

## Empress of China

In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, the new and nearly bankrupt United States viewed the China trade as a means to settle war debts.

“[O]n Sunday, February 22, [1784] as the sun rose in the brilliant blue sky and gentle winds tipped the surface of water...the Empress of China cleared the wharf, and [Captain] Green and his forty-two-man crew began the groundbreaking voyage, thus launching America’s trade with China.” (Dolins)

It carried the hopes of a newly independent nation, desperate to establish new trading links with China. “The backer of the Empress of China were all the signatories of the Independence agreement, so they knew what they wanted. This was a private enterprise but a national priority.” (Libby Chan Lai-pik)

The Empress of China also carried thirty tons of ginseng. It was *Panax quinquefolius*, the American ginseng native to specific temperate regions of North America and known to Chinese as *xiyangshen*, “west ocean ginseng”. (Journal of Medical Humanities)

### Ginseng

Ginseng was the most important medicinal herb in Chinese cosmology; it’s a medicinal from the vantage point of *qi*: the vital force that comprised and linked all entities, had complementary yin and yang elements, and whose elements’ disruption in humans could manifest as illnesses. (Journal of Medical Humanities)

American and East Asian ginseng are different.

Globalization accelerated the development and dissemination of medicines. The Empress of China’s journey occurred squarely between the late 1700s and early 1800s, when international trade facilitated much knowledge production worldwide.

Because *xiyangshen* was imported into China via the hot southern port of Guangzhou, it was assumed by Chinese to thrive in hot climates despite actually originating from temperate eastern North America.



The intimate integration of American ginseng into Chinese pharmacopoeia as *xiyangshen* supports two major points. First, that a millennia-old Chinese medical tradition assimilated a North American herbal as late as the 1700s testifies to Chinese medicine being dynamic, flexible, and continuously evolving, as opposed to static and rigid.

The herb was not quite as valued in America for its effects on the human body as it was in Qing China. The American ginseng root, known for its stimulant, therapeutic, and aphrodisiac properties was extremely popular in China.

## Ginseng Grown in the American Hollows

Long before the 1700s, Native American groups such as the Iroquois had consumed American ginseng (garent-oguen) for indications ranging from fatigue and headache to infertility.

After French Jesuit Pierre Jartoux wrote in 1711 about environmental conditions under which ginseng flourished in temperate northeastern China, fellow Jesuit naturalist Joseph-Francois Lafitau, who was based in Canada, became inspired to search for ginseng in climatically similar New France.

After several months' search in 1716, Lafitau successfully identified ginseng in the wilderness of North America, aided by the expertise of Mohawk women.



Ginseng Range of Growth in North America

The findings he published inspired enterprising French merchants - and eventually their British counterparts in the Thirteen Colonies - to buy American ginseng from Native American harvesters and lucratively export it to Qing China, where it was immensely popular for its therapeutic properties but was overharvested and dwindling in supply. (Journal of Medical Humanities)

"The harvesting of ginseng (as well as other wild plants) flourished within a system of corn-woodland-pastureland farming. Crucial to this system was recourse to a vast, forested commons rising away from the settled hollows."

"Because of the abundant supply of tree fodder (wild nuts and fruit), the central Appalachian plateau in the nineteenth century furnished some of the best pastureland in the country."

In the 18th century ginseng was also popular in America, especially when the native ginseng was discovered to be used by various Native American tribes. It is estimated that American colonists discovered it in the mid-1700s in New England.

"The history of human interaction with ginseng lurks in the language of the land. Look at a detailed map of almost any portion of the region and ginseng is registered somewhere, often in association with the deeper, moister places ..."

"Seng Branch (Fayette County), Sang Camp Creek (Logan County), Ginseng (Wyoming County), Seng Creek (Boone County), Three-Prong Holler (Raleigh)."

"The hollows, deep dendritic fissures created over eons by water cutting through the ancient table land to form tributaries of the Coal River, receive water from lesser depressions that ripple the slopes."

"These depressions are distinguished in local parlance as "coves" (shallower, amphitheater-shaped depressions), 'swags' (steeper depressions, 'swagged' on both sides), and 'drains' (natural channels through which water flows out of the swag or cove)."

