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IN SEARCH OF DRAGONS TO TRADE WITH:

THE IMAGE OF THE CHINA MARKET

IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE, 1784-1900

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### **Introduction: The invention of a fictional marketplace**

Standing before the United States House of Representatives on July 4, 1821, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams proclaimed, “Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will [America’s] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.”<sup>1</sup> Adams asserted that the United States would not conjure up foreign enemies that would warrant its expansion, but did the nation invent a fictional marketplace that could serve that purpose instead? From its inception in 1784 through the end of the nineteenth century, the United States’ relationship with China was characterized by a fundamental discrepancy between the way in which the American political elite discuss China and the nation’s substantive economic and political interest there. How is it that a lofty and promising rhetoric about China persists throughout the nineteenth century, even as the proportion of Chinese trade declines, and as the political environment in East Asia ebbs and flows? To rephrase Adams’ proposition, how and why did the United States talk about going abroad in search of dragons to trade with, and what effect did this have on the course of American foreign relations?

Historians have long acknowledged the limited and diminishing level of China’s economic significance to the United States in the nineteenth century; however they have approached the Sino-American relationship in different ways, and many have ignored the issue altogether. Tyler Dennett, whose landmark *Americans in Eastern Asia* is still the best introductory study, explains, “After 1840 American policy in Asia was always directed with an eye to the future – to the day when Americans would supply the seemingly limitless markets of

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<sup>1</sup>. John Quincy Adams, “Address of July 4, 1821” in *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire: Letters, Papers and Speeches*, ed. Walter LaFeber (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 45.

the East.”<sup>2</sup> What Dennett and others have failed to note is that while American *policy* might not have always been “directed with an eye to the future,” the *rhetoric* of many of its most important political actors was. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, when American political involvement in the Pacific had grown to new heights, the economic reality remained stark. Whitney Griswold reports that in 1898 U.S. trade with China comprised only two percent of its total foreign trade, and that “Despite the enthusiasm of the business groups engendered by Dewey’s victory, the fundamental fact remained that China was a remote and relatively insignificant province of American economic enterprise.”<sup>3</sup> This was not just a phenomenon of the late nineteenth century, but also a consistent pattern that held throughout the century, with the 1890s as the dramatic climax where the United States began to match its actions with its overblown rhetoric.

While the Old China Trade began as a profitable and alluring endeavor for those brave enough to attempt it, it was wildly unpredictable and began its relative decline in the first half of the nineteenth century. Trade data are incomplete, but it appears that total trade with Asia in the 1780s through the early 1800s never composed more than fifteen percent of total U.S. foreign trade. Changes in textile technology, better investment opportunities in the United States, and a retreat from many of its early protections pushed the total closer to five percent after the 1820s.<sup>4</sup> John K. Fairbank calculates that throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century “the American trade with China might take no more than two to four percent of total American trade,” adding in jest, “but never mind, it was surely a great *potential* market.”<sup>5</sup> This leads

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<sup>2</sup>. Tyler Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia: A Critical Study of United States’ Policy in the Far East in the Nineteenth Century* (1922; repr., New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 74.

<sup>3</sup>. A. Whitney Griswold, *The Far Eastern Policy of the United States* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938), 24.

<sup>4</sup>. Donald Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific: Private Interests and Public Policies, 1784-1899* (Westport: Praeger, 1995), 21.

<sup>5</sup>. John K. Fairbank, “Introduction,” in *America’s China Trade in Historical Perspective: The Chinese and American Performance*, eds. Ernest R. May and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 2.

Fairbank to conclude “that the bouts of American enthusiasm for trade and investment in China originated in the American imagination, in a mind-set that believed in economic expansion, more than in concrete concerns and vested interests of business and industry.”<sup>6</sup> The China that existed in American word and thought was certainly divorced from that which existed in reality, but how can this be explained? Was it, as Fairbank suggests, an enduring belief in economic expansion that fuelled the American imagination? Historians have approached this dilemma from two overlapping angles, which illuminate both the role of deterministic characteristics and interest-based actors in shaping relations with China.

One of the oldest and most persistent strands of scholarship seeks to attribute the course of Sino-American relations to recurring elemental themes in American history. These variants of determinism are expressed as both economic and cultural characteristics. Economic determinism has long been a popular interpretation of the American relationship with China. Dennett described the “tap-root” of American policy as a “demand for most-favored-nation treatment,” arising out of the principles of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>7</sup> However, in the late 1950s, the New Left began to reinterpret much of the history of the previous century. For some historians, this meant spinning determinism in a different light. This school of historians rethought US foreign relations in a way that ascribed many of its actions to its economic system and social structure. As they tell it, this tendency began with the founders, was sustained by succeeding generations of politicians and businessmen, and consistently found resonance in the American public. Williams explained it as the “dogmatic belief, that America’s *domestic* well-being depends upon such sustained, ever-increasing overseas economic expansion.”<sup>8</sup> For Williams, U.S. foreign relations can be explained as a struggle between agricultural and industrial actors

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<sup>6</sup>. Fairbank, “Introduction,” 7.

<sup>7</sup>. Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, vii.

<sup>8</sup>. William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1972), 15.

for control of the uniquely American “tradition of expansion” that tied notions of freedom to market expansion.<sup>9</sup> Thomas McCormick has also explored how this disposition towards expansion, when presented with the “overproduction thesis” of the 1890s, led the United States to dramatically increase its involvement in the Pacific.<sup>10</sup> For many New Left historians, the US relationship with China was defined by the indelible American preference for marketplace expansion.

A concurrent idea took root around the same time that sought to explain the US relationship with China as the product of a fundamental cultural disposition, inherited from America’s European colonizers. In 1959 William Appleman Williams posited that U.S. foreign policy was driven by three sometimes overlapping perceptions: “the warm, generous, humanitarian impulse to help other people solve their problems,” the “principle of self-determination applied at the international level,” and the notion “that other people cannot *really* solve their problems and improve their lives unless they go about it in the same way as the United States.”<sup>11</sup> Bradford Perkins calls it the national “prism.”<sup>12</sup> This emphasis on a unique American character, applicable not just to individuals, but to the nation as a whole, has been very influential in the study of the relationship with China.

Akira Iriye was one of the first historians to fully explore the image of China in America as a determinant of the Sino-American relationship. As Iriye puts it, “Most Americans may never have seen an Asian, much less visited Asia, but they had an image of Asia because they

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<sup>9</sup>. William A. Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Random House, 1969), 49-65.

<sup>10</sup>. Thomas McCormick, *China Market: America’s Quest for Informal Empire 1893-1901* (1967; repr., Chicago: Elephant Paperback, 1990), 37.

<sup>11</sup>. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 13.

<sup>12</sup>. Bradford Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865*, vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 12.

had an image of America.”<sup>13</sup> An image of despotic Asia relative to the new American nation inculcated a sense of American mission, whereby America could help China and the East “regain its ancient vigor and join the march of humanity.”<sup>14</sup> Thus far, most analyses of nineteenth century American rhetoric about China have focused on the use of racial imagery by anti-immigrant groups and politicians. Stuart Miller and Warren Cohen have measured the impact of racism in shaping public opinion about China, with special attention paid to the immigration of the late nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Michael Hunt has considered the impact of racism on both sides of the Pacific in shaping the “Special Relationship” between the Americans and Chinese: one that is marked by outward friendship and tacit animosity.<sup>16</sup> More recently historians have explored how China entered into the American intellectual and commercial life through its ancient writings and extensively used consumer products.<sup>17</sup> These historians have established a necessary cultural component to the deterministic view of Sino-American relations.

Conversely, historians have also interpreted the US relationship with China as the product of the persistent and self-interested actions of commercial, religious, and governmental actors. According to this approach, the United States acts in certain ways because of the disproportionate influence of individuals, such as merchants and business elites. Norman Graebner was one of the first to exemplify this line of thought, and he posited that access to

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<sup>13</sup>. Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 7.

<sup>14</sup>. Iriye, *Across the Pacific*, 6.

<sup>15</sup>. Stuart C. Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); , Warren I. Cohen, “American Perceptions of China, 1789-1911,” in *China in the American Political Imagination*, ed. Carola McGiffert. Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2003, 25-30.

<sup>16</sup>. Michael H. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>17</sup>. Jonathan Goldstein, Jerry Israel, and Hilary Conroy, eds., *America Views China: American Images of China Then and Now* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1991); Margaret C.S. Christman, *Adventurous Pursuits: Americans and the China Trade, 1784-1844*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984); A. Owen Aldridge, *The Dragon and the Eagle: The Presence of China in the American Enlightenment* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993).

Chinese markets, not a vague idea of Manifest destiny, guided U.S. continental expansionism.

Graebner argues:

The mere urge to expand or even the acceptance of a destiny to occupy new areas on the continent does not create specific geographical objectives ... It was not by accident that the United States spread as a broad belt across the continent ... It was rather through clearly conceived policies relentlessly pursued that the United States achieved its empire on the Pacific.<sup>18</sup>

Other historians have also tried to explain the course of U.S.-China relations as the product of interested actors. Hunt has paired his analysis of the racial dynamic with an account of the “rise of the open door constituency,” composed of a triumvirate of merchants, missionaries, and diplomats.<sup>19</sup> Donald Johnson, recognizing the “element of fantasy” in US policy towards China, set out to determine “what interests ... directed U.S. policies toward the Pacific Basin,” and he determined that while the business interests constantly shifted, public figures frequently exaggerated the reality about China on their behalf.<sup>20</sup> Marilyn B. Young has examined how those interested in the China trade carefully used rhetoric to shape perceptions of reality during the late 1890s.<sup>21</sup>

Some historians combine this analysis with the notion of economic and cultural determinism, with businessmen, missionaries, and diplomats as the arbiters of the most aggressive American characteristics. Williams describes the forceful lobbying of the metropolitan and agricultural leaders in the late nineteenth century, and Hunt juxtaposes the lobbying of business elites against the racial tensions among the general public, magnifying the undemocratic nature of U.S. foreign policy making.<sup>22</sup> Others, such as Fairbank, Cohen, and

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<sup>18</sup>. Norman Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (1955, repr., Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 1983), 228.

<sup>19</sup>. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*, 5.

<sup>20</sup>. Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific*, 166.

<sup>21</sup>. Marilyn B. Young, *The Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy 1895-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

<sup>22</sup>. Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire*, 442-444; Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*.

Macabe Keliher interpret the actions of individuals as a response to British policy and actions in China, highlighting a theme of Americans following Anglo leadership.<sup>23</sup> If both strands of the historiography are valid, and the relationship with China was both a product of individual actors and a part of a broader pattern of American behavior, in which direction does the historiography of the China trade proceed?

The purpose of this paper will be to examine the rhetoric about the China trade in particular and to highlight how it was able to invent the idea of an American interest in China. While historians have paid acknowledgement to the gap between the rhetoric and reality about China, they have as of yet agreed upon an explanation for its persistence. Previous scholarship has looked at official interactions between the two countries, the vague images that Americans and Chinese had of each other, and in some cases, the ways in which rhetoric framed particular policy objectives. While the imagery about China and the trade with China often overlap, the trade rhetoric survives and adapts despite changes in opinion about China itself. Historians have not yet charted the full development of the image of the China trade throughout the nineteenth century American political discourse, and this paper will attempt to fill that gap.

Rhetorical imagery can be just as illuminative as government policies or social interactions for understanding the motivations of those involved in shaping the U.S. relationship with China. Interested actors certainly guided the outcome of government policies, and enduring patterns of American involvement are clearly evident throughout the relationship. However, the assemblage of the relatively consistent rhetorical backdrop is another matter that lies somewhere in between. This is especially true when one considers that the rhetoric managed to survive the

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<sup>23</sup>. John K. Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Macabe Keliher, "Anglo-American Rivalry and the Origins of U.S. China Policy," in *Diplomatic History* 31 no. 2 (April 2007): 227-257, ProQuest Research Library, <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed November 28, 2007).



turbulent market conditions in China and the United States, as well as the relative decline of the China trade's importance throughout the century. The social scientist Max Weber once wrote, “‘Interests (material and moral), not ideas, dominate directly the actions of men. Yet the ‘images of the world’ created by these ideas have very often served as switches determining the tracks on which the dynamism of interests kept action going.’”<sup>24</sup> The China trade discourse helped to build a framework within which objectives were identified, policies were pursued, and patterns of behavior were justified and reinforced. Also, rhetoric is especially instructive because of the muddled consciousness involved in its creation. A policy is enacted in order to achieve a desired outcome, and its formulation is mostly deliberate. However, the rhetoric and discourse from this period were both deliberate and instinctive; they sought to shape opinions, but they also exhibit the author's perception of reality. Thus, an examination of rhetoric can be especially useful in the historian's quest to fully understand the course of the Sino-American relationship.

During the late eighteenth century, and throughout the nineteenth century, the rhetoric and discourse advanced by many American political elites consistently employed the themes of profit, providence, and power as a means to advance their broader strategic concerns and interests. These actors include politicians, newspaper editors, China traders, and other opinion-shapers. They represent both sides of the political divide and all regions of the country. In many cases they were countered by skepticism or racially motivated opposition; however China's distance from the United States and its exotic image in the minds of many usually prevented countervailing rhetoric from hijacking control of the discussion. The enduring success and persistence of the image of the China trade can be explained by its usefulness in constructing the broader national priorities of legitimacy, continental expansion, and Open Door market access.

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<sup>24</sup>. Marianne Weber, *Max Weber* (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1926) 347-8, quoted in Hans. J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (1949, repr., New York: Knopf, 1963), 9.

These priorities were not just buttressed by the image of the China trade; they also gave shape to its rhetoric and motivated the discourse of the political actors in this period.

### **The Imperial Vocabulary**

The themes of profit, providence, and power are consistently evident from the beginnings of the U.S. trade with China in 1784 through the issuance of the Open Door notes in 1899 and 1900. These themes are interconnected, and often overlap and reinforce one another, making separation difficult at times. The dialogue within each thematic element exhibits a considerable degree of fantasy in its ebullient optimism and extravagant portrayals of reality. Those who spoke of China were afforded such wide latitude with the truth partially because of stereotypes that had been inherited from Europe, and partially because China was so distant from most Americans' everyday concerns. Most Americans encountered China in the form of tea or chinoiserie porcelain. Not until Chinese immigrants began arriving in the middle of the nineteenth century did Americans literally have to face the consequences of their country's involvement there. However, this analysis will not attempt to chronicle the American image of China or the Chinese, but rather, America's image of the China trade, and how it contributed to and was sustained by contemporary strategic paradigms. Also, the views expressed in the rhetoric represent the opinions and beliefs of a political class of opinion-shapers and interested actors. Their thoughts and opinions filtered into popular perception via newspapers and speeches, but they do not represent the way in which the average citizen thought about China. The rhetoric of the political class contributed to public perceptions and helped to reinforce broader national themes, but its real importance lies in creation of a context that guided decision makers' thoughts and actions towards China.

Profit is the most consistent and the most prevalent theme throughout the discourse on the China trade. Despite the trade's aggregate national reality, it was immensely profitable for those few firms that could successfully navigate its myriad intricacies. The influence of Chinese style on European and American decorative arts, and the emergence of lush manors known as "Chinese Cottage" and "China's Retreat," indicate the exotic social appeal of the China trade.<sup>25</sup> Politicians were especially interested in the national value of the trade, and frequently used terms such as "enterprises," "commerce," "advantages," "manufactures," and "prosperity" to depict its value. In the mid nineteenth century many of them developed a love for the use of numbers, listing off the number of pounds of cotton that could be sold or the number of days it would take to get to Canton from San Francisco rather than New York. In each of the three periods to be examined, profit was at the center of the discussion about China.

The theme of providence in the China trade rhetoric is as old as the European settlement of North America. Columbus sailed west in search of "Cathay" and the "East Indies," both of which were synonymous with Asian trade in general, of which the China trade at Canton was a crucial part.<sup>26</sup> Finding a passage to Asia was inherent in the birth of the British American colonies as well, evident in the instructions to the first settlers of Virginia.<sup>27</sup> The notion that America was destined to engage China and the East is persistent throughout the period, but its form and direction changes. Early Americans used terms such as "Providence" and "destiny" to describe their early engagement with China. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century the dialogue included terms such as "settlement," "civilization," "humanity," "race," and

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<sup>25</sup>. Quoted in Jonathan Goldstein, "Cantonese Artifacts, Chinoiserie, and Early American Idealization of China," in *America Views China*, 43-53.

<sup>26</sup>. Kenneth S. Latourette, *The History of Early Relations between the United States and China, 1784-1844* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917), 10; Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, 3.

<sup>27</sup>. Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific*, 1.

“progress.” While profit was consistently a desirable aim, the invocation of America destiny shifted to suit the needs and views of those who made the rhetoric.

The dialogue is also replete with a preoccupation with the balance of power, and any discussion of China among politicians and diplomats necessarily includes this theme. Whether discussing the balance of trade, the acquisition of new territory, or market access in China, Britain was an especially useful scapegoat. The obsession with the balance of trade persisted throughout this time period, and was a reflection of the British mercantilist views that were inherited by many early American statesmen. Also, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century American merchants in China were at the mercy of the British, who conducted the majority of the trade and had the most influence on the Chinese. Thus, the opinion shapers often relied on terms such as, “grandeur,” “advantages,” “position,” “neutrality,” and “footing” to emphasize the national interest in the China trade and its effect on the balance of power with European powers, especially Britain.

### **The China trade as an Opportunity for Legitimacy: 1784 – 1814**

When the *Empress of China* set sail from New York on February 22, 1784, it carried not only the potential of tremendous profits for its owners, but also the hope of establishing a trade that would make the United States a legitimate and respectable nation, and the peer of Britain, France, and all the other great European powers. The prospect of establishing an active trade with China fed into the new nation’s hunger for legitimacy on the world stage, and this fostered the optimistic rhetoric and dialogue amongst the nation’s early leaders. Foster R. Dulles explains that the first voyages to Canton carried a “special vogue” which “helped to give to the United States a new confidence in its destiny.”<sup>28</sup> The congressional debates, correspondence, and newspapers of the period reveal that early American statesmen’s discussions about China are

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<sup>28</sup>. Foster R. Dulles, *The Old China Trade* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1930), 4, 94.

laced with the familiar themes of profit, providence, and power. Their dialogue and rhetoric show that their aims in establishing the China trade had as much to do with the nation's broader challenge of attaining legitimacy as it did with the actualities of the trade. China was a useful image and symbol that spoke directly to the national desire for profit, the sense of an American Mission, and the possibility of establishing the United States as a great power.

The dire challenges of the 1780s and the difficulties of establishing the new federal government, both at home and in foreign diplomatic circles, provide a useful lens through which to view the political discourse of the period. The most consistent dilemma of foreign affairs for the Founders in the years after they had secured Independence from Britain was to make the United States a legitimate power. Thomas Jefferson described this feeling of American inferiority while serving as minister to France, writing, "Be assured we are the lowest and most obscure of the whole diplomatic tribe."<sup>29</sup> Much of this weakness was attributed to the failure of the Articles of Confederation to empower the national government to regulate trade. If the United States could not bargain with other nations, enforce trade agreements on its own individual states, or protect itself with a viable army or navy, how was it to be taken seriously? Bradford Perkins explains that among the motivations for the Constitutional Convention of 1787, "a good case can be made for the primacy of concerns over American weakness in the world."<sup>30</sup>

In 1789, armed with the new apparatus of governance and diplomacy outlined in the Constitution, American politicians immediately turned their attention to the issue of international commerce. The first tariff act of 1789, signed by President Washington on the fourth of July after heated debate, provided protections for a number of American-carried products, among

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<sup>29</sup>. Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, November 11, 1784, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 7: 512.

<sup>30</sup>. Bradford Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire*, 58.

them Chinese tea.<sup>31</sup> Amidst the furious political arguments of the 1790s and the war between Britain and France, foreign commerce became the chief distraction and a way to advance the interests of the nation without becoming embroiled in Europe's contests. Neutral commerce was not only a means to wealth or a *modus operandi*, but also America's brand in the global arena. Washington explained in his Farewell Address, "Our Commercial policy should hold an equal and impartial hand: neither seeking nor granting exclusive favours or preferences; consulting the natural course of things; diffusing and deversifying by gentle means the streams of Commerce, but forcing nothing."<sup>32</sup> This was part of his broader aim to, "endeavour to gain time to our country to settle and mature its yet recent institutions," so that the United States might soon have "command of its own fortunes."<sup>33</sup> Washington's comments not only foreshadow the Open Door Notes one hundred years later; they indicate the degree to which early Americans saw commerce abroad as an avenue towards legitimacy and strength.

While the vast majority of American trade remained with Europe, the American merchants took advantage of the European war and increased their activity in China.<sup>34</sup> Trade statistics show that American ships carried just over 743,000 pounds of tea in 1791, but this increased to nearly 2.8 million pounds in 1796 and to 9.8 million pounds by 1806.<sup>35</sup> The only interruptions came from Jefferson's embargo in 1807 and from the War of 1812, but commerce recovered quickly in both cases.<sup>36</sup> The development of trading firms whose livelihood depended on the trade engendered a material interest in China, and these traders undoubtedly had voices in

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<sup>31</sup>. Samuel F. Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965), 90; Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, 8.

<sup>32</sup>. George Washington, "Farewell Address," *George Washington: Writings*, ed. John Rhodehamel (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 975.

<sup>33</sup>. Washington, "Farewell Address," 977.

<sup>34</sup>. Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific*, 18.

<sup>35</sup>. Dulles, *The Old China Trade*, 210.

<sup>36</sup>. Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific*, 19.

Congress to fight for their interests with regards to its policies. However, the lofty rhetoric in this early period demonstrates the national character of the China trade, and suggests that it meant more than the number of tea crates carried or the percentage of return on investment. As the trade strengthened, it reinforced the image Washington had put forth of a neutral America conducting commerce unhindered by cumbersome political alliances, and helped to give the United States the legitimacy it sought so that it could one day have “command of its own fortunes.”<sup>37</sup>

Profit was at the heart of the earliest rhetoric about China, and for good reason. The American economy was in shambles, and trade that the colonies had previously accessed via Britain was denied to the new nation. Americans were forced into using credit to pay for imports from Britain, and they found their former French and Spanish allies unwilling to abandon their own mercantile policies, thus excluding many American merchants from their markets.<sup>38</sup> Tyler Dennett explains, “The first Americans went to Asia because they had to go – they had to go everywhere.”<sup>39</sup> The dire economic need made the China trade an important national endeavor, if only to create the appearance that the United States could trade on a global scale. John Adams would have agreed with Dennett. In 1785 he wrote to John Jay from London, advocating:

There is no better advice to be given to the merchants of the United States than to push their commerce to the East Indies as fast and as far as it will go.

If information from persons who ought to know may be depended upon the tobacco and peltries, as well as the ginseng of the United States, are proper articles for the China market, and have been found to answer very well; and many other of our commodities may be found in demand there.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>. Washington, “Farewell Address,” 977.

<sup>38</sup>. Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific*, 6-7.

<sup>39</sup>. Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, 6.

<sup>40</sup>. John Adams to John Jay, November 11, 1785, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 8: 343.

Adams's concern for the export potential of the Chinese market highlights the transmission of the mercantile philosophy from Great Britain to the United States. He does not discuss the vast supply of Chinese tea that could be imported, which was where much of the real volume of the early China trade lay, but instead focused on the potential for exports to China. William Maclay observed the value of the tea trade, and suggested that China might serve as a market to replace Britain. In his journal of the proceedings of the tariff debate, he reported, "It had been said the British would take raw materials from us and give us teas. I was well informed that the Chinese took many articles from us, and some that no other people would take."<sup>41</sup> In order to be a great power, the United States would have to become an exporting country, and as far as Adams and Maclay were concerned, China was a place to develop such a market.

