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Kendall A. Johnson. *The New Middle Kingdom: China and the Early American Romance of Free Trade.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. 384 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4214-2251-0.

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A Fresh Take on Free Trade

In *The New Middle Kingdom*, literary scholar Kendall A. Johnson makes a persuasive case that Americans represented their engagement with China during the first century of regular contact as a “romance of free trade” (p. 1). Whether pursued by merchants, missionaries, or diplomats, Americans’ adventures were figured as part of a “quest narrative” in which China provided an “exotic setting” where a “young, free-trading American hero” (and sometimes a heroine) could face “an anciently pagan, despotic antagonist” and triumph—with individual fortunes and national glory the prize (pp. 1, 7). A durable construct, this “romance of free trade” tied commerce, Christianity, and imperial expansion together under the banner of a “free-trade liberalism” (p. 11), linking it instrumentally to other national projects, from independence to Manifest Destiny to postbellum reunification. Tracking discursive patterns within a large body of texts dealing with Americans’ activity in China, Johnson’s erudite volume makes a clear contribution to the growing literature attesting to China’s importance in antebellum American culture; and in its gaps, the book suggests some of the ways the history of the US-China relationship might help scholars ask new questions about the development of American imperialism, capitalism, and identity.

Johnson draws on a wide body of sources in *The New Middle Kingdom*. His research is focused on print culture—no manuscripts or archival sources are used—but the book’s materials are impressively varied, including “memoirs, biographies, epistolary journals, monthly

magazines, book reviews, narrative fiction, travel narratives, and treaties,” as well as “maps and engraved illustrations” (p. 9). Sharply attentive to the language, formal structures, and aesthetic grammars of these sources, Johnson sheds new light on how texts produced by Americans entangled with China were made, circulated, and interpreted.

Johnson characterizes these texts as “romance,” a term he expands beyond “conventional literary designations” to encompass fictional and nonfictional works that share similar “strands of national anxiety, commercial optimism, and diplomatic imperialism” (p. 7). He argues that the tropes of literary romance permeated Americans’ print productions in and about China, as well as responses to that work. Americans in China modeled “their own letters, journals, and memoirs after fictional characters” in romances, while at the same time “canonical American romances” critiqued the culture of “commercial adventure” that commerce with China exemplified (pp. 16, 15). Johnson’s capacious definition of “romance” names a common rhetorical strategy, its structuring ideology, and the emotional energy it conveyed, and highlights China’s role as a reference point for both celebrations and critiques of the global liberal order that Americans’ Asian commerce was helping to create.

Johnson argues that “romance” also characterizes how the claims of extraterritoriality—exemptions for citizens or subjects of other polities from local laws—evolved from new ideas about the obligations of commerce and

evangelism. In the “romance of evangelical free trade” that Americans thinking about China came to embrace (p. 243), sovereign nations could not refuse unhindered commerce because doing so would transgress basic Christian morality: the responsibility to aid your neighbors, by trading with them. But at the same time extraterritorial jurisdictions had to be enforced beyond Christendom, because pagan territories were not sufficiently civilized—commercially free—for law there to be trusted. Johnson’s contribution lies not in revealing the roots of extraterritoriality but rather in explaining its narrative logic and rhetorical power.

After a prologue and an introduction to orient the reader, Johnson organizes his book into seven chapters. These move chronologically from Americans’ hopeful first voyages to Canton in the 1780s through the bitter beginnings of Chinese Exclusion in the 1880s. However, the book’s main focus is on the antebellum period, the subject of six of the seven chapters. Mirroring a pattern common to histories of early US-China relations, the key characters under consideration shift as time and pages roll forward, going from merchants to missionaries and concluding with diplomats. The first two chapters center on texts by merchants (Samuel Shaw and Amasa Delano) and track the origins of American involvement in China-centered trading networks, as well as the work trade did to define national identity. Chapter 3 transitions between merchants to missionaries, examining how gender structured the Pearl River Delta experiences of Harriet Low, a niece of a Russell & Company merchant who observed the company’s rise to power in the opium trade, and then contrasts it with the lives of two female missionaries, Henrietta Shuck and Eliza Bridgman, whose observations of the consequences of American business in China were less sanguine. Chapter 4 examines the “extraterritorial printing” produced by missionaries in the Chinese Repository and elsewhere. The next two chapters concern diplomacy and high politics: chapter 5 looks at how Caleb Cushing developed a theory of extraterritoriality in his writings and put it into practice as a policymaker, fusing ideas about commercial development and civilization with legal distinctions based on religious difference; and chapter 6 examines how the representation of extraterritorial burial in Commodore Matthew Perry’s *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan ...* (1856) complemented his designs for American commercial hegemony. The final chapter analyzes how Samuel Wells Williams, revising his encyclopedic study of the Qing Empire, *The Middle Kingdom* (1883), at the end of a long missionary and diplomatic career, tried

and ultimately failed to reconcile his “romance of evangelical free trade” with the “social reality” of colonialism and exclusion (p. 243).

