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“When Minds Met: China and the West in the Seventeenth Century”

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(As prepared for delivery)

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SHARE What's this?

It is just over fifty years since I made my first wobbly attempts to read and write Chinese. Within a few weeks I was hooked completely by the complexity and scope of Chinese history and culture, and since that time I have continued to try and understand what makes this extraordinary civilization so difficult to understand and yet so rewarding. Back in 1959–1960, when I was a student, Mao and his pliant colleagues in the People's Republic of China were driving the entire country into apparently irreversible programs of fundamental economic transformation, known by the optimistic name of the Great Leap Forward. Now, in 2010, that particular Great Leap has faded from global discourse, and has been replaced by a different type of transformative and explosive economic growth, as China has learned how to marshal its vast potential along new tracks of reconstruction and change. I see this invitation to give the Jefferson Lecture as being an opportunity to present some thoughts concerning an earlier period of Chinese history, one in which concepts of cultural change were very much present. Westerners and Chinese in the late seventeenth century were able to share certain beliefs and priorities that show how the idea of a “Meeting of the Minds” could be a genuine force for exploration and possible change, but also for harmony and adaptation.

The particular meeting of the minds that I am exploring this evening occurred in the 1680s. That was just a century after the pioneering Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (whom the Chinese still refer to by his Chinese name of “Li Madou”) had crossed the border between Macao and China and rented a small house in Guangdong province. As a conversation piece, he placed on the wall a print of a world map made in the West, with the names of the main



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— Photo by Nancy Crampton



continents and countries spelled out in the Western alphabet. Some of the Chinese who came to visit were vexed, other were intrigued. It was those Chinese with the greatest interest in getting at the truth who persuaded Ricci to make an enlarged version of the world map with the names identified by Chinese characters, and with the cartography somewhat adjusted so that China was closer to the center of the map, rather than being stuck on the periphery (as had been the case with the original map). In following these Chinese requests, Ricci further revised and enlarged the map with descriptive passages (in Chinese) which gave commercial and political details of many countries in both Europe and East Asia, along with descriptive references to some aspect of the Catholic states, the role of the papacy, and the nature of Chinese relations with its neighbors.

Over the following years, a small but steady stream of missionaries followed Ricci, and even served in Chinese official positions in the bureau of astronomy. A smaller number of Chinese also traveled to Europe during this period, though none left detailed accounts of their experiences. But travelers moving in either direction during the 1680s were aware that there was a tough new emperor on the Chinese throne, on whose orders troops of the newly installed Qing dynasty had consolidated China's southwest borders, occupied the island of Taiwan and blocked Russian settlers in the north from intruding further into the territories claimed by China along the Amur River.

In England, just to complete this brief summary, the year 1685 marked the accession to the throne of King James II, who boldly identified himself as a Catholic ruler of his largely Protestant subjects. It soon became clear that King James II intended to roll back the anti-Catholic prohibitions so strongly imposed on England by the Puritan rule of Oliver Cromwell. For those of the Catholic faith in particular, the times were fragile and unpredictable—and citizens of any faith were all too aware of the recent and disastrous Great Plague and Great Fire which had laid waste whole areas of London, including the old St. Paul's cathedral, no less than eighty-six parish churches, and at least forty-four of the grandest commercial company halls. London's recovery was steady but also expensive and King James II—trying to rule without Parliament—was soon to be forced from his throne and sent to live in exile in France.

It is a commonplace that the sources that underpin our concept of the humanities, as a focus for thought, are expected to be broadly inclusive. But as a historian I have always been drawn to the apparently small-scale happenings in circumscribed settings, out of which we can tease a more expansive story. Thus I would like to start our search for the meeting of the minds not only in the later seventeenth century, but with a most unassertive source, an apparently simple letter of introduction written by a scholar in England, at Oxford University, dated July 26, 1687. Though the language of the letter is rather formal, even neutral in tone, if we read it carefully we notice that the range of topics covered in a short space is unusual, and can serve as a useful guide to the kinds of issues that in the seventeenth century served to bring people of different ages, races, and backgrounds into a common dialogue.

The writer of this late July letter in 1687 was a historian and linguist named Thomas Hyde, fifty-one years old at the time,

a scholar of wide interests, who conducted his researches in a variety of "Oriental" languages, including Persian, Hebrew, Arabic, and Syriac. In his youth, Hyde had found employment in the "publick library" at Oxford, completing a catalogue of the enormous benefaction later known, from the name of its principle donor Thomas Bodley, as the Bodleian Library. With that project now safely behind him, and the catalogue completed except for the tracking of certain Chinese titles, Hyde felt free to delve more deeply into his own scholarly interests, including the learning of the Chinese language.

The man on whose behalf Thomas Hyde was writing his letter of introduction was a Chinese traveler, called Shen Fuzong, who had arrived in England that March. Shen Fuzong had been born and raised in central China, where his father was a physician, and educated in Chinese by his parents, who were both practicing Christians. At the same time he had been taught Latin (both written and spoken), by Jesuit missionaries stationed in China. Now in his late thirties, Shen had been invited by one of his teachers, the Flemish Jesuit Father Couplet, to join him in what turned out to be an adventurous and protracted journey by land and sea, which took the two men through Southeast Asia and around the Cape of Good Hope to an eventual safe landing in the Netherlands. From there they journeyed to Flanders, Paris, Rome, and Florence, and then returned to Paris again in 1686. After close to a year back in Paris, working on cataloguing Chinese books in the royal library of King Louis XIV, and helping French scholars with problems of translation and exegesis, Shen had left France and come to England in the spring of 1687. England, at that time, was the way-station for ships voyaging to Portugal, and Shen hoped to travel to Portugal so that, while there, he could complete his training for the priesthood, before returning to China to take up full time pastoral work.

As for the intended recipient of the letter of introduction that Hyde was drafting on Shen's behalf, his name was Robert Boyle. Boyle, aged sixty, resided with his widowed sister in her mansion in the area of London known as Pall Mall, close to the royal palaces of Whitehall and St. James's. Over the previous thirty years, due to his experimental work in physics and chemistry, Boyle—a founding member of the Royal Society, as well as a man of great wealth and powerful aristocratic connections—had gradually built up a reputation as one of the leading scientists in England. He was particularly celebrated for his work on the compression and expansion of gases, which was to become globally known as "Boyle's Law." To catch Boyle's full attention was no easy task, for he was so inundated with curious visitors that at times he had to withdraw into self-enforced seclusion: Boyle had been known, occasionally, to post advertisements stating that he was no longer available for meetings or, as he phrased it in one of his work journals, that he was driven to "scaping into his study, out of a crowd of extraordinary vaine company of both sexes." These attempts to find some respite from society were noted by the contemporary diarist and avid gossip John Evelyn, who wrote that Boyle's visitors grew "sometimes so incomodius, that he now & then repair'd to a private lodging in another quarter of the Towne." Foreigners provided no respite: travellers to England never "think they had seen any-thing, til they had visited Mr. Boyle," wrote another observer, adding that Boyle "had so universal an esteeme in foraine parts that not

any stranger of note or quality, learned or curious coming into England, but us'd to visite him with the greatest respect and satisfaction."

Hyde had known Boyle a long time, and his letter showed his deftness in saying just enough to encourage the celebrated scientist to want to learn more. It is worth quoting the letter in full. "Sir," Hyde began his letter, "The Bearer hereof, the Chinese, hath been with us at Oxford, to make a catalogue of our Chinese books, and to inform us about the subjects of them. We have some of Confucius's books; but most of what we have is physick. He is extremely well versed in his own language, having studied it many years, and also Confucius's philosophy, which he doth not praise. He is a very good-natured man, studious and industrious, and sober. His Latin is a little imperfect; but it is well he hath any Latin; for before him there was never but one (who is dead) that understood any Latin. And now this is the only man left. I have made what use of him I could in a few days, losing no time ever since he hath been with me. He tells me, that in his province of Nankin (i.e. the south-court) they have but two months of winter, and very little ice or snow. The temper of the clime is much better than England, only hotter: but about Pekin (or the north-court) it is cold enough. You may make a shift to understand him, though he speaks but imperfectly. He was very desirous to be recommended to your favour and friendship by, Sir, your ever obliged and most humble servant, Thomas Hyde."

