

[Markov on Norwood, 'Trading Freedom: How Trade with China Defined Early America'](#)

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Dael A. Norwood. *Trading Freedom: How Trade with China Defined Early America*. American Beginnings, 1500-1900 Series. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. Illustrations. 312 pp.

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Dael A. Norwood's *Trading Freedom* traces the history of American trade with China through the long nineteenth century, from the early republic to the Gilded Age. Norwood argues that leading statesmen, merchants, naval officers, and opinion makers at different times presented the China trade as both a wondrous cornucopia of riches and a frightening *bête noire*. He also argues that this trade helped Americans define the republic and its place in the world. Though the book is at its heart a study of the American political economy, focusing on the evolution of the concept of the "China trade" and its implications, *Trading Freedom* skillfully incorporates, depending on the period explored, the relative economic significance and social impact of trade in general. Indeed, *Trading Freedom* engages with a remarkable number of historiographic fields, from economic history and US diplomatic relations with the Qing Empire to studies of the slave trade and the history of capitalism.

Trading Freedom is arranged chronologically. The first chapter highlights the importance of the China trade for the early republic as an engine for an economy that no longer had access to British ports in the Caribbean, as well as a marker of national glory, status, and recognition. However, broad support for this trade did not last into the following decades, despite the increased importance of American merchantmen in the profitable, if morally dubious, commercial venture. Norwood argues that divides over the potential dangers and utility of trade with China not only mirrored but in fact also partially framed contemporary American political divides. If the promotion of the China trade by the Federalists and the suspicion of it by the Democratic Republicans aligns with existing scholarship of the First Party System, Norwood's account of this trade's influence on the so-called Bank Wars or the contentious issue of rechartering the Second Bank of the United States is particularly insightful.[1] *Trading Freedom* adds to the history of global capitalism by showing how American traders contributed to British imperial designs of liberalizing trade with China by shipping large quantities of British Indian opium while backed by bills from British banks. This volatile trade was also supported in the 1820s and '30s by specially designed bills from the Bank of the United States that could be redeemed in British banks. Paradoxically, this occurred in an era of heightened Anglo-American tensions. Norwood argues that these bills' very success, combined with the China traders' popