



Introduction: America's Early Adventure in China

A Story of Tea, Treaties, Opium, and Salvation

We begin with two scenes from two different times. The first takes us back to 1784. Samuel Shaw has recently arrived in Canton aboard the *Empress of China*, the first U.S. vessel to reach China. As supercargo, Shaw handles the business side of the venture—the buying and selling of goods and the payment of duties and port fees. Every day, a local Chinese merchant drops in on Shaw, points to the same article of merchandise, and offers to pay an amount Shaw considers low. “I treated him politely every time,” Shaw later writes, but “adhered to my first demand.” After cycling through this routine for several days, the man finally accepts the higher price, and Shaw happily sells him the article.

Though the transaction is complete, the man is not finished. Throughout the process, he has shown a strange interest not just in Shaw’s merchandise but in Shaw himself. Something about Shaw’s behavior mystifies him, and he is determined to get to the bottom of it. “You are not Englishman?” he finally asks. After Shaw confirms that he is not, the man’s face brightens. The British always treat him like an inferior, he says, whenever he approaches them to bargain. “Go to hell, you damned rascal,” they sometimes scold. The anomaly of a polite English speaker now explained, the man becomes chatty. He has never heard of the United States but nevertheless pays it a compliment: “China-man very much love your country.” Though these words flatter Shaw, the ones that follow carry an ominous tone. “All men come first time China very good gentlemen,” he observes. “I think two three times more Canton, you make all same Englishman too.”¹ Shaw has made a favorable first impression, but will he and the Americans who follow him to China come to act more and more like the British?

For our second scene, we vault forward eight decades to the year 1867, descending on a farewell banquet being held in Peking for a departing American. Anson Burlingame plans to head home after serving six years as

the American minister to China. Overflowing with charisma and bonhomie, Burlingame has endeared himself to European and Chinese colleagues alike. In particular, he has won over both Prince Gong, the leader of China's ruling faction, and the members of China's Foreign Affairs Office, the hosts of this gathering. As Burlingame says his good-byes, the Chinese blindsides him with an astounding offer. "Events of such importance have transpired within a few days," his flabbergasted wife informs their son, "that I take advantage of the Russian mail . . . to write you something about them." Her "astonished" husband has just been appointed "Ambassador from China to all the Treaty Powers!" The Chinese government rapidly confers on Burlingame an official title and rank and empowers him to represent China in Washington, Moscow, European capitals, and—most important of all—London. Days later, he and his delegation embark for San Francisco.²

What do these two scenes tell us? In the most practical sense, they set the temporal boundaries for this book, which begins with the *Empress of China* (1784) and ends with the Burlingame mission (1867–1870). More substantively, the scenes describe Sino-American relationships, which lie at the heart of this book. In writing it, I wanted to tell the story of early Americans in China, explaining how the two peoples first met in the eighteenth century and how that relationship matured in the nineteenth. In the first scene, Shaw and his Chinese counterpart both appear cautious, circumspect, and perhaps a little suspicious as each tries to ascertain the other's motives. Their guarded behavior is typical of the early stage of the Sino-American relationship, in which each side operated within a fog of ignorance with respect to the other's language, customs, and values. By the second scene, that fog has dispersed. Impressed by Burlingame's character and his knowledge of Chinese values and needs, these officials make a supreme gesture of trust: they place in his hands their hopes for an effective Western diplomacy.

The two scenes also illustrate the method I use to tell this story: this is a work of narrative history with a biographical focus. Though I address the larger historical, economic, and religious forces driving American activity in China, I refract these through the lens of individual lives. The chapter on the missionary movement, for example, not only discusses the theological currents carrying Protestantism into China; it also examines the dreams and anxieties of the volunteers themselves. What compelled these individuals to bid farewell to family, give up comfort and security, and accept a hard life in an alien culture? What strategies did they employ to win over the Chinese, and how did they maintain morale amid setbacks and failures?

Finally, the two scenes illuminate the chief findings of this book. Henry Luce, the son of American missionaries in China and the founder of *Time* and *Life* magazines, famously called the twentieth century the "American century." Today, consensus appears to be building to stamp the twenty-first the Chinese century. Neither, however, could claim superpower status in the nineteenth century, which indisputably belonged to the British. China

and the United States, in other words, forged their relationship during Britain's period of global dominance. Given this context, the connection between the two scenes becomes clear: the first implicitly poses a question that the second answers. Would Americans in China carve out a distinctive identity for themselves, the Shaw encounter asks, while operating in the shadow of the British goliath? The answer embedded in the Burlingame episode is an emphatic yes.

