

CAROLINE FRANK, *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011), 257 pp.

According to data released by China and the U.S., by the end of 2015, the U.S. had become China's second largest trading partner, its largest export market, and the fourth largest source of imports to China, and China has exceeded Canada to become the largest trading partner of the U.S. for the first time. Maintaining a good China-U.S. economic relationship is vital for the well-development and prosperity of economies in both countries. Leaders in both countries are well aware of that. That's why U.S. President Barack Obama travelled to China for the first time on November 16, 2009, not long after assuming office. In the Museum of Science and Technology, Shanghai, President Obama held a town hall meeting with Chinese youth. In his remarks, Obama traced America's early relationship with China to 1784 when the commissioned ship *Empress of China* sailed to Canton, China.

In 1784, our founding father, George Washington<sup>1</sup>, commissioned the *Empress of China*, a ship that set sail for these shores so that it could pursue trade with the Qing Dynasty. Washington wanted to see the ship carry the flag around the globe, and to forge new ties with nations like China. This is a common American impulse—the desire to reach for new horizons, and to forge new partnerships that are mutually beneficial.<sup>2</sup>

By tracing America's economic relationship with China to the eighteenth century, Obama

<sup>1</sup> It may be assumed that Obama knew that George Washington became the first U.S. President five years later, in 1789. But what Obama probably wanted to convey by evoking the name of the founding father was that although the *Empress of China* was funded privately, e.g. by the rich Philadelphia financier Robert Morris, the enterprise was at the same time considered of significant national importance; see, for example, Eric Jay Dolin, *When America First Met China: An Exotic History of Tea, Drugs, and Money in the Age of Sail* (New York: Norton, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> "Remarks by President Barack Obama at Town Hall Meeting with Future Chinese Leaders." 16 Nov. 2009. *WhiteHouse.gov*. Web. 29 Aug. 2014.

wants to display to the Chinese people how the U.S. and China have been closely related in an economic sense since the very early period of America's foundation. However, he could have done an even better job in appealing to his Chinese audience had he known Caroline Frank's book *Objectifying China, Imagining America* published two years after his speech, which shows with much material evidence that America's commercial engagement with China could be dated back to a much earlier time—the 1690s.

When America won political independence from Britain in 1783, the economic situation was desperate as the young nation was cut off from the profitable trade with the West Indies by Britain. Therefore, American merchants began to look elsewhere for new trade—the Asian market—and began trade with China. The *Empress of China*, for example, achieved great commercial success. This is the conventional historical discourse. Frank, however, dates the story almost a century earlier to the late seventeenth century, proving with material evidence and occasionally with personal anecdotes and individual life stories that colonial Americans went to China, where a massive market was believed to exist, seeking material wealth. As Frank stresses throughout this book, the initiative and adventurous spirit of the colonial Americans should be acknowledged while studying U.S.-China relations.

Frank very explicitly informs her readers about the relationship between China and colonial America by examining the overwhelming presence of Chinese commodities, mainly chinaware and tea, in the American colonies. She points out that America established a relationship with China through economic trade before, not after, their independence from Britain. The large consumption of Chinese commodities such as porcelain, tea, and silk manifest colonial America's intense interest in China. However, it seems to be trivial, inaccurate, and somewhat subjective to merely use objects or the pictures and inventories of objects as the major avenue to re-explore colonial Americans' participation in the buying, selling, and owning of Chinese commodities.

During this early period, there was very little real cultural exchange despite much material contact between China and North America; Americans still perceived China as an imaginary landscape no different from other countries such as India and Japan. The first Americans who went to China were most-

ly merchants and missionaries whose interest in China centered mainly on commodities and religious conversion. The commodities were exchanged through the economic trades, while the original cultural meanings of these commodities were ignored and re-/misinterpreted through oriental imagination for commercial and/or social purpose. Frank solidifies this idea, for example, through her analysis of Gibbs's murals which "indicate that Americans [who were not only deeply influenced but also] fully participated in a Western perception of the East, built on centuries of remote contacts" (78).

A highlight of this book is the use of various illustrations collected from university libraries, arts centers, and personal courtesies from several European countries (namely Britain, France, Italy, and Germany) and America. These illustrations help readers to visualize the Chinese commodities in North America in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. The Chinese commodities examined by Frank can be considered as an objectified form of cultural capital, not for China but for America, and Frank points out the cultural and even political meanings behind them. During the trading process of these commodities (particularly the artistic pieces), various cultural meanings were accumulated; the independent economic engagement with China (particularly the tea trade) drove, to a certain extent, Anglo-America's desire for her political independence. In a word, the geopolitical relations among Britain, China, and America were closely tied to the trading of Chinese commodities even before America's independence.

The major goal of this book, according to Frank, is to explore how East Indies trades affected American commerce and the formation of the American state by revealing the overwhelming presence of Chinese commodities in early North America. These objects are examined from transnational and transcultural perspectives. For example, in chapter four, while acknowledging the Chinese-ness represented by the Chinese porcelains, Frank also draws our attention to the Orientalism prevailing among colonial Americans who projected new cultural and social meanings onto these commodities while consuming them. In this sense, the original cultural and social meanings of Chinese porcelain were both transplanted and transformed in this New World. It is difficult to generalize these meanings as the consumers were from dif-

ferent classes (including common people, social elites, and aristocrats) and used these commodities for different purposes. What's more, by examining tea trade and consumption in American colonies in chapter five, Frank points out the political significance of the trade and consumption of Chinese tea in pushing colonial Americans to resist the Britain imperial oppression and in driving their desire to win independence.

The title, *Objectifying China, Imagining America*, is perhaps too ambitious. I would rather say it is more about imagining China through buying, selling, and owning Chinese commodities in American colonies, as Frank's discourse throughout the book centers on how colonial Americans imagined China, and the East in general, through the Chinese objects they consumed. However, studying these objects does not necessarily mean that one can objectify the place where they are produced. What's more, in most of the cases, early Americans' imagination of China was dominated by Orientalism and preconceived notions based on stereotypes. Asians, the so called Orientals, exist as a unity in European American historical consciousness for a very long time. According to Edward Saïd, the early European conception of Asia and Asians as European's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other" and "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West)" as its opposition<sup>3</sup>. Culturally and ideologically speaking, early Americans still carried the baggage of the Old World, Europe, while arriving in the New World, America<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, their perception of China was not formed after they built direct relationship with China; it was formed centuries ago through the various discourses and imaginations of different generations of Europeans. Therefore, as Frank also occasionally points out, the Chinese porcelains and artistic commodities were colored with an Orientalist aesthetic while consumed by the colonial Americans.

While Frank focuses on the material aspects of Chinese commodities in colonial America, she also offers a cultural study of colonial Americans through exploring the

<sup>3</sup> Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle & London: U of Washington P, 1994) 20.

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meanings behind these material objects. Revealing early America's commercial ties with China and colonial Americans' cultural perception of China and Chinese people, Frank's book presents an excellent supplementary

source for the history of U.S.-China economic relations and transnational and transcultural American studies in general.

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