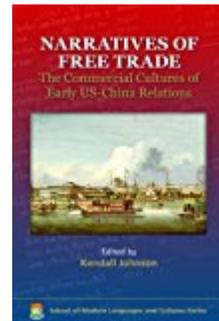




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The Consequences of Commerce, Collected

Narratives of Free Trade is, like its subject, a product of international exchange. The result of a 2009 colloquium cosponsored by the University of Hong Kong, Sun Yat-sen University, the Instituto Cultural do Governo da R.A.E. de Macau, and the Hong Kong-America Center, the book includes essays by contributors who come from a global range of institutions and represent multiple disciplines. While the collection does not fulfill the promise of its title—the diversity of contributors militates against any narrow purpose—it does provide readers with a very useful survey of some of the ways that histories of the United States and China are being substantially revised by new work on early commercial encounters.

The essays gathered together by editor Kendall Johnson are loosely grouped around the theme of commerce and its effects, and intervene in several different scholarly literatures. Readers interested in the cultural and intellectual history of foreign relations will find innovative arguments about the ways that American commerce and power intertwined in Asia in the contributions of Johnson, John R. Haddad, and Paul A. Bové. For those interested in Western merchants in China, Paul A. Van

Dyke and Sibing He provide new evidence for understanding how an age of cooperative imperial “free trade” replaced an earlier era of zero-sum monopoly-company commerce. The collection also features several essays focused on how individuals reflected, refracted, and transmitted culture within the spaces created by commerce: the contributions of Rogério Miguel Puga, May-bo Ching, Yeewan Koon, and Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Yedan Huang provide food for thought (and, in Ching’s case, thought about food) by taking a more ethnographic approach. Taken together, the collected essays’ common language is an interdisciplinary pidgin of theory and method, similar to that used in American studies—though here that heterogeneity is deployed to transnational ends.

Of interest to specialists in business history, Van Dyke’s essay, “Bookkeeping as a Window into Efficiencies of Early Modern Trade: Europeans, Americans and Others in China Compared, 1700-1842,” approaches an old question from a new angle: how did Americans successfully compete in China against established East India companies (EICs)? Part of the answer, Van Dyke argues, lies in administrative overhead: the cost of bookkeeping,

Facing significant principal-agent problems in a trade beset by physical and political insecurity, European EIC directors devised complex, redundant, and centralized documentation procedures to manage the millions of dollars they had invested in goods, personnel, and vessels spread across the world. But while the paperwork these structures generated are a historian's dream—"the companies' documents ... are today among the best historical records available for the study of the eighteenth century" (p. 24)—this bureaucracy came at a heavy cost. In a similar way to how European EICs' commitment to maintaining armed ships with large crews burdened companies' balance sheets while creating a safer trading environment for their rivals, the documentary procedures that EICs established diminished their profits while stabilizing global trade patterns for private merchants.

In contrast, upstart American traders, operating as small private concerns, were able to manage their voyages more informally—and thus efficiently. Van Dyke illustrates the contrast between the two kinds of ventures through their strikingly different physical records. Where established EICs' bookkeeping created shelf upon shelf of thick cross-referenced ledgers to account for every pound of tea and every sailor's berth, American voyages commonly produced but a "shoe box" of materials: a sheaf of receipts and official passes thrown into a file at the end of a voyage and quickly forgotten (p. 184n8). Entering late into a preexisting commercial system unshackled from the political inertia that came to hobble the monopoly companies, American ventures represented a "downward shift of ownership" that exploited the infrastructure created by the EICs (p. 24). Operators were owners in the American trade, not functionaries, and worked venture to venture; they therefore needed no sophisticated accounting procedures. This image of nimble American entrepreneurs outcompeting lumbering European monopoly corporations is a well-established one, and indeed common to descriptions of the workings of the China trade since at least the 1830s. Van Dyke's contribution thus lies not in any new causal explanations, but primarily in his persuasive and detailed comparison of private and corporate record-creation practices—as well as the link he draws between these practices and organizational structures.