The passages in Hyde's letter about the weather and the precise durations and gradations of temperature between the north and south of China sound to our ears like a rather bewildering shift of focus, but in fact they signal to us that Hyde knew well (as did any well-educated colleague and friend of Boyle), that Boyle had undertaken a lengthy and detailed study of the nature of coldness, and the reasons for extreme fluctuations of temperature, as part of his lifelong interest in weather and the nature of air. Similarly, the brief description of Shen's attitudes to the thought of Confucius, and the fact that he was interested without being captivated, showed Boyle that Shen took a median position over the writings of China's famous sage, whose collected sayings had become a central facet of Chinese life and thought. As edited by later scholars, these words of Confucius (who had lived from 551 to 479 BCE) were central to the competitive examination system that had dominated the scholarly tradition in China across two millennia, and had been memorized and glossed by generations of China's youth. By completing a careful and accurate translation into Latin of Confucius's surviving words, the Jesuits hoped not just to find a readership for Confucius in Europe, but also to demonstrate to the papacy and leading Catholic theologians that Chinese thought had a firm and morally strong grounding, on which a project of mass conversion could be based.

The immanent appearance of this translated volume of Confucius's sayings formed an overarching context to the letter of introduction that Hyde wrote to Boyle. It was one of the four co-editors of this complex translation project, a Jesuit priest named Couplet, who had invited Shen to travel to Europe with him, and see to the final proof-reading, and to the insertion of Chinese written characters at key places in the Latin text, so as to prevent any interpretive mistakes. But publication was no simple matter. A deal with a projected

Dutch publisher fell through, nor could anyone with the right resources be found for the project in Rome. But through scholarly contacts in Rome, who linked the translators up with publishers in France, a deal was struck with an influential publisher in Paris, Daniel Horthemels. Horthemels bought the exclusive rights for publication of "The Confucius" (as it was informally termed) from the French King's usual official intermediary for religious and travel publishing. This meant that Horthemels essentially procured a ten-year monopoly for this Confucian volume, along with the exclusion of all rivals, beginning with the appearance of the first printed copy. In a minor but still very real disappointment for Shen and Couplet, and despite the support of the King's Library director, funding could not be found for the inclusion in the printed text of the relevant Chinese characters, even though the notation numbers for those characters had already been set in type in the first few chapters of the Latin version. The numbers can still be seen there in the surviving copies of the first edition, mute testimony to the problems of cost over-runs in technical publishing, even when one was backed by the prestige of the King himself.

There seems little doubt that the French King's Library could have found the money if it had really wanted to, for the account books from the royal library show a payment of four hundred livres (equivalent to as many pounds sterling) payable for services rendered to Couplet and his "Chinois" or Chinese helper, Signor Shen, with further payments totaling five thousand livres being made later in 1687. The first volume of the magisterial edition came off the presses in Paris on May 28 of the year 1687, and just three weeks later, on June 21, the senior editor traveled to the palace at Versailles to hand deliver a copy to the French king, Louis XIV. Initial French reactions were favorable, and the Confucius received a seven page review in the leading intellectual journal, as contrasted with the single page that was dedicated to Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* which came out shortly after. A copy of the beautifully printed Latin version of Confucius was in the Bodleian Library by (or before) the early autumn of 1687, since a contemporary noted at that time that King James II asked Hyde if he had a copy of Confucius in the Bodleian Library, and Hyde replied "yes," it was already there. But certainly the Bodleian library did not pay at the same level as the French king: the Bodleian's own account book for this same year shows a payment of just six pounds made to "the Chinese for making Catalogues [of] the Chinese books, for his expenses and his lodgings."