The beginnings of the China trade looked promising from a macro perspective, as well as from the perspective of the individual merchants who wished to trade in it. The prospect of importing luxury goods such as ornate porcelain and exotic teas stimulated the imaginations of merchants and spendthrift consumers.<sup>42</sup> That Americans might have access to the luxurious wares previously reserved for the European upper classes would have been a symbol of American legitimacy. Upon hearing that the United States and Britain were close to a peace settlement in 1783, the merchant Matthew Ridley of Baltimore wrote to his friends, "There is now no doubt but a good voyage might be made to China, but to do it to advantage will require at least 1,200,000 Livres..."<sup>43</sup> John Ledyard, having impressed Robert Morris with his travels on Captain Cook's final voyage, was bursting with excitement when Morris chose him to lead a

<sup>41</sup>. William Maclay, *Journal of William Maclay, United States Senator from Pennsylvania, 1789-1791*, ed. Edgar S. Maclay, (New York: D.A. Appleton and Company, 1890), 60-61, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(mj0017\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field(DOCID+@lit(mj0017))) (accessed February 24, 2008).

<sup>42</sup>. Goldstein, *Philadelphia and the China Trade 1682 – 1846* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), 32-33.

<sup>43</sup>. Matthew Ridley to correspondents in France, March 18, 1783, John Holker Papers, 177/1822, 41/4500F, microfilm reel 10, fols. 3846-3850, Library of Congress, Washington, DC quoted in Philip C. Smith, *The Empress of China* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Maritime Museum, 1984), 14.



voyage to the Northwest Coast for furs, and then across the Pacific to China.<sup>44</sup> He wrote to one of his friends, “I take the Lead of the greatest Commercial Enterprize ever embarked on in this country.”<sup>45</sup> These merchants had little knowledge of the actual market conditions in China, but their enthusiasm for its prospects is indisputable. In 1785 the Confederation Congress delegate William Grayson wrote to James Madison to report the excitement of the merchant community over the recent voyage to China. He recounted that the *Empress of China* was “laden with the commodities of that country.” Furthermore, “Most of the American merchants here are of the opinion that this commerce can be carried on, on not only to supply our own wants but to smuggle a very considerable quantity to the West Indies. I could heartily wish to see the merchants of our state engage in the business.”<sup>46</sup> The merchant ambitions that Grayson described, to become global carriers of goods, would have sounded profitable and pleasing to some Americans who envisioned their country as a trading nation. To others, a society of merchants would undermine the social fabric and pose a danger to the infant republic.

The Founders mostly agreed on the nation’s need for export markets, but they had different visions of what kind of supplier the United States would be. William Appleman Williams has characterized this as the dilemma of “the counting house versus the farm.”<sup>47</sup> Jefferson admitted, “Our people have a decided taste for navigation and commerce. They take this from their mother country.”<sup>48</sup> However, his vision of US trade was different. It saw manufacturing and commercial endeavors as secondary to establishing an agrarian society that would be the breadbasket to the world. Jefferson wrote, “Our numbers should so increase as that

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<sup>44</sup>. Smith, *The Empress of China*, 18.

<sup>45</sup>. John Ledyard to Isaac Ledyard, ca. July 1783, *The Papers of Robert Morris*, Elizabeth M. Nuxoll and Mary A. Gallagher, eds. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 8:866.

<sup>46</sup>. William Grayson to James Madison, May 28, 1785, *The Papers of James Madison*, Robert A. Rutland and William M.E. Rachal, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 8:284-285.

<sup>47</sup>. Williams, ed., *The Shaping of American Diplomacy* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1956), 45.

<sup>48</sup>. Jefferson to G.K. van Hogendorp, October 13, 1785, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 8:633.

our produce would overstock the markets of those nations who should come to seek it,” and that eventually surplus labor would be diverted to manufacturing and navigation.<sup>49</sup> Jeffersonians were not opposed to expansion, only theirs was to proceed over land rather than across oceans. While the Jeffersonian view might not have been as enthusiastic about the pursuit of the China trade, the prospect of obtaining markets for produce abroad, particularly for tobacco, as Adams mentioned, would have been enticing. As Bradford Perkins puts it, “The profits were too great to abandon,” and eventually, “self-interest” and “virtuous republicanism” would be united in the search for “a steady increase in exports.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, seeking profit in China was not the exclusive purview of Northeastern merchants. The difficult circumstances of the late eighteenth century and the potential for profit made it a practical concern for the “counting house” and the “farm” alike.<sup>51</sup>

If the China trade held such great potential for profit, and the opening of the trade was so crucial for establishing the credibility of the new nation, what role would the government play in encouraging that profit? National protection of the China trade offered legislators a way to cultivate American commerce there while having the advantageous side effect of raising funds for the fledgling government. When the *Empress of China* returned to New York in 1785, the Continental Congress expressed its “peculiar satisfaction in the successful issue of this first effort of the citizens of America to establish a direct trade with China, which does so much honor to its undertakers and conductors.”<sup>52</sup> Congress did not go so far as to publish Samuel Shaw’s journal of the voyage “lest the speculators and adventurers be too numerous for the profit of a few,” as

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<sup>49</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>. Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire*, 93-94.

<sup>51</sup>. Williams, ed., *The Shaping of American Diplomacy*, 45.

<sup>52</sup>. *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, ed. Worthington C. Ford et al. (Washington D.C., 1904-37), 28:443, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(jc028115\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field(DOCID+@lit(jc028115))) (accessed February 17, 2008).

Adams put it.<sup>53</sup> Congress may not have been willing to advertise the China trade to the American public, however many in Congress were willing to extol its value when potential tariff revenue from the trade was at stake. The debates over the tariff were highly contentious, and many Northeastern legislators succeeded in loading it full of protections for their home districts' products. Despite the general opposition from Southerners, who depended on cheap imports from Europe, even some Southern legislators decided to take advantage of the opportunity to score points with their home constituencies. Through days of raucous debate, protections were eventually extended to glass, tobacco, steel, sugar, and even slippers, in addition to the very generous protections for tea.<sup>54</sup> William Maclay, frustrated by some of the opposition to the protections for tea, complained, "To talk of not protecting a trade sought after by all the world was a phenomenon in a national council."<sup>55</sup> Maclay suggested that the value of the China tea was not confined to dollars and cents since it was so desired by other nations. Thus, Americans could look to the trade to help to build the status of the United States as much as for the profit it would bring.

While there certainly was not unanimous consensus, many of the most important leaders in the US government were disposed to think that the success of the China trade was tied to the support of the government, and that it should prudently do what it could to aid the enterprise.

Adams foresaw the value of the tariff and government support, writing to John Jay in 1785:

The States may greatly encourage these enterprises by laying on duties upon the importation of all East India goods from Europe, and, indeed, by proceeding in time to prohibitions. This, however, may never be necessary. Duties, judiciously calculated, and made high enough to give a clear advantage to the direct importation from India, will

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<sup>53</sup>. Adams to John Jay, November 11, 1785, *The Works of John Adams*, 8:344.

<sup>54</sup>. Margaret C.S Christman, *The First Federal Congress 1789-1791* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 120-125.

<sup>55</sup>. William Maclay, *Journal of William Maclay*, 60.

answer the end as effectually as prohibitions, and are less odious, and less liable to exceptions.<sup>56</sup>

Adams's assertion implied that he and others thought the China trade held tremendous future value, and that the government would have to play a role in nurturing the trade's future.

Hamilton believed that the government should support the China trade, though he was reluctant about what form that support should take. While Secretary of the Treasury, he explained (speaking of himself in third person), "He perceives various advantages in a direct commerce with the East Indies, and is hitherto inclined to believe it merits the patronage of the Government; but the tendency of it not yet sufficiently developed to his judgment, to leave him wholly without reserve as to the extent of the encouragement which ought to be given."<sup>57</sup> Later, he described the trade to Congress as "An additional and extensive field for the enterprize of our merchants and mariners, and as an additional outlet for the commodities of the country," and conceded, "The trade to India and China appears to lay claim to the patronage of the Government."<sup>58</sup> The patronage of the government would prove to be fickle, at least in the early part of the next century, but the rhetoric would maintain Hamilton's realization that China held tremendous wealth for the United States to access.

The tariff of 1789 marked the early beginnings of the collaboration between the US government and China merchants, and the dialogues of the early American political elites enshrined much of the rhetoric that would place emphasis on the future value of the trade. The fragile state of the national economy and the infant state of trade made the commercial prospects an especially prescient issue, and this fueled much of the rhetorical indulgences of the

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<sup>56</sup>. Adams to John Jay, November 11, 1785, *The Works of John Adams*, 8: 344.

<sup>57</sup>. Alexander Hamilton, "Report on Defects in the Existing Laws of Revenue," April 22, 1790, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-87), 6: 376.

<sup>58</sup>. Hamilton, "Report on the Petition of the Merchants of Philadelphia Trading to India and China," February 10, 1791, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 8:20.

discussion. Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries support for such protections as Adams described would ebb and flow based on the conditions of the market, and the petitions of the effected merchants. However, the rhetoric from the first debate set a precedent in Washington that established the future importance of the China trade in the minds of American statesmen. The reports of merchants, the musings of political leaders, and the debates in Congress show that many early Americans believed that the China trade would be of significant economic value in the not so distant future. However, the rhetoric in this period cannot be explained by profit alone.

The early rhetoric about the China trade can also be explained by the sense the nation was embarking upon some great mission that was to fulfill a divine purpose. The first American encounter with China informed the sense of American Providentialism, and this perspective can be found throughout the rhetoric of the period. Central to this idea was the impression that the China trade was a means to bridge the old and new worlds, and that Americans would be part of an exchange between the East and West. The beginnings of the trade also witnessed a swelling of national pride, which undoubtedly allayed Americans' anxiety about their place in the world. Some of the early merchant impressions carried a negative tone and conveyed astonishment at the perceived barbarity of some Chinese practices. However, these only piqued American curiosities further, and did not yet suppress the sense of national purpose evidenced in the discourse.

The sense that the United States was embarking upon something monumental is evident in contemporary newspapers, in the writings of the China traders, and in the discourse of national political elites. Shortly before the return of the *Empress of China*, the Massachusetts Centinel declared, "This passage is one of the greatest nautical prodigies we ever recollect hearing."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>. "Boston, May 18," *Massachusetts Centinel*, May 18, 1785, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Hist>

Boastful claims such as this demonstrate the pride derived from the China trade, and part of this stemmed from the feeling of independence from Europe. A Pennsylvania newspaper rejoiced, “As the ship has returned with a full cargo, and of such articles as we generally import from Europe, it presages a happy period of our being able to dispense with that burdensome traffic which we have heretofore carried on to the prejudice of our rising empire.”<sup>60</sup> A poem by the revolutionary poet Philip Freneau included nationalistic lines such as, “Those golden regions to explore/ Where George forbade to sail before,” and “She now her eager course explores,/ And soon shall greet Chinesian shores./ From thence their fragrant TEAS to bring/ Without the leave of Britain’s king.”<sup>61</sup> The poem contextualized the recently fought war by suggesting that Americans were destined not only to be politically independent, but also that Britain had been keeping them from their economic destiny that lay in the East. Considering the newness of the nation, the fact that it had just barely won its right to exist, and the early difficulties in keeping it together, the sense that “Providence” had bestowed upon the United States a mission in Asia lent the nation a desperately needed sense of legitimacy and purpose, and it does as much to explain the rhetoric of the period as does the promise of extravagant profits.

The American sense of purpose hinged on what Akira Iriye describes as an understanding that America and Asia were “related as two stages in the flow of human history.”<sup>62</sup> He explains that “America was at once young and most mature, at once new and most advanced, unrelated to the old world and yet springing from the past.”<sup>63</sup> The American mission then, was to engage the

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Archive (accessed March 28, 2008).

<sup>60</sup>. “New York, May 12,” *Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser*, May 16, 1785, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive> (accessed February 22, 2008).

<sup>61</sup>. Philip Freneau, “On the First American Ship That Explored the Route to China and the East-Indies, After the Revolution,” in *The Poems of Philip Freneau Poet of the American Revolution*, ed. Fred L. Pattee (Princeton, NJ: The University Library, 1903), 261-262, Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=KF8RAAAAYAAJ> (accessed March 28, 2008).

<sup>62</sup>. Iriye, *Across the Pacific*, 6.

<sup>63</sup>. *Ibid.*, 5.

