

*Narratives of Free Trade: The Commercial Cultures of Early US-China Relations.* Edited by Kendall Johnson. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 234. \$50.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Between 1783 and 1815 American free traders challenged British attempts to dominate the overseas trade of China, India, the Mascarene Islands, and Southeast Asia, a region referred to collectively as “the East Indies.” Before 1783 U.S. merchants were part of Great Britain’s international trading network. After 1783 U.S. merchants profited independently in the silver-rich trade to Asia. This was especially true after 1795 when Jay’s Treaty admitted U.S. vessels to British East Indian ports on a non-discriminatory basis. By 1813 U.S. trade with Asia was greater than that of any other Western nation, save Great Britain. After Parliament revoked the British East India Company’s monopoly on Indian trade at the end of the French Wars in 1813, the rivalry between Great Britain and the United States became, according to economic historian James Fichter, a “bizarrely competitive and cooperative” interaction between the free-trade Americans so recently departed from the British Empire and British free traders remaking that empire in Asia.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this interaction, American East Indian merchants gradually overtook Southern planter-aristocrats as the wealthiest Americans. They created the first American million dollar fortunes, acquired enough money to compete with London capitalists, and helped lay the ground work for nineteenth-century American industrialism. They invested widely and often did well, financing Lowell, Massachusetts, textile mills, New York City real estate, banks, canals, anthracite coal mines in Pennsylvania’s upper Susquehanna region, and railroads in Pennsylvania and Michigan.

Kendall Johnson, a professor in and the director of the American Studies Programme at The University of Hong Kong, has now published a collection of nine essays by Chinese, American, and European scholars about the role of free trade in eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Sino-American relations. Johnson’s volume is a representative sampling of various perspectives on free trade rather than a comprehensive overview of it. Drawing evidence from three continents, the anthology concentrates on the geographical area encompassed by Canton, Macao, and the Pearl River Delta. The volume draws its perspectives from the disciplines of American Studies, art history, English, comparative literature, cultural anthropology, and sociology, as well as from economic and diplomatic history. All of the chapters were

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<sup>1</sup> Fichter, *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) and my review of Fichter in the *International Journal of Maritime History* 23, no. 1 (June 2011), pp. 367–68.

originally given as papers at a June 2009 Hong Kong conference. The book includes an introductory essay by Johnson as well as an additional chapter by Johnson himself.

As such he provides valuable regional and international context for a growing body of literature on American free traders. His anthology elaborates on Fichter's tracing of shifts of silver and not just credit and Fichter's demonstration of how these free trade entrepreneurs transformed capitalism within the United States. Johnson also expands on themes first raised in Jacques M. Downs's seminal work *The Golden Ghetto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784–1844*.<sup>2</sup> Downs provided profiles of fifteen major and several minor American firms, solo-practitioners, and traders affiliated with British firms in Canton before 1844.<sup>3</sup> Downs went beyond what was previously available in studies by Cheong W[eng] E[ang], John K. Fairbank, Robert Gardella, Frederic Delano Grant, Jr., Hao Yen-ping, Hosea Ballou Morse, John A. Wills, Jr., and my own work. He emphasized the social history of Americans in the East, their housing, taste, lifestyle, regattas, and even social indiscretions.

Johnson begins his exploration of economic, cultural, and diplomatic issues with a poignant 1847 quotation from former American China trader and Mexican War veteran Brantz Mayer (1809–1879) justifying the Sino-British Opium War of 1839–1842. That conflict forced “the stubborn Empire” (i.e. China) onto “the common platform of the commercial world.” The “tideless oozing” of Chinese life would now be opened to the “civilizing channels” of global commerce, a rationale which could also be applied to the then-ongoing Mexican War (pp. 1–2). According to Johnson, commercial activity occasionally enabled cross-cultural curiosity, communication, and even mutual respect. But, regrettably, it also involved confrontation as ambitious American entrepreneurs pursued lucrative opportunities and often embraced British-style imperialism in the name of free trade.

The first essay in this anthology, by economic historian Paul A. Van Dyke, cites the evidence of bookkeeping practices as a way to distinguish between vast monopolistic operations such as the British East India Company and independent American free traders who worked on a smaller scale and different model. Americans incorporated themselves under state jurisdictions as private companies without either a monopoly advantage or any particular obligation to the federal government. In these private companies, or in consortia composed of several investors, a small group of owners held responsibility for the building, management, lading, and captaincy of ships. Van Dyke argues that the dismemberment of vast monopolies and the emergence of both British and American free traders was a slow and complex

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<sup>2</sup> Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> See my review in *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 1 (February 1999), pp. 159–61.

process. “Privatization would have required both the restructuring of enormous commercial and political operations that were spread around the globe and the pulling apart of centuries-old bureaucracies that were the lifeblood to hundreds of elite families” (p. 31).