Hyde mentioned, in his letter introducing Shen to Boyle, that some time previously he had had another Chinese helper, who had since died, but scholars have found no sources to tell us who this person might have been. The sum of six pounds hardly offers a motive for Shen to have left Paris so abruptly for England, and Shen's departure was a major inconvenience for Couplet, who wrote to a friend that he was sorely missing the skilled help with Chinese language problems that Shen had provided over the previous year. Did Shen perhaps take some advance copies of the proofs of the Confucius work to important contacts in London and Oxford? There is as yet no evidence for this, but certainly the book distribution system was surprisingly efficient and swift in seventeenth century Europe, and an earlier partial translation of a Chinese classical text—also published in

Paris—had been specially delivered to both Hyde and Boyle by a scholar in Louis XIV's library. Could Shen have been sent on a similar kind of errand? We know King James II had not only heard of the book himself, but was well-enough acquainted with the book to know that it had four co-editors, and signaled an important stage in English knowledge of China. It is true that non-Catholic readers in England might have been mortified by the fulsome dedication of the book to King Louis XIV, and the praise it lavished on him for his steadfast battle with the dissenting Protestants in France, not to mention the extended parallels drawn in the book between the ideas on firm governance held by King Louis and Confucius. But we have no proof that Shen was involved in the delivery in any way, especially since, as Hyde mentioned in his letter of introduction, Shen had noted that in the Bodleian library "we have some of Confucius's books; but most of what we have is physick." By quoting that sentence, Hyde was neatly hinting at Shen's knowledge of the worlds of medicine and alchemy, two areas in which Boyle was known to have a deep and abiding interest.

We do know, from an entry that Boyle made in his work diary, that the letter of introduction had its hoped for effect, and that Boyle and Shen did meet and talk. Brief though the surviving evidence may be, the work diary shows us Boyle's curiosity at work. Boyle reports that he asked Shen—identified simply as "the Chinois I was visited by yesterday"—two sets of questions. The first question for Shen was whether in China the number of Chinese written characters that an educated man needed to know was really as huge as it was rumored to be. Shen replied "that the number of their characters was really incredibly great, & that he himself was master of between 10 and 12 thousand of them." The second question Boyle asked was how many Chinese people really knew such a range of characters. Shen responded by explaining the differences that distinguished classical Chinese from colloquial. "The language of the Mandarins (or Magistrates)" he told Boyle, "was very different from that of the Common people, & also from that of the clergy, and some of the Literati: insomuch that few understood the mandarins Language, or could make any use of it; tho, for his part, he had made some progress in it." Boyle and Shen must have had this conversation about language in Latin, since despite Hyde's cautionary remarks we can tell from Shen's extant letters that he could read and write Latin comfortably. Boyle, for his part, was widely known to be a talented linguist, and Hyde wrote in a letter to a colleague that "Mr. Boyle besides his skill in the modern Languages, was excellently versed in the reading and speaking of the Latin tongue which I have heard him do to my admiration." (Oddly enough, in light of all this mutual praise, Hyde's own skills in the formal writing of Latin were queried by at least one of his scholarly friends.) Since it is probable that Shen did not return to Oxford after his meeting with Boyle—he seems to have been content to keep in touch with Hyde by mail—Shen may have lived for the later summer and fall in London, and have had other conversations with Boyle, though we cannot be sure.

It was probably just coincidence, but the figure of ten to twelve thousand characters being considered necessary to attaining the status of a moderately learned Chinese was very close to the figure of eight to ten thousand characters used by John Webb, in his eccentric but widely read book on Chinese as a universal language, first published in the late 1660s.

Webb's book purported to show "a probability that the language of the empire of China is the primitive language spoken through the whole world before the confusion of Babel." It was this Chinese "lingua humana" that Webb claimed was spoken by Adam and Eve in Eden and was ultimately passed on to Noah and his descendants. In China, Webb wrote, after the flood, people continued to speak this language, while it was lost in the post-Babel cacophony that spread elsewhere in the world. In a similar vein, a flurry of books appeared in the late 1680s, extolling the complexity and efficiency of China's government, and finding the roots of its success in a patriarchal system linked to Confucian antecedents. Shen and Boyle were not alone in probing these questions of comprehensive governance.

