport him to an oriental fantasy world, and he did not leave disappointed. What he did not fully grasp, however, was the causal relationship between the busy carpenters and his pleasurable dreamlike experience. For during the planning stage of the exhibit, Robert Hart and the other customs officers had conceived of an architectural plan designed to evoke this exact response. The carpenters were busy transforming a blueprint on paper into a three-dimensional reality.

A Wall around China

Inside the Main Building, Chinese carpenters worked steadily to bring to fruition the architectural plan, the governing idea of which was virtual travel. By erecting partitions along the perimeter of the allotted space and covering the exhibit with a roof, they created an enclosure, unique among exhibits at the fair, that blocked out the many distracting sights and sounds of the Main Building.

³⁶ In addition, at the three entrances they raised elaborate gateways, prefabricated in Peking, that each towered more than fourteen feet in height (fig. 9.4). Over the northern gate, the most prominent of the three, Li Gui wrote three Chinese characters in large, bold strokes: "The great Qing state" (fig. 9.5). ³⁷ A journalist for the *Cincinnati Commercial* acknowledged the "potency" of these structures in creating an immediate effect on the visitor. By referring to them as "portals," he implied that they actually worked to heighten the impression that one was actually entering a foreign country and not a mere exhibit. ³⁸

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Indeed, other visitors corroborated this sensation of virtual travel. "We entered into this country," one observer wrote, "through a tall noble gateway of carved wood painted in dark colors, with the roof turned up, and trimmed off with dragons like tea-chests and pagodas." ³⁹ Rebecca Harding Davis, writing for *Harper's Weekly*, noted that the Chinese "shut us into a different world from that which we have known, but one which is somehow oddly familiar." ⁴⁰ Likewise, James McCabe, who compiled an entire book on the Centennial, wrote that the exhibit conjured up the illusion of an actual trip to China: A "number of almond-eyed, pig-tailed celestials, in their native costumes, were scattered through the enclosure, and you might for a moment imagine that you had put the sea between you and the Exhibition and had suddenly landed in some large Chinese bazaar." ⁴¹ The journalist from the *Cincinnati Commercial* became so absorbed in the Chinese department that, on completing his tour and passing over the "threshold," he found the outside world oddly transformed: "The visitor . . . involuntarily and instantly seems to be setting forth into an entirely different world, appearing familiar, yet strangely novel." ⁴²



Besides creating the attractive possibility of virtual travel, the architectural plan played an important role in visitors' experience by discouraging them from viewing the Chinese exhibit in the context of its surroundings in the Main Building. Robert Rydell, a historian who specializes in world's fairs, describes America's expositions before and after the turn of the century as "triumphs of hegemony" in which the nation's "political, financial, corporate, and intellectual leaders" used their prestige to impose a specific worldview on a consenting population. Each exposition, he claims, was organized around a "cohesive explanatory blueprint" aimed at promoting and disseminating to the public American nationalism and notions about the racial superiority of Americans of European stock.

As for the Centennial, Rydell contends that organizers arranged the foreign exhibits around a "classification scheme" intended to demonstrate a firm link connecting race to the scientific and industrial progress achieved by the various participating cultures. Indeed, this agenda was clearly manifest in the American Indian exhibit, which was organized by the Smithsonian Institution rather than by the tribes themselves. By portraying American Indians as violent, depraved, and antagonistic to Western civilization, the Smithsonian implicitly justified a federal policy that involved the use of military force to suppress their resistance. If William Dean Howells's comments reflected those of the other visitors, then the exhibit achieved the desired effect. He referred to the "red man" as "a hideous demon, whose malign traits can hardly inspire any emotion softer than abhorrence." He advocated "extermination" as a viable solution. ⁴³

Assuming Rydell is correct in discerning a race-based hierarchical plan behind the layout of foreign exhibits, one must question the efficacy of such a plan with regard to China. The architectural apparatus encasing the Chinese exhibit had the effect of insulating it, both physically and psychologically, from its surroundings. The Chinese enclosure existed as a pocket of autonomy, impermeable to the external designs of fair organizers, inside of which members of the Chinese Commission could attempt to inculcate visitors with the view that the Chinese were an ingenious people capable of producing objects of both aesthetic beauty and practical utility—a

view contrary to the Centennial's overarching purpose. Undoubtedly, some visitors imported into the enclosure prevailing opinions about the importance of Western technology and then judged the exhibit accordingly. Yet others happily relinquished their preconceptions on passing through the gateways and allowed the Middle Kingdom to explain itself on its own terms.

Through the Gateway

Drawn by the promise of a novel experience, visitors came in droves to the Chinese exhibit, making it one of the most crowded in the Main Building. ⁴⁴ What they found was a pleasing profusion of exquisite things with which to occupy their attention. Sir Robert Hart, his assistants, and the numerous Chinese contributors had set out to assemble an exhibit that would awe visitors with the wonderful products of China and the masterful skill of its artisans. According to Li Gui, who carefully observed the reactions of the guests, the exhibit achieved this objective convincingly: "China's productions are something that other countries' officers and visitors have never before seen. They all gasp at the beauty of everything, with some even exclaiming: 'Now we know Chinese people's ingenuity is above even that of Westerners.'" ⁴⁵

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With so much to take in at one time, David Bailey, a schoolteacher from rural Ohio, expressed the great difficulty he had in describing the place: "Were I writing a book of a thousand pages, instead of one of a hundred, I could now go on and enumerate hundreds of curiosities displayed here, but as it is, I must desist." ⁴⁶ "The more China is studied," observed a journalist, "the more weird, curious, suggestive and unique (from all else around) it appears to be." Though the "Celestial compartment" was not "so extensive as that of the neighboring Empire of Japan," it contained "far more than one would suppose at first, and scarcely an object will fail to repay close examination." ⁴⁷

From the ceiling, large Chinese lanterns hung, some made of bone with sides of embroidered silk. For fabrics, one could find satins, crapes, brocades, silks, shawls, nankeens, and pongees. And out of bamboo, Chinese artisans had fabricated all manner of items, including pillows, musical instruments, shoes, and even a luxurious sleeping chair (fig. 9.6). An assortment of tiny women's shoes accompanied by a model of a compacted female foot provided visitors with a glimpse of an upper-class Chinese custom they found bizarre. Although intrigued by all these, most visitors had come to see what China was most famous for—porcelain—and here they found plenty of it. The exhibit included hundreds of varieties from the best kilns in China. ⁴⁸



For tea lovers, the Chinese had brought fifty varieties, all available for purchase. An extensive array of Chinese medicines included potions that attracted all seekers of the exotic and the strange. Some guests were legitimately interested in methods of Chinese healing, but others simply took great delight in being repulsed by the tiger skulls, deer antlers, ibex horns, opium, rhinoceros bones, wild-locust pods, pulverized insects and desiccated centipedes, sea horses, lizards, and toads. ⁴⁹ In addition, visitors found large bronze idols, intricate tortoiseshell carvings, fine examples of lacquerware and jade, hanging scrolls of calligraphy, and genuine relics from the Imperial Summer Palace. As for the carved wooden furniture, one reporter praised the workmanship but found the designs strange and disturbing: "The dragon crawls over everything, and where he is not there will be found some horribly ugly animal, such as could only enter the fancy of one troubled with indigestion."

The exhibit also contained dozens of statues designed to reflect the different aspects of Chinese life. A handful of these were life-size, with porcelain heads attached to wooden bodies that, being jointed, could assume any position. Guests came face to face with two mandarins, a wedding bride, a woman with bound feet and her child, a schoolmaster, a shroff (money changer), three soldiers, and a Buddhist priest with a shaved head (fig. 9.7). Along with the life-size variety, numerous smaller clay figures, most about a foot high, also populated the exhibit. Organizers had planned to exhibit these in a handful of signature scenes of Chinese life (such as a funeral procession, a wedding ceremony, and the execution of a criminal), but damage to numerous statues while en route to Philadelphia forced the Commission to abandon this scheme in favor of a single eclectic display. One observer still called them "a very amusing and at the same time very instructive feature in the Chinese exhibit" (fig. 9.8). Despite the fairly wide sampling of people and vocations, the statues did not represent China's millions of peasant

farmers and laborers. "The Chinese exhibit in the Main Building," according to Rebecca Harding Davis, "illustrates only the life of the higher classes." [50](#)

In the ivory display, Chinese craftsmen had carved out of ivory blocks shapes that stretched the imagination—twenty-three concentric balls, for example, and an exquisitely detailed flower boat. Still more spectacular, a miniature ivory pagoda, four feet tall, rose out of a miniature garden where small figurines cavorted beneath fruit trees. Like the concentric balls, it was



a miniature China within the Chinese exhibit, which was itself intended as a microcosm of the actual country. And as perhaps the most striking example of an artisan's patience and eye for meticulous detail, an elephant's tusk that was 2_ feet long bore the carved image of a Chinese city on a mountainside, complete with mulberry trees, "pumpkin-headed Celestials," temples, and "the characteristic landmarks of a Chinese city—pagodas." Although it was the result of a single man's painstaking and unerring effort over a three-year period, it could be had for the amazingly low sum of \$320.

