

# H-Net Reviews

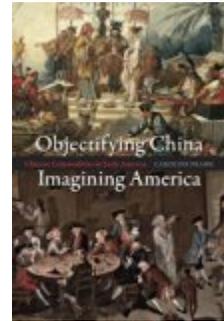
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Caroline Frank. *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xiii + 257 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-26027-3; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-26028-0.

Reviewed by Jennifer Marshall (University of Minnesota, Twin Cities)

Published on H-Empire (November, 2012)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed



## China Patterns: Tracking Chinese Commodities in Colonial American Consumerism

Caroline Frank's *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America* urges scholars of colonial U.S. history to acknowledge China as *the* organizing global force of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—not just in terms of political power and economic exchange, but also in terms of the structures of feeling and identity that necessarily influenced the lives, habits, and ambitions of colonials worldwide.

Frank, a historian and scholar of American studies, is specifically concerned with examining China's impact on the political development of the North American colonies, but her interest is motivated by more than just professional obligation. American relations with Chinese exports, she contends, were of a specific flavor. In these years of raucous maritime battles, privateering, and piracy, British imperial rule mobilized its American territories as pawns in the larger economic contest for dominance in Pacific trade routes. For one thing, the New World was a source of silver, the only commodity that held its value against the titan stuffs of Asia (tea, porcelain, silk, and spices). And, more relevant to Frank's study, it was home to another prized resource vis-à-vis Chinese trade—consumers. Philadelphia, Boston, and New York were full of them, as were Providence, Newport, and Marblehead, all locales that figure prominently in Frank's account of transoceanic early modernity. In these North American towns (where probate records, historically preserved houses, and public collections serve as her archives of colonial consumption), buyers welcomed

Chinese commodities into their homes, though their motivations for doing so—and their feelings about it—would change considerably in the century leading up to revolution. Indeed, *Objectifying China, Imagining America* illustrates how all the usual explanatory devices in histories of consumerism, i.e., “identity” or “status,” are insufficient for accounting for the sheer weight of china (and China) in American lives.

Over the course of five chapters, Frank charts changing American relations to Asian imports. In the late 1600s and in the first decades of the 1700s, soft-paste statuary or decorative blue-and-white porcelain might have appeared in the home as signs of their owners' worldly, even macho attainments. Frank documents how in this period, porcelain ownership usually tracked with the possession of other, similarly seaworthy goods: maps, Spanish coins, “India carpets,” and even small islands. Indeed, these trinkets served so strongly as indexes of wartime plunder and extralegal aggression that eighteenth-century Quakers abstained from owning them, specifically out of deference to their pacificism. Accordingly, Frank wagers that, early in its American absorption, porcelain served handily as a sign of masculine accomplishment. But gradually, as more and more Americans from all different social and professional strata began to purchase china, or “cheney,” as it was also called, its social meanings became more subtle and diverse.

For Frank, this historical diversification of symbolic

value necessitates an historiographic strategy of detailed specificity, or, “link[ing] known people with specific china dishes,” in order to account more accurately for the many cultural duties these commodities assumed (p. 148). Sometimes, this approach runs afoul of argumentative clarity. By the end of the book, we are not exactly sure how “China” was objectified, much less how “America” was imagined—her stories are too multiple for the punchiness of her title. Instead, benefits accrue on the side of complexity. Frank tells multiple, even seemingly contradictory stories. (Ben Franklin once belittled the British Empire by referring to it as a “vase,” then turned around and extolled the American colonies with the same analogy—allowing the metaphor to flip-flop between brittle fragility and tensile durability. See p. 163 and note 59, p. 243.) The breadth and depth of her research sustain the multiplicity of the meanings she tracks, and, as a result, *Objectifying China, Imagining America* works to extend the symbolism of what we mean by “consumption.”

