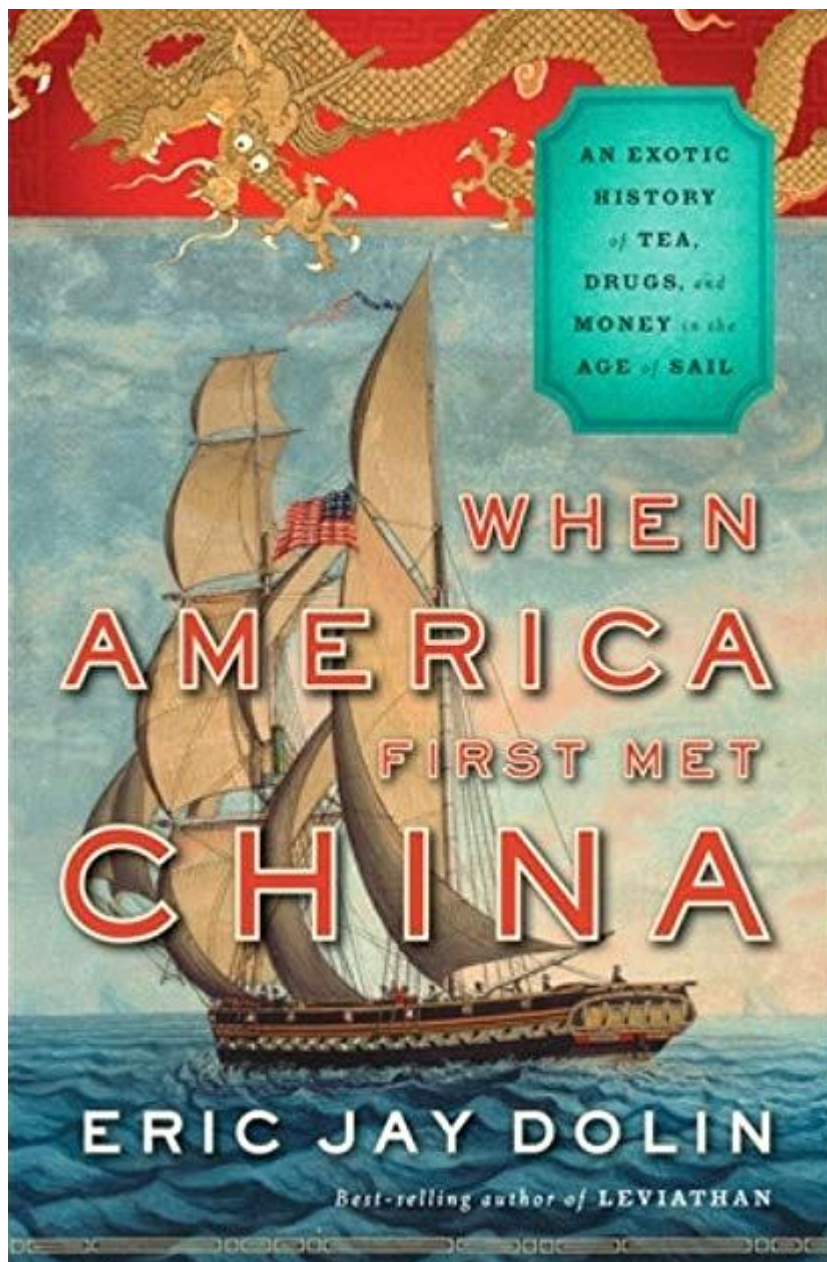


Chinese Market; Global Trade



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Eric Jay Dolin, *When America First Met China: An Exotic History of Tea, Drugs, and Money in the Age of Sail*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. 416 pp., \$27.95.