Though neither Hyde nor Boyle mentioned the fact, sometime during that spring or summer of 1687 Shen Fuzong had his portrait painted. (That is the painting displayed here, both on the program and the tickets.) This was not just a casual venture by an unknown artist: it was a full-length portrait by one of the best-known and most fashionable portraitists of the day, Godfrey Kneller, soon to be knighted and already celebrated as a painter both of the English royal family, and of many leading aristocrats of the day. Kneller portraits did not come cheap, and the painter's own surviving account books from the time show him receiving between thirty-five and forty pounds sterling for a full-length portrait such as this one. (Three-quarter length and bust length portraits were cheaper, depending on the exact square footage.) According to those who knew Kneller, this was the painting of his of which he was the proudest, and in retrospect it gains additional value as the first detailed portrayal ever made of a Chinese in England. It is startling both in its pose and in its clarity. Shen is shown holding a crucifix in his left hand, and gesturing toward it with his right, even as he looks up and past the viewer to some distant horizon, with his face (beneath a fur hat) and his hands shining in the light of dawn. Shen's attire is an unusual mixture of styles and fabrics, part Chinese and part Western. He stands on a marble floor, with the view to a distant tropical countryside opening out through the open window behind him. On the lavishly fringed table covering, just touched by the light, is a leather-bound book that we might guess is the newly published Confucius volume, fresh from the Paris press.

Who commissioned this painting, and exactly when and where did Kneller create it? Was it a gift? If so, from whom? Could it have been commissioned by King James II himself? (That is not totally far-fetched, since on one occasion James sent Kneller to make a portrait of King Louis in France.) Or did the idea come from one of the prominent Catholic families, or from the newly appointed papal legate sent to London from Rome? Or from the Jesuit priests who could once again worship openly in post-Reformation England, now that the King, James II, was proclaimed as a Catholic monarch, and was taking the initiative in funding or reestablishing schools, hospitals and beautifully decorated chapels for the Catholic congregations? There were many people eager to salute the King for righting what they believed to be past wrongs, and for seeking to bring Catholics back to many public positions, from posts in the treasury to the masterships and fellowships of Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Was Shen's portrait, in this particular religious and political context, seen as the symbol of a new

dawn for the Catholic faith, of which the mission to China was a manifestation? There seems no doubt that King James took a kind of proprietary interest in the painting and made sure that others knew of the pleasure it gave him. In a visit to Oxford in early September 1687, King James summoned Hyde from his desk in the Bodleian and asked him specifically if he knew this Chinese man, and to tell Hyde that he had Shen's "picture to the life hanging in his room, next to the bed chamber." Hyde told the King that he not only knew Shen but that he personally "learned many things of him."

Shen's presence in England intrigued both Hyde and Boyle, but did not intrude in any cumbersome way. For the relationship between Hyde and Boyle went back to the 1660s, and from that time onward they had corresponded at fairly regular intervals. Their letters ranged widely, but the majority of them seem to have focused on problems of language or scientific experiments, due to Hyde's stated wish to "consult chiefly such authors as have not been perused by Europeans." They discussed Arabic and Persian texts, Malay grammars and Bible translations into Malay, Dutch translations from the Malay, and how to access books from Tangier, Constantinople and Bombay. Among the many scientific subjects they explored were the chemical constituents of sal ammoniac and amber, the efficacy (or lack of it) in medical diagnoses made from measuring the pulse, the effectiveness of certain Mexican herbs, rare plant seeds, the properties of vinegar and nitre, current studies of human blood and air, the nature of papyrus, the writings of Ramon Llull and the use of elixirs and alchemy. Hyde was familiar with at least some of the problems caused by alchemical experiments, especially those of two of his acquaintances who had developed a "gnawing in their stomach and guts," probably the result of ingesting too much "sweet mercury." But if it had been Hyde's goal fully to fathom Boyle's alchemical experiments and writings, the difficulties in his way would have been strong indeed. Historians have recently found that in describing his alchemical researches Boyle used a complex variety of codes, including four basic "encoding services" involving name, word, letter and numerical substitutions, supplemented by language alternations—for instance replacing English and Latin with Greek and Hebrew, inventing his own unique words, or employing the form of letter matrix known as the "Polybius Square."