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How was this possible? One observer pointed to the price of labor and the absence of machinery. "All these carvings—in fact all the articles in the Chinese section," he wrote, "were executed by hand, there being little machinery in China." Artisans in the ivory-carving trade, he explained, received a mere fifteen cents a day as compensation for their work, and this low cost of labor explains why China could sell a carving for around \$300 when the same object would cost \$3,000 if made in the United States. China, he implied, had found a niche by using its inexpensive work force to accomplish tasks that demanded a level of precision that Western machines were incapable of at any cost. And so China's dearth of machinery, though deemed by many a liability in the modern age, encouraged the remarkably inexpensive but exquisite handcraftsmanship that was one of China's strengths. [51](#)

The Mandarin and the Machine

This observer's point of view represented a departure from the more standard response to China's dearth of technology: that the lack of machines in the Chinese exhibit was emblematic of vast cultural failure. Though the latter view was probably the more common of the two, many Americans clearly resisted thinking in this way. Without any intended condescension, they viewed China as the anti-Japan, a beautiful Asian nation that maintained both wonderful artistry and exotic charm by resisting the very Western ideas its island neighbor had embraced. Believing that the absence of machinery in the production process increased the beauty of the objects, these observers raved about the skill, patience, ingenuity, and eye for beauty that the Chinese craftsmen possessed:

Every inch, every line of this work was the product not of mechanical contrivances, but of human labor directed by an unerring though somewhat incongruous sense of the beautiful, and aided by endless patience and perseverance. The entire exhibit of China was composed not of mighty engines for economizing labor, nor the apparently delicate yet actually coarse fabrics manufactured in astonishing quantities by complicated machines, but of artistically beautiful though aesthetically grotesque ornamentation, which has been cultivated until even the most ordinary articles of household use have been transformed into visions of unique beauty. [52](#)

Similarly, Rebecca Harding Davis identified one of the Chinese as "one of the most skillful ivory carvers in China, a man of probity and weight in his class." Were it not for prejudice and the language barrier, this Chinese craftsman and "one of the master-mechanics yonder in Machinery Hall" would realize that they "differ but little in the scope and culture of their intellects." [53](#)

While a stroll through Machinery Hall could certainly instill in one a sense of awe for humankind's ability to harness the forces of nature, exhibits like China's had tremendous appeal precisely because they went against the prevailing current at the Centennial. "You hear the sharp click of

the telegraph telling of the restless, busy energy that has produced all this luxury," stated one visitor on his way to the exhibits of China, Egypt, and the American Indians, "and are reminded that you are not yet in Fairyland." ⁵⁴ To many, the Chinese exhibit offered a preindustrial wonderland, a timeless and exotic enclave that existed inside a larger exposition devoted to change and progress. In short, for anyone who had grown weary of the worshipful reverence for technology that characterized the tone in Machinery Hall, the Chinese exhibit offered a welcome change of pace.

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Although the goods the Chinese displayed were handmade rather than machine-made, one should not assume that they resisted technology. Indeed, the debate over industrialization was not purely an American phenomenon; a parallel version of it raged in China, where it took on even greater meaning because national identity itself was at stake. In 1876, the Chinese stood at a crossroads. Earlier wars with European powers and several internal rebellions had exposed the Qing dynasty's vulnerability for all the world to see. In the wake of these events, one faction in the government, recognizing the example of Meiji Japan, sought to safeguard Chinese civilization from future conflicts by mastering the same technologies that had given Western countries such an overwhelming advantage. But to the more conservative elements, this Self-Strengthening Movement, as it was called, involved making a compromise that was tantamount to cultural suicide. For once the Chinese gates opened to let Western ideas in, would they not destroy the very Confucian essence they were meant to preserve? ⁵⁵

Li Gui epitomized China's ambivalence toward modernity. In his younger years, on his way to becoming a scholar-official, he had studied and mastered the revered Confucian texts. To him, these books were not merely a means to an end, as he believed fervently both in their wisdom and in their continued relevance to Chinese society. Yet he was also a remarkably open-minded thinker, and he viewed the international exposition as an opportunity for China to perform a thorough self-evaluation with respect to its "strengths" and "defects." ⁵⁶ China represented itself in a fashion Li could be proud of, but he also recognized that the exhibit lacked the one element that characterized the modern age—the machine.

Ironically, then, one of the most passionate voices criticizing China belonged not to Americans but to a Chinese official educated in the Confucian tradition. Li praised the United States for its marvelous machines and concurrently chastised conservative elements in China for their reluctance to explore anything mechanical. One reporter, implying that the Japanese took an interest in American technology while the Chinese did not, wrote that "while the Japanese are everywhere, observant, critical, apparently delighted, I cannot remember that I have seen a Chinaman in Machinery or Agricultural Halls." ⁵⁷ Li's curiosity drew him to both places, and in Machinery Hall he recognized the wave of the future. In particular, the Corliss steam engine, which towered majestically over all else in its vicinity, captivated the Chinese official. He stood and marveled at the iron-and-steel colossus as its powerful walking-beams, rising and falling, efficiently meted out energy to the other machines in the hall. To Li it was nothing short of miraculous: "This giant machine does not make much noise when running, and a single person can operate it. It is truly a wonder." ⁵⁸

As Li went on to view the entire panoply of American inventions in both Machinery and Agricultural Halls, he enjoyed an epiphany reminiscent of that experienced by Henry Adams as he beheld the electric dynamo at the Paris Exposition of 1900. The path China must follow in the near future became perfectly clear. As Li examined the various machines, tools, and labor-saving devices, he envisioned their implementation ameliorating the harsh conditions in which many in China were forced to live. Hydraulic pumps would finally control China's unpredictable rivers and prevent the floods that habitually devastated the countryside. Likewise, the various farming machines seemed to have the potential to increase the food supply dramatically and thereby reduce starvation. But would China awaken to the importance of Western technology? Perhaps, but Li noted ominously that, while conservatives in the Chinese government were content to let China stand pat, the Japanese at the Centennial were busy purchasing all kinds of American machines. ⁵⁹

The Exhibitors Become the Exhibits

As the Chinese official gazed at the various Centennial exhibits that fascinated him, he was

keenly aware of the extreme interest others were taking in him. The beauty of the Chinese objects notwithstanding, Li Gui and the nine other members of the Chinese Commission discovered that, in the minds of visitors, they did not merely monitor the exhibit, they were an essential part of it. Ethnological displays would not become institutionalized in world's fairs until the 1889 Paris Exhibition and the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, but at this 1876 Centennial the members of the Chinese Commission did constitute an accidental or de facto human showcase, although their reason for attending was not to be observed. That so many visitors ventured into the Chinese enclosure with the express purpose of seeing authentic Chinese people prompted William Dean Howells to wonder "what they [the Chinese] thought of us spectators." [60](#)

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As if in answer to Howells, Li Gui in his description of the spectators' fascination invoked the issue of class. "The Chinese the Westerners know wear short shirts and work at low ranking jobs," he wrote. "They rarely see people like us who are well-dressed and well-mannered." Indeed, as hard-working laundrymen and railroad workers had never graced the side of a porcelain vase, Americans embraced this opportunity to meet sophisticated mandarins, such as Li Gui or Hu Ying Ding, and wealthy merchants, such as Sung Sing Kung, all of whom comported themselves with grace, elegance, and refinement. Li Gui found all the attention flattering but it sometimes proved overwhelming and even smothering. "Westerners all want to talk to me," he wrote. "Wherever I go, I am besieged by people and cannot get out." [61](#)

