

ANDREW SINGER TALKS ABOUT CHINA

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ANDREW SINGER

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AMERICA-CHINA LINKS: SNAPSHOT FROM THE LATE GILDED AGE



America and China have been directly linked for almost two-and-one-half centuries and counting. In January, 1784, the first American merchant trader, *Empress of China*, set sail from New York City to Canton. Earlier this month (240 years later), it was announced that the China Wildlife Conservation Association has signed a cooperation agreement with the San Diego Zoo to once again dispatch two giant pandas there on a cuddly diplomatic posting.

Today's issue looks at China and America links more than a century ago, on the East Coast, in the late Gilded Age city of Newport, Rhode Island.

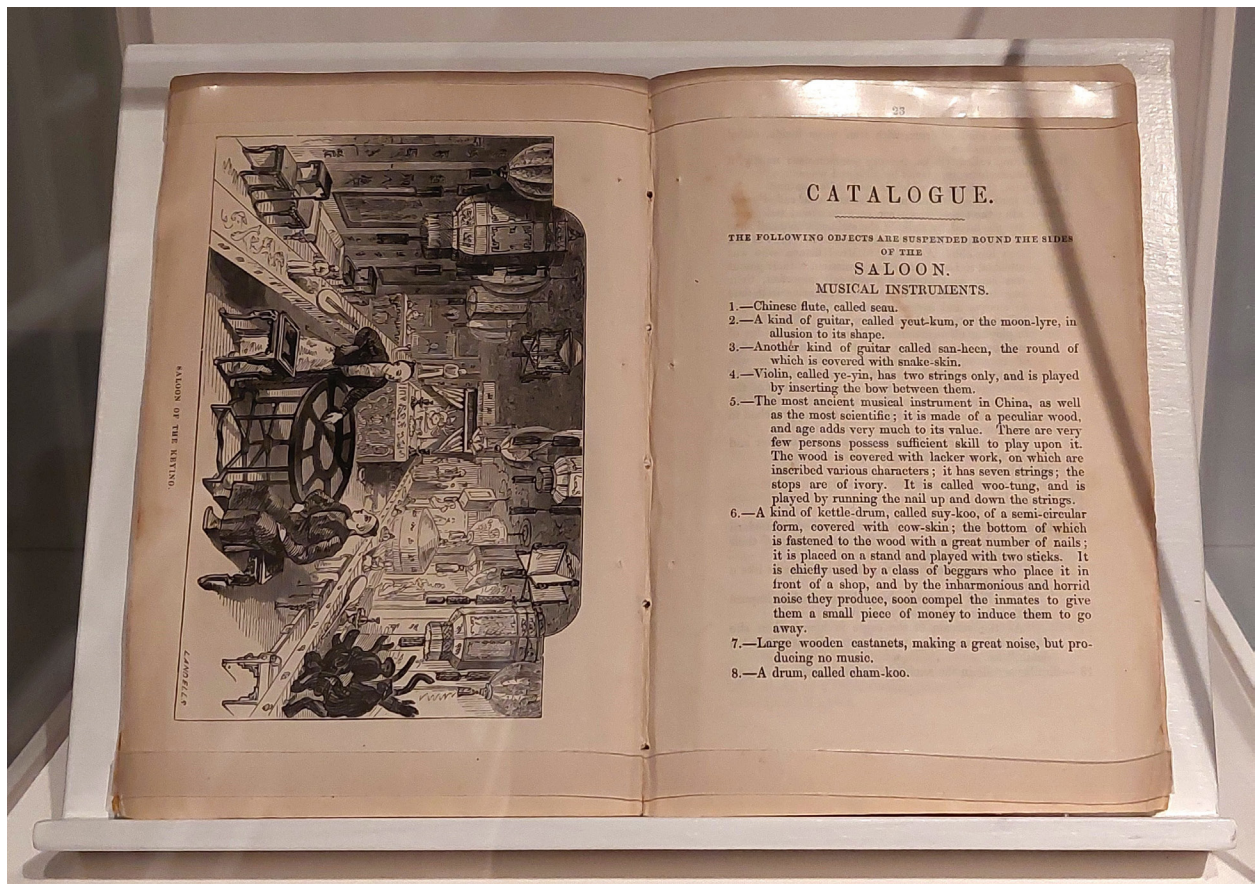
Chinese art, history, culture, and not a few Chinese people sailed into Newport during the second half of the nineteenth century. All left their imprint on the city. On a cold, rainy day earlier this winter in the Newport mansion known as Rosecliff, sheltered from the storm waters churning Sheep Point Cove just outside, we explored the wing above the largest ballroom in the city as it burst with beauty, poise, and an America-China chronicle uplifting, tenacious, and tragic.

The Celestial City: Newport and China was an evocative exhibition fusing old and new art, documenting the highs and lows of American and Chinese history near and far in that age and place, and bringing the past to the present. More than 100 works owned and borrowed by the **Newport Mansions Preservation Society** filled several rooms and the long, majestic hallway.

The first piece on the right as you entered was none other than local Newport artist Gilbert Stuart's famous late eighteenth century portrait of America's first President, George Washington. Or was it?

This oil painting is in actuality an early nineteenth-century reproduction by Cantonese painter, Foeiqua. It was one of ten such Washington portraits purchased in Southern China by a Rhode Island merchant and shipped back home.

Demonstrating that the present often mirrors the past, Mr. Stuart was so exercised that Chinese artists were copying his work (which cut into his own profitable practice of copying his work) that he filed suit seeking an injunction against the sale of the Chinese copies. He ultimately prevailed.



In 1846, a Chinese seagoing junk, the *Keying*, left Hong Kong for London. This teak-wood vessel had been outfitted by the British who bought her for display as a floating Chinese parlor-cabinet of curiosities, a living piece of exotic and remote China. For 25 cents each, the public was welcomed on board to gaze at the ship, the exhibits, and the Chinese sailors. The owners published this booklet, *A Description of the Royal Chinese Junk "Keying"* (fourth edition 1848), detailing the ship and contents for visitors.

The mixed European-Chinese crew had to divert to New York City (and then visited Boston) on the voyage around the Cape of Good Hope to London. The *Keying* was the first documented Chinese ship to visit America. She stopped in Newport for four days in October, 1847, on her way north.

While docked for several months in New York City, there was excitement when several of the crew arrested the ship for the captain's alleged breach of contract and fraud. With pro bono legal representation, these sailors appeared in court before a magistrate arguing that the captain had violated their contracts, not paid them, and otherwise deceived them as to nature of the voyage and their duties. They were successful and some were repatriated to China, but accounts make it seem that overall it was a pyrrhic victory.

Newport residents of the era, like many both in America and Europe, craved Chinese porcelains, or chinaware. From the late seventeenth century through the eighteenth century, it has been claimed that the number of households in Newport with porcelains reportedly increased from ten percent to one hundred percent (at least of the well-heeled).



Porcelain was both functional and luxurious. It provided ballast for the ships and elevated shelving to protect precious cargoes of Chinese tea on the long journeys over. Once on shore, these plates, bowls, cups, tea sets, vases, jars, and garden seats became ensconced in fashionable society.

Among the much-traded tea, silks, and opium that went back and forth between China and America in Newport ships, there returned stunningly carved pieces made of jade, amber, tourmaline, cloisonne, embroidery, and much more. The pieces above are from the Berwind Collection and include a delicate tourmaline figure of Liu Hai, the Daoist God of Wealth and Prosperity accompanied by a three-legged toad with a string of coins in its mouth (lower left front) and a jade brush washer shaped like lotus petals and decorated with *chi* dragons, clouds, and bats (lower right front).



These three 18th and 19th century cloisonne pieces include a gourd vase, a square vase, and a covered round box. Flying storks grace the top of the latter. The domestic life of a Chinese scholar is depicted in “intimate glimpses” spread across the small square vase.





This is an advertisement for the 1914 silent film, *The Yellow Traffic*. The movie, which was shot along Newport’s rocky coast, recounted the tale of *The Caroline*, a New England trading ship that was “seized by an evil merchant engaged in smuggling Chinese workmen.” As was customary at the time, the Chinese actors in the movie were omitted from the credits.

Exhibited in the same alcove was a heavily-stereotyped Puck Magazine cartoon from 1905 entitled, “How John May Dodge the Exclusion Act.” Both reflect the poignancy of the Chinese Exclusion Era in America (1882-1943). Yet even then, the voices of the Chinese also shone through. An entire room was dedicated to Chinese women who supported and participated in the American Women’s Suffrage Movement.

Mrs. Alva Belmont had a Chinese tea house built on the bluff overlooking the ocean at her nearby Marble House mansion in the early twentieth century. At her request, Richard and Joseph Hunt, the famous architect brothers, traveled to China in 1912 to make studies for the design and decoration of this structure. The inside of the tea house is adorned with delicate painted panels depicting scenes of Chinese culture, nature, and aesthetics. Some of the panel studies are shown above. In 1914, this elegant oasis with its painted panels was the site of a major women’s suffrage conference.



Newport hosted more than sixty Chinese business openings between 1876-1915. Nearly all of these businesses were laundries and restaurants that served working-class neighborhoods. The local Chinese lived, worked, and enlivened the city along with those of Irish, Greek, Jewish, Portuguese, and African descent.



The Rosecliff mansion hosting this exhibition was itself built by an heiress whose father's wealth had come from his railroad and mining interests that employed many Chinese laborers out west. Some, if not many, of the Chinese who settled in Newport may have come here to escape the discrimination and violence they faced there.



Contemporary lanterns commissioned for the exhibition filled the center of the last room. These lanterns honored the industrious and courageous Chinese of Newport. The lanterns themselves illuminated Chinese communities in past and present Newport County. There were five lanterns and five themes – Arrivals, Trade, Entrepreneurship, the Exclusion Act, and Women’s Suffrage. The three lanterns shown here depict the *Keying*, Women’s Suffrage, and Chinese-owned businesses.

China was known as the Celestial Empire. The celestial moniker was also appended to Newport itself. Mark Twain wrote in a short story that his protagonists dreamed of a vast palace that “*was far, far away toward the rising sun, immeasurably remote, astronomically remote, in Newport, Rhode Island, Holy Land of High Society, ineffable Domain of the American Aristocracy.*” No doubt hyperbole; however, maybe no more so than the words of eighteenth-century minister Ezra Stiles who, in extolling at length on the greatness and unique destiny of the new United States, sermonized that China was “the wisest empire the sun hath ever shined upon.”



China and the Chinese were an integral part of Newport’s early character, landscape, and heritage. *The Celestial City: Newport and China* brought this China and America link to life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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