“decayed” and “stagnant” East so that it could “regain its ancient vigor and join the march of humanity.”<sup>64</sup> Americans had a dual understanding of Asia, particularly embodied by China as a source of wisdom and technology, but also as a bastion of corruption and barbarity. While Americans did not yet display the missionary impulse that was to come later, the early discussion about China reveals some of the expected concerns about the cultural differences between the two peoples. Stuart Miller describes the early American traders’ view of the Chinese as, “ridiculously clad, superstitious ridden, dishonest, crafty, cruel, and marginal members of the human race who lacked the courage, intelligence, skill, and will to do anything about the oppressive despotism under which they lived.”<sup>65</sup> However little the traders might have thought of the Chinese, these concerns as yet only added to the exoticism of the Chinese image. For most Americans, the distance to China and the fact that few people had ever encountered a Chinese person before meant that the providential image would persist.

The trade with China reinforced the American image as the world’s newest and most advanced civilization by juxtaposing it with what Americans perceived as its oldest civilization. Samuel Shaw explained that the Chinese took “some time before they could fully comprehend the distinction between us and Englishmen. They styled us the New People.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the rhetoric emphasizes the expectations of a profitable and promising future. Shaw’s optimism indicates the future that he and others might have envisioned with China. He reported, “When by the map we conveyed to them an idea of the extent of our country, with its present and increasing population, they were highly pleased at the prospect of so considerable a market for

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<sup>64</sup>. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>65</sup>. Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant*, 36.

<sup>66</sup>. Samuel Shaw to John Jay, May 19, 1785, *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw, the First American Consul at Canton*, ed. Josiah Quincy (Boston: Wm Crosby and H.B. Nichols, 1847), 338, Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=E49JAAAAMAAJ> (accessed March 28, 2008).

the productions of their own empire.”<sup>67</sup> This would indeed prove true, as American proved to be a better market for Chinese goods than vice versa. In considering the potential of the trade, *The Pennsylvania Packet* asked, “Should not this be our practice now, since Providence is countenancing our navigation to this new world?”<sup>68</sup> In the rhetoric at least, the trade had as much to do with a sense of a divine plan, the connection of East and West, old and new, as it did with the actual profits to be made.

When Samuel Shaw returned home from his first voyage he quickly wrote John Jay, proclaiming, “To every lover of his country, as well as to those more immediately concerned in commerce, it must be a pleasing reflection that a communication is thus happily opened between us and the eastern extremity of the globe.”<sup>69</sup> Part of this potential “communication” might have been intellectual, philosophical, or technological in nature. More than a decade before he was publishing congratulations for the first voyage to China as Secretary of the Continental Congress, Charles Thomson was theorizing about the promise of Chinese agriculture in the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*. In the preface of the introductory issue, he wrote:

Thus by introducing the produce of those countries, which lie on the east side of the old world, and particularly those of *China*, this country may be improved beyond what heretofore might have been expected. And could we be so fortunate as to introduce the industry of the *Chinese*, their arts of living and improvements in husbandry, as well as their native plants, *America* might in time become as populous as China, which is allowed to contain more inhabitants than any other country, of the same extent, in the world.<sup>70</sup>

Before his “country” had even begun to fight for its independence from Britain, Thomson was already thinking about the benefits of an exchange between East and West, and not just in from a

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<sup>67</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>. “New York, May 12,” *Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser*, May 16, 1785.

<sup>69</sup>. Samuel Shaw to John Jay, May 19, 1785, *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw, the First American Consul at Canton*, 341.

<sup>70</sup>. Charles Thomson, “Preface,” in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Held at Philadelphia, for Promoting Useful Knowledge*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: William and Thomas Bradford, at the London Coffee-House, 1771), 38, <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO> (accessed February 17, 2008).



commercial perspective. His high esteem of Chinese agriculture and technology confirm Iriye's claim that Americans retained some level of respect for ancient Chinese wisdom even if they deplored some of its present social and political conditions. Thomas Jefferson admired the Chinese political philosophy, and saw in it a model for his own agrarian view. He hoped that his countrymen would avoid active commerce abroad, explaining, "Were I to indulge in my own theory, I should wish them to practice neither commerce nor navigation, but to stand with respect to Europe precisely on the footing of China. We should thus avoid wars, and all our citizens would be husbandmen."<sup>71</sup> While Jefferson's wishes may not have been realized (the embargo did not go so well), the fact that he and Thomson, among others, spoke admirably about the Chinese indicates a hope that the United States might carry out more of a two-way dialogue than their European competitors. When the writings of Jefferson and Thomson are considered along with the reports from Shaw's journals, Freneau's poem, and the boastful and proud newspaper reports, the discourse from the period shows that America saw its destiny in China, and that this helped to provide it with the national legitimacy it so dearly desired.

The third element of the discourse, an awareness of the balance of power, indicates that Americans saw the China trade as a way of improving their position relative to Europe and securing their fragile standing in a dangerous world. The evidence shows that America's early statesmen saw the China trade as a way to prevent the United States from becoming financially dependent upon Europe and as a means to obstruct European power abroad. In many examples, including those previously discussed, it seems they were unable to talk about China without bringing up Europe. Adams, Hamilton, Morris and others exhibit sensitivity to Europe's power and position, and many of their arguments seem to revolve around this sentiment. Robert Morris, the financier of the *Empress of China*, made clear that his intentions were more than to

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<sup>71</sup>. Jefferson to G.K. van Hogendorp, October 13, 1785, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 8:633.

make money from the China trade; he wanted to establish the United States' power abroad. He informed John Jay in 1783, "I am sending some ships to China in order to encourage others in the adventurous pursuits of Commerce," and added, "I wish to see a foundation laid for an American Navy."<sup>72</sup> His mention of the beginnings of a naval force shows that Morris envisioned the trade as the beginnings of something more than just a commercial route.

Many political leaders in this period were afraid that the United States would never break free of its British commercial origins, and that the United States would be at the mercy of the European economies. Gouverneur Morris wrote Charles Thomson, then Secretary of Congress, arguing, "It is of Importance by opening this direct Trade to prevent the Europ Powers from draining us as they now do of our Specie in Exchange for the Superfluities of the East."<sup>73</sup> Morris and others were concerned that if the United States didn't establish its own overseas routes, it would continue to pay the British for foreign goods like spices, tea, and porcelain. Thus, the tariff of 1789 was important not only because it protected and insulated American shippers, but because it kept British and other European goods out of American markets. William Grayson offered a similar perspective, predicting, "A dollar sent to Europe for East India goods would not import more than half a dollar sent to the East Indies."<sup>74</sup> This was important not just because of the loss of money, but because of the loss of money to Europe.

The China trade was not just a way to break free from European market dominance; it was also a way to challenge Europe and compete with it abroad. In *Federalist No. 4*, John Jay explained to voters, "In the trade to China and India, we interfere with more than one nation, inasmuch as it enables us to partake in advantages which they had in a manner monopolized, and

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<sup>72</sup>. Robert Morris to John Jay, November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1783, *The Papers of Robert Morris*, 786.

<sup>73</sup>. Gouverneur Morris to Charles Thomson, December 30, 1783, Charles Thomson Papers, Library of Congress, vol. I, fols. 7726-7727 quoted in Smith, 70.

<sup>74</sup>. William Maclay, *Journal of William Maclay*, 60-61.

as we thereby supply ourselves with commodities which we used to purchase from them.”<sup>75</sup>

Adams, too, saw the potential to establish a foothold in the European’s area of influence. He envisioned Americans becoming carriers of excess European goods, and explained, “There are many persons in the European factories in India, particularly the English, who have accumulated large property, which they wish to transmit to Europe, but have not been able to do it, on account of the distance and the scarcity of the freight. These would be glad to sell us their commodities, and take our bills of exchange upon Europe or America.”<sup>76</sup> The idea that the United States could “interfere” with great European powers’ operations overseas, or become carriers of goods that they could not carry themselves, would suggest that the United States was on their level, and in this way the China trade satisfied the early political elites’ concerns that the US would be a respected power.

At times, the American eagerness to compete with Europe approached laughable proportions. Samuel Shaw reported to Henry Knox that on his second voyage to China he received a much cooler welcome from the other Europeans. Shaw recalled, “We are now five vessels...This competition alarms them, and has created a jealousy which it is not easy for them to conceal notwithstanding every personal civility to us and some instances of real friendship from individuals, yet, nationally, I believe they all wish us to the d – l.”<sup>77</sup> Shaw’s acute perception of European jealousy might act as a microcosmic example of the national mindset during this period. On one comical occasion in 1808, Jefferson opined on the value of the Sino-American relationship while allowing an important Chinese dignitary to break the American embargo and return to China. In reality, John Jacob Astor and Thomas C. Perkins had fooled

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<sup>75</sup>. John Jay, “Federalist No. 4,” in *The Federalist Papers* (McLean, Virginia: IndyPublish.com), 15.

<sup>76</sup>. Adams to John Jay, November 11, 1785, *The Works of John Adams*, 8: 343-344.

<sup>77</sup>. Shaw to Henry Knox, August 15, 1786, Henry Knox Papers, reel 19: 25, Massachusetts Historical Society, quoted in Christman, *Adventurous Pursuits*, 64.

Jefferson, as the Chinese man was in fact a lowly Canton shopkeeper.<sup>78</sup> Jefferson hoped that his magnanimous kindness would, “[make] known through one of its own characters of note, our nation, our circumstances and character, and [let] that government understand at length the difference between us and the English,” and that it was, “likely to bring lasting advantage to our merchants and commerce with that country.”<sup>79</sup> Jefferson, like so many other statesmen of this era, could not discuss China without also discussing a European power. In this case, Astor and Perkins would get the last laugh.

Ultimately, as with the rhetoric about profit and providence, the concern over the balance of power was about the future. John Adams, ever the grand strategist, urged:

We should attend to this intercourse with the east with the more ardor, because the stronger footing we obtain in those countries, of more importance will our friendship be to the powers of Europe who have large connections there. The East Indies will probably be the object and theatre of the next war; and the more familiar we are with every thing relating to that country, the more will the contending parties desire to win us to their side, or, at least, what we ought to wish foremost, to keep us neutral.<sup>80</sup>

To Adams, as well as his contemporaries, the China trade was about the big picture and the “next war.” Indeed, American neutrality, and thus American identity might depend on it. Politicians, newspapers, and traders argued that America had to go to China because it provided the new nation with a hope for profit, a sense of purpose, and a means for challenging Europe. All of these factors helped to satisfy the nation’s strategic anxiety. But it was a dual relationship, because the rhetoric helped to elevate the China trade and transform it beyond its symbolic importance. Although the reality of the relationship between the United States and China would undergo tremendous change in the middle and late nineteenth century, China’s power as a symbol and as a fantasy would persist.

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<sup>78</sup>. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*, 322 n.14.

<sup>79</sup>. Thomas Jefferson to Albert Gallatin, August 15, 1808, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), 12: 134.

<sup>80</sup>. Adams to John Jay, November 11, 1785, *The Works of John Adams*, 8:344.

### **The China Trade and the Vision of a Continental Nation: 1815-1865**

In the decades that followed the War of 1812, the image of the China trade in the American political discourse would transition from that of a legitimating enterprise into a fantastical goal line for continental expansion. Paying no mind to the present value of the trade, which had been declining in relative importance since 1808, the American political elite began constructing an image of China as a mirage lying on the other side of the continent, waiting for Pacific harbors if its true potential was to be realized.<sup>81</sup> The possibility of having such preferable geographic access to China both informed the expansionist paradigm of the period and was a product of it. Once again, congressional debates, correspondence, and newspapers of this period reveal that antebellum political elites remained beholden to the themes of profit, providence, and power that they had inherited from the previous generation. The image of China helped to construct the broader national images of seemingly limitless opportunities for profit, the fulfillment of America's racial and geographic destiny, and the possibility of securing a continuous sphere of influence free from the interference of other powers.

The American preference for territorial expansion was in no way limited to the narrow window between 1815 and 1865, but it was during this period that issues of expansion began to dominate the national dialogue and act as a *modus operandi* for the nation's foreign relations. Henry Adams explained, "In 1815, for the first time the Americans ceased to doubt the path they were to follow."<sup>82</sup> The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the Adams-Onís Treaty in 1819 doubled the square mileage of the country, and the latter established the United States' territorial boundary along the 42 degrees latitude line all the way to the Pacific Ocean, laying the

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<sup>81</sup>. Dulles, *The Old China Trade*, 210-211.