This conclusion was far from obvious. In fact, while reviewing existing books on Americans in China, I tentatively formed the contrary view. I should state here that these sources do not cover the American experience in China in its totality. Each one, rather, explores a single category of that experience—the commodity trade, opium smuggling, missionary activity, official diplomacy, or intellectual achievement. When I viewed the American experience in China in this way, broken down into separate components, I received the impression that Americans largely imitated the British, though always on a smaller scale and with a shoestring budget. Like Britain, the United States conducted trade with China, but Americans handled a lower volume of goods. Americans copied Britain's smuggling networks but imported far less opium into China. In matters of diplomacy, Americans merely piggybacked off the British, who handled all the heavy lifting by sending formidable fleets to China. Though American missionaries proselytized in China, they simply adopted the British evangelical model. Intellectually, Americans took a back seat to the British, who produced the authoritative works in the field later named "Sinology." The American presence in China, in sum, amounted to a lesser version of the British presence, or so my early thinking went.³

However, to write this book, I needed to consider the American experience in China *holistically* rather than in *itemized* fashion. When I stepped back to widen my field of vision, a different picture emerged, one in which the American and British experiences contrasted sharply. Most British subjects shipped out under the auspices of some larger entity—the East India Company, perhaps, or the Royal Navy. In China vast institutional and governmental structures dominated their lives. Small cogs within large machines, these men tended to behave according to clearly delineated protocols that left little room for improvisation. Americans faced the opposite set of circumstances in China. For much of the 1800s, the official U.S. presence was so small, poorly funded, and militarily weak as to verge on insignificant. The British sometimes scoffed at it. This absence of bureaucratic structure affected American behavior in two profound ways.

First, *it intensified the already-pronounced individualistic tendencies of Americans*. For white male citizens of the United States, the decades before the Civil War provided the high-water mark for individualism. In this period, Americans celebrated the Western pioneer and the Yankee trader, aspired to become Jacksonian self-made men, or heeded Ralph Waldo Emerson's stirring call for self-reliance. When transplanted in China, this

individualism became further amplified, unchecked as it was by much familial, institutional, or governmental oversight. The result: *hyperindividualism*. Americans imagined China as a field of potential, a vast canvas on which they could project gaudy visions of self-actualization. To open China to the West, to get rich, to save millions of souls, to acquire total knowledge of China, to assemble vast Chinese collections, to introduce modern technology to China, to introduce Chinese culture to Americans, to reinvent Sino-Western relations, to command a Chinese army—these were some of the fantastic dreams spun by Americans in China.

If the American Dream found expression in China, so too did its dark side. Driven by class aspirations, many traders turned to opium smuggling as a means to hasten their rise. Like the protagonists in novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald or Theodore Dreiser, these men willingly traded morality for quick wealth. Other Americans were led astray by a different sort of dream. Harboring the grand ambition to change China in a profound way, some individuals believed so much in their own importance as to ultimately succumb to megalomania. When their elaborate plans collapsed around them (as they almost invariably did), they typically descended into states of depression. Fortunately, the failure of a China dream did not always lead to personal ruin. Some recovered, set realistic expectations for themselves, and enjoyed meaningful careers in China.

Second, *the lack of official structure forced Americans to adopt pragmatism in their dealings with the Chinese*. Unlike the British, American expatriates could not depend on protection from their government. Therefore, to achieve a favorable result in China, an American needed to adjust his behavior in a way that a British expatriate did not. The latter, though encumbered by bureaucratic structure, benefited from the respect and fear his nationality commanded; he could prosecute his business with the reassuring knowledge that the greatest power in Asia backed his activities. If he could make demands of the Chinese, an American, in contrast, had to strike compromises with them, form partnerships with them, and approach problems with flexibility rather than dogma. However, while befriending the Chinese, Americans had to remain conscious of the British. Since all Western activity in China—missionary work, the commodity trade, or opium smuggling—took place under Britain's protective shield, Americans could not afford to provoke the British. This was difficult terrain to negotiate.