All day long, Li and the others circulated through the exhibits, tirelessly fielding questions from inquisitive fairgoers. While most queries were good-natured, one reporter did attempt to provoke the Chinese, who apparently handled the situation quite wisely and simply ignored his prodding questions. "It is amazing to see how they sit back in their retreating bamboo chairs," remarked the reporter, "and how indifferent they are to all the questions with which you try to stir them up." [62](#)

But efforts to rile the Chinese attendants were hardly the rule. Most visitors who approached them harbored only good intentions. Children bearing notebooks and albums would seek them out and walk away delighted with several lines of classical Chinese poetry or the autograph of a genuine gentleman from the "Empire of China." [63](#) A woman from New Jersey approached one of the Chinese to inquire about his age, his wife, the number of children he had, and his opinion about Americans. [64](#) When adults made advances, it was often to ascertain information about a particular object in the exhibit ([fig. 9.9](#)). David Bailey, for example, convinced one attendant to share with him the secret technique behind the twenty-three concentric ivory balls. Other American visitors brought from home the cherished pieces of porcelain from their own collections and asked the Chinese for an assessment. To these requests, the Chinese would always lend their expertise, free of charge. [65](#)

Much of the interaction between Americans and Chinese involved bargaining. Nearly everything in the exhibit was for sale, and visitors enticed by the prospect of bringing a small piece of Chinese high culture into their own homes readily loosened their purse strings. For large transactions, the Chinese Commission had erected alongside the exhibit a small house, which, equipped with a six-foot couch, had the added benefit of providing temporary rest and refuge from assertive fairgoers. [66](#) The prices of many of the pieces soared into the hundreds and even thousands of dollars, but others could be had for pocket change. For example, for less than one dollar a visitor could outfit him or herself with a paper fan, a bamboo hat, a hand gong, and a parasol.



As far as sales were concerned, the Chinese were quite successful. By selling thousands of dollars' worth of art and commodities, the Chinese attendants reaped large profits either for themselves or for the business interests they represented. Illustrating the commercial side of the Chinese exhibit, a cartoon in *Harper's Weekly* pictured a smiling Chinese man sitting atop a throne while below him Americans eagerly wave money in attempt to buy the vases he holds ([fig. 9.10](#)). By the time the world's fair closed, the Chinese had not only sold all of their porcelain but also had accepted numerous orders for future purchases. [67](#)



With Americans approaching the Chinese to ask for autographs, solicit information on handicrafts, haggle over prices, and make inquiries about life in China, the Chinese exhibit became a “contact zone”—a locus of interaction between the East and the West. ⁶⁸ Quite often, it was young white women who met with the male Chinese attendants inside the enclosure. A correspondent for the *Cincinnati Commercial* reported that the Chinese “are often seen sitting down with the prettiest and most dressiest young ladies, holding jolly confabs.” And according to a story in the *Hartford Courant*, the frequency and intensity of these exchanges was so great as to spawn at least one nuptial. One member of the Chinese Commission had “captured the affections of a young and handsome American girl,” and the two were planning to wed that winter. At a time when relationships between Chinese immigrants and white women were generally proscribed in American society, the newspaper appeared to find this interracial union charming and even befitting the spirit of internationalism and cultural understanding at the Centennial. ⁶⁹

Flirting with Boundaries

If this interracial union was not something many Americans tended to frown on, two reasons for that might be adduced. First, assuming the couple would settle in the United States, Americans could expect that the Chinese man would improve himself by undergoing the beneficial process of Americanization; he would shed his queue, his silk robes, his antiquated beliefs, and his “pagan” religion and adopt American customs, dress, ideas, and religion. Second, and more intriguingly, Americans might not object to the union because they might find themselves strangely fascinated by the prospect of becoming more Chinese themselves, even if they neither approved of that outcome nor fully understood their ambivalence about it. In this way, the stern critique of Chinese culture and the irresistible attraction to it, far from being mutually exclusive, could reside within the same person. While exhorting China to change in the modern world, individuals might at the same time have found Chinese culture so appealing that they actually could entertain the thought of becoming Chinese. In fact, in several works of popular literature from this period, we find these competing strains dueling with one another inside the minds of the characters.

One year before the Centennial, Louisa May Alcott, best known as the author of *Little Women*, published the novel *Eight Cousins* (1875). Rose, the young protagonist, meets two Chinese merchants at a New England harbor who have just arrived from China:

Mr. Whang Lo was an elderly gentleman in American costume, with his pigtail neatly wound round his head. He spoke English, and was talking busily . . . in the most commonplace way,—so Rose considered him a failure. But Fun See was delightfully Chinese from his junk-like shoes to the bottom of his pagoda hat; for he had got himself up in style, and was a mass of silk jackets and slouchy trousers. He was short and fat, and waddled comically; his eyes were very ‘slanting,’ as Rose said; his queue was long, so were his nails; his yellow face was plump and shiny, and he was altogether a highly satisfactory Chinaman.

Through Rose’s eyes, Alcott delineates two distinct types of Chinese people. Whang Lo’s language, dress, and mannerisms all bespeak a high degree of Americanization. Since his extensive contact with the Western world through commerce has eliminated what Rose feels to be authentic Chinese traits, she pronounces him a “failure.” The aptly named Fun See is far more pleasant for her to regard. In contrast to his associate, he possesses all the wonderful attributes she has come to expect from someone from China, and so she can enthusiastically declare him “a highly satisfactory Chinaman.”

But is he really the quintessential “Chinaman” as she professes? Raised in a wealthy merchant-class family, Fun See has always been well-fed and has never been subjected to any hard physical labor; as a result, he can grow long nails and maintain a cherubic appearance. In addition, his wealth allows him not only to attire himself in luxurious silken garments but also to dazzle Rose by presenting her with splendid Chinese handicrafts—a porcelain tea kettle and a painted fan. Fun See appeals to Rose for precisely the same reason the elite members of the

Chinese Commission appealed to visitors at the Centennial. In his presence, she can enjoy the experience of becoming temporarily ensconced in the beautiful but bizarre trappings of upper-class Chinese culture.

However, Fun See's oriental exoticism proves fleeting. He has come to the United States "to be educated," and prolonged exposure to American society transforms him. Six months after Rose's initial encounter with him, she sees him again at a dinner party and finds him greatly altered in appearance. He has cut off his queue, donned American clothes, and learned English at an American school. Although the aura of enchantment has left the young Chinese merchant, Rose shows no sign of disapprobation, and her male cousins all joke that he has "improved" himself. Furthermore, when Fun See invites a white woman to dance, she is "immensely flattered by his admiration" and even signals to him that she would like a kiss; not one to disappoint, he politely obliges her request. In sum, although Rose had been pleasantly bewitched by Fun See's exotic appearance at their first meeting, both she and others agree that it is only right and proper that he become Americanized, even though this metamorphosis requires that he begin to resemble Whang Lo, the man she initially dubbed a "failure." [70](#)

Cherished by Rose initially for his exotic difference, the aristocratic Fun See ultimately wins the approval of his American acquaintances by learning their language and conforming to their dress and customs. In 1877, an actual situation involving a Chinese government official followed the pattern established in Alcott's fictional example. [71](#) An official, accompanied by both his wife and a second woman believed to be his sister-in-law, was "received with open arms" when he first took up residence in Providence. A few ministers called the man a "heathen," but the local community actually opposed the church and defended the visitor, arguing that his religion was "beautiful," and that "no man who bowed so gracefully and said such nice things could be anything but good." While the citizens saw the Chinese newcomer as strange and exotic (his wife had bound feet), they also viewed him as a man of cultivation, refinement, and learning. Indeed, it was to this lofty perception that he owed his positive reception.