After writing successful books on whaling (*Leviathan*) and the fur trade (*Fur, Fortune, and Empire*), Eric Jay Dolin has set his sights on another fascinating chapter of nineteenth-century maritime history—America’s early encounters with China. The book covers roughly three-quarters of a century, starting in 1784 with the historic voyage of the *Empress of China*, the first U.S. vessel to reach China, and ending in 1860. It was around then, Dolin writes, that “the China trade lost much of the drama and tragedy that had characterized it in

earlier years" (xvi). Sandwiched between these dates are hundreds of colorful facts and stories, all recounted by an author who employs a brisk prose style that is every bit the match for the energetic seafaring Americans he covers. As a result, this is an effortless read: the reader advances through the text with the easy speed of one of the rakish clipper ships Dolin describes. The book's text is supplemented with dozens of illustrations which further enhance the reading experience.

Though the main historical narrative begins with the *Empress of China*, Dolin prepares readers for America's entry into the China trade by providing abundant background information. Readers learn about the ancient Silk Road, the early Sino-European trade, tea and silk production, the cultivation of opium and its introduction into China, the rise of the British East India Company, the role of Chinese goods in the American colonies, and the politicizing of Chinese tea during the Boston Tea Party. When readers reach the embarkation of the *Empress of China*, they are able to place this voyage in proper historical context. Americans, who had recently won their independence, saw the voyage as courageous, pioneering, and steeped in national significance. Yet what was exciting and new for Americans had long since become routine for Europeans. Indeed, when the *Empress* reached Macau, it plugged into an elaborate and complex trading system that China had used for more than a century to receive and process European trading vessels. The story of the *Empress*, however, turned out to be far from routine. By pure chance, its stay in Canton coincided with the most dramatic Sino-British conflict of the eighteenth century: the *Lady Hughes* affair. A British sailor on the deck of this vessel accidentally killed a Chinese civilian when he discharged his firearm during a salute. When the Chinese insisted on prosecuting the gunner, the British refused to hand him over to a criminal justice system they viewed as harsh and unfair. A tense stand-off ensued, and the Americans had to decide whether to support the British when doing so meant potentially damaging their nation's relationship with China in its infancy. They did exactly that, and were quite fortunate that the British and Chinese eventually reached a resolution.

After the *Empress* returned home, it was judged a modest success financially. Its solid but unspectacular profits were sufficient to convince others to enter the trade. Dolin sketches the careers of three men who dominated the first generation of China traders: John Jacob Astor, Elias Derby, and Stephen Girard. (There is little on Thomas Handasyd Perkins, perhaps the most ruthlessly successful of all China traders of this period.) As Dolin describes the early mercantile activities of these and other men, China itself fades into the background. As the book progresses into its middle chapters, we find ourselves less in Canton and more in locations like Hawaii, the Falkland Islands, and Nootka Sound in the Pacific Northwest.

Why does Dolin shift his narrative away from China? The answer has to do with a trade imbalance, one so basic yet so profoundly important that it shaped the entire Sino-American trade from the 1790s to the 1830s. Simply put, Americans coveted tea, but the Chinese did not reciprocate by demanding American goods.

Thus, American merchants either had to buy their tea cargoes using Spanish silver, which they were loath to do because silver was not easy to obtain, or scour the earth in search of goods that appealed to China's finicky tastes. Dolin tracks the voyages of American traders as they plunder Hawaii's pristine forests for sandalwood, club and skin thousands of unsuspecting seals on islands off South America, obtain sea slugs (*bêche-de-mer*) in places like Fiji, and barter for otter pelts with tribes in the Pacific Northwest. As these far-flung quests for exotic goods clearly demonstrate, the China trade unleashed vast reservoirs of American enterprise and dynamism. Unfortunately, these ventures also resulted in numerous violent and deadly clashes with indigenous peoples and ecological damage of disastrous proportions. "The scope of carnage was almost beyond belief," Dolin writes (107). Indeed, the incredible destruction inflicted upon entire plant and animal species, all within the space of a few decades, stands as one of the great tragedies spawned by America's China trade.