The second essay, by Johnson, considers the patriotic, even chauvinistic, appeal for an American China trade by American Revolutionary War Major Samuel Shaw (1754–1794), the supercargo of the first American ship to arrive in Canton and the first American consul there. Shaw’s advocacy for an expanded American China trade did not become widely known until the 1847 posthumous publication of his *Journals* and other writings. Former Harvard University President Josiah Quincy III edited Shaw’s commentary and provided biographical information. Quincy resurrected Shaw as a “nationally representative man” and the China trade as a “national romance” (pp. 34–35). Shaw proclaimed that the China trade made America “an empire, and the eyes of the world are fastened upon her. [. . .] We have a character to establish among the great powers of the earth, who will for the most part form their opinion of us from the manner in which we set out” (p. 36). Both Shaw and his mid-nineteenth-century promoter saw free trade in China trade as the kernel for the establishment of an American commercial empire across the Pacific region.

American Studies Professor John R. Haddad cites other evidence that the opportunity for free trade in China trade fired the imagination of many Americans in the decades after the Revolutionary War. According to Haddad, free trade turned a trickle of Chinese artefacts imported into pre-Revolutionary America into a torrent after the Revolution. An idealized image of China was emblazoned on inexpensive Chinese ceramics readily available in early American homes and in museums of “Chinese curiosities.” Caroline King was fascinated by the Chinese wares she saw in the East India Marine Society of Salem, Massachusetts. In 1830 William Wood, a Philadelphia merchant who resided in Canton, remarked that a “romantic illusion” had come to permeate American perceptions of China. As early as 1842 returning missionary Samuel Wells Williams perceptively noted derisive laughter in the American response to things Chinese. Indeed, the exaggerated, romanticized, and unrealistic images of China and Chinese that were emblazoned on artefacts may well have paved the way for the overwhelmingly negative American media treatment to which Chinese were subjected by the 1870s.<sup>4</sup>

Anthropologist/historian May-bo Ching takes a refreshingly new perspective on Sino-American trade, focusing on the banquets sponsored by Canton’s cohong 公行, or association of foreign trade merchants, as a means of furthering their commercial

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<sup>4</sup> On this point see my article “Philadelphia’s Old China Trade and Early American Images of China,” *Pennsylvania Legacies* 12, no. 1 (May 2012), pp. 6–11.

objectives. Ching examines the knowledge Chinese chefs possessed for entertaining foreign guests (pp. 14–15) and their attempts to entertain “in the English fashion” (p. 109). These servants and their sponsors not only “set the menu” but also created the milieu for the elaborate negotiating banquets which American diplomats and entrepreneurs encountered when China reopened to the West in the 1970s.

Comparative literature specialist Rogério Miguel Puga adds “women” to historian John King Fairbank’s list of primary early American informants about China. Fairbank’s other three groups were traders, naval diplomats, and missionaries. Puga cites New Englander Caroline Hyde Butler’s (1804–1892) observations in 1837 about social life at the international crossroads of Macao. Her narrative was partially based on Jeremiah Reynolds’s *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac*, published in 1835. *Potomac* was sent to Macao to protect American free trade in Asia, and Butler was clearly in sympathy with its mission (p.118). She had no difficulty combining such a political imperative with a condescending fascination with, and titillation by, things Chinese. Reinforcing Haddad’s argument, Puga sees in Butler’s narrative “stereotypes transmitted by the images on chinaware [which] influenced the way that travelers filtered their first contact with the cultural Other” (p. 120). Butler juxtaposes idealized images of China with the stark, unpleasant realities of Chinese life, wherein local inhabitants subsisted on “gleanings of the streets, or refuse from some foreigner’s table” (p. 123). She finds the Macanese “very unprepossessing in their appearance . . . insipid . . . they are a mongrel race” (p. 125).

Diplomatic historian Sibing He examines the efforts of the American firm of Russell and Company to open China to free trade. Russell’s activities reinforced the arguments of Reynolds, Butler, Mayer, Shaw, and Quincy. These combined pressures received their fullest expression in the 1844 Sino-American Wangxia Treaty 望夏條約, which formally secured for the United States rights and privileges comparable to those the British had secured two years earlier in their Treaty of Nanjing. These provisions included extraterritoriality and the right to “trade freely to and from the five ports of China open to foreign commerce.” An ostensible prohibition on American importation of opium to China was “purposefully and practically unenforceable” (p. 13).