Indeed, much of the book is aimed at rethinking how consumerism might come under historical scrutiny. Besides extending its possible metaphorical associations, Frank also hopes to extend its temporal axis in analysis. Gesturing toward influential studies of colonial American consumerism, like James Deetz’s *In Small Things Forgotten* (1996) or Margaretta Lovell’s *Art in a Season of Revolution* (2005), Frank gripes that these scholars begin too unreflexively from probate analyses—that they begin, in other words, with an inventory of objects-already-in-the-home, without reckoning with the various factors that determined how they got there in the first place. “The colonial American owner of porcelain did not forget all the angst, capital, and labor involved in bringing that object into the household once it was on the mantel,” she notes (p. 101). Thus, scholars need to understand better the nature of supply, in order to paint a more complex picture of demand. Put another way: we’d be wise to keep in mind that trade patterns not only *reflect* taste, but also *inform* it, and to widen our historiographic purview accordingly. Only then, once we have a better understanding of circuits of exchange, will we have a shot at “integrat[ing]” traditional material-culture interpretations of household inventories—and their emphases on taste, status, identity, and other domestic symbolisms—into a more complete cultural history. While the upshot of this discussion is unproblematic and even galvanizing, I’m not sure it that it provides quite the correction Frank suggests. Lovell’s study explicitly takes up the issue of artisanal production, for example. It’s not international trade, but craftsmanship still counts as a factor in pre-

point-of-purchase value-production. Nonetheless, opening some of the windows on consumerism, so to speak, in order to let its domestic politics mingle with the international politics of its time (trade agreements, manufacturing quotas, and imperial war) is a worthy, indeed, politically necessary goal.

If Frank’s purpose is to examine the social significance—and cultural significations—of Chinese exports in the North American colonies, her first task is to establish the extent of their consumption in the first place. Although many facts and figures pepper Frank’s discussion, as does the occasional graph, perhaps the most staggering statistic is this: “some 70 million pieces of porcelain” “poured into the North Atlantic basin in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (p. 99). In spite of this preponderance, however, “early modern China-mania” remains mostly invisible in historical accounts of colonial America (p. 29). The reasons for this invisibility, Frank reasons, are both practical and ideological. The nature of colonial record-keeping conspires against a complete view of the extent of trade, a practical obstacle that itself has ideological origins. After all, British imperial restrictions on independent American trade exerted a material pressure on colonials to keep mum. As a result, in reading probate inventories, such as one detailing the worldly possessions of one Cornelius Jacobs of New York (d. 1700), Frank finds no explicit mention of china. But the “absence of the word,” she persuasively reasons, “may be due ... to the political culture” surrounding this particular commodity, not a reliable indicator of its absence (p. 46). At the same time, Frank argues, period ideas about the colonial relationship between England and North America have persisted to the point of being solidified as historiographic assumption. British imperial rule is thus imagined to have been so viciously ironclad that American colonists were helpless against it; thus, any independent trade relations with the East have been assumed to be minor or nonexistent. Likewise, the ideological investment in an American character founded on hardscrabble and homespun has been so strong that material evidence of a pre-Revolutionary-era cosmopolitanism tends to be pushed to the side.

Given the archival and political obstacles for reckoning with North America’s *direct* engagement with the East, Frank’s success in demonstrating the preponderance she seeks to understand is admirable in and of itself. She’s looked broadly at the trade patterns that allowed for consumption and then deeply at the private patterns of consumption itself. The book is nicely explicit about these two levels of engagement—“the macro

(trade) and micro (household)” (p. 22). Indeed, it derives its organization from them. Frank’s five chapters alternate between the two perspectives (as well as their attendant archives, debates, and methodologies), in histories that take us from the bird’s-eye-view to behind-closed-doors and back again. This approach is enlivening and even suspense-building, especially since we know what’s coming: that famous Tea Party, an event that concludes Frank’s study, but begins the Revolution. (This, the fifth chapter, justifies the pique; it is one of the book’s best. But I’ll have more to say about that later.)