While acting as individuals, Americans *when taken collectively* constituted a new force in China, one that placed stress on British and Chinese systems. American traders stunned the British East India Company by transporting cargoes faster and more efficiently than the mercantile colossus could. Americans also competed effectively in opium trafficking; indeed, when the Chinese cracked down on smuggling in 1839, they were reacting to both British and American contraband. As for American missionaries, they largely adopted the English model; however, they injected so much evangelical fervor into that model as to make it their own. It is also

safe to assume that the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), a massive civil war that cost roughly twenty million Chinese their lives, either would not have happened or would not have assumed its quasi-Christian form without the involvement of American missionaries. Finally, in the area of diplomacy, two American officials, Caleb Cushing (who arrived in 1844) and Anson Burlingame (who arrived in 1861), brought substantial change to Sino-Western relations. Crucially, they did so not by following their government's instructions but by acting on their individual initiative.

This book proceeds mostly chronologically, beginning with three chapters on American merchants. Chapter 1 offers an account of the *Empress of China* (1784), the first American vessel to reach China. Though the voyage advanced the nation's interests, it was nevertheless a private enterprise organized by men who dreamed of tapping the unrealized potential of a trade with China. A modest commercial success, the voyage sparked a debate within the merchant community: should the United States follow Europe's model by founding an East India Company to control its Asian trade? When the United States opted to forgo that model, China was left open as a field of competition. A magnet for ambitious men, the China trade grew robust over the ensuing four decades, despite strict Chinese regulations that included confining foreigners to a small area in Canton. Chapter 2 approaches the China trade from a microeconomic perspective, examining the company built by Thomas Perkins, a Boston merchant who achieved dominance in this laissez-faire trading environment by imposing a system over his commercial activity. Shifting to a macroeconomic lens, Chapter 3 describes the collective resourcefulness of American traders as they tried to offset the trade imbalance caused by America's passion for tea and China's apathy for American goods.

Chapter 4 considers the missionaries who began arriving in Canton in 1830. Of all Americans, missionaries perhaps brought the most ambitious dream: they believed that their efforts to convert the Chinese would help bring about the Second Coming. However, being limited to Canton, missionaries struggled to reconcile the vastness of their holy objective with the smallness of their space. Unable to engage in direct evangelism, they instead launched projects in writing, translating, science, medicine, and education, discovering in the process talents they did not previously know they had. Since their home institutions wanted to see conversions, missionaries often pursued these interests against their sponsors' express wishes. However, as this chapter shows, it was in these projects, not in proselytizing, that missionaries achieved lasting influence.

Chapter 5 discusses the potent role that opium played in the dreams of Americans, both those who smuggled it and those who opposed its importation. The former had entered the China trade aspiring to become self-made men; they saw easy profits from opium sales as accelerating their progress toward this goal. Though the latter had also come to China for the purpose of self-making, they envisioned for themselves not just an

economic rise but a *moral ascendancy*. By taking a vocal stand against the opium trade, they hoped to establish their moral superiority to their peers. This chapter also examines Americans' involvement in China's dramatic attempt to crush the opium trade in 1839, the event that prompted a determined military response from Britain.

Britain's victory in the First Opium War roused Washington into action. As Chapter 6 explains, the United States sent Caleb Cushing to China to secure the same rights and privileges as contained in Britain's Treaty of Nanjing, such as access to four new ports. Though Cushing had planned only to execute his government's instructions and no more, a series of setbacks forced him to improvise in China. Indeed, he returned home with a treaty that exceeded his government's expectations, securing from China concessions of far-ranging significance. Chapter 7 considers the great changes wrought by the ending of the Canton confinement. Specifically, this chapter shows how the opening of the treaty ports triggered the rapid dispersal of people, goods, capital, and ideas previously concentrated in Canton.

On one occasion, the transmission of Christian theology contributed to massive upheaval in China. As Chapter 8 explains, individual Americans played a large role in sparking, nurturing, and finally suppressing the Taiping Rebellion and did so by acting contrary to the wishes of their government and home institutions. Chapter 9 discusses the amazing diplomatic career of Anson Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln's minister to China. Not backed by any American military presence, Burlingame's predecessors had all complained of the powerlessness of their post. Undeterred, Burlingame dreamed of big things: he aspired to reinvent Sino-Western relations by replacing gunboat diplomacy with his own model based on cooperation. In 1867 the Chinese government, believing that Burlingame both understood and cared deeply about China, took a remarkable leap of faith by entrusting its Western diplomacy to his capable hands.

Our story begins in 1784 with a gamble of a different sort. The American Revolution having just come to an end, the officers and crew of the *Empress of China* are readying their vessel for departure. For them, China looms as terra incognita. For introduction, Congress has just drafted an official letter that the captain is to carry to Canton. Upon arrival, he is to present the letter to Chinese authorities, who are unaware that a country named "United States of America" even exists.