For some of their letters Hyde, Boyle, and Shen could use the newly established English "penny post," which enabled mail from Oxford to reach London in less than a day. For bulkier or heavy objects, such as book proofs or samples, they could continue to use the tried and true services of "Mr. Moor's Waggon" to drop off packages at Moor's own warehouse adjacent to the Saracen's Head in Newgate, or with a "Mr. Bartlett at the Oxford Arms in Warwick Lane." More prosaically, many of Hyde's letters to Boyle included urgent pleas for money or for preferment, either for truly desperate souls like the recently bereaved printer of the Malay New Testament with five children, who faced starvation for his whole family due to their pay being so long in arrears, or for Hyde himself and his friends. Other major gifts from Boyle included "a noble award" to the scholar who translated Grotius into Arabic, which "he took care to order to be scattered in all the countries where that language is understood;" a further gift went to the Turkish translators of

the New Testament, to the translators of Irish and Welsh bibles, and 300 pounds for "propagating the Christian Religion in America," along with other sums to "the praying Indians" for printing "a small primer and Cattachisme in their language." Boyle seems to have been unabashedly generous, and Hyde was just one of his many beneficiaries.

Hyde sometimes shared his thoughts about language and language study with both Boyle and Shen. For instance, in a letter to Boyle from Oxford dated "Easter Tuesday, 1677," about an unusually obscure Arabic text, Hyde toyed with the idea (held by some of his acquaintance) that the text had been coded in some way "under disguised names," only to reject the suggestion with the argument that the text concerned was nothing but "mere superstition and enchantment." But in trying to be fair to the text, which could be traced back to an Arabic thirteenth-century alchemist, Hyde reflected that even the most obscure writings might carry some useful truths. Thus, he wrote to Boyle, "there are in the book many odd words proper to the author's own country and dialect, which are not to be found in any dictionary. But towards the end of this summer, I look for two men, who are natives of those parts, who perhaps may unriddle the hard words for me." Developing that idea, Hyde continued: "It were to be wished, that we had in Oxford a college for the maintenance of some able men out of the several eastern countries; it would be a great help to all eastern learning: ...such eastern men being amongst us, would enable us to be so accustomed to the true and genuine pronunciation of those languages, that so our emissaries might be enabled to discourse readily with the natives; for book learning alone will not do it. And therefore I, for my own both benefit and pleasure, do catch at all opportunities of discoursing with the natives of those countries in their own languages."

It was surely in this spirit that, as soon as he heard the news of Shen's arrival in London, Hyde conceived the idea of inviting him to Oxford. The ostensible reason was to complete the cataloguing of the Chinese books in the Bodleian, as Hyde mentioned to Boyle in the letter of introduction, but at the same time Hyde sought to gauge whether Shen's skills in working with Chinese language were good enough for him to undertake more demanding tasks, and for this reason (one might guess) Hyde asked Shen to gloss the meanings and pronunciations of two Chinese characters. We do not have the full text of Hyde's original invitation letter to Shen, but we do have Shen's Latin reply, dated London, 25 May, 1687, in which he writes to "the most renowned and learned" Hyde that he has received Hyde's letter along with an enclosure of the two Chinese characters that Hyde wanted him to gloss and translate, and that "if time permits I will come and enjoy the company of your esteemed self, whose Library is the font of enduring knowledge." Shen signed his letter in the romanized form, "Michael Shin fo cum," and at the same time gave Hyde the Chinese characters for his entire name.

A number of sub-channels flowed together into this intellectually rich main stream, but one key reason for Hyde's eagerness to get together with Shen was not only Hyde's wish to finish cataloguing the Chinese titles in the Bodleian collection, but also the fact that Hyde's current major preoccupation was completing a comprehensive history and analysis of the game of chess. Hyde undertook

this study of chess not only for its own sake as an intellectual adventure, but as part of a major analysis of board games in general. During his various researches, Hyde had grown convinced that the game of chess could teach us not just the game itself, but also could illuminate a country's military strategy and broader comparative history. Several years before Shen's arrival in England, Hyde had finished the bulk of the task, reading voraciously in earlier chess histories, and exploring European, Hebrew, Old English, Persian, Indian and other versions, as well as seeking Russian and Irish leads. But Hyde's writings on Chinese chess, prior to Shen's arrival in England, had been entirely drawn from a few random comments that happened to appear in published Jesuit memoirs concerning China. What Shen could—and did—give to Hyde was an overarching analysis of the sixty-four square board game of chess as it played out in Chinese, along with the names of the pieces and the shape of the moves that each piece was allowed to make. Shen also discussed a number of other Chinese board games, including “Weiqi” or “Go,” along with many others. Hyde was lavish in his praise of Shen's contributions to his chess study, giving Shen elaborate thanks in the printed introduction to his finished opus, along with some discussion of Shen's family background and education, and calling the Chinese visitor indispensable to the project as a whole. Hyde referred to Shen, in these encomia, as “my Chinese,” “our Chinese,” or “My dearest friend,” and praised him as a true collaborator and key “informant on all matters Chinese.” Hyde noted Shen's abilities in Latin, the breadth of his knowledge of the sciences, and his shrewd evaluations of China; and Hyde acknowledged that in the case of “all the Chinese games which are mentioned in this book, it was [Shen] who gave me the glosses and the descriptions, and wrote out the Chinese characters with his own hand.” Hyde added: “Languages are the keys to all things, without which we can never reach to the things themselves.”