Art historian Yeewan Koon discusses the phenomenon of “calling card” portraits, a nineteenth-century custom wherein merchants and diplomats who rarely saw one another had token likenesses of themselves painted and shipped to colleagues overseas. China traders like Philadelphia’s Stephen Girard mounted these images on their office or living room walls. Koon focuses on portraits which Imperial Commissioner Qiying 耆英 (1787–1858) had painted specifically at the request of British, French, American, and Italian diplomats. Koon situates Qiying’s “gifting” of portraits in a Chinese context: such items were no longer part of a traditional tribute

system, but were rather tokens of esteem in a modern diplomatic sense, not unlike presents which China's head-of-state might bestow on an official visitor today.

The last two essays in the collection focus on the period after the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865). Paul A. Bove considers United States Secretary of State John Hay's unsuccessful effort to negotiate an international agreement on China amongst the world's naval powers. Hay argued that carving out colonies and spheres of influence encroached unfairly on China's territory and sovereignty. China's treaty ports should be open to all nations. Only Italy responded positively to Hay's initiative. It, like the United States, had no territorial enclave within China and therefore favoured free and unrestricted trade. Bove might have added the argument of Brooks Adams, that the United States desired an "open" China at a time when the U.S.A. confidently felt a "commercial supremacy heretofore unrivalled." A China open to free trade would be in America's self-interest but certainly not in the interest of lesser economic powers. Finally sociologists Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Yedan Huang focus on the years prior to America's 1882 Oriental Exclusion Act, when Cantonese could freely immigrate to the U.S., and on the lives these and additional immigrants built stateside. In yet another consequence of free trade, these scholars examine "The Flow of the Traders' Goddess: Tianhou in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century America." They trace the evolution of diasporic religious practice in America.

There are several key issues about free trade which go largely unexplored in this anthology. In eighteenth-century America, Chinese tea became symbolic for British monopolistic control and a hated object in the rebellion of the American colonists against England. The formal revolt included the famous "tea party" in Boston after Parliament's passage of the 1773 Tea Act, but there were also protests in thirteen British North American colonies before the end of the year. At the time of the protest against British tea monopolization and taxation, three quarters of the tea in Boston and nine-tenths of the tea in New York and Philadelphia was already Dutch, much of it smuggled in from the West Indian island of St. Eustacius. Other challenges to British control of the China trade included the manufacture of Chinese porcelain in the Southwark district of Philadelphia in 1770–1771 and Benjamin Franklin's three attempts in the 1750s to send out exploratory voyages to find a route from North America directly to China. Had these voyages succeeded, such commerce would have been in violation of virtually every Navigation Act.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there is also the matter of Anglo-American importation of opium into China. Fairbank maintained in his book *China Watch* that "the opium trade from India to China was the longest-continued systematic international crime of modern time."<sup>5</sup> Although this collection mentions

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<sup>5</sup> Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 13.

individual opium traders, the anthology skirts the intense public and private debate over the propriety of importing so deleterious a substance. The aforementioned William Wood as well as Peter Dobell described the commerce as “pernicious.” Together with Nathan Dunn, they refrained from the business on moral grounds. Most vocal among the abstainers was New York’s D.W.C. Olyphant, who characterized the opium trade as “an evil of the deepest dye.” He was sarcastically nicknamed “Holy Joe” by the pushers. In a classic defence of a dishonourable “free trade,” John Murray Forbes of Russell and Co. wrote of Olyphant: “Protect me from all the hallowing influence of holy Joe—his ships are commanded by J-C—officered by Angels and manned by Saints. . . . Happy thrice happy is the ship even consigned to them.” John Quincy Adams and John Worth Edmonds joined the debate in public speeches, both in December 1841, which were reprinted in newspapers and widely discussed. References to the opium trade in this anthology leaves the reader eager for more information on its moral implications.

The book contains mechanical errors which can easily be corrected in a second edition. “Forme” should be “form” (p. 3), Canton is incorrectly parenthesized (p. 10), the founding dean of American sinology is John King Fairbank, not “Fairbanks” or “Fairbanks’s” (pp. 12, 178), “Sino-Chinese War” should be “Sino-Japanese War” (p. 179), and *Philadelphians* should be *Philadelphia* (p. 188). The bibliography should include Jacques Downs’s dozens of seminal works on the China trade and not just his *Golden Ghetto*. Hong Kong University Press is to be congratulated for going to considerable expense in including two sections of coloured illustrations. Yet some are reproduced in such tiny scale as to be illegible (1.1–1.8, 3.2, 7.3). They should either be enlarged or accompanied by full text. A glossary of Chinese characters for terms like *Cohong* and *Qiyong* (not to mention brandy, claret, and port wine) should also be included for the international readership of this anthology (p. 105). Finally, a brief conclusion by Johnson, referring back to the questions raised in his introduction, would help crystallize for the reader the fresh perspectives on Sino-American trade and relations that have been raised in this volume.

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