While Van Dyke shies away from causal arguments, Haddad's essay, "China of the American Imagination: The Influence of Trade on US Portrayals of China, 1820 to 1850," surveys material and literary culture to offer a convincing argument for why Americans held the "closed-off" China of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

centuries in such high esteem (p. 58). Recapitulating the deeply researched analysis of Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum that appeared in Haddad's excellent first book (*The Romance of China: Excursions to China in U.S. Culture, 1776-1876* [2005]), Haddad identifies three reasons for Americans' early positive feelings about China. First, an absence of firsthand impressions created a vacuum that "imagination rushed to fill" with stories of an "Oriental wonderland" (pp. 58-59). Second, Americans' scattered scientific investigations of China buttressed this fantasy by displaying objects from China together in overwhelming but marvelous exhibits, such as Dunn's Chinese Museum. Finally, the narrowness of the conduits connecting China and America created circumstances wherein the Chinese themselves played an influential part in representing their nation. Unsurprisingly, their images—widely reproduced on ceramics—were positive ones.

These pleasant associations did not last forever. The end of China's "isolation" in the wake of the Opium War led to its "swift and precipitous decline" in American culture (p. 58). Britain's victory, Haddad argues, soured Americans' awe; with China's grandeur undermined by military defeat, Americans now viewed Chinese "hauteur" as ridiculous, a clumsy arrogance. Though Haddad's explanation for how "closed-off" could translate to a "wonderland" is persuasive, this abrupt concluding chronology is perhaps too neat. Focused on movements in popular culture, it ignores how the Opium War brought China into American politics for the first time—and specifically, how the invasion led American policymakers, particularly slaveholders already deeply concerned by Britain's Atlantic antislavery program, to look at China as a harbinger of future British interventions in the Western Hemisphere. Defeat bred condescension, certainly, but it also created a sense among some Americans that they, like the Chinese, were also being victimized by a "perfidious Albion"—a shared feeling that would influence U.S. policy for decades to come.

Though Haddad suggests that popular affection for China in the United States would not reach levels comparable to the pre-Opium War period until the publication of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* in 1931, Bové, in "To Make a Way: Telling a Story of US-China Union through the Letters of Henry Adams and John Hay," finds a surprisingly deep respect for China's geopolitical importance among elites a generation earlier. Specifically, Bové is concerned with the political theories of Hay and Adams. Keying off of Adams's assertion that his friend Hay's Open Door policy fundamentally rear-

ranged global political economy, Bové explicates Hay and Adams's view of geopolitics as a conflict between rival forces of inertia—the moribund ancien régime, represented most powerfully by the land empire of Russia, and the restless dynamic movement of American republican government and market capitalism, active over the world ocean. China of the late nineteenth century was, in Hay and Adams's view, the battleground for these systems of organization, and the chief challenge was to draw China into the “American system” (p. 153). The question of the Qing Empire's future thus emerges in Bové's telling as the focus of “US state political imagination” at a critical moment in the rise of American hegemony and imperial power (p. 162).

He's essay “Russell and Company and the Imperialism of Anglo-American Free Trade” focuses on an earlier moment of “state political imagination,” when the United States first developed a China policy in the wake of the Opium War (p. 162). The author of one of the best studies of the affairs of the most important American trading firm, Russell & Co., He takes aim at Macabe Keliher's revisionist contention that Americans' rivalry with Great Britain underwrote the goals of the first American diplomatic mission to China.[1] Leveraging his archival work, He digs into the actions and opinions of American merchants and their missionary allies in China to reassert the more traditional argument, namely, that cooperation in the project of “imperial free trade”—and not competition—was the goal of American policy.

While He is surely correct to note, as many others have, that American merchants and missionaries actively collaborated with British officials and traders to reconstruct Chinese sovereignty to benefit their own bottom lines, this argument runs into difficulty when it assumes that merchants set U.S. policy, full stop. While merchants' certainly had an influence, the connection between their congressional petitions and the formulation and execution of American policy was hardly a direct one. Among other things, domestic American politics, which had a strongly Anglophobic bent in the 1840s, were an important contributing factor, as well as an arena where distant merchants had little experience, and, at times, limited influence.