Within each chapter, Johnson’s method is to organize sources into “topical clusters” to construct a discrete “literary historical analysis” that reveals the “intertextual frames of reference and intellectual influence” inhabited by the “editors, writers, printers, and cultural historians” who crafted the “print record” under consideration (pp. 9, 1, 11). This method allows Johnson to make several important interpretive moves. The first is to track the persistence of the “romance of free trade” that formed at the intersection of “commerce, Christianity, [and] diplomacy” in China across a century (p. 29). Johnson sees interlocking convictions—about commerce’s civilizing effect, the necessity of evangelism, and a fundamental division in the law of nations between Christian and non-Christian countries—as integral to Americans’ actions in Asia, as well as reasons why accounts of their exploits circulated widely and influentially domestically. The “romance” justified opium trafficking, the use of force, and a close partnership with British imperialists, and gave Americans a national purpose—perhaps even beyond the nineteenth century, though Johnson does not follow that story in this survey.

Johnson’s intertextual approach offers fresh insights into many sources. Foregrounding how trades in tea, silver, and opium structured Americans’ interpretive world, Johnson tracks how Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1856) and Walt Whitman’s “Passage to India” (1872), among other canonical texts, responded to heroic commercial narratives. Some of his readings will be primarily of interest to scholars of the China trade: his examination of the editorial history of Samuel Shaw’s journals, for example, addresses significant questions about the timing of that book’s publication, as well as Shaw’s own developing sense of global trade; while his careful parsing of Caleb Cushing’s writings on sovereignty and extraterritoriality will be recognized as a tremendous service by anyone familiar with Cushing’s impossibly voluminous output. Throughout, Johnson’s attention to visual aesthetics pays dividends, highlighting the role that sentimentality, the picturesque, and the gothic played in structuring American texts about China. Johnson also narrates historical context ably: so while the history of the Canton system, the political economy of opium traffic, or the Taiping Rebellion are not the primary focus of any chapter, even nonspecialist readers will gain enough information, drawn from recent scholarship, to make sense of the discussion. That said, at times the con-

textualization becomes repetitive—the rise of Russell & Company, the leading American China firm, appears in several different chapters—though this is most likely an artifact of how each chapter is designed to stand on its own.

The titular “new Middle Kingdom” of Johnson’s volume is not China but rather what antebellum Americans imagined their own young nation would become as a result of their mastery of commercial connections with Asia, a conceit borrowed from Commodore Matthew Perry (p. 8). Johnson’s decision to spotlight Perry’s vision is representative of his overall argument regarding foreign relations: that there is very little change at the core of Americans’ approach to China over time. Perry’s “hard” gunboat diplomacy differed only in degree from “softer” approaches like Burlingame’s Cooperative Policy (pp. 11, 29, 256); they were both formulated as free trade “romances.”

Arguing for continuity across decades of early US-China relations puts Johnson in good company; if anything characterizes the scholarship it is an endorsement of long-term patterns. But the static depiction obscures some important tensions within American political economy, as well as major shifts in the mode of Americans’ economic outreach. Johnson’s argument assumes that a close embrace of “free trade” was a hegemonic “national ideal” (p. 25), when in fact it was always hotly contested, one of several different approaches to political economy. In a similar vein, Johnson emphasizes how “merchant princes” of the early China trade transferred their capital and capabilities to new operations, arguing that creation and management “systems of transportation” like the Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy Railroad “transposed to land the shipping lanes that spanned the oceans,” mirroring in the United States what Russell & Company had done in Shanghai (pp. 1, 215, 240). Johnson reads this continuation of capital and personnel—and their celebration by figures like Perry and Burlingame—as evidence of China’s importance to the United States and proof of the power of the “romance of free trade.”

However, Johnson passes over how these commer-

cial heroes chose the corporate form for their new enterprises, even as they continued to renew their trading firms as co-partnerships. Time limited, with no legal personhood separate investors, co-partnership structure meant firms like Russell & Company operated quite differently than the incorporated companies some of the same men owned. This elision may be a consequence of terminological confusion: at various points, Johnson seems to imply that American merchant “companies” were “corporations” (pp. 11, 14, 24, 25, 196, 197, 216, 266, 368), which they were not. (The difficulty may lie in his sources, which do not include business records.) By positing a continuity across an epochal change in business organization, Johnson is suggesting that the shift from personal, merchant capitalism to corporate, industrial capitalism did not affect the US-China relationship. This claim needs further investigation, especially given the coincidence of corporations’ rise with an ebbing of American interest in close relations with China.

Johnson’s stated goals for *The New Middle Kingdom* are ambitious. By illuminating how “commerce, Christianity, and diplomacy” intersected in US-China relations (p. 29), he aims to work across literature and history to bridge American studies and China studies. The book accomplishes much of this. Johnson’s investigations bear on questions of vital interest to scholars working in history, literature, and American studies, and each chapter includes important insights for specialists. It is less clear that his readings of American print culture will be of as much interest to scholars of China as they are to those focused on the United States, given how closely Americans’ “romance of free trade” matches the productions of other Western empires, and how tangential the US-China relationship was to the Qing Empire; but without question, the volume provides a solid basis upon which to begin that conversation. Likewise, in exploring, in so much depth and so persuasively, the “romance of free trade,” Johnson has prepared the way for further explorations of how different approaches to American political economy intersected with US-China relations, as well as provided a basis for interrogating why—and how—there could have been such ideological and narrative continuity amid such significant change in this complex relationship.

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