



CHINESE EXPORT SILK FOR THE AMERICAN MARKET IN THE 19TH
CENTURY AND THE FEMALE INFLUENCE



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INTRODUCTION

The Treaty of Paris marked the end of the Revolutionary War and announced the independence of the United States on September 3, 1783. American ships could now sail to the Far East without British restrictions. Shortly thereafter, an experienced businessman Robert Morris rebuilt a ship and named it *Empress of China*. Morris wrote to the Secretary of State John Jay that he was sending a ship to China to “encourage others in the adventurous pursuit of commerce.”¹ This was a monumental moment. John King Fairbank described it, as “an eastward movement by sea that was at the outset greater than the westward movement across the continent.”²

Approximately fifteen months after the *Empress of China* left New York for the Pearl River, she returned home arriving on May 11, 1785. It was a successful voyage and began a new era of relations with one of the youngest nations in the world and one of the oldest. Today, this era has become known to historians as the “Old China Trade”, and marks the beginning of direct contact between the two nations.

This project focuses on a discussion of the types of silk, (i.e., raw silk, clothing, bedding, furnishings, etc.) which were exported from China to the United States from approximately 1789 to 1850. I begin with a survey of the secondary literature concerning silk production, trade and consumption. I then turn to a brief discussion of the processes involved in making silk in China and its preparation for export. This will give us background information to better understand what was involved in ordering those products for the American market. I conclude by showing that, despite the trade being run predominately by males, there was a strong female presence behind the commerce that influenced and shaped the silk market in the United States.

I compare many different silk items, including nankeens, cloth, umbrellas, fans, shoes, outer garments, and under garments, that were consumed by both men and woman. I will show that over 85 percent of these items were intended for use by woman. Because the surface quality and fine detail of these pieces is especially evident, American women chose Chinese export silk for its smooth quality and fine detail. Chinese silk was used for evening garments, wedding dresses, to decorate homes, and numerous other usages.

The primary sources that I make use of in this study include the Benjamin Shreve Papers in the Phillips Library in the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) as well as other miscellaneous items from PEM, Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) and Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA); the Forbes Family Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society; and several published primary sources such as *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw* and the journal and ship papers of *The Empress of China*.³ The items that I examine are in many different collections in the United States and abroad.

The findings of this study show that it was the women who were really driving the silk market in the United States. Merchants' wives, girlfriends, mothers, and sisters made notes and wrote letters to describe, with delicate precision, the patterns and quantity of silk they wanted. These requests were then passed to the menfolk who handled most of the trade. As previous studies have shown, the face of the China trade was very much male oriented with male investors, sailors, merchants, and government regulators and officials. But the nature of the Chinese export silk market to the United States was actually shaped and driven by American women.

This work examines various types of silk and silk products in the United States that were exported from China from the late eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century. There are a few reasons why I selected the period from 1785 to 1850. First of all, right after the

American Revolution War in 1784, the first ship *Empress of China* departed from New York on Washington's Birthday, February 22, 1784 and returned in 1785. Secondly, after the signing of the Treaty of Nanking during the first opium war on August 29, 1842, five more ports were opened to trade: Shanghai, Amoy (Xiamen), Ningbo, Fuzhou and Canton (Shamian). This marked the end of the "Canton System". Because of the unique position of Shanghai, it replaced Canton and became the primary export trading port in 1853. Thirdly, when Japan signed the Convention of Kanagawa with Matthew C. Perry of the United States Navy in 1854, Japan abandon its old policy, and started to adopt new technology which especially affected the silk industry. Eventually, Japanese silk surpassed Chinese silk in popularity and became the leader in the export silk market to the West.

There are many questions that will be explored below, such as how silk was produced in China; and what specific types of textiles were imported into the United States and their specific types (i.e., raw silk, patterned silk or finished clothing, etc)? Were the fabrics pre-chosen by the ultimate buyers, or picked out by the merchants on the spot in Canton? What was the chain of manufacture such as were the textiles fabricated or cut into clothing in China or after they were imported into the United States? Who were the persons involved in silk production and distribution from inland China to American consumers (i.e., spinners, weavers, painters, embroiderers, cutters, designers, merchants, sailors, wholesalers, retailers, etc.)? Who were the majority of silks made for? The answers to these questions will help illuminate the history of the American silk trade at this time, and hopefully fill a void in the secondary literature concerning this commerce.