He seems particularly suspicious of Keliher's claim that Caleb Cushing, the first American diplomat in China, actually opposed British goals in Asia. But key actors like Cushing were complex figures, capable of a multi-layered response to British power and personnel. An unreconstructed Anglophobe, Cushing was also a com-

mitted white supremacist, and moreover, an elitist—and more than willing to argue for intervention in China and elsewhere as part of a broader imperial project, a shared “white man's burden” *avant la lettre*. As powerful politicians with their own interests to tend to, Cushing and his successor commissioners to China were not puppets for mercantile interests, and came into serious conflict with traders at times. This clash of interests was perhaps clearest with regard to the “coolie” trade, a lucrative commerce in Chinese labor that U.S. officials worried posed a serious threat to the economic basis of American power, southern slavery. While He is persuasive in outlining how Americans in Canton worked across national and imperial boundaries to advance Western penetration into China, this understanding of private economic interests is not sufficient to explain the full range of motives driving American policy in China in the nineteenth century.

Johnson explores how the personal could be geopolitical in his chapter “A Question of Character: The Romance of Early Sino-American Commerce in *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw, the First American Consul at Canton* (1847).” The China trade, Johnson observes, “presented an opportunity for American authors to tell a story of their new nation,” one in which the successful revolutionaries were able to win “international respect” in global commerce after independence (p. 33). Through a close reading of Samuel Shaw's activities and memoirs, Johnson finds an early American anxiety about credit—about how it could be created through global commerce, and what its impact on the body politic might be. Johnson's investigation is thus broadly similar to the Canton section of Kariann Yokota's recent book *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Post-colonial Nation* (2011), though with an important difference: Johnson innovates by probing Shaw's narrative diachronically, considering it first in the context of Shaw's own life in the 1780s and 1790s and then in the period of the *Journals*'s publication fifty years later.

Johnson argues that Shaw, like many of his countrymen, was intensely anxious about credibility—his own, and the nation's. In both cases, Johnson relates, Shaw thought he had found a solution in ginseng, a product of American forests then valuable in Canton. On the basis of Shaw's interest in using ginseng in lieu of silver, and his comments about the ills of being paid in scrip during the Revolution, Johnson concludes that Shaw was deeply suspicious of both speculation and fiat currency. While I am not convinced that an itinerant wholesale dealer like Shaw was as uncomfortable with abstract financial transactions as Johnson suggests, the essay does draw a

useful link between Shaw's concerns about personal and national credit abroad and his efforts to establish a trustworthy ruling class at home through institutions like the Society of the Cincinnati.

While Shaw used ginseng in his project to establish personal and national credibility, Johnson argues that Josiah Quincy, Shaw's biographer and editor of the *Journals*, depicted Shaw's journey to China as a national romance—an example of an American character “rising from debt and economic disenfranchisement” to financial security and respectability (p. 52). The *Journals*, Johnson argues, both exhibit and seek to suppress tensions crucial to the Republic: in Shaw's time, between democratic revolution and the need to maintain respectability; and in Quincy's, through a depiction of national character that was at once unified and riven by deep sectional and class disputes.

Puga's chapter, “Representing Macao in 1837: The Unpublished Peripatetic Diary of Caroline Hyde Butler (Laing),” continues Johnson's foray into textual analysis with an examination of Butler's account of her sojourn to Macao. Puga places Butler's “China diary” in the context of other Anglophone travel narratives that shared its general interest in the city's natural landscapes, human populations, and linguistic mixing (p. 117). While familiar in some regards, Puga argues that the diary is unique in its level of detail—at times even chronicling Butler's experiences “almost to the hour” (p. 128). Puga notes that the “solitary everyday life” of North American women at Macao that Butler captured reminds us of something surprising—that for white North American Protestant women, there was “not just one exotic ‘Other’ in Macao,” but two: “the Chinese and the Portuguese” (p. 128). The Catholic rituals of Butler's Portuguese neighbors were as mysterious and forbidding as any Chinese rites.