Despite the fulfilling work with Hyde, Shen did not lose sight of his larger goal, which was to proceed to Portugal and finish his preparation for service with the Jesuits in the Far East. Shen left Oxford, carrying his letter of introduction, in late July 1687, and we have seen that he met with Boyle in London as planned. How firmly was he integrated into Boyle's intellectual and social orbit? It is hard to be precise, but thanks to a diary entry on February 10, 1688, written by the powerful politician the Earl of Clarendon, a close friend of Boyle's, we can place Shen at a dinner party on that day, hosted by Clarendon. Besides Shen, there were two other guests: one of them was a famous dealer in foreign books (who often acquired rare titles for Boyle), and the other was the same Father Couplet who several years before had persuaded Shen to leave China with him and travel to Europe with the translated Confucius text. After the dinner, Clarendon served his guests tea, (still a costly rarity in England), which Couplet claimed “was really as good as any he had drank [sic] in China.”

During late 1687 and early 1688, Shen continued to collaborate with Hyde by mail, broadening Hyde's Chinese vocabulary, and conducting far-ranging discussions over such technical matters as the precise dimensions of China's units of weights and measures—a topic which would also have been of considerable interest to Boyle with his passion for precise calculations. Shen also sent Hyde a chart of the workings of the Chinese examination system and

bureaucracy, along with a sketch of the so-called "Tribute system" by which China classified foreigners. In addition, Shen sent to Hyde a list of the Chinese words used to classify different types of Chinese temples, along with a brief description of the Chinese Buddhist belief in the transmigration of souls. But such diversions were only temporary in Shen's planning. Back in October 1687 Shen had already applied for, and received, the necessary English departure papers for his journey to Portugal, and in the spring of 1688 he set sail, just before King James II was driven from his throne to permanent exile in France by his anti-Catholic political and religious enemies.

By the time Hyde's book on chess was published, at Oxford in 1694, complete with its praise of Shen's contributions, Shen himself had died, in September 1691, before he could return to his home in China, of a shipboard fever he contracted near Mozambique. Boyle, who had long been ailing, died in that same year as Shen. When one of the memorial speakers at Boyle's funeral asked Hyde if he had any last thoughts on his friend, Hyde replied yes, he had one thought to share. Boyle had told him that, whenever he went to English church services, he always carried with him a volume of the relevant scriptures either in Greek or in Hebrew. That way, Boyle told Hyde, he "alwaies had in his hand the original, wondering to heare our English translation so different from it." Shen, like Hyde, would have known just what larger point about cultural interchange Boyle was making; for all three men, though so different, shared certain basic ideas about human knowledge: these included, but were not limited to, the importance of linguistic precision, the need for broad-based comparative studies, the role of clarity in argument, the need for thorough scrutiny of philosophical and theological principles, boldness of explication, and clarity. Theirs, though brief, had been a real meeting of the minds. And the values they shared remain, well over three hundred years later, the kind that we can seek to practice even in our own hurried lives.

(I owe special thanks to those who have explored aspects of this story: these include Theodore Foss, David Mungello, Noel Golvers, Nicholas Dew, John Witek S.J., Michael Hunter, Nicolas Standaert, William Poole, Steve Pincus, Jessica Hanser, Victor Keats, Han Qi, and the staffs of the Beinecke Rare Book Library and the Yale Center for British art. JDS)

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