As intrigued as people initially were by his novelty and difference, they nonetheless withheld their long-term acceptance of him, making that contingent on his successful adoption of American ways. The official was able to impress them simply by subordinating the Chinese elements in his physical appearance and accentuating the American. "He was an amiable gentleman," wrote the journalist who penned this story, "who dressed in the Rhode Island style" and "put up his pigtail with hairpins" in order to "conceal it under his hat." Like Fun See, the official seemed on the verge of shedding what had originally lent him such a pleasingly exotic appearance, and the community viewed this Americanization process as a worthy project. Indeed, women who had hoped to oversee his transformation personally expressed regret that he was already a married man: "More than one lady . . . took the broad general ground that for a Christian woman to marry a well-meaning Confucian . . . would be a noble exhibition of enlightened philanthropy." Apparently, Providence society was prepared not just to welcome the Chinese newcomer into the fold but even to advocate his marriage to a white woman if matrimony would accelerate his adoption of Christianity and American customs.

Interestingly, the Providence community eventually grew disillusioned with its Chinese resident. However, this change of heart occurred only after an unexpected incident brought about a disturbing disclosure regarding the marital customs of the official: The woman believed to be his sister-in-law bore him a son. Shocked and outraged, the community abruptly abandoned its "noble" project of Americanizing the official, on the grounds that some offending Chinese traits, such as bigamy, were too ingrained to be extirpated. Simply put, he was deemed to be too old and too set in his ways to ever fully embrace American ways and customs. [72](#)

It is important to note that, during these cultural collisions between the East and the West, the Chinese side often exerts a reciprocal, sinifying influence. In Alcott's *Eight Cousins*, for example, the Chinese character Fun See is not the only one who undergoes a transformation. The protagonist, Rose, delights not just in inspecting Chinese things but also in playfully flirting with the idea of becoming like the Chinese herself. She never crosses that line, but the act of approaching it becomes a great source of fascination and amusement. When she parts company with Fun See, she finds herself holding many of the items commonly associated with a Chinese person—a fan, parasol, and tea set—and the feeling is not at all disagreeable. "I feel as if I had really been to China," she remarks, "and I'm sure I look so." Similarly, at the Centennial, visitors purchased fans, gongs, tea sets, hats, and parasols for this same purpose of playful

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experimentation. Many of those who criticized China for failing to modernize would at the same time relish the opportunity to transform their wardrobes and their homes with Chinese things. [73](#)

In *Eight Cousins*, Alcott placed Rose's flirtation with Chinese culture on the periphery of her story. Another novelist, however, Edward Greey, boldly placed the issue at the center of his novel *Blue Jackets; or, the Adventures of J. Thompson, A.B., among "the Heathen Chinees"* (1871). When this rollicking adventure story first appeared, reviewers praised it for its realistic depiction of China. According to *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, the author "takes us into a country which the novelist has rarely or never visited—China." Similarly, the *New York Lantern* promised that the "reader will learn more . . . than he would from a dozen 'Travels in China.'" But what fascinated reviewers most was the love affair between the swashbuckling American sailor Jerry Thompson and the young Chinese tea-picker A-tae. [74](#) The novel is an early manifestation of a theme that would later appear with frequency in literature, theater, and the opera: the forbidden love between a white man and an Asian woman and that ends in the woman's tragic death. [75](#)

After various plot twists, Jerry Thompson finds himself having become a fugitive in China, fleeing from Chinese authorities. To render himself inconspicuous, he dissembles as a Chinese man. He adopts the Chinese wardrobe, attaches an artificial queue to the back of his head, and learns much of the language. On one occasion, he evades his pursuers by disappearing into the tea fields and posing as a hired hand; it is here that he meets the pretty tea-picker A-Tae. A true romantic, Jerry instantly falls in love and even entertains dreams of matrimony with A-tae and of a family of Chinese children. As for A-tae, she is equally smitten by the handsome stranger who, unlike the Chinese men she knows, refuses to treat her "like an inferior animal."

Yet after tantalizing readers with the intriguing possibility of interracial sex, biracial children, and an American who chooses a life of Chinese domesticity, Greey quickly reroutes the course of the novel. The Chinese police find A-tae's brother, who leads them straight to the cave where the couple is hiding. Shocked by his sister's behavior, the brother plunges a sword into her chest. After Jerry kills the brother, he seizes the mortally wounded A-tae, holds her in his arms, and says, "I am not worthy of such love as yours, you pure lily." Before the spirit departs her body, A-tae is able to respond, "Yung-Yung-Sho, I'm-so-happy!" Then her head drops to her shoulder, signifying that she is dead. [76](#)

Jerry grieves for quite a while, but he eventually returns to the United States, where he finds a Caucasian wife. Still moved by his romance with A-tae and tempted by a life in China, he nonetheless decides to relegate that to the past and concentrate on his new life in America. Going further than Alcott, Greey created a protagonist who not only demonstrates a strong fascination with Chinese culture but also seriously considers "going native" before he ultimately chooses to live again among his own people. Interestingly, in the final lines of the novel, one detects in Jerry a hint of lingering dissatisfaction with his choice: "Jerry sometimes talks about his adventures . . . but never reverts to the sad fate of the poor Chinese girl. He is happy in the society of his wife and friends; and though she is not forgotten, he has no desire to dwell upon the memory of 'A-tae.'" [77](#) Jerry's willful determination neither to speak nor to think of A-tae suggests that she continues to haunt him. Indeed, one almost gets the impression that Greey wrote this particular ending because it was safe and proper—not because it was necessarily the ending he wanted to write.

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In one final literary example, Harry French's *Our Boys in China* (1883), characters demonstrate this same ambiguous tendency to exhort China to change while at the same time exploring its seductive possibilities. The novel describes the adventures of two brothers—Scott, age fifteen, and Paul, seven—who must travel alone through China after surviving a shipwreck. [78](#) Before the wreck, they meet a missionary onboard the vessel who has lived in China. They express their curiosity about China and he answers all their questions. He disabuses them of certain stereotypes (the Chinese do not, for example, eat rats except in famine), but he concurs with the commonly held view that Chinese are not a forward-looking people: "They go back, back, back, and care very little for anything ahead. They hate progressive, modern notions,—railways and telegraphy are abominations in their eyes." [79](#)

In addition to being culturally backward, the Chinese are depicted in *Our Boys* as in need of enlightenment from Americans. In one episode, young Paul sits atop a coil of rope, preaching to a gathering of "swarthy" Asians who adopt a worshipful pose in his presence ([fig. 9.11](#)). Like his

literary cousin, the angelic little Eva of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Paul is a golden child who radiates an angelic glow over the more darkly complected men huddled beneath him:

Scott . . . thought he had never seen anything so beautiful in all his life as his brother Paul, at that moment, perched on the coil of rope, the silver moonlight falling softly on the golden hair, the little hands clasping his knees, the blue eyes fixed intently on . . . the three swarthy men of the Orient lying prostrate before him, as though he were a little god and they his humble devotees.

This notion of Paul being the savior of Asia appears more than once. A Chinese man on the boat named Ling becomes so devoted to Paul that he bends over and kisses the child's feet. And to protect his young master at night, Ling curls up to sleep on the floor at the entrance to Paul's quarters. [80](#)

After the shipwreck, the boys find themselves faced with the daunting task of traveling across the southern part of China in order to reach Hong Kong. Along the way, Paul sometimes seeks to correct the flaws he observes in Chinese society, with the pastime of cricket-fighting being the most memorable target of his moral outrage: "He had witnessed an injustice, and against it, instinctively his little heart rebelled." In an accusatory tone, Paul cries "Shame! Shame!" to the gamers and then proceeds to intrude on the contest, scoop up the insect combatants, and carry them to safety. While Scott agrees that the custom is abhorrent, he tries to temper Paul's reformist streak, believing that stern demands for change do not belong to the sphere of an outsider. "If it [China] has different customs," he explains to his younger brother, "and mean ones, we must overlook them; we are not called upon to reform all China." [81](#)