I say “histories” and I mean just that. Admirably, Frank has done more than her due diligence in fleshing out her many historical subjects. In this way, *Objectifying China, Imagining America* remedies a common complaint about histories of consumerism: that they might account for the *type* and *number* of goods on the market, and that they may offer a *general* argument for what the consumption of those goods meant in the *aggregate*, but that they fail ultimately as historical investigations into the myriad specificities of consumerism: who bought what, where they did it, and why. Frank fills in these blanks. She tells us about Rhode Island’s Lodowick OpDyck and his probably-plundered Chinese porcelain vase, an object that bears a coat-of-arms not his own, but that still served to ennoble his sense of worldly standing (in chapter 4). She introduces us to Philadelphia’s colorful Benjamin Lay, an angry Quaker who smashed a set of china in the streets in order to agitate against the very worldliness OpDyck hoped to mobilize (also chapter 4). And she takes us on a tour of the family, life, and home of William Gibbs, a sign painter who transformed the walls of his Newport dining room into so many unsettling scenes of rolling hills, swaying cypress trees, and, bizarrely, impaled men—all gracefully portrayed in fashionable “japanned” lacquer effect (the main focus of chapter 2).

In this list of subjects, however, I’d be remiss if I didn’t count among them the china imports themselves (the porcelain, or the lacquerware, or the tea, or the statuettes, or ..., or ...). All these many travelling objects track a specific and dynamic sort of historical “agency” on their own, related to, but ultimately exceeding the subjective reach of their individual owners. In other words, Frank not only pursues the various genealogical, professional, and personal routes that her *human* actors took relative to owning, using, and displaying Chinese goods; her book, taken in sum, offers an understanding of the great geographic and cultural distances traversed by those *goods themselves* and allows those goods to serve as

protagonists in this larger, global narrative. In the book’s introduction, Frank phrases this methodological ethos as an appeal. “We need to follow,” she writes, “the network of meanings, associations, and people *these things gathered* on the long trail from Chinese cultivator or producer to western Atlantic merchant and consumer” (p. 10, emphasis added). It’s subtle, but by allowing “these things” to serve as the *subject* of the verb “gathered” (in another passage, she follows imported “objects ... as they *marched* through the house,” p. 134), Frank ventures much. Specifically, she signals her methodological association with Igor Kopytoff’s influential suggestion that scholars attend to the “cultural biography of things.”[1]

She also hints at the more radical turn this line of thought has recently taken, especially in talk about “non-human actors,” “alien phenomenology,” or “vibrant matter.”[2] Much of the emphasis in this interdisciplinary conversation is philosophical; authors are explicit in their aim to construct a “nonmodern ontology,” or a theory of being and action that does *not* rely on strict, Cartesian divisions between the human self and the material world.[3] Frank’s concern is not with philosophies of ontology, early modern or otherwise. (And, you’ll note that the hot-off-the-presses dates of some of the works just cited make it impossible for Frank to have responded to them directly.) Still, and happily, it’s possible to read *Objectifying China, Imagining America* as an illustration of the degree to which these currently very fashionable ideas may claim a much longer intellectual history. In other words, if people and their things are now seen as mutually implicated in a field of shimmering relations, Frank’s early colonial landscape shimmers thusly too. How could Lodowick OpDyck *not* marvel at the long biography of his blue-and-white porcelain? Whose coat-of-arms was that on his vase? And what valor (or vice) had he assumed along with it? Likewise, how could Benjamin Lay’s china-smashing spectacle *not* have been motivated by some animus against the threatening vibrancy, even meaningful agency of those things? At least something like this was at work in the mind of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reporter, who referred to the shattered goods in personified language—as, in a note of tragicomic farce, “the Sacrifice” (p. 161). Frank’s project is not an intellectual history of colonial feelings about being and objecthood; but it’s a compliment to her study that it might productively be viewed as one—especially if read alongside recent movements to reframe colonial American decorative arts in precisely these terms. (The installation of the Chipstone Foundation collection at the Milwaukee Art Museum is a case in point. There, card tables are acti-

vated as inducements to seduction, rather than left dumb and still as so much stuff. Credit for this move should partially be given to curator Ethan Lasser, whose work on colonial furniture, including japanned furniture, is notable for its attention to eighteenth-century ideas about materiality.[4]