<sup>82</sup>. Henry Adams, *The Second Administration of James Madison: 1813-1817*, vol. 9 of *History of the United States of America* (1890; repr., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), 220.

foundations for claims to a continental nation.<sup>83</sup> In 1823, the Monroe Doctrine declared the Western Hemisphere separate from that of Europe, and in so doing satisfied John Quincy Adams' previously expressed desire that the world be "familiarized with the idea of considering our proper dominion to be the continent of North America."<sup>84</sup>

However, continental expansion was not simply a uniform national desire. Williams' dilemma of "the counting house versus the farm" persisted into the middle of the century, and helped to define the politics of this era just as it had the last.<sup>85</sup> Bradford Perkins explains that territorial expansionism "was ... largely a farmers' crusade, although in the 1840s it also gained support, and even some leadership, from urban segments of the Jacksonian coalition."<sup>86</sup> Conversely, the Federalists and Whigs championed the interests of the commercial community, who "tended to oppose territorial expansion. Businessmen did not find Texas at all alluring. Oregon and California – the Pacific Coast – were perhaps another matter."<sup>87</sup> Northeasterners clearly did not have complete control over the course of Continental expansion, evidenced most lucidly by the Whig opposition to "Mr. Polk's War" with Mexico.<sup>88</sup> Whatever Polk's motives may have been, the Mexican Cession of California in 1848 produced the coastline that the Northeastern commercial class had so desired. Furthermore, the expansionist impulse predated this era, as well as that of the Founding. While the business community certainly contributed to the national dialogue on expansion, they by no means hijacked it. This would suggest that the

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<sup>83</sup>. Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire*, 154.

<sup>84</sup>. John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, vol. 4, ed. Charles Francis Adams (1874-77; repr., Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 438.

<sup>85</sup>. Williams, ed., *The Shaping of American Diplomacy*, 45.

<sup>86</sup>. Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire*, 174.

<sup>87</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>. John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973).

image of the China trade developed in response to the national paradigm towards expansion, and not by a handful of interested actors with a relatively minor stake in the trade.

The promise of better access to the China trade, which according to Norman Graebner, “determined the territorial goals of all American presidents from John Quincy Adams to Polk,” was not limited to the acquisition of the Pacific coast. The discourse from the period reveals that the second wave of expansion – that of filling in the acquired territory with people, infrastructure, railroads, steamship lines, and most importantly, republican democracy – was also associated with the desire to access the Chinese market. The China market was a motivation to not only acquire the continent, but to conquer it, too. The object of Manifest Destiny was not to maintain limited control over isolated port cities, but to spread American institutions, and the white race, across the continent. The historian Reginald Horsman explains that American expansion was viewed as, “evidence of the innate superiority of the American Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race,” and that “In the middle of the nineteenth century a sense of racial destiny permeated discussions of American progress and of future American world destiny.”<sup>89</sup> After the Civil War, the United States consolidated its territorial gains, and landed expansion ceased to be a driving national impetus.

During this period the China trade went through a period of consolidation, followed by an end to the informal nature of the trade with the signing of treaties in 1844 and 1858. Between 1815 and 1839 the firms Russell, Olyphant, Heard, and Wetmore became the only companies able to survive the vicissitudes of the market, and their success lent them extravagant wealth and status.<sup>90</sup> These firms replaced the ship-by-ship operations of old with established trading houses, and the effect of this, Dennett explains, “was to stabilize business, and to increase the influence

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<sup>89</sup>. Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1.

<sup>90</sup>. Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, 69-75.

of the surviving merchants in their dealings with both the Chinese and the other foreigners.”<sup>91</sup> However, much of the capital that had originally been invested in the China trade was diverted to more profitable business opportunities at home, and the roller coaster growth of the China trade did not at all keep pace with the total growth of US foreign trade.<sup>92</sup> The development of manufacturing technologies not only reduced the demand for some Chinese products, but it also slowly changed the perception of China as a source for goods, and morphed it into a market for them.<sup>93</sup> Another important development was the British-led growth of the opium trade, which the Americans participated in to the effect of bettering the balance of payments with China.<sup>94</sup> Despite the American participation in the trade, Caleb Cushing was able to take advantage of the first British Opium War as a chance to differentiate the United States. He negotiated the Treaty of Wanghia in 1844, ushering in official relations between the American and Chinese governments.

Profit remained a thematic centerpiece of the China trade discourse, though its use changed to reflect the evolving nature of the trade, and the expansionist mindset of the period. The notion that the Pacific coast could plausibly serve as an American gateway to China can be traced back to John Ledyard’s plan to carry fur pelts from the Northwest coast across the Pacific and exchange them for Chinese goods.<sup>95</sup> The Lewis and Clark expedition advanced this idea and afforded national attention to the prospect of a transcontinental trade. Upon returning to St. Louis, Meriwether Lewis immediately wrote Jefferson to speculate about how the trade with China would revolve around the seasons, and he concluded, “The productions nine tenths of the

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<sup>91</sup>. Ibid., 74.

<sup>92</sup>. Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific*, 19.

<sup>93</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>. Paul Varg, *New England and Foreign Relations, 1789-1850* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 154-160.

<sup>95</sup>. Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific*, 8-10.



most valuable fur country of America could be conveyed by the rout proposed to the East Indies.”<sup>96</sup> John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company followed in 1808, and from his settlement, Astoria, he reaped fabled, though unsteady, profits in fulfilling Ledyard’s vision.<sup>97</sup> Astor wrote to Jefferson in 1808, “The intention is to carry on the trade so extensively that it may in time embrace the greater part of the fur trade on this continent.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, even though the hopes for the fur trade proved to be ill founded in the long run, it played an important part in fusing the notions of a transcontinental nation and a profitable exchange with China.

Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, even though the China trade was diminishing relative to trade with Europe and domestic economic growth, the seed planted by the early probing of the Northwest Coast began to grow into a mandate for transcontinental migration. As early as 1824 one Massachusetts newspaper reported talk of “uniting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans - opening to the United States a direct trade with China, and with the western shores of America, by a route across the Rocky Mountains.”<sup>99</sup> The mention of a “direct” trade reflects the complicated patterns of exchange that might take a China trader to Chile, Southern California, London, Spain or Portugal, Smyrna, Capetown, Bombay, or anywhere in between before he actually offloaded his wares in Canton.<sup>100</sup> Thus, the appeal of accessing China directly from Pacific ports was that it would cut out the European middlemen and allow the United States to engage China not by far flung ships, but by a sustained and direct path across the Pacific. In 1829, Congressman Samuel P. Carson of North Carolina circulated a letter to his district

<sup>96</sup>. Meriwether Lewis to Thomas Jefferson, September 23, 1806, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Series 1: General Correspondence, 1651-1827 (Library of Congress), [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(je00063\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field(DOCID+@lit(je00063))) (accessed March 31, 2008).

<sup>97</sup>. Washington Irving, *Three Western Narratives* (New York: Library of America, 2004).

<sup>98</sup>. John Jacob Astor to Thomas Jefferson, February 27, 1808, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Series 1: General Correspondence, 1651-1827 (Library of Congress), [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mtj:5:/temp/~ammem\\_ePML:](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mtj:5:/temp/~ammem_ePML:;), (accessed March 31, 2008).

<sup>99</sup>. “Empire Traveling West,” *Haverhill Gazette*, September 11, 1824, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive> (accessed March 31, 2008).

<sup>100</sup>. Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific*, 17.

explaining his support for the occupation of the Columbia River on the grounds “that our citizens there would engross the whole trade of China...”<sup>101</sup> Carson’s letter demonstrates the appeal of direct access to China to agrarian Southerners, as well as Northeastern merchants.

A confluence of events in the 1840s helped to solidify the identification of the China trade with national expansion in ways that helped bridge divides of region and party. First, the Treaty of Wanghia, secured following the British defeat of China in the Opium Wars, produced excitement because it secured access to four new ports, reduced the influence of the burdensome hong merchants, and provided additional provisions that the British had not obtained.<sup>102</sup> Shortly after the treaty was ratified by the Senate and made public, one newspaper proclaimed, “Those persons are now living who will see a railroad connecting New York with the Pacific, and a steam communication from Oregon to China.”<sup>103</sup> Second, some Southern Democrats adopted the China trade into their vision of continental expansion. Despite their fiery debates with the Whigs over the war with Mexico, the prospect of the trade with China was one area that had appeal for both parties and both regions of the country. President Tyler’s minister to Mexico, Waddy Thompson, urged for investment in a Mexican railway, explaining, “...if to that can be added the immense trade of India and China, it would be difficult even to conjecture the future profits.”<sup>104</sup> Thompson also appealed to the interests of Southerners by speculating, “I have no doubt that the time will come when New Orleans will be the greatest city in the world. That period would be incalculably hastened by the measures which I have indicated, which would throw into her lap

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<sup>101</sup>. Samuel P. Carson, “To the Freemen of the Twelfth Congressional District of North Carolina,” February 28, 1829 in *Circular Letters of Congressmen to Their Constituents 1789-1829*, vol. 3, ed. Noble E. Cunningham, Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 1507.

<sup>102</sup>. Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, 160-161.

<sup>103</sup>. “America and China,” *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* 4, no. 18 (February 1, 1845): 4, American Periodical Series Online, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=832341332&SrchMode=1&sid=10&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1207153073&clientId=31806> (accessed April 1, 2008).

<sup>104</sup>. Waddy Thompson, Jr., *Recollections of Mexico* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846), 206, Google Books, <http://books.google.com/books?id=cC4EAAAQAAJ> (accessed April 1, 2008).

the vast commerce of China and of India.”<sup>105</sup> Trade publications were replete with reports of increasing cotton exports to China and the potential for growth in that sector, undercutting the notion that the China trade was a regional as opposed to a national interest.<sup>106</sup> Senators and congressmen from states west of the Appalachians could envision their states as the nexus of a continental commercial enterprise that would unite the North, South, and West.<sup>107</sup> Reports from this period also speculated on the size of the Chinese population, as a larger population meant a larger market for goods. One report put the population at 333 million people, presumably whetting the appetite of cotton growers and garment manufacturers alike.<sup>108</sup> Finally, the Mexican-American war, though not explicitly initiated for the acquisition of the American West, made it possible to transform visions of Pacific access to the China market into a reality.

Visions of an expanded China trade acted as an olive branch for political reconciliation and as a distraction from the fact that the United States had exacted such a large swath of territory from its controversial war with Mexico. After US forces had taken Mexico City and the Mexican Cession had been agreed upon, Polk wasted no time in connecting the newly acquired territory with the market possibilities in China. In his third State of the Union address he predicted, “The Bay of San Francisco and other harbors along the Californian coast would afford shelter for our Navy, for our numerous whale ships, and other merchant vessels employed in the Pacific Ocean, and would in a short period become the marts of an extensive and profitable

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<sup>105</sup>. Thompson, *Recollections of Mexico*, 234.

<sup>106</sup>. Robert B. Forbes, “The China trade,” *The Merchants’ Magazine and Commercial Review* 12, no. 1 (January 1845): 50-51, American Periodical Series Online, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=10&did=83289648&SrchMode=1&sid=12&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1207154152&clientId=31806> (accessed April 1, 2008); “America and China,” *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* 4, no. 18 (February 1, 1845): 4.

<sup>107</sup>. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific*, 94-99.

<sup>108</sup>. “China and its Prospective Trade,” *The United States Magazine, and Democratic Review* 18, 95 (May 1846): 382, American Periodical Series Online, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=331707301&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1207284702&clientId=31806> (accessed April 2, 2008).

commerce with China and other countries of the East.”<sup>109</sup> Polk’s use of such a vision is especially constructive, given that he “was no China trader,” as Donald Johnson puts it, “nor were the men around him in touch with or primarily influenced by either Pacific shipping or whaling interests.”<sup>110</sup> The image of the China trade, so pliable and fantastical in the discourse of this period, helped to construct and rationalize Polk’s vision for national expansion. Furthermore, the broader concern with national expansion helped to fuel the fantasy of the China market. Together, the image of the China market and the obsession with national expansion formed an endogenous and self-reinforcing cycle of rhetoric.