Avarice trumps morality elsewhere in Dolin's narrative. Partly to rectify the trade imbalance, many Americans followed the British model by engaging in the highly lucrative opium trade. Britain enjoyed a monopoly over Indian opium, but the Americans were able to exploit an alternative source for the narcotic: Turkey. Though the British opium trade dwarfed that of the Americans, the latter was still substantial, accounting for roughly 10 percent of China's total opium imports. The opium trade was illegal, of course, and the Chinese government did erect barriers to impede the inflow of the drug. However, except for the occasional crackdown, these measures proved to be mostly fruitless. The British and Americans smuggled in the contraband with little difficulty so long as they followed their own procedures and bribed Chinese officials.

Yet the status quo could not hold forever. Since the Chinese paid for opium with silver, the emperor began to notice in the 1830s that the precious metal was exiting the nation at an alarming rate. To stop the silver drain, he dispatched Lin Zexu to Canton in 1839 to put an end to opium trafficking. Dolin devotes substantial space to describing both Lin's stand-off with the foreign traders in Canton, a drama in which Americans played a role, and the ensuing Opium War, which did not involve Americans at all. Britain's victory resulted in the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), which opened four additional ports to British trade. To secure a comparable treaty, the United States sent Caleb Cushing to negotiate with the Chinese in 1843. After describing Cushing's largely successful mission, Dolin concludes the book with a discussion of two classes of ocean-going vessels, one that horrifies as much as the other inspires. The period after the Opium War witnessed the ascendancy of America's clipper ships, sleek merchant vessels that could transport large cargoes between China and the United States in record times. The same period also saw the advent of the coolie trade, in which American shippers participated in the coerced transportation of thousands of Chinese men to the New World, usually to sugar plantations in Cuba and Peru.

When America First Met China has an ambitious scope. Readers will debate

whether the broadness of the scope works to the book's advantage or detriment. If one were to divide the book's material into three categories, one might say it has a *center*, a *periphery*, and a *background*. The center refers to those sections which describe the direct interaction of Chinese and Americans in China (such as the buying and selling of goods in Canton); the periphery refers to American activity happening outside of China that bears some relation to the China trade (such as sandalwood purchases in Hawaii); the background refers to historical events either that took place before the *Empress of China* or that do not directly involve Americans (such as Dolin's detailed narration of the Sino-British Opium War). Though all categories are important, an author cannot explore all in great depth if he hopes to produce a book of manageable length rather than a massive tome. Readers will be divided as to whether Dolin made the right choices.

Some will undoubtedly find that Dolin emphasizes the periphery at the expense of the center. Pointing to the title (*When America First Met China*), such readers will argue that Americans do not *meet* Chinese people nearly enough in a book in which much of the action takes place in locales far from China. This view, to me, seems shortsighted. One cannot grasp the significance of the China trade without an understanding of the vast global trading networks that America's China trade spawned. Indeed, Dolin does a masterful job depicting these ventures. That being said, I do believe that Dolin might have cut out or condensed much of the background information. For example, readers might have done without a blow-by-blow account of the Opium War, the elimination of which would have created space for more genuine Sino-American encounters. Indeed, Dolin elects to devote only a single paragraph to America's missionaries who, he states, tried to convert souls "with little success" (183). However, to measure the influence of the missionaries by the number of conversions is to miss their true impact. Unlike traders, missionaries actually engaged the Chinese by learning Mandarin and Cantonese, by studying Chinese civilization and writing exhaustively about it, and by forcing contact with ordinary Chinese people. Even though their conversions were few, they laid the foundation for the much larger and successful missionary operations that would appear later in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, their publications allowed Americans to begin to understand the Chinese in the nineteenth century, planting the seeds for the growth of the field of Sinology in the twentieth century. The usual quibbling over omissions aside, this is a highly readable book that will entertain and inform readers on a topic rendered increasingly relevant by China's rise as a global economic power.

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