

Trading Freedom: How Commerce with China Defined Early America

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SUMMARY

The early United States did not exist in a vacuum. Citizens of the United States rarely saw themselves as engaged solely in a North American, an Atlantic, or a Pacific realm; their world was round, encompassing the whole globe. Indeed, many early Americans defined themselves, and their nation, through their relations with the rest of the world. My research engages this lived reality by exploring a crucial aspect of those connections: how global commerce, and Americans' ideas about global commerce, informed their theories and practices of power – as projected abroad and organized at home.

In my current book project, *Trading Freedom: How Commerce with China Defined Early America*, I approach these questions from the perspective of American commerce with China. The book tracks the opening and closing of the free passage of goods and people between the American republic and the Qing dynasty's empire, beginning in 1784 with the first U.S. trading voyage to Canton and closing with a consideration of the consequences of 1882's Chinese Exclusion Act. *Trading Freedom* reveals that the exchanges in between were about more than filling up tea cups: the demands of China's markets took Americans all over the world in search of silver specie and rare commodities, and indeed, the profits of Americans' Asian trade depended as much on the navigation of global networks of credit and international diplomatic protocols as they did on the management of ships and sails. Americans' commerce with China required, and produced, a worldly perspective.

Using confidential government archives, merchants' private correspondence, and debates in newspapers and other public prints, *Trading Freedom* reconstructs how knowledge of this trade was created, communicated, and used. From these materials, *Trading Freedom* demonstrates that the conflicts that defined American politics and statecraft – over federal authority, states' rights, slavery, immigration, and imperial expansion – were all profoundly affected by the ongoing practice of Americans' commerce with China. Recovering the importance of these deep connections to Asia for the nineteenth-century United States, the book offers a new model for understanding how a global outlook on political economy structured Americans' relations with other peoples, as well as with each other. Their world was round – and their political economy, global.

My project joins a growing literature on America in the world. Arguing that Americans' participation in global commerce had a transformative impact on the country's cultural and institutional development, it melds elements of new approaches to transnational history with those of more traditional studies of foreign relations. In *Trading Freedom*, “the nation” remains a construction with real power, though one shaped by what lay beyond it, as well as by processes that ran through it, like trade and migration. In this, it follows upon Thomas Bender's suggestion to consider the United States as “a province among the provinces that make up the world,” rather than as a *sui generis* entity.¹

¹ Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

Historians of the early United States have long been interested in the interplay between economic development, governance, and political ideas. New work has repeatedly shown how core components of U.S. economic and political culture were deeply connected to overseas markets. Using different materials, scholars like Eliga Gould and Kariann Yokota have approached the question of the formation and maintenance of American identity from an international perspective, finding that Americans regarded recognition by other powers and peoples as a crucial, if anxiety-inducing, part of their performance of independence.² By revealing Americans' intense and lasting focus on Asian commerce – and later, Asian labor – as an important component of their international relations, economic growth, and domestic politics, *Trading Freedom* reorients these conversations to account for how Americans' varied understandings of global political economy shaped the national imagination.

Finally, *Trading Freedom* is also in conversation with the developing scholarship on American relations with Asia. It shares with this literature an interest in how political culture intertwined with economic activity, and a willingness to look beyond the recent past to understand the roots of American engagement with the peoples of the Pacific Rim. But unlike other recent works that focus primarily on the stories of American travelers or entrepreneurs, this book takes a more integrated approach, balancing the idiosyncrasies of biography by contextualizing individual lives within the sweep of larger movements in Asian and American politics.³ This larger scope allows *Trading Freedom* to reintegrate the two silos of scholarship on Sino-American relations, one on the “Old China trade” (usually an economic history story) and the other on “Chinese exclusion” (almost always explained primarily with reference to the history of race and immigration). Framing the story of how trade and migration were linked together in one narrative, this book reveals the subtle and unexpected ways that the pursuit of free commerce in Chinese goods informed the exclusion of Chinese people, and vice versa.

² Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Eliga H. Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

³ Eric Jay Dolin, *When America First Met China: An Exotic History of Tea, Drugs, and Money in the Age of Sail*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012); John Rogers Haddad, *America's First Adventure in China: Trade, Treaties, Opium, and Salvation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The book's Introduction opens by following American travelers as they pass through the *Bocca Tigris*, or Tiger's Mouth, the strait that allowed access to the markets of Canton (Guangzhou). Leaving the relative calm of the Pearl River Delta after an arduous sea voyage, they encountered a vibrant, buzzing confusion: a crowded, wealthy city floating on the edge of the world's largest empire. Just getting there was a triumph of organization and logistics. Bereft of cheap silver, saleable goods, or easy credit at home, American merchants had to build intricate commercial networks and trace circuitous sailing routes across the world's oceans to generate the commodities and coin required to purchase the highly-sought after teas, silks, and manufactured goods available in China. The only Chinese port open to Western maritime commerce, Canton was tightly controlled by Qing imperial authorities: sojourning merchants' transactions were strictly regulated by overlapping bureaucracies; their visits were limited to a set season; and they were confined to a small quarter beyond the city's walls. Social relations within this "golden ghetto" added to the complexity: the foreign quarter was dominated by Americans' chief rivals, the resident factors of the powerful British East India Company. From the beginning of trade, the unique demands imposed by Canton's contentious communities placed special pressure on American traders, even as the city's famous opportunities for profit inspired their fellow citizens.

Chapter One shifts back to North America to examine how American leaders looked to trade with Asia's well-stocked markets to counteract European hegemony in the years after the Revolutionary War, and how republican ideology intertwined the pursuit of independence with efforts to establish a "free trade" with the world. I uncover how the First Federal Congress, excited by the trade and the possibilities it offered for a recovery from the war's privations and the mercantilist trade barriers of rival powers, granted it unique legal protections, encoding an early enthusiasm for the commerce in the country's national political and economic frameworks. This chapter closes with a view from Canton, using consular reports and merchants' accounts to explore how Americans handled the dual challenge of managing relations with European competitors and Chinese officials. As the wars spawned by France's revolution took Europe's conflicts global – entangling Americans along with them – the commercial policies and consular networks created to support U.S. enterprise abroad served primarily to record how American hopes for a trade free of obstruction were increasingly frustrated, even in China.

In Chapter Two, I detail how federal officials' continuing efforts to support trade with China during the Jefferson and Madison administrations succeeded almost too well. After the near disaster of the War of 1812, a rising generation of politicians came to regard commerce with China as symptomatic of the dangers posed by mercantile capital. This backlash, I find, helped to animate a new nationalist vision of political economy – one that sought security and prosperity through increased internal connections, expansion of the plantation frontier, and growth in domestic manufacturing, instead of neutral trade. The practice of commerce in China also shifted with the outbreak of peace in the Napoleonic wars. Eliminating Americans' advantage as neutral shippers, peace led the American trading community to grow more consolidated, more highly capitalized, and more deeply involved in the world's most lucrative commodity trade – smuggling opium into China in exchange for exporting tea to the West.

Chapter Three examines how even in an era defined by continental expansion, the promise of overseas Chinese trade still wielded considerable influence among the advocates for American empire. Beginning in 1818, influential senator Thomas Hart Benton founded his powerful Jacksonian geopolitics on the idea that Asian trade could be redirected to flow across North America instead of around it, thereby powering U.S. expansion. Eager to erase continental distances with new technology, the generation of projectors that followed Benton repurposed these ideas. Led by ex-China merchant Asa Whitney, these political entrepreneurs crafted a vision of commercial empire-*cum*-manifest destiny that motivated the creation of the most important American infrastructure project of the nineteenth century: the transcontinental railroad.