After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, visions of the China market were deployed towards the task of filling in the continent and connecting the links of a commercial empire that would span from the mills of the North and the fields of the South to the gateway ports of California, and eventually Oregon. Asa Whitney had become the nation’s foremost advocate of a Pacific railroad after he returned from China after just fifteen months with a huge fortune. In 1845 he and many other political and commercial giants met in Memphis at a conference, presided by John C. Calhoun (like Polk, not an advocate of Northeastern merchants), to discuss the details of a railroad to the Pacific.<sup>111</sup> When the railroad was proposed to Congress in 1848, one publication justified its construction on the grounds that, “The unsealing of the ports of China to the commerce of the world, have naturally attracted the attention of the American People to the policy of enlarging their commercial relations, and establishing new channels for profitable adventure.”<sup>112</sup> Whitney’s calculations about the speed and distance that the railroad

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<sup>109</sup>. James K. Polk, “Third Annual Message,” December 7, 1847, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29488> (accessed April 1, 2008).

<sup>110</sup>. Johnson, *The United States in the Pacific*, 77.

<sup>111</sup>. Paul Varg, *United States Foreign Relations 1820-1860* (Michigan State University Press, 1979), 168.

<sup>112</sup>. “China and the United States,” *National Era* 2, no. 72 (May 18, 1848): 78, American Periodical Series Online, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=7&did=220158081&SrchMode=1&sid=5&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1207277638&clientId=31806> (accessed April 3, 2008).

could attain, and the effect this would have on the China trade, were key in convincing Congress that it was a worthy investment.<sup>113</sup> As the expansionist urge shifted from the acquisition of Pacific harbors to the establishment of transportation links to them, so the China rhetoric shifted. Yet again, profitable engagement of China depended upon the completion of the latest national project.

Railroads, of course, would not be enough. Congressman Thomas King, of Georgia, proposed a line of military steamships that would run between San Francisco or Monterrey and Shanghai.<sup>114</sup> King envisioned cutting the time between New York and the Orient significantly, thus making New York, “the great settling house of the world.”<sup>115</sup> The support of yet another Southerner suggests that the image of the China trade fit more broadly with the image of national expansion, and was not simply the province of Northeastern shipping interests. The image of the China trade justified the establishment of infrastructure that would prove profitable to Northerners and Southerners. The appeal for both the railroad and steamships persisted throughout the 1850s, when Congressman Milton Latham of California called for the establishment of them both, “on the grounds of humanity, civilization, commerce, and navigation.”<sup>116</sup> The commercial potential, it seemed, was limitless, however, for the rhetoric to find resonance in the public mindset, it had to do more than fantasize about limitless profits.

While the potential for profit provided a material incentive for westward expansion, the rhetoric of this period was buttressed by a heightened awareness of the providential element to American expansionism. Providential rhetoric in this period transformed from its innocent and

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<sup>113</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>114</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>116</sup>. “Thirty-Third Congress...Second Session,” *New York Daily Times*, January 10, 1855, 1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851–2004). <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?RQT=302&COPT=SU5UPTAmVkvSPTImREJTPTFBQ0Q@&clientId=31806&cfc=1> (accessed November 6, 2007).

adventurous nationalism to a sharper, more racially and religiously charged argument. As the nation acquired more territories, and those territories became states, the sense of the East-to-West movement of history became a self-fulfilling reality. As the states approached the Pacific, and the possibility of a closer communication with China seemed more imminent, profit and power ceased to be an ample justifications for expansion; the peopling of the continent and the engagement of the East would be predicated upon questions of race and civilization as well. In concert with these themes, the arrival of the first American missionaries in China added a religious dimension to expansion; God not only looked favorably upon America, but also called Americans to leave their homes and save the East from itself. In this way, the image of the China trade reinforced the foundations of Manifest Destiny, while at the same time being shaped by the expansionist preoccupation among political elites.

The mere juxtaposition of East and West afforded by the first American voyages to China was replaced with an invitation for Americans to complete the westward course of human civilization. The sense of history that colored the rhetoric of the previous period became bolder, more explicit, and more urgent. Political leaders eagerly seized upon the American sense of history to add weight to their arguments for expansion. One of the earliest visionary expansionists was Senator Thomas Hart Benton, of Missouri, who originally envisioned a continental American empire divided into five separate nations, so as to not compromise the viability of the republic. In one Senate debate in 1825 he predicted, "Upon the people of Eastern Asia, the establishment of a civilized power upon the opposite coast of America, could not fail to produce great and wonderful benefits. Science, liberal principles in government, and the true religion, might cast their lights across the intervening sea."<sup>117</sup> The call to engage China in extra-

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<sup>117</sup>. *Register of Debates*, 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., pp. 711-713, March 1, 1825, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage> (accessed April 5, 2008).

commercial ways would not have been readily seized upon by the merchants at Canton, who would not have been eager to invite backlash from the Chinese population or the government. Furthermore, his rhetoric expresses the common refrain that the art, science, and political philosophy of the West were superior to that of the East. The intellectual curiosity of Franklin, Jefferson, and Thomson had been replaced, at least in the public dialogue, by a drive to shape China, rather than learn from it. Benton went on to speculate, “The inhabitants of the oldest and the newest, the most despotic and the freest Governments, would become the neighbors, and, peradventure, the friends of each other.”<sup>118</sup> In order for the United States to attain Benton’s desired “neighborly” status with China it would first have to commandeer control of the continent.

Following the acquisition of California, the rhetoric continued to grow in its extravagance. The *New York Daily Times* reported that Congressman Latham supported the 1855 steamship bill by prophesizing, “The colonization and settlement of California by our own race would have a similar influence on Asia, as the discovery and settlement of this continent had on Europe.”<sup>119</sup> Latham reinforced the image of the Western movement of civilization, but he took his metaphor one step further. “California and Oregon,” he argued, “are to play a part like that played by ancient Egypt in the civilization of the world. San Francisco will become a modern Alexandria, through which the wealth and magnificence of Asia will be poured onto our lap ... Commerce is a greater civilizer than war.”<sup>120</sup> Latham would have people believe that civilization itself depended on transcontinental commercial engagement with China. By incorporating historical references to ancient Egyptian Alexandria he helped to romanticize the image of the China trade, taking focus away from the economic realities. By connecting the

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<sup>118</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>119</sup>. “Thirty-Third Congress...Second Session,” *New York Daily Times*, January 10, 1855, 1.

<sup>120</sup>. “Thirty-Third Congress...Second Session,” *New York Daily Times*, January 10, 1855, 1.

settlement of California with the future of civilization, he not only had the effect of earning support for the steamship bill and the railroad; he helped to bolster the paradigm of national expansion which had by then dominated the affairs of state for nearly thirty years.

The dialogue of this period also moved the racial dynamic from the background to the forefront of the discussion. The development of racial image of the Chinese in America has been well documented, but it is important to consider how this played into notions of Manifest Destiny.<sup>121</sup> Perhaps the racial element in the previous period is best exemplified by George Washington's shock upon learning that the Chinese were not, in fact, white.<sup>122</sup> From the 1820s through the 1840s, this curiosity was transformed by the racial overtones of Manifest Destiny, and this carried into the China discourse. Reginald Horsman explains that, "The old dreams of the westward movement of civilization had merged with the newer German-influenced ideas of the westward movement of a superior people."<sup>123</sup> One of the most vocal advocates of America's racial destiny was Caleb Cushing, who carried his pretension of superiority with him to China. "We have become the teachers of our teachers," he proclaimed in Boston shortly before he departed for China.<sup>124</sup> Thus, the racial dynamic was intimately tied to the historical dynamic. In 1859 he announced to the Massachusetts House of Representatives that Anglo-Saxons were duty bound to "to Christianize and to civilize, to command to be obeyed, to conquer and to reign," and that "the yellow men of Asia," were, along with Native Americans, and Africans, not his equals.<sup>125</sup> Statements such as these highlight connection between social Darwinism, the image of

<sup>121</sup>. Jonathan Goldstein, *Philadelphia and the China Trade: 1682 – 1846, Commercial, Cultural, and Attitudinal Effects* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), 68-82; Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*.

<sup>122</sup>. George Washington to Tench Tilghman, August 29, 1785, *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1939), 28:239.

<sup>123</sup>. Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 286-7.

<sup>124</sup>. Quoted in Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*, 18.

<sup>125</sup>. Caleb Cushing Speech to the Massachusetts House of Representatives, February 11, 1859, Cushing MSS, Library of Congress quoted in John M. Belohlavek, "Race, Progress, and Destiny: Caleb Cushing and the Quest for American Empire," in *Manifest Destiny and Empire: American Antebellum Expansion*, eds. Sam W. Haynes and



the China trade, and Manifest Destiny. Americans would bring their civilization in an attempt to correct the errant ways of the Chinese, but if they could not be reformed they would eventually be replaced, just as previous inferior races had been.<sup>126</sup>

Christianity was another supporting pillar of Western civilization, and any engagement of China would necessarily include an export of Christianity. Missionaries began venturing to China in the 1830s with the dual objectives of education and medical care, and a broader goal of conversion.<sup>127</sup> Commerce, civilization, and the spread of the white race were all important, but in a spiritual sense, there were also souls to save. Just as numbers were important in the discussion of profit projections and distances between ports, so too were they effective in creating an image of teeming masses waiting to be saved by Christianity. Asa Whitney envisioned, “...the calm Pacific rolls, five thousand miles between us and all Asia, with seven hundred millions of souls.”<sup>128</sup> The missionary movement and its influence on official diplomacy have been well documented, but it influenced more than just official policies; it also contributed to the imperative of Manifest Destiny. H.W. Halleck of California predicted, “The people of California will penetrate the hitherto inaccessible portions of Asia, carrying with them not only the arts and sciences, but the refining and purifying influence of civilization and Christianity.”<sup>129</sup> If the Chinese were an inferior race, they could at least be “purified” by Christianity so that they might, in time, become more civilized.

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Christopher Morris (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 25.

<sup>126</sup>. Horsman, 291.

<sup>127</sup>. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*, 27-28.

<sup>128</sup>. Asa Whitney, “Railroad to the Pacific,” *Home Journal* 47, no. 145 (November 18, 1848): 2, American Periodical Series Online, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=7&did=776191642&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1207723331&clientId=31806> (accessed April 5, 2008).

<sup>129</sup>. J. Ross Browne, *Report of the Debates in the Convention of California, on the Formation of the State Constitution, in September and October, 1849* (Washington, D.C., 1850), 433-434.

Christianity was also closely associated with commerce. When Britain undertook the Opium Wars to force the Chinese to allow them to offload Opium in China, John Quincy Adams used Christianity as a basis for defending Britain and berating the Chinese. “China, not being a Christian Nation, its inhabitants do not consider themselves bound by the Christian precept, to love their neighbor as themselves,” he explained, adding, “The right of commercial intercourse with them reverts not to the execrable principle of Hobbes, that the state of Nature is a state ... but to the Law of Nature independent of the precept of Christianity.”<sup>130</sup> Along with race and notions of highly developed civilization, Christianity helped to fashion an image of the China trade that reinforced the broader themes of Manifest Destiny and called the United States to expand to the shores of the Pacific.

Finally, the image of the China trade heightened the urgency of Manifest Destiny by rousing concerns about the balance of power between the United States and its European competitors. The discourse shows that Americans were motivated to expand by more than a avaricious desire to access the profitable Chinese market; they wanted to keep the British, the Russians, and the Mexicans from seizing command of the Pacific coast and impeding the American destiny. Future access to the China market was the underlying source of conflict between the British and Americans in the contest over Oregon, which sparked diplomatic flare-ups all throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, Britain’s willingness to use force in the first and second Opium Wars made clear just how precarious and dependent the U.S. position in China really was. The U.S. government may have been ill equipped to protect American interests in China, but political actors could use their voices and their pens to make the balance of power a rationale for expanding the frontier.

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<sup>130</sup>. John Quincy Adams, “The Opium War and the Sanctity of Commercial Reciprocity,” in Walter LaFeber, *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Expansion*, 48.

