

Narratives of Free Trade: The Commercial Cultures of Early US-China Relations. Kendall Johnson, ed. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012. xi + 234pp. ISBN 9789888083534.

The essays in this interdisciplinary volume explore commercial and diplomatic interactions between two nineteenth-century empires, one established (China) and one new (the United States). As the title of the collection suggests, the essays focus more on the imaginative dimensions of international commerce than on the quantitative empirical questions often associated with economic history. Careful case studies of events, actors, and artifacts reveal how the people who participated in, and reflected on, Sino-American exchanges in this period understood these interactions. The authors show how the idea and the practice of “free trade” developed in the shadow of imperialist violence. *Narratives of Free Trade* contributes to a growing historiography of capitalism that is exploring the violent and coercive roots of the free market.

The United States in the early nineteenth century lacked the military might to compel the Qing state to respect American interests, but US representatives were able to build on the concessions extracted by British forces to exercise their own “free” trade. The Opium Wars helped open China to American merchants and provided American writers with a pretext to theorise their own exceptionalism. Kendall Johnson argues in his introduction that examining this early nineteenth-century moment offers an “opportunity to consider the underappreciated role of China in the ‘imaginative geography’ of American national development” (6). American writers like Brantz Mayer saw China as timeless and stagnant, a mirror image of the dynamic, expanding US. This imaginative framework reassuringly placed a still fragile and often deeply divided American nation within a telos of civilisational advancement. Johnson suggests that for American writers and merchants, “the ‘economic facts’ of the nineteenth-century China Trade are bound up with the belief that the United States was rising to international prominence in what we might call a national romance of free trade” (6). This long-term thinking helped to paper over local injustices by focusing instead on progressive narratives of global change.

The nine essays in this volume examine how these ideas manifested in a variety of local contexts and historical moments. Paul A. Van Dyke’s “Bookkeeping as a Window into Efficiencies of Early Modern Trade” explains how private traders, by reducing bureaucratic overhead, came to dominate a market that had been created forcibly by large state-sponsored enterprises. Johnson’s contribution to the volume, “A Question of Character,” uses the diary of the first United States Consul General at Canton, Samuel Shaw, to show how he represented the US less as a democracy than as an empire in his commercial interactions with the Chinese. John R. Haddad’s essay, “China in the American Imagination,” looks at representations of China in the US through artifacts (such as ceramics) displayed in museums which curated these items for American consumption. Sibing He’s “Russell and Company and the Imperialism of Anglo-American Free Trade” counters recent claims that US rivalry with Britain was at the core of the American China policy, showing instead that American firms sought to “ride the coattails of England, sharing the privileges gained by them” (93). May-bo Ching’s “Chopsticks or Cutlery?” offers an intimate, up-close account of the formal dinners hosted by Chinese merchants for English and American traders; she reveals that such dinners were sites of cultural encounter and accommodation. Rogerio Miguel Puga’s “Representing Macao in 1837” analyses the diary of American Caroline Hyde Butler, locating this document within “a network of Old China Trade texts” (117) that position the visitor as “the Other in a foreign country” (129). Yeewan Koon’s “The Face of Diplomacy in

Nineteenth-Century China” investigates portrait exchanges to understand the different assumptions that Chinese and Euro-American negotiators brought to their interactions. Paul A. Bové’s “To Make a Way” argues that the world-historical imaginations of Henry Adams and John Hay—as much or more than American business interests—shaped American foreign policy. Finally, Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Yedan Huang, in “The Flow of the Traders’ Goddess,” track Chinese diasporic movement by examining the widely dispersed temples to the goddess Tianhou; worship of the goddess overseas, they suggest, had ebbed with the rise of Christianity but has recently grown, complicating narratives of assimilation.

Many of these essays use particular artifacts –account books, porcelains, diaries, portraits – as a point of entry into larger questions about commerce and culture. Koon’s essay on portraiture is a particularly strong example. Whereas portraits in Europe and America were self-presentations that expressed one’s place in a social hierarchy, in Qing China, portraits were primarily used for ancestral commemoration and assumed a standardised rather than individualised form. Thus when British, American, and Chinese negotiators exchanged portraits, they had to mediate these distinct understandings of artistic representation and the notions of selfhood they contained. Koon focuses on imperial minister Qiying’s exchanges with British and American negotiators, and writes: “Because the painting absorbed the image of the subject (Qiying), the painting blurred the distinction between persons and things and between official diplomacy and personal friendship” (133). Koon analyses the formal composition and divergent meanings of these paintings, yet she also reminds us that the amity represented by these portraits should not obscure the militaristic undercurrents of these negotiations. These efforts at exchange and accommodation are only part of a larger story of political disputes enforced with firepower. Portraits of Chinese officials like Qiying that had been gifted to Euro-American negotiators came to hang in American museums; Qiying himself, betrayed by his British confidants, was arrested for taking liberty with imperial rules on diplomatic exchange and “committed ritual suicide by strangulation” (147).

Koon’s attention to the interplay between material culture and political history is one example of the ways in which *Narratives of Free Trade* breaks down barriers between the local history of interaction and exchange and the global history of ideology and empire. Not every essay manages this balance as effectively as Koon’s. Some chapters focus more on British than American actors, and thus seem only tenuously connected to the central theme of US-China relation. Nonetheless, this collection as a whole suggests new directions for research not only in the history of Sino-American relations, but in the cultural history of empire and commerce.

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