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Curiously, despite Paul's insistence that China conform to his moral vision, it is he and not his older brother who is seduced by the culture. As the boys travel, Paul begins to absorb aspects from his Chinese environment with startling rapidity. Since the boys stay mainly in the palatial homes of Chinese prefects and governors, the ways and customs Paul internalizes are those of elite Chinese society. In this way, the ardent reformer Paul discovers that Chinese high culture is dangerously alluring. He expresses his desire to grow a queue, picks up the language with astonishing ease, and immediately takes to his new Chinese garments. In his silk outfit, French writes, Paul "began trotting about the room precisely like a Chinaman, uttering short words and simple phrases which he had already learned of the Chinese language." The "very last link" that "bound" Paul to America "seemed [to be] snapping." Indeed, the alarming sinification of Paul is a subplot of the novel. "But for his golden hair and blue eyes and pink-white skin," French writes, "one would surely have thought him a veritable Chinese." Baffled and concerned by the metamorphosis, Scott makes attempts to forestall it before it is too late. "Paul," he resolutely believes, "should not be a Chinese boy when he reached Hong Kong." [82](#)

Of course, the two boys exit the country before the transformation is complete, and so Paul, like Jerry Thompson, is able to return to his normal American life. Interestingly, in writing the introduction to *Our Boys in China*, French felt the need to state in unambiguous fashion his view that China needed to change. Although the boys "found some good things" among the Chinese, he summarized, "it does not at all follow that China cannot become better than she is." [83](#) Yet, as has been shown, those "good things" in China prove so tantalizing as to nearly lure Paul away from his American identity. And so there runs through *Our Boys in China* a subversive current that, while it cannot subvert the dominant narrative, does destabilize it as it did in *Blue Jackets*. In both novels, Americans who flirt with the idea of becoming Chinese ultimately pull back before the transformation is complete. And in *Eight Cousins* and *Our Boys in China*, Americans who are fascinated by Chinese culture end up endorsing the China's Americanization

These conflicting desires moved to the foreground of the Centennial when a group of 113 Chinese boys who, as part of an educational mission, were studying in the United States arrived in Philadelphia. Although present solely for the purpose of seeing the exhibits, these Chinese teenagers captured the attention of visitors and the press alike. Had it not been for them, enthusiasts for Chinese culture would have continued their love affair with it without having to

confront the issue of modernization. Likewise, critics would have persisted in faulting the Chinese for their backwardness while extolling the virtues of the progressive Japanese. The presence of these Chinese boys at the Centennial challenged both groups to modify their views. It forced the critics to muffle their disapproval and admit that China was not as hopeless as they had previously thought. And enthusiasts had to concede that China must improve itself by following America's lead. Apparently their idealized conception of their own country as a City upon a Hill trumped their love for exoticism.

Chinese Yankees

The Chinese Educational Mission (C.E.M.) was the brainchild of one man, Yung Wing. Brought to the United States by a missionary in 1847, Yung possessed, in his own words, "a great inclination to get a liberal education." Indeed, he was passionate about it, to the point where he risked alienating family members in China who did not see the value of a Western education. While residing in the United States, he maintained a correspondence with Samuel Wells Williams, whom he had known in China. Yung had great faith in Williams, trusting him to deliver money and important messages to his family. "You are better acquainted with the Chinese" than are other Westerners, Yung told Williams in a letter, adding that his own family members "put more confidence in you than [in] anybody else." In 1849, Yung tasked Williams with the difficult chore of explaining to his uncle the wisdom behind his plan to study in the United States for six additional years. This was no easy assignment, he explained to Williams, because the Chinese do not grasp "the object, the advantage, and the value of being educated. Ignorance and superstition have sealed up the noble faculties of their minds." ⁸⁴

Yung's hard work and passion for learning paid off. In 1850, he gained acceptance to the college of Samuel Wells Williams's dream—Yale. Though he found the schoolwork tough-going in the beginning, he gradually acclimated himself to the rigorous curriculum and ended up enjoying a strong academic career that included awards in English composition. The Yale experience also accelerated the pace of a personal transformation that was taking place in Yung. When he began to attend classes in 1850, he wore a long queue and Chinese tunic, but by the end of his first year both had disappeared. By the time of his graduation, he had Americanized to a great extent, even though people who did not know him still regarded him as an exotic novelty. For this reason, commencement exercises attracted a larger crowd in 1854 than it had in previous years. The additional spectators had apparently come solely to catch a glimpse of Yale's first Chinese graduate. "Being the first Chinaman who had ever been known to go through a first-class American college, I naturally attracted considerable attention," Yung later wrote, "and my nationality, of course, added piquancy to my popularity."

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With his college days at an end, Yung Wing faced intense pressure to become a minister and devote his life to proselytizing the Chinese. He opted not to follow that path, however, because in his heart he knew he was meant for a different purpose. Yung was convinced that China had to change in order to survive in the modern world, but he did not believe that Christianity was the right vehicle for change. "I was determined that the rising generation of China," he wrote, "should enjoy the same educational advantages that I had enjoyed; that through western education China might become regenerated." This single goal became "the guiding star of my ambition." For many years after college, Yung worked in China, waiting for the right opportunity to bring Western learning to it.

In the 1850s and '60s, Yung Wing became a naturalized U.S. citizen, married a white American woman, and volunteered to fight for the Union Army during the Civil War. ⁸⁵ In 1870, the opportunity he had been seeking at last presented itself. That year, he submitted to Zeng Guofan, a high-ranking government official, a proposal in which he volunteered to take thirty boys, twelve to fifteen years of age, to the United States every year to study in American secondary schools and colleges. As the chief architect of the Self-Strengthening Movement, Zeng subscribed to the theory that, by adopting the same technologies that had made Western nations so powerful, the Qing government could defend itself against internal rebellions and protect China's traditional culture from further foreign encroachment. In short, China must imitate the West in boats and guns but not in morals and ideas. Zeng readily approved Yung's plan because he believed the graduates would one day replace the foreign teachers in China, help revamp the military, and guide the construction of a sound industrial base. In 1872, the first detachment of thirty young boys embarked for Hartford, Connecticut, the headquarters of the C.E.M. ⁸⁶

In Hartford, B. G. Northrup, commissioner of education for the state of Connecticut, convinced Yung Wing to divide the students into groups of two and three and place them in American host families. Greater contact with Americans, he argued, would both enrich the boys' experience and expedite their acquisition of the English language. But the Chinese government, fearing the adverse effects of excessive emphasis on American culture, insisted on striking a proper balance with Chinese culture. Toward that end, Chinese teachers accompanied the students to Hartford to inculcate in them Confucian ideals and to ensure that the boys maintained high standards in their study of the Chinese classics. Yung Wing abided by this stipulation, but in his heart he considered Western learning to be of paramount importance, and his supervision of the boys might have subtly reflected this bias. [87](#)

In newspaper and magazine articles and in personal accounts, one never finds a negative word written on either the students in the C.E.M. or their Chinese instructors. "The students of the Mission have thus far . . . exhibited excellent ability as scholars, and . . . have been marked by their exemplary conduct," the Reverend Joseph H. Twichell said before a gathering at Yale Law School. "They have everywhere been most hospitably received. They are certainly worthy to be objects of the highest and most friendly interest to every Christian citizen in the United States." [88](#) Similarly, when the fourth deployment of thirty students arrived in 1875, the *New York Times* devoted a significant amount of space to a description of the latest Chinese commissioner to accompany the mission. The reporter called him "a gentleman of high and distinguished rank" and proceeded to list the honors and degrees he had earned at the most prestigious institutions in China. As for the students, he praised their sharp minds: "The boys . . . intellectually bear traces of more than ordinary capacity." He also approved of the egalitarian nature of the program—boys from poor backgrounds could, through academic achievement, earn a place next to their more privileged peers. "The poorest is arrayed in silks and satins of as fine a texture as the highest titled among them." [89](#)

Once situated in Hartford, the boys faced the immediate challenge of fitting in both at school and in the community. William Lyon Phelps, a classmate of some of them, looked back fondly on his experience with them. Above all else, they possessed "a genius for adaptation" that made their stay in the United States a resounding success. They excelled in their studies, learned English rapidly, forged strong and lasting friendships, and even attracted the loveliest dance partners at parties—often to the chagrin of their American classmates. Like Yung Wing's marriage to a white woman and the marriage of a member of the Chinese Commission also to a white woman, these dance combinations did not elicit public outrage, a response corroborated by the conjugal interest that several Providence women expressed in the Chinese official living there. [90](#) According to Phelps, the boys also pursued athletics with a competitive spirit, learning both football and baseball. In football, the boys would tie their queues around their heads before stepping onto the playing field so as not to tempt opposing tacklers.