The notion that Chinese imports might be agents of a sort, or *secret* agents, is at work in Frank's fifth and final chapter. A reexamination of the Boston Tea Party, this discussion examines the mounting suspicion that Chinese goods could bring danger with them: cultural contagions like cosmopolitan vanity, British effeminacy, or Asian subservience. This leads her to reconsider the *tea* in the Boston Tea Party as the thing assaulted—*concretely*, she means, and not as symbolic proxy for taxation. In Frank's words: "Chinese tea holds the distinction of having been the only *commodity* to be attacked, the only commodity suspected of subversion. We need to ask why *tea*" (p. 179). Indeed, while operative throughout the book, the final chapter's discussion of the Tea Party is perhaps the most direct and forceful application of Frank's secondary methodological investment: not just to examine consumerism from macro- and micro-perspectives, but to interpret its vicissitudes symbolically. Frank inherits this approach directly from Robert St. George, whose *Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture* (1998) was a flash point for conversations—and some controversy—about the role of literary approaches in reading the material, visual, and archival records of the historical past. Frank's engagement with some of the major themes of St. George's book is clear; she also discusses bodily analogies and the cultural imagination of witchcraft. (Admittedly, these passages are often more strained than their questionable relevance justifies.) And she endorses its method as an ethos, writing at the start of the fifth chapter, "I intend ... to associate the empirical outlines of tea consumption with written and visual *metaphors, allusions, and symbols* about tea, to recover its role in creating or threatening an American identity above and beyond superficially labeling tea and china as status symbols" (p. 179, emphasis added). She's interested, in other words, in ferreting out the "indirect references" (the term is St. George's) of her historical subject matter (p. 12). Addressing the state of this method in the academy in an endnote, Frank explains: "There are very few historians who probe the references contained within objects to the extent that archaeologists and cultural anthropologists do"; she goes on to credit "a number of literary scholars, familiar with 'close reading' and discourse anal-

ysis, [who] have turned to ... objects" as another source of methodological inspiration (note 37, p. 213). It's conspicuous, at least to me (a historian of American art and material culture), that Frank has left art history out of her tool kit.

Leaving art historical approaches out of the mix yields an ironic inattention to the porcelain itself: its decorative motifs, its colors, its form, its lyric and narrative content. Details come in along the way, yes; but a "close reading" we do not find. Frank knows well enough to address this aporia, defending her lack of specificity about what the objects looked like as consonant with the cultural habits that attended to these things in colonial America in the first place. All the chatter on china, Frank notes, was mostly either quantitative (inventories, records, etc.) or qualitative about those quantities (pride in booty, angst about tea-sipping). There was, she notes, an overriding "ignorance of the Chinese significance of the decorations on their dishes"; and, because of this, while we can "speculate all we like about what these designs *might* have meant to Americans ... what is more significant is their silence on the subject" (pp. 12 and 17). To some extent, I think Frank is justified in bracketing the Chinese artistic traditions from which her objects sprung and even in bracketing some of their visual and material characteristics. After all, her quarry is the colonial imagination (not hers) and her method is text-based. But, in the few instances where she *does* utilize visual and material evidence, allowing the objects to speak for themselves (so to speak), the interpretive results are that much richer for it. This is true in the second chapter's discussion of those lacquered mural scenes. And it is stunningly true in the last object-case of the book: a porcelain punch bowl depicting Chinese craftsmen at work—the very punch bowl from which the Tea Party's rebels drank their courage before heading to harbor. One cannot help but think that the symbolic camaraderie between North American colonials and the Chinese laborers who supplied the inter-imperial trade that sustained colonialism was at least a little apparent, even inspiring, to the men who put the bowl to use on that fateful night. Frank explores this very consonance. It's a lovely moment, and one that forces us to wonder what other dialogical encounters may have been happening at the cupboards of all the households she visits—how the years spent with these objects might have eventually, if silently, ushered the colonial consumers to consider, at last, their china. So, would an art historian have written a different book? Yes. Is this book still useful to art historians? Also yes; and precisely because it reminds us

that symbolic approaches to historical formations need not be limited only to images and objects, but to the relations that condition their receipt.