<sup>131</sup>. Perkins, *Creation of a Republican Empire*, 213-216.

Had American politicians not been so convinced that the ports of Oregon would be “windows on the Pacific,” the competition with Great Britain for control of the territory would not have been so great.<sup>132</sup> Robert Winthrop made the distinction between landed expansion and access to the Pacific clear when he argued to Congress, “We need ports on the Pacific. As to land, we have millions of acres of better land still unoccupied on this side of the mountains.”<sup>133</sup> Macabe Keliher explains that the fear of British domination and encroachment was not limited to North America, or even Asia, but that Americans feared British dominance across the world. Keliher explains, “Many believed that the United States was in grave economic danger as Britain used its industrial, financial, and commercial resources to build an empire of economic domination.”<sup>134</sup> The British designs on California, the northern portions of Mexico, and Texas were threatening not just because of their proximity to the United States, but also because they would cut off access to the Pacific, and thus to China.<sup>135</sup>

The tension over Oregon nearly came to war in the mid 1820s, and Albert Gallatin’s negotiations with Britain’s George Canning revealed the degree to which each nation’s position was motivated by a desire for access to the Pacific.<sup>136</sup> In 1829 Congressman Carson wrote to his North Carolina constituents that controlling Oregon, “would not only aid in settling that controversy, in a manner favorable to our interests and honor, but would be highly important to our commerce and fisheries in the Pacific Ocean, as well as the Indian trade.”<sup>137</sup> Carson’s letter highlights the animosity and concern for the balance of power with Britain, and he hoped that

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<sup>132</sup>. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific*, 126.

<sup>133</sup>. *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 99 <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage> (accessed April 8, 2008).

<sup>134</sup>. Keliher, “Anglo-American Rivalry and the Origins of U.S. China Policy,” 233.

<sup>135</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>136</sup>. Frederick Merk, *The Oregon Question: Essays in Anglo-American Diplomacy and Politics* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1967), 142-146, 157-159.

<sup>137</sup>. Samuel P. Carson, “To the Freemen of the Twelfth Congressional District of North Carolina,” February 28, 1829, 1507.

controlling Oregon, “would expose the trade of their East India Colonies to our attacks, and afford our cruisers a place to secure their prizes.”<sup>138</sup>

Fear of losing Pacific access to Britain or Russia was supplemented by skepticism that Mexico could use its ports productively. In 1848 one newspaper lamented, “Instead of planting colonies on the northwest coast, pursuing the sperm whale, or the trade to China, Mexico annually exhibits in all her ports a smaller tonnage than the port of New Bedford.”<sup>139</sup> The argument helped to justify the war with Mexico and the “purchase” of California and the Southwest. If Mexicans could not properly use their geographic advantages to trade with China, then Americans would. In this way, the China trade was not just a defensive concern involving the balance of power with Europe; it was an opportunity to make the United States the pre-eminent power on the continent. Access to the Pacific Coast, and trade with China, would give geographic and commercial weight to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, making the United States a truly great power.

### **The China Trade and the Open Door Empire: 1865-1899**

The fantastical image of the China trade maintained its thematic elements but differed in its utility after the Civil War. Just as it had been previously used to construct notions of national legitimacy and to encourage westward landed expansion, the political actors of the late nineteenth century would harness the China trade rhetoric to assemble an image of an informal American empire characterized by free market access. Historians, especially those of the New Left, have extensively chronicled this period and detailed the high degree to which industrial capitalists and their political representatives influenced the course of U.S. expansion in the

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<sup>138</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>139</sup>. “Past and Present Position and Resources of Mexico: Her Relations to the United States – Police of the Later Country,” *New Hampshire Patriot & State Gazette*, March 30, 1848, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive> (accessed April 5, 2008).

Pacific. Thomas McCormick's *China Market* shows how the perceived promise of the China market merged with an "overproduction thesis" and general social stagnation to spur and direct U.S. expansion in the Pacific.<sup>140</sup> McCormick and others have already demonstrated the connection between the China trade and U.S. policy and actions, but can the survival of the China market fantasy be explained by more than just its immediate political or commercial utility? The rhetoric of this period displays the now-familiar themes of profit, providence, and the balance of power, and it exhibits a great deal of continuity with the previous two periods. It seems the fantasy was able to survive because its imagery could be flexibly applied to create a broader national paradigm that would create context for political action.

The origins of an Open Door approach, characterized by equal access to ports and markets, stretch back to the beginning of the republic, when Washington warned of the dangers of entangling foreign alliances. However, in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, a confluence of circumstances forced this notion of free and equal market access to the center of debates about U.S. foreign policy. Robert Beisner describes this "paradigm shift" as resulting from a combination of "widespread social malaise," the depression of the mid-1890s, and the perceived threat to U.S. export markets abroad.<sup>141</sup> The immense numbers of immigrants from unfamiliar countries (including China), along with rapid urbanization and the growth of corporate entities eroded the traditional Anglo-Saxon, agrarian image of the country.<sup>142</sup> For example, the Irish immigrant Denis Kearney and his Workingmen's party vehemently opposed Chinese immigration in California, which had seen anti-Chinese riots in 1852, 1854, 1867, and 1869.<sup>143</sup> In 1885 a group of white miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming slaughtered twenty-eight Chinese

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<sup>140</sup>. McCormick, *China Market*, 37.

<sup>141</sup>. Robert Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New: 1865-1900* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1975), 73-74.

<sup>142</sup>. Ibid., 74-76.

<sup>143</sup>. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*, 76.

workers who had been brought in to work in the mines.<sup>144</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis forced Americans to consider that "the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."<sup>145</sup> If the first period had indeed passed, many were left wondering what the next period would hold for them.

Adding to the social tumult was the severe depression of 1893, and the surpassing of industrial manufacturing over agricultural output.<sup>146</sup> This gave rise to an "overproduction analysis," essentially arguing that the economy was too productive for its domestic demand, and that without foreign markets it would continue to stagnate.<sup>147</sup> Also, politicians and business leaders were worried by the menace posed by European powers, who sought to tighten their control over foreign markets, thus threatening notions of equal access. Beisner notes that new European tariffs, along with the carving up of China following the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, had the effect of pushing the export issue from "urgent" to "desperate."<sup>148</sup> The resulting paradigm hinged on the notion that the United States would have to increase its exports abroad, and this would require intervention and involvement on the part of the federal government. Thus, the themes of profit, providence, and power that were endemic to the image of the China trade made it especially useful in constructing and legitimizing this perspective, regardless of the material interests involved.

The pattern of trade that solidified in the 1820s and 1830s persisted throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. A greater supply of national economic and trade data following the Civil War help to paint a picture of just how unimportant the trade with China was for the

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<sup>144</sup>. Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>145</sup>. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Turner Thesis*, ed. George Rogers Taylor (1949, repr., Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972), 28.

<sup>146</sup>. Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New*, 76-77.

<sup>147</sup>. McCormick, *China Market*, 34.

<sup>148</sup>. Ibid., 77.

United States. The image of China as an export market had developed throughout the early nineteenth century, but in this respect China remained little more than a disappointment. China consumed less than eight percent of U.S. exports in the period between 1821 and 1825, but this declined to just two percent between 1856 and 1860. By 1877 to 1881 China consumed only 0.4 percent of U.S. exports, and it would never consume more than one percent between 1869 and 1901. What about U.S. imports from China? In this respect, China was marginally more important, but the pattern of declining relative importance is evident here, too. Around four percent of U.S. imports came from China between 1851 and 1855, and this fell steadily to just under three percent between 1897 and 1901. Is it possible that U.S. trade grew tremendously in this period, thus concealing the real value of the China trade? Total U.S. trade was nearly fourteen percent of Gross National Product (GNP) between 1869 and 1873, and this fell to under twelve percent of GNP between 1897 and 1901, never surpassing fifteen percent.<sup>149</sup> Peter Schran has concluded that the trade was of greater relative value to China than it was to the United States.<sup>150</sup>

Though the China trade diminished in its relative importance, it still grew in absolute terms, albeit inconsistently. While it may have been less and less important for the U.S. as a whole, it was still very profitable to those few enterprises that could survive its uncertainty. Furthermore, there were a few industries whose exports to China were particularly profitable and important. Cotton cloth, tobacco products, and later in the century, petroleum products such as kerosene, were the most prominent exports to China.<sup>151</sup> Peter Schran notes that while China was a large market for cotton and tobacco products in particular, the export sectors of these industries

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<sup>149</sup>. Peter Schran, "Commercial Relations between the U.S. and China," in *America's China Trade in Historical Perspective*, John K. Fairbank and Ernest R. May, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 239.

<sup>150</sup>. Ibid., 258.

<sup>151</sup>. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Involvement*, 130.

were small, meaning that China was only ever of moderate importance even to the businesses in these industries.<sup>152</sup> Thus, as in the previous two periods, the China trade rhetoric is best explained by its ability to reinforce national paradigms with fantasy rather than with facts.

The fantasy of an untapped profitable trade with China had special relevance during the hard times of the 1890s, and it helped to make the notion of the “Open Door” the driving force in foreign affairs for this period. As McCormick has explained, the fantasy of a limitless export market in China gained traction because of its perceived ability to solve the overproduction crisis at the root of depression of 1893.<sup>153</sup> The rhetoric during this period changes in two principal ways from the previous generation. First, the undying belief in the potential of China as an export market was reinforced by moderate growth among certain sectors such as kerosene and cotton.<sup>154</sup> Success in these sectors did much to develop the hope that Americans could tap into the limitless Chinese consumer demands, and so the rhetoric becomes more industry-focused and data-driven. Second, businessmen became especially interested in the development of Chinese infrastructure, both as a profitable endeavor and as a means to stimulate the Chinese consumer market.

China’s immediate allure lay in its prospects as a consumer market. If the Chinese demanded kerosene, cotton, and tobacco, why not also clothes and shoes and all of the other goods that the industrializing United States could provide? There were estimated to be between three hundred and four hundred million Chinese, and “natural resources apparently inexhaustible,” which were surely an enticing prospect among the business elites who sought new customers to allay stagnating demand at home.<sup>155</sup> Thomas Jernigan advised his readers of

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<sup>152</sup>. Schran, “Commercial Relations between the U.S. and China,” 250-257.

<sup>153</sup>. McCormick, *China Market*, 22.

<sup>154</sup>. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Involvement*, 130.

<sup>155</sup>. Thomas R. Jernigan, “A Hindrance to Our Foreign Trade,” *The North American Review* 163, no. 479 (October 1896): 447-448, American Periodical Series Online, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=204669271&>



*The North American Commercial Review*, “It is believed that the figures which show that the importation of cotton goods from the United States is annually increasing in value also attest that every advance in civilization by China will open new markets for such goods.”<sup>156</sup> Jernigan’s report is filled with facts and tables about the growth of the trade, which did especially well in 1896. Indeed, in the minds of the business class China was finally “awakening” as had long been hoped for, just in time to meet the domestic crisis.<sup>157</sup> Jernigan connected the opportunities in China with the depression at home, instructing:

The American citizen who comprehends the geographical position of his country, and measures, even in mental vision, its vast capabilities, cannot fail to see in the future, if not in the present, the need of new markets for our producers and merchants. However great the consumption at home, the extent of the industry of our people knows no standard in history by which to gauge the achievements of future results. In Asia there is already heard of the retreating footsteps of a conservatism which has heretofore stood as an impenetrable barrier to all progress; and barbarians no longer threaten the gates of civilization.<sup>158</sup>

By 1898 Congressman William Sulzer was proclaiming, “Let me say to the businessmen of America, look to the land of the setting sun, look to the Pacific! There are teeming millions there who will ere long want to be fed and clothed the same as we are.”<sup>159</sup> Despite the fact that only a few sectors were showing significant growth, the exaggerated image of the China trade was a powerful symbol that was perfectly suited to constructing the Open Door model of U.S. foreign relations.

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SrchMode=3&sid=3&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1207712816&clientId=31806&aid=2 (accessed April 7, 2008).