“The prime locations for ginseng are found on the north-facing, ‘wet’ sides of these depressions. ‘Once in a while you’ll find some on the ridges, but not like in the swags there.’” (LOC)

“A seasonal round of plying the commons is registered in many of the names for swags and coves: Walnut Hollow, Paw-Paw Hollow, Beech Hollow, Red Root Hollow, Sugar Camp Hollow, and so forth.” (LOC)

### **America’s First Trade with China**

After trading, the Empress of China arrived in New York Harbor on May 11, 1785 (22 months after her departure.) She carried 800 chests of tea, 20,000 pairs of nankeen trousers (a kind of pale yellowish cloth originally made in Nanking (modern Nanjing), China from a yellow variety of cotton) and a huge quantity of porcelain.



Newspapers announced her return, and stores up and down the East Coast sold her cargo. That’s where the Americans learned how to make real money in the China trade: the sale of Chinese export goods to Americans.

All told, the voyage earned a 25 percent return on investment. Investors had hoped for more, but they made enough to spawn a new era of commerce with China.

The Empress of China's organizer gave a complete report of the voyage to John Jay, the U.S. foreign minister. Jay shared his findings with Congress. Members of Congress responded with 'a peculiar satisfaction in the successful issue of this first effort of the citizens of America to establish a direct trade with China.'

For the next 60 years, the China trade would make New England merchants very, very wealthy. (New England Historical Society)

In his article in the Western Illinois Review (2017), Nathan Schmidt wrote,

At first glance, the Empress of China can be seen to have embodied national support from both the US public and federal government. Public writings of the time portrayed the Empress as part of a larger, national movement that would bring wealth to the United States.

In a commemorative poem about the successful expedition, poet Philip Freneau proudly wrote,

"No foreign tars are here allow'd  
To mingle with her chosen crowd,  
Who, when return'd, might, boasting, say,  
They show'd our native oak the way."

Freneau's words reflect a sense of national pride in the mission, with the emphasis on "our native oak" suggesting that the ship in fact served America as a whole. Indeed, many newspapers saw the voyage as something significant for the nation.

The Pennsylvania Packet saw the ship as guided by "the hands of Providence, who have undertaken to extend the commerce of the United States of America to that distant, and to us unexplored, country."

In this manner, the public viewed the Empress as not an independent merchant ship that happened to come from America, but rather as a ship that served to represent the United States in foreign affairs.

In addition, certain aspects of the voyage could suggest that the Empress of China in fact was operating as an official mission to China for the American government. The vessel departed on the birthday of George Washington, perhaps a coincidental occurrence but most likely as a symbolic gesture.

As the ship sailed out of the harbor and passed the St. George garrison, "she [the Empress] fired, with great regularity, the United States salute, which was returned from the fort." The mutual salutes suggest a sense of official pride in the voyage, and that the ship was part of a larger action on the part of the United States.

In addition, the crew of the Empress carried several documents obtained from Congress, ranging from the Declaration of Independence and official treaties to a letter from New York's governor. These facts together imply some degree of official support by the government for the voyage, making the Empress a national symbol.

Furthermore, many of the key figures involved in the Empress's voyage were historic patriots in the American cause. During the War of Independence, Captain John Green sailed many smuggling missions and raids against the British fleet.

Likewise, supercargo [manager of the ship's cargo] Samuel Shaw served as a major in the Revolutionary War, and George Washington wrote of him, "throughout the whole of his service, he has greatly distinguished himself in every thing which could entitle him to the character of an intelligent, active, and brave officer."

This leads Min Wu to argue in his dissertation that "Major Samuel Shaw was not a merchant, but a decorated war hero," and suggest that his presence in the voyage highlights the national dimensions of the endeavor. Indeed, Shaw would come to represent in some ways the beginning of the American-Chinese connection, as not only do his journals remain the main source of information on the voyage, he eventually became the first American consul to China.

Also, Green, Shaw, and five other members of the crew belonged to the Society of the Cincinnati, which supported the growth and independence of the United States. When combined, these facts appear to highlight a patriotic, government-backed vision behind the voyage. ...

[T]he high level of public and government interest in the journey suggests that the Empress of China in fact had a larger role in American history. The voyage of the Empress of China reflects deeper patterns of cultural and economic interest in China within the United States, and America's newfound freedom from British control encouraged personal and national efforts to expand trade into not only China, but into Asian and international trade as a whole. (Schmidt)

Other US merchants were quick to see the value of the China trade. At first, however, they flooded the Chinese market with ginseng. Chinese demand for the root dropped, and so did its price. But the Chinese did want sea-otter pelts, which Yankees traded from Indians in the American Northwest. Sandalwood, found in the Sandwich Islands (Hawai'i), also brought a high price from Chinese merchants. (Monroe Columbia University)

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young