Chapter Four examines the consequences of leading American tea and opium merchants increasingly close association with British traders and London capital. I argue that new economic and social alliances led the American community at Canton to become involved in serious disputes with Chinese officials, and, crucially, in actions that undermined the Qing dynasty's sovereignty over their empire. By the late 1830s, these associations eroded the insulation between American politics and commerce with China. Instead of serving as a model for connections without entanglement, as the Revolutionary generation had hoped, Americans' new commercial alignments in China helped to open a new front in a domestic conflict over how to relate to other sovereign peoples, as well as to other sovereign American states.

The disputes over sovereignty and slavery that drove antebellum politics were intimately tied to Americans' overseas commerce. In Chapter Five, I use Americans' long conversation about Britain's invasion of the China coast (the Opium War, c.1839-1842) to show that the controversy over states' rights and secession can only be fully understood with reference to how Americans integrated that conflict into other disputes over the precise location and limits of sovereignty, both within the international system and the federal union. In a reciprocal motion, the Opium War debate gave Asian affairs a new relevance in Washington, leading the U.S. to initiate direct diplomatic ties with China. I demonstrate that this new establishment led information about Americans' activities in the Far East to flow back home with greater regularity and coherence – though not always to traders' benefit.

My analysis of when and why Americans chose to build closer connections to the Pacific, in Chapter Six, adds a new dimension to our understanding of the road to the Civil War. Proslavery advocates, deeply concerned in the 1850s with how traffic in Asian workers was restructuring plantation regimes across the Americas, used diplomatic reports from China to attack Northern merchants' involvement in the traffic in Asian labor. The exposure of this “coolie trade” helped to redraw the two-party system, erasing any hope for a compromise between Southern planters and Northern capitalists – and, through wartime legislation that banned the carriage of Asian laborers in U.S. ships, laid the groundwork for the Chinese Exclusion Acts and federal control of immigration.

Despite these narrowing conceptions about migration from Asia, the middle of the nineteenth century was still a hopeful age for U.S.-China relations. With regimes in both countries emerging from destructive civil wars, political leaders in each were open to a closer and more equal association. By analyzing Anson Burlingame's dual career as an American minister to Beijing and then as China's emissary to Washington, I argue in Chapter Seven that the late 1860s represented the high point of radical Republican geopolitics. The Burlingame Treaty of 1868, which liberalized commercial access and migration flows, realized this purpose, offering a Reconstructed vision of Americans' international relations and global imperial connections motivated by the same ideals that domestic reforms. Unfortunately, radical Republicans' success in staving off aggressive colonial incursions in China and toxic anti-immigration sentiment at home died with the end of Reconstruction, squeezed between imperial competitors, capitalists' increasing demands for access to China, and a racially straitened view of the body politic.

Chapter Eight investigates the problems the "Chinese question" posed for Republican leaders after Burlingame's death. Caught between the universalism attempted in Reconstruction, the need to court votes in the Pacific West, and the threat of mob violence in America and Asia, they sought a means to reconcile these tensions. Tracing the reverberations of the antebellum coolie debate through attempts at exclusionary legislation in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, I argue that Republicans sought to quiet these waters by adapting the logic and language of slavery's empire to incrementally exile Chinese migrants from the American political community. These same inheritances enabled them to mobilize state institutions designed to regulate commerce to enforce that exclusion, helping to create modern notions of citizenship alongside the new bureaucracy of immigration control – but at the cost of a century's worth of hopes for Sino-American commercial and social comity.

The book's Epilogue considers the political power of historical memory. As Americans moved to close their borders and open new Asian markets at the end of the nineteenth century, the last generation of "old China" hands passed away. But before they did, some of those traders and missionaries recorded their memories of pre-treaty port China in extensive memoirs. In my conclusion, I use these productions to reflect on the memory of American commerce with China in its different social and institutional variations. I find that these narratives of the history of American engagement in global commerce set up debates over American Asia policy in the 1890s, by establishing a century's record of (supposedly) private, peaceful commerce with the "China market" which could be used to legitimate Washington's new militarism and experiments in trans-imperial cooperation in Asia.