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I can well remember, when we used to 'choose up sides' at football, how the first choice invariably went to Se Chung, a short thick-set boy, built close to the ground, who ran like a hound and dodged like a cat. What Se Chung had in grace and speed, Kong had in bull strength. Built broad and strong, eternally good-natured and smiling, he would cross the goal line, carrying four or five Americans on his shoulders. In baseball, Tsang was a great pitcher, impossible to hit.

Looking back on his experience with the boys, Phelps did not think he had "ever known a finer group of boys or young men." [91](#)

Before the students made the trip to Philadelphia, visitors there were already familiar with the C.E.M. because samples of the boys' academic work had been on display in the Main Building. The Centennial included an international competition in which judges from several countries assessed the achievements of participating states and nations in such categories as manufactures, medicines, handicrafts, machinery, and the arts. In his state's entry in the category "Educational Systems, Methods, and Libraries," Dr. Northrup included the schoolwork of the Chinese students, and it received accolades from the judges:

Considering the age of the pupils, the difficulties inseparable from the pursuit of studies in a foreign language . . . and the shortness of their term of study, the results presented were very remarkable. In one point of view, these specimens of Chinese pupils' work were the most interesting objects shown in the whole Exhibition, representing . . . that the most populous nation in the world, until so recently refusing intercourse with the other nations, has not only revolutionized her commercial policy but has actually organized an educational commission . . . and sent them to this newest of the nations . . . at the expense of the empire. It means a dawn of a new era in Asiatic civilization. [92](#)

Up to this point, the Chinese had inspired mostly comments to the effect that, while they were capable of creating stunning beauty in their handicrafts, they were also conservative, hidebound, and locked in the misty past. All of a sudden, some were beginning to regard China as a progressive Asian nation much like Japan.

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Not surprisingly, the boys became the center of attention the moment they arrived in Philadelphia on August 22, 1876. Symbolic of the partial nature of their Americanization was their attire, which combined American with Chinese elements ([fig. 9.12](#)). To augment the educational experience, notable professors volunteered to give them guided tours and lectures. Yet despite the trip's ostensible purpose of exposing the boys to the highest attainments of world culture, the students quickly discovered that they themselves had become a second, though unofficial, Chinese exhibit. As they moved about, they attracted crowds of curious onlookers and newspaper reporters. According to the *Daily Graphic*, whenever the students paused to rest, they were immediately "pounced upon and interviewed." The "bright, intelligent looks on their faces," wrote a reporter for the *New York Tribune*, "show that their thirst for knowledge is just as keen as that of boys who do not have almond-shaped eyes, or wear their hair in a braided string." [93](#)



The upwelling of support for the Chinese students culminated on August 24, in Judges' Hall, where each of the boys received the rare honor of a formal introduction to President Ulysses S. Grant. After Grant had shaken the hands of all 113 students, everyone congregated in a larger room and listened to speeches marking the occasion. The most substantial words were delivered by Joseph Roswell Hawley, ex-general of the Union Army and former governor of Connecticut, who was serving as president of the Centennial Commission. Six years earlier, Hawley had delivered a speech in which he voiced his opinion on the controversial "Chinese question." Although decidedly against any restrictions on immigration, he admitted to wishing that the Chinese who came were "in a better condition" and had "a better education in regard to American institutions." [94](#) Now he found himself standing before a large group of Chinese boys who perfectly matched his ideal specifications; in the precise areas where he had observed shortcomings among Chinese immigrants—degree of Americanization, level of education, and overall refinement—these boys were strong.

This is "the strangest audience I have ever addressed," Hawley remarked as he scanned the several rows of youths, "and yet, it fills me with pleasure to see your bright faces." Twenty-five years earlier it was "a matter of wonder to see one of your countrymen" in the United States, but now it was within the power of these boys both to change China for the better and to effect a mutually beneficial relationship with the United States:

We are a great and ingenious people, as you may see in our machinery. You will study it, and when you go home you can tell your country men what you have seen, and may invent some new labor-saving device . . . of your own. After you have spent your years of probation here you will go home and will be a power in your land, and we will know each other better, and can exchange our knowledge and become better friends.

Hawley could have delivered a few perfunctory remarks and stepped down from the podium, but he chose instead to share his vision of what the long-term effect of the C.E.M. should be: nothing less than a new China remade according to the American example. Rather than merely acquiring the latest ideas and inventions of the United States, China should adopt the American

inventive spirit itself and use it to develop new machinery of its own. In this way, Hawley's goals surpassed those of the Self-Strengthening Movement out of which the C.E.M. had initially sprung and according to which the Chinese mind was, as an essential tenet of that movement, to remain inviolable to external influences. But in Hawley's far-reaching vision, American ideas would actually penetrate the Chinese mind and utterly transform it. He foresaw a colossal American ally across the Pacific, populated by Chinese Yankees, that would exchange ideas and inventions with the United States. After these prophetic words, the next speaker rose and added that next time China should send girls too. [95](#)

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If Li Gui understood the full implications of Hawley's speech, it probably filled him with grave concern. As progressive as his thinking was, he would have wondered whether the Americanization process, once set in motion, could be halted before one's entire thinking became subsumed by it. Could Western ideas coexist peacefully with Chinese ideas inside a single mind, or would the former eclipse the latter, undermine traditional Confucian morals, and leave Hawley's Chinese Yankees as the undesirable yet inevitable result? With these vexing thoughts in mind, Li singled out some of the older boys and posed question after question relating to Confucianism. In this way, he sought to determine whether their absorption of American "technical knowledge" had precluded a traditional Chinese education. To his relief, the boys passed his test, indicating that Chinese values had not suffered as a result of the sudden and powerful infusion of Western ideas. [96](#)

Conclusion

On November 10, 1876, Ulysses S. Grant stood before a crowd and officially announced, "I now declare the International Exhibition of 1876 closed." [97](#) In a gesture of goodwill, both the Chinese government and Hu Quang Yung bequeathed many of the remaining pieces of the Chinese exhibit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which was established in the wake of the Exposition. [98](#) The showing made by Japan was remarkable, of course, but it did not prevent most American visitors from thinking highly of the China they encountered in Philadelphia—regardless of which China that was. In an odd twist of events, Americans at the Exposition were exposed to two versions of the Chinese empire, traditional China and Yankee China, neither of which accurately represented the actual country. The official Chinese exhibit, displaying mostly objects that only the wealthy could afford, reflected the lifestyle of only a tiny stratum, the uppermost stratum, of Chinese society. As for the students of the C.E.M., they offered Americans a pleasing glimpse of Yankee China, which, being purely hypothetical, did not exist except as a possibility in the future.

Notes:

Note 1: Dee Brown, *The Year of the Century: 1876* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 2, 12. Richard Nicolai places the attendance figure at 10 million, or one in every four Americans. *Centennial Philadelphia* (Bryn Mawr, Pa.: Bryn Mawr Press, 1976), 84. [Back.](#)

Note 2: William Dean Howells, "A Sennight of the Centennial," *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1876), 96. A sennight is one week. [Back.](#)

Note 3: Bayard Taylor, "Foreign Pavilions and Booths," *New York Tribune* (22 August 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 4: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 5: The year 1876 marked the onset of one of the worst famines in modern Chinese history. See *Cincinnati Commercial* (31 July 1876); North China *Herald* (22 March 1877). [Back.](#)

Note 6: When Bayard Taylor went to "inspect the dwelling of a Chinaman of the better class," even he was modestly impressed. *India, China, and Japan* (New York: Putnam, 1855), 334. [Back.](#)

Note 7: China had participated in the 1873 exposition in Vienna. *The I. G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868-1907*, ed. John King Fairbank, Katherine Frost

Bruner, and Elizabeth Macleod Matheson (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975), 99. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Contrary to the mistaken assumption that the Office of Chinese Maritime Customs Service only served the interests of Western nations trading in China, Chinese authorities approved of the arrangement, received substantial revenue from it, and were responsible for both appointing the Western officials and paying their salaries. *The I. G. in Peking*, 5–6. [Back.](#)