*Objectifying China, Imagining America* succeeds in its goal to globalize early American history. This comes with a secondary payoff: to rescue it from some of the geographic myopia that has lately crept in under cover of the “Atlantic world” rubric. Frank makes no bones about the disciplinary turf she’s challenging. “Pre-national British Americans did not view themselves as living in an Atlantic world,” she writes in the introduction, pushing further in a subsequent chapter: “It is impossible to reconstruct an ‘Atlantic World,’ as so many historians have done, apart from the centripetal force of the trading world of the Indian Ocean” (pp. 4 and 43). As it coalesced in the 1990s, the “Atlantic world” concept served to pull historical investigations of the early modern period away from anachronistic nationalisms (whether Spanish, British, American, etc.); and pushed for a reconsideration of all the era’s major political and cultural developments in ways that would admit to the material realities that bound together western Europe, Africa, and the New World. Frank’s challenge to this once-broadening frame is to widen it further. This seems just—and timely. Indeed, Frank’s portrayal of an early modern, “global” world dominated by anxious imaginings of the East sounds not so dissimilar from our own. That said, in a twist of irony, Frank’s redrawn map repeats some of the covert presentism that suffused the “Atlantic world” concept in the first place: an ostensibly historical conceit, but ventured in conspicuous lockstep with the transatlantic diplomacy of the post-WWII era, as Bernard Bailyn argued in his *Atlantic History* (2005).

To be fair, while I’m using the word “global” fairly liberally, it’s conspicuous—and refreshing—that Frank doesn’t stoop to this contemporary, journalistic shorthand. At the same time, her apparent resistance to then-versus-now analogies leaves the reader feeling just the slightest bit teased. And, need it be said? , this coyness turns provocative when talk turns to the Tea Party. Revisiting that event *now*, when the conservative wing of the U.S. Republican Party has taken it on as slogan and moniker is touchy work. Even more, explicitly seeking to reframe the Tea Party in ways that shift emphasis away

from *taxation* and toward multinational *business* interests in identifying the source of patriotic enmity—well ... these are fighting words. And Frank knows it. She just allows the reader to make the metaphorical conclusion. One endnote *does* compare colonial fears about the poisonous effects of tea to twenty-first-century concerns with the toxicity of Chinese imports: “from pet food to toothpaste to baby toys” (note 61, p. 249). But, without being more specific about the comparisons that might be possible between the eighteenth century and the present, Frank allows readers to misread her whole study as parable—thus drastically undercutting all the irreducible specificity she’s labored to provide.

Ultimately, it’s this aspect of the book that proves to be its greatest contribution, not just for the increase of historical knowledge it provides, but also for the methodological goals it meets: complication, nuance, and detail, instead of sweeping narratives or shorthand symbolisms. Thus, *Objectifying China, Imagining America* is a book that will reward the diverse readership it so generously and responsibly addresses.

#### Notes

[1]. Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-94.

[2]. See especially Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What it’s Like to be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012); and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[3]. Bruce Braun, “Nature and Culture: On the Career of a False Problem,” in *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, ed. James Duncan, Nuala Johnson, and Richard Schein (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 151-179.

[4]. Ethan Weldon Lasser, “Reading Japanned Furniture,” in *American Furniture*, ed. Luke Beckerdite (Milwaukee: Chipstone Foundation, 2007): 169-190.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-empire>

**Citation:** Jennifer Marshall. Review of Frank, Caroline, *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36583>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.