The way differing gift rituals and portrait traditions shaped foreign relations is the subject of Koon's chapter “The Face of Diplomacy in Nineteenth-Century China: Qiying's Portrait Gifts.” By examining the portraits that Qiying, the Chinese imperial commissioner responsible for negotiating the post-Opium War treaties, gave as gifts to Western diplomats, Koon provides a persuasive explanation for why—and how—the Qing diplomat incorporated portraiture into diplomatic protocol. The essay first considers portraits in the context of Chinese and Western art history in order to understand how the objects could be legible and socially powerful to both sides during the mid-nineteenth century. Then Koon shifts to

Qiying's own behavior, arguing that the commissioner used gifts of his own image, done in a blended Chinese-Western style common among Canton merchants, to cultivate an intimacy with his counterparts and thereby create the personal relationships he thought would preserve Chinese interests from the threat of renewed Western violence.

In a similarly revealing look at blended cultural practices, Ching's chapter, “Chopsticks or Cutlery? How Canton Hong Merchants Entertained Foreign Guests in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” uses accounts of the crapulent dinner parties thrown by Hong merchants for their Western partners and clients to help explain the later rise of the much-emulated Cantonese tradition of elaborate and luxurious banquets. Ching details how the multi-course “chopstick dinner” that such Hong merchants as Puankhequa II (1755-1820) served their guests were convivial affairs that created new traditions by blending Western and Chinese cooking styles and foods (pp. 103-106). But these epicurean adventures, Ching argues, were also occasions where serious cultural work was done, through displays of fine porcelain, retinues of servants, and even humor, as Canton's merchants and their guests enjoyed a hearty laugh at the foreigners' fumbled attempts to wield chopsticks (at least before the forks, knives, and spoons were wheeled out, to the foreigners' undisguised relief).

In the collection's final essay, sociologists Kuah-Pearce and Huang retrace the journey that Ching suggests Cantonese banquet culture followed, moving from Canton's markets to San Francisco's supper clubs—but instead of following diners, they consider religious practice. In their chapter “The Flow of the Traders' Goddess: Tianhou in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century America,” they chart how Chinese migrants brought worship of Tianhou (literally “Heavenly Empress/Queen”) to new homes in East Asia and the Americas. While allowing that the cult of Tianhou had spread beyond Fujian and Guangdong provinces through imperial patronage before the nineteenth century, Kuah-Pearce and Huang argue that the worship of the goddess became much more important and widespread after the waves of Chinese emigration that followed the first Opium War. Providing important psychological and social support to migrants, the temples dedicated to Tianhou worship, they conclude, became community centers for expatriate Chinese—a trend, the authors note, that continues in the present-day.

In common with many edited collections, and partic-

ularly those that spring from conferences, *Narratives of Free Trade* does not advance one single program for revising the field, but rather several. Moreover, in this collection, the individual essays rarely build on any themes together, except in the broadest sense of considering commerce as an important driver of change. This leads to some missed opportunities. For example, while many of the essays touch on how early U.S.-China relations were deeply affected, and sometimes even mediated, by each country's relationship with Great Britain, the significance of this triangulation never reaches the level of direct analysis—a particularly surprising oversight given the attention that Johnson pays in the volume's introduction to James Fichter's *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism* (2010), which focuses on this issue. Likewise, no one essay in the book is truly comparative—each author is primarily committed to analyzing either the American or the Chinese side. That said, Koon's essay, one of the best in the collection, comes closest, and it, along with the general proximity of chapters covering multiple angles of the Sino-American encounter in the volume, suggests just how productive such perspectives could be.

What the volume lacks in synergy or coherence, however, it makes up in the diversity of methodologies on display. *Narratives of Free Trade* joins a growing literature concerned with unraveling how Americans' engagement with China and Chinese engagement with Americans shaped each nation, and in turn how these encounters shaped the modern global system. By mobilizing new and old forms of analysis in service of this project, and by putting scholars of the United States and China into conversation, the book opens up new vistas for exploration and expands a field that we can expect will continue to grow for some years to come.

Note

[1]. See Sibing He, "Russell and Company, 1818-1891: America's Trade and Diplomacy in Nineteenth-Century China" (PhD diss., Miami University, 1997); and Macabe Keliher, "Anglo-American Rivalry and the Origins of U.S. China Policy," *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 227-257.

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