Note 9: The traveling Commission included James Hart, Robert Hart's son who served as commissioner at Canton; Alfred Huber, a French customs official; and James Hammond, the commissioner at Swatow. The three companies were represented in Philadelphia by Edward Cunningham (Russell and Co.), W. W. Parkin (Olyphant and Co.), and F. P. Knight (Knight and Co.). *The Catalogue of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Collection, at the United States International Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876* (Shanghai: Inspector General of Chinese Maritime Customs, 1876); *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (4 April 1876); *The I. G. in Peking*, 72, 212–13. [Back.](#)

Note 10: For a list of these companies, see United States Centennial Commission, *Reports and Awards*, ed. Francis A. Walker (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1877), 27. Several are also mentioned in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger's* lengthy description of the Chinese exhibit (21 April 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 11: Frank H. Norton, *Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876* (New York: American News Company, 1879), 244–47; J. S. Ingram, *The Centennial Exposition, Described and Illustrated* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1876), 571–73. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Li Gui, *New Account of Traveling around the World* (Hunan People's Publisher, 1980), 8–9. Li Gui's writings, which are in Chinese, have been translated by Minhui Wang Haddad for use in this chapter. [Back.](#)

Note 13: Pearl Buck once wrote that, regrettably, the "beauty of China" is lodged in the possessions of the "wealthy and leisured." The "poorer and more ignorant classes" have no access to it. "Beauty in China," *Forum* (March 1924), 334. Several years later, Buck would describe beauty in the lives of common people in her book *The Good Earth* (1931). [Back.](#)

Note 14: Edward C. Bruce, *The Century: Its Fruits and Its Festivals, Being a History and Description of the Centennial Exhibition, with a Preliminary Outline of Modern Progress* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1877), 95. [Back.](#)

Note 15: *Chinese Immigration: The Social, Moral, and Political Effect* (Sacramento, Calif.: State Printing Office, 1876). Richard Dillon, *The Hatchet Men: The Story of the Tong Wars in San Francisco's Chinatown* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962), 79–110. [Back.](#)

Note 16: *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (4 April 1876); Brown, 114. [Back.](#)

Note 17: According to the *Authorized Visitor's Guide to the Centennial Exhibition*, the Japanese had 17,080 square feet at their disposal, and most other nations occupied between 1,000 and 5,000 (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1876). The Chinese exhibit filled 8,844 square feet. *Catalogue of the Chinese . . . Collection.* [Back.](#)

Note 18: Li Gui, 8–9. Advertisement, Thomas Birch and Son, auctioneers, *Philadelphia Public Ledger* (4 May 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 19: Taken from a newspaper article pasted into the scrapbook of the Philadelphia Centennial, Library Company of Philadelphia. In most clippings, the name of the newspaper and the date of the article have literally been cut out. For this reason, readers are referred to the scrapbook itself as the source of information. See also Ingram, 576. As with other international expositions, the Chinese workers in Philadelphia were almost certainly a part of the Chinese Commission and sent by Robert Hart. *The I. G. in Peking*, 250–53. [Back.](#)

Note 20: Rebecca Harding Davis wrote that on opening day "the great American people had for the first time rushed in upon" the Chinese ("Odd Corners at the Exposition," *Harper's Weekly* [25 November 1876]). "The Centennial," *Harper's Weekly*, (20 May 1876), 413; "Our Centennial," (27 May 1876), 422; Nicolai, 16. [Back.](#)

Note 21: Bruce, 112 (italic in original). [Back.](#)

Note 22: *Cincinnati Commercial* (25 May 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 23: "Fogyism and Progress," *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* (24 May 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 24: Walter A. McDougall, *Let the Sea Make a Noise—: A History of the North Pacific from Magellan to MacArthur* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 270–72. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Brown, 298. [Back.](#)

Note 26: James McCabe, *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition* (1876; reprint, Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1976), 417. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Nathan Appleton, *Centennial Movement, 1876: A Comedy in Five Acts* (Boston: Lockwood, Brooks, 1877), 28–29. [Back.](#)

Note 28: Scrapbook of the Centennial, Library Company of Philadelphia. [Back.](#)

Note 29: *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* (30 May 1876); Li Gui, 10. [Back.](#)

Note 30: Scrapbook of the Centennial, Library Company of Philadelphia. [Back.](#)

Note 31: Howells, 97. [Back.](#)

Note 32: *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* (8 July 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 33: Scrapbook of the Centennial, Library Company of Philadelphia. [Back.](#)

Note 34: *Cincinnati Commercial* (25 August 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 35: Howells, 96–97. [Back.](#)

Note 36: Although in his letters Robert Hart said little about this particular construction project, he wrote voluminously about the Chinese exhibit at the Health Exhibition of 1884 in London. Clearly, Hart had a talent for arranging a space in a way that would grant Westerners the oriental experience they craved. For the London exhibit, Hart even agreed to send along a "Tea-House" that, though seeming Chinese, was unlike anything in China because it was modeled on the Western idea of how a Chinese teahouse should look—not an authentic structure. "The English idea of the Chinese Tea-House," Hart explained, "has nothing corresponding to it in China except that there are buildings in which people can . . . drink tea: if we could supply you with one of them bodily, you would indeed have a slice out of the real life of China, but English sightseers would neither eat nor sit in it, and the Committee would very soon beg us to move it out." *The I. G. in Peking*, 516–20. [Back.](#)

Note 37: Sung Sing Kung, a merchant who worked at the exhibit, sold the gateways to the Philadelphia Museum of Art at the end of the Centennial (Accession files for 1876 Exhibition, Office of the Registrar, Philadelphia Museum of Art). On another gateway, Li Gui wrote "Treasury of Heaven" on the top and, down the side, couplets: "Treasures gathered from eighteen provinces, the craftsmanship is superb" and "Celebrate the Centennial, the friendship is everlasting" (Li Gui, 8–9). [Back.](#)

Note 38: *Cincinnati Commercial* (May 25, 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 39: *Josiah Allen's Wife as a P.A. and P.I., Samantha at the Centennial* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company, 1877), 439. See also Norton, 87. [Back.](#)

Note 40: Rebecca Harding Davis, "Odd Corners at the Exposition." [Back.](#)

Note 41: McCabe, 418–19. [Back.](#)

Note 42: *Cincinnati Commercial* (25 May 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 43: Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 2–3, 21–22, 24–26. One should note that Howells did not lump all American Indians together indiscriminately. In fact, he called the Apaches and the Comanches "red savages" because he believed their presence threatened the existence of the Pueblos, whom he saw as a "peaceful and industrious people"

(Howells, 103). [Back.](#)

Note 44: James Dale, *What Ben Beverly Saw at the Great Exposition* (Chicago: Centennial, 1876), 76. [Back.](#)

Note 45: Chang-fang Chen, "Barbarian Paradise: Chinese Views of the United States, 1784–1911" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1985), 128. Li Gui, 8–9. [Back.](#)

Note 46: David Bailey, *"Eastward Ho!" or, Leaves from the Diary of a Centennial Pilgrim* (Highland County, Ohio: The Highland News Office, 1877), 72. [Back.](#)

Note 47: *Cincinnati Commercial* (25 May 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 48: The following description of the Chinese exhibit draws from several sources: Norton, 244–47; Ingram, 573–75, 580–84; *The Philadelphia Public Ledger* (21 August 1876); and the Scrapbook of the Philadelphia Centennial, Library Company of Philadelphia. [Back.](#)

Note 49: Americans were starting to visit the handful of Chinese physicians practicing in the United States at this time. According to a newspaper story, one physician in New York "enjoyed a very large patronage, many of the richest ladies of the city being among his credulous patients." The journalist wrote that the Chinese doctor used medicines such as "serpents" and "revolting salves" to treat his patients. Another doctor moved to New York from New Orleans, where he had been "very successful," with "many white persons being among his patients." "Chinese in New-York," *New York Times* (26 December 1873). To attract non-Chinese patients, the first doctor mentioned above placed advertisements in the *New York Times* (6 July 1870). [Back.](#)

Note 50: Rebecca Harding Davis, "Odd Corners at the Exposition." [Back.](#)

Note 51: Ingram, 571. According to Neil Harris, inexpensive labor allowed Asian nations to produce commodities that Europe and the United States could not duplicate despite their sophisticated machinery. "All the World a Melting Pot? Japan at American Fairs, 1876–1904," in *Mutual Images: Essays in American-Japanese Relations*, ed. Akira Iriye (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 34–35. [Back.](#)