<sup>156</sup>. Thomas R. Jernigan, “Commercial Trend of China,” *The North American Review* 165, no. 488 (July 1897): 70, American Periodical Series Online, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=19&did=204672561&SrchMode=1&sid=2&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1207705380&clientId=31806> (accessed April 7, 2008).

<sup>157</sup>. Jernigan, “A Hindrance to Our Foreign Trade,” 445.

<sup>158</sup>. Jernigan, “A Hindrance to Our Foreign Trade,” 445.

<sup>159</sup>. *Congressional Record*, 55th Congress, 2nd Session, 1898, XXXI, Part 6, 5906 quoted in Paul Varg, *The Making of a Myth: The United States and China, 1897-1912* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1968), 15.

The image of the China market was also reconstructed with a focus on investment in infrastructure and its potential to increase China's domestic demand. Paul Varg explains that the lack of transportation networks and the lack of Chinese income meant that China would not be able to live up to the image that Americans had created for it.<sup>160</sup> U.S. government officials who spent time in China became increasingly aware of the limitations posed by a lack of transportation infrastructure to distribute the goods that they wanted to sell.<sup>161</sup> In 1895 the U.S. Consul in Shanghai warned that the Chinese roads were so bad that "the holes and ruts that deface them force travelers to desert them for the tracks by the sides, although these in wet weather are but quagmires, and in dry weather, several inches in dust."<sup>162</sup> Without roads, how would Americans move their wares to the inner reaches of the country to reach the "teeming millions?" In 1899 the U.S. Consul-General in Hong Kong, Rounseville Wildman, wrote, "Another great point that American exporters overlook is that 99 percent of China is still closed to the world. When the magazine writer refers in glowing terms to the 400,000,000 inhabitants of China, he forgets that 350,000,000 are a dead letter so far as commerce is concerned."<sup>163</sup> While American businessmen could easily opine on the need for investment in China, actually getting Americans to commit their precious capital to China was another matter altogether. However nice it may have sounded to theorize about selling a product to four hundred million people, the companies had to meet their bottom line. Despite the still-present reality gap, the steady increase in government involvement in China and the efforts of organizations such as the

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<sup>160</sup>. Varg, *The Myth of the China Market*, 38.

<sup>161</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>162</sup>. U.S. Bureau of Statistics, Department of State, *Special Consular Reports, Highways of Commerce* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1895), 12:597 quoted in Varg, *The Myth of the China Market*, 38.

<sup>163</sup>. Report of Rounseville Wildman, Consul-General in Hong Kong, *Commercial Relations of the United States with Foreign Countries During the Year 1899* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1900) 1:874 quoted in Varg, *The Myth of the China Market*, 38.

American Asiatic Association meant that the China trade had never had so many advocates.<sup>164</sup>

The emerging “overproduction thesis,” had only one solution: exports. Thus, what mattered more than reality was the desired reality, and the promise of profits in China helped political and business elites to create such a climate where this was possible.

The China trade rhetoric of the late nineteenth century was also infused with the usual providential spirit, however it exhibited an even harsher racial and religious tone, partially as a result of increased missionary activity in China. Though the Open Door policy seems rooted in international economic and political principles, it was very heavily driven by the dual “civilizing” influences of Anglo-Saxonism and missionary Christianity. Furthermore, from the Pacific coast of the United States the pseudo-prophecy so often invoked throughout the last century finally seemed close enough to be realized. Reginald Horsman puts it best:

The American thrust into the Pacific was to be the grand culmination of the movement that had begun so long ago in the highlands of central Asia. Those Aryan tribesmen who had begun their march with the sun thousands of years before were now to return home. What had so long been prophesied was to come to pass: arts, sciences, religion, the whole of civilization were to return to their original birthplace after completing a circuit of the globe.<sup>165</sup>

The discourse from this period shows that the opinion-shaping elite did not simply want to engage China commercially; they saw commerce as a way of correcting what they perceived to be an inherently flawed Chinese character and culture. The Open Door was meant to allow for cultural as well as economic expansion, and the use of the providential rhetoric that had developed over the past century helped to construct this national paradigm.

The Open Door Policy hinged on the notion that commercial engagement with the East would change its culture as well as its economy. Thomas McCormick explains that “the

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<sup>164</sup>. James J. Lorence, “Organized Business and the Myth of the China Market: The American Asiatic Association, 1898-1937.” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 71, pt.4 (1981): 1-112.

<sup>165</sup>. Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 286.

translation of the China market from myth to reality,” was set off by the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895.<sup>166</sup> In addition to the opening of new ports and the allowance of foreign direct investment in China, many in the United States hoped China had learned that it “would have to emulate the Westernizing ways of her Japanese conqueror.”<sup>167</sup> The *New York Times* hoped Japan would be the “Light of Asia” and a “Great Civilizing Influence,” and proposed that its “great aim” was to “prevent the ruin of China.”<sup>168</sup> If America was supposed to be marching ever westward, it would have made sense that Japan would industrialize first, followed by China. Japan’s victory over China in battle was further vindication that the West was winning in Asia, and that the course of human civilization was indeed flowing along its natural path. Japan’s strength, in the eyes of Americans, was its liberalism. As Jernigan argued, China’s “conservatism” was what had previously “stood as an impenetrable barrier to all progress,” but Japan’s victory in the war was seen as removing this barrier.<sup>169</sup> A missionary publication predicted that Japan and China would “adopt the methods and appliances of modern warfare” and, “so far as they find it for their advantage, the civilization of the West. Railways, steamships, telegraphic wires, and the various kinds of machinery are sure to be employed in these Eastern lands.”<sup>170</sup> Civilization would be carried out by industrialization as well as by missionaries.

John Hay’s Open Door Notes in 1899 and 1900 also reinforce the providential image of America as the civilizing savior of China. Hay’s insistence on “maintaining the integrity of

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<sup>166</sup>. McCormick, *China Market*, 60.

<sup>167</sup>. Ibid., 61.

<sup>168</sup>. “Japan’s Ideals and Hopes,” *New York Times*, August 16, 1896, 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=114&did=103384117&SrchMode=1&sid=7&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1207733372&clientId=31806> (accessed April 9, 2008).

<sup>169</sup>. Jernigan, “A Hindrance to Our Foreign Trade,” 445.

<sup>170</sup>. Henry Blodget, “The War Between China and Japan,” *The Missionary Herald* 91, no. 2 (February 1895): 51, American Periodical Series Online, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index> (accessed April 7, 2008).

China” from colonizing Europeans’ “spheres of interest” highlight the desire to reform China, not just to use it as a market.<sup>171</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan explained the difference between civilizing commerce and colonial commerce, and emphasized the danger of the latter:

If the advantage to us is great of a China open to commerce, the danger to us and to her is infinitely greater of a China enriched and strengthened by the material advantages we have to offer, but uncontrolled in the use of them by any clear understanding, much less any full acceptance, or the mental and moral forces which have generated, and which in large measure govern, our political and social action.<sup>172</sup>

Mahan and others saw open commerce as a way to fundamentally change China, and they feared what might happen if China were to have the industrial or commercial power of the United States without also having the “mental and moral forces” of the United States. Thus, the potential partitioning of China by the European powers threatened not only American enterprise, but also the perception that America could engage and change China through commerce. Never mind the record of American action in China; in rhetoric, at least, America’s civilizing mission would be central to its export-driven foreign policy.

Finally, the rhetoric of the late nineteenth century evidences a heightened preoccupation with the balance of power, culminating in the issuance of the Open Door Notes in response to Europeans’ plans to partition China amongst themselves. The enunciation of the Open Door Policy was merely a formal declaration of what had implicitly been the American stance for quite some time, but it drew upon the long history of neutrality and independence from European affairs.<sup>173</sup> In 1899 the China trade was of less importance than it had been decades earlier, yet the prospect of abandoning access to China to the Europeans was out of the question. Americans

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<sup>171</sup> John Hay, First Open Door Note, U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1899* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), 131-133; John Hay, Second Open Door Note, U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1901*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902), Appendix, 12.

<sup>172</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, “Effects of Asiatic Conditions Upon International Policies,” *North American Review* 170 (November, 1900): 609-626. American Periodical Series Online. <http://proquest.umi.com/> (accessed April 9, 2008).

<sup>173</sup> McCormick, *China Market*, 127.

were concerned not only with losing the potential future profits in China, which were always just over the horizon, but also with jeopardizing their position in the Pacific. Thus, the balance of power rhetoric helped to construct the Open Door Policy in a way that profit alone could not.

As the European powers moved to partition China, the business and political classes were concerned primarily with the threat to U.S. business. The New York *Commercial Advertiser* lamented, “‘The Orient is just beginning to be a purchaser in our markets for things which every civilized nation has always bought to its capacity,’” and insisted that the United States had to “‘retain free entry into the China market...It must be clearly understood that while armed Europe is welcome to steal Chinese territory ..., we cannot submit to being excluded from trade in that territory.’”<sup>174</sup> Thus, from a business perspective China’s territorial integrity was not as important as access to its markets. American concern over European aggression was also rooted in fear that it would compromise progress in the Pacific. The long pattern of American expansion in Alaska, Midway Island, and Hawaii culminated in the acquisition of the Philippines and Guam during the Spanish-American War, giving the U.S. a “commercial entrepôt to the China market.”<sup>175</sup> But what would happen if China was partitioned and the U.S. was left at the mercy of the various owners of the separate ports? In 1898 Charles Denby insisted, “Partition would tend to destroy our markets. The Pacific Ocean is destined to bear on its bosom a larger commerce than the Atlantic.”<sup>176</sup> The decades-old vision of commanding the entire Pacific seemed to be at stake. John Hay explained, “The inherent weakness of our position is this: we do not want to rob China ourselves, and our public opinion will not permit us to interfere, with an

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<sup>174</sup>. New York *Commercial Advertiser*, January 26, 1898, 6, quoted in LaFeber, *The American Search for Opportunity*, 169.

<sup>175</sup>. McCormick, 107.

<sup>176</sup>. Quoted in McCormick, *China Market*, 77.

army, to prevent others from robbing her. Besides, we have no army.”<sup>177</sup> Faced with limited options, Hay issued the Open Door Notes in 1899 and 1900 to attempt to secure the China market for future American enterprise. The rhetorical elements of profit, providence and the balance of power were essential in constructing the late eighteenth century worldview that made the China trade of such valuable importance that it had to be protected, at least in word, if not deed. However, the time for direct involvement to protect the China trade was not far off.

### **Conclusion**

The nineteenth century China trade rhetoric outstripped its reality because political actors were able to use the themes of profit, providence, and power to form a fantastical China that helped to construct broader national paradigms. The China trade discourse was indeed shaped by the American desire for legitimacy, for landed expansion, and for an Open Door empire, but these viewpoints were also very much shaped by the mythical lore of the China market. The myth of the China market has been lurking in the background during many, if not most of the key moments in the history of American foreign relations. The mythical China was resilient enough to survive in the face of disappointing economic reality, and it morphed into a darker, but equally mythical image of the China trade that grew more common during the late nineteenth century. The themes of profit, providence, and power were consistently invoked by successive generations, and each shaped the dialogue in ways particular to itself, and in ways that are still evident today.

Just as the search for legitimacy, the desire for expansion, and need for overseas markets dictated the thinking of eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans, broad themes hold great sway over contemporary foreign relations as well. Armed with even more proliferated mass

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<sup>177</sup>. Hay to Adee, September 14, 1900, McKinley Papers quoted in LaFeber, *The American Search for Opportunity*, 175.

media, national paradigms are advanced by slogans such as the Cold War, globalization, and the War on Terror. Are contemporary voters and politicians willing to overlook the colossal U.S. trade deficit and the hemorrhaging of traditional industrial jobs because trade with China informs a modern sense of globalization? Indeed, an examination of current attitudes about China might also reveal that the division between public sentiment about China and public perceptions about trade with China has persisted. Americans can envision toxic toothpaste and brutal suppression of Tibetans, while also holding in their minds the images of blazing GDP growth, rapid modernization, and tremendous investment potential. The first American merchants set out in search of dragons to trade with, and their descendants diligently kept the search going, at least rhetorically. Perhaps, after all this time nothing has changed, and the United States is still going abroad in search of dragons to trade with and monsters to destroy.

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