Note 52: Ingram, 573. A Philadelphia journalist echoed this sentiment. The United States was more technologically advanced than China, he wrote, but the latter showed "a marvelous skill, an individuality of design and delicacy of manipulation in their hand-work deserving of attentive study" (*Philadelphia Public Ledger* [12 May 1876]). [Back.](#)

Note 53: Rebecca Harding Davis, "Odd Corners at the Exposition." [Back.](#)

Note 54: McCabe, 340–41. The telegraph office was situated in the west end of the Main Building, very close to the Chinese exhibit (*The Philadelphia Inquirer* [28 April 1876]). To another reporter, a trip to the Chinese enclosure was tantamount to time travel: "It is with venerable admiration that the eye dares to roam . . . over teapots, out of which Confucius himself may have often sipped the fragrant leaf decoction. . . . All these things as one meanders about the tangle, are not only queer, but quite thrilling to think of—carrying us back to the cradle of the race" (*Cincinnati Commercial* [25 May 1876]). [Back.](#)

Note 55: Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), 216–20. [Back.](#)

Note 56: Li Gui, 128. [Back.](#)

Note 57: "The Chinese Display in the Main Building," *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* (8 July 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 58: Li Gui, 26–27. [Back.](#)

Note 59: Li Gui, 25–27, 36–38; Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), 380–81. [Back.](#)

Note 60: At later world's fairs, ethnological exhibitions often took the form of "native villages." Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions, and World's Fairs, 1851–1931* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 82–86. Howells, 96–97. [Back.](#)

Note 61: Li Gui, 7–8. [Back.](#)

Note 62: *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* (8 July 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 63: *Cincinnati Commercial* (25 August 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 64: Rebecca Harding Davis, "A Rainy Day at the Exposition," *Harper's Weekly* (18 November 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 65: Bailey, 71. To determine the origin of a particular piece, one individual presented it to a Chinese attendant who "spoke a few words of English." The latter replied, "No, No, not China—not China—don't know—maybe Europe—not China" (Annie Trumbull Slosson, *The China Hunters Club, by the Youngest Member* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1878], 263). [Back.](#)

Note 66: McCabe, 418–19. [Back.](#)

Note 67: Some antiques and silks remained because of the hefty price tags they carried (Li Gui, 9). A high tariff on imported silks might have dampened sales in that department (Francis Walker, *The World's Fair: A Critical Account* [New York: A. S. Barnes, 1878], 42). [Back.](#)

Note 68: Mary Louise Pratt uses this term (*Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* [London and New York: Routledge, 1992], 6). [Back.](#)

Note 69: *Cincinnati Commercial* (2 June 1876); *Hartford Courant* (23 August 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 70: Louisa May Alcott, *Eight Cousins; or, The Aunt-Hill* (1875; reprint, Cleveland: World, 1948), 68–77, 200. [Back.](#)

Note 71: "A Chinese Mystery," *New York Times* (23 August 1877). [Back.](#)

Note 72: Another distinguished Chinese gentleman residing in the Northeast also found the local community welcoming: "A Chinese citizen of credit and renown, temporarily residing in Connecticut, contemplates becoming naturalized to the great Republic. He has married a daughter of the Pilgrims, and has assumed other obligations . . . to the land of the free and the home of the brave." *New York Times* (11 April 1875). Quite possibly, this individual was Yung Wing, discussed later in this chapter. [Back.](#)

Note 73: Alcott, 73–74. [Back.](#)

Note 74: The edition consulted for this description included numerous excerpts from book reviews—Edward Greey, *Blue Jackets; or, the Adventures of J. Thompson, A.B., among "the Heathen Chinee"* (Boston: J. E. Tilton, 1871), The Phillips Library. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass. [Back.](#)

Note 75: All of the various permutations of "*Madame Butterfly*" share this basic plot. John Luther Long, a Philadelphia lawyer, first published his story "*Madame Butterfly*" in the *Century Magazine* (January 1897). Inspired by both Long's story and Pierre Loti's romance *Madame Chrysantheme* (1888), the dramatist David Belasco wrote the theatrical drama *Madame Butterfly*, which first appeared on the New York stage in 1900. Later that year, Belasco took the play to London, where Puccini saw it on opening night. Almost immediately, the composer and the dramatist reached an agreement whereby Puccini would produce an opera by the same name. His *Madame Butterfly* opened in New York in 1906. David Belasco, *Six Plays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929), 3–8. [Back.](#)

Note 76: Greey, 113, 126–46. [Back.](#)

Note 77: Greey, 236. [Back.](#)

Note 78: Harry French, *Our Boys in China: The Thrilling Story of Two Young Americans, Scott and Paul Clayton Wrecked in the China Sea, on their Return from India, with their strange adventures in China* (New York: Charles Dillingham, 1883). [Back.](#)

Note 79: French, 39. [Back.](#)

Note 80: French, 29–33. [Back.](#)

Note 81: French, 224–27. [Back.](#)

Note 82: French, 184–85, 313. [Back.](#)

Note 83: French, vii–viii. [Back.](#)

Note 84: Yung Wing to Samuel Wells Williams, letter, 13 April 1849, box 1, series 1, Yung Wing Papers, Manuscript Collections, Yale University Library. [Back.](#)

Note 85: Since his offer to enlist occurred late in the war, he was cordially turned away, although the gesture was appreciated (Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* [New York: Holt, 1909], 38–41, 158–59, 222, 255). [Back.](#)

Note 86: Yung Wing, 39–40; Yung Shang Him, *The Chinese Educational Mission and Its Influence* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1939), 4–5, 8; Bill Lann Lee, “Yung Wing and the Americanization of China,” *Amerasia* (March 1971), 25–29. [Back.](#)

Note 87: Edwin Pak-Wah Leung, “The Making of the Chinese Yankees: School Life of the Chinese Educational Mission Students in New England,” *Asian Profile* (October 1988), 402, 410; Bill Lann Lee, 25–29, 31. [Back.](#)

Note 88: An address by Rev. Joseph H. Twichell, delivered before the Kent Club of Yale Law School, 10 April 1878, reprinted in Yung Wing, 271. [Back.](#)

Note 89: “Chinese Students,” *New York Times* (28 November 1875). [Back.](#)

Note 90: According to the *New York Times* (9 January 1882), one student who fell in love with a white American girl in Connecticut corresponded with her after returning to China. Chinese officials learned of the affair and promptly beheaded the student. Given its sensational nature, this story may be false. [Back.](#)

Note 91: Phelps became a noted writer and professor at Yale University. The experience inspired in him an interest in China that lasted throughout his life. In the 1930s, he publicly championed Pearl Buck, pronouncing her “the ablest living interpreter of the Chinese character” (Peter Conn, *Pearl Buck: A Cultural Biography* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 156). William Lloyd Phelps, *Autobiography with Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 83–85; Edwin Pak-Wah Leung, “The Making of the Chinese Yankees,” 406, 408. [Back.](#)

Note 92: United States Centennial Commission, *Reports and Awards* (Group 27), 24. [Back.](#)

Note 93: *Daily Graphic* (31 August 1876); *Hartford Courant* (25 August 1876); *New York Tribune* (25 August 1876); Edwin Pak-Wah Leung, “China’s Quest from the West: The Chinese Educational Mission to the United States, 1872–1881,” *Asian Profile* (December 1983), 531. [Back.](#)

Note 94: *New York Times* (5 July 1870). [Back.](#)

Note 95: *Philadelphia Inquirer* (25 August 1876). [Back.](#)

Note 96: Edwin Pak-Wah Leung, “China’s Quest from the West,” 531. [Back.](#)

Note 97: Brown, 290. [Back.](#)

Note 98: See letter from Colin Jamieson, indicating that the Chinese commissioner has been authorized, presumably by the Chinese government, to donate the remnants of the trade collection (Archives of the Philadelphia Museum of Art). Also, the accession files for the 1876 Exhibition in the Office of the Registrar (PMA) contain records of the items given to the museum by Hu Quang Yung. Hu’s career ended in financial ruin in 1884 after an economic panic precipitated the collapse of his corner of the silk market *The I. G. in Peking*, 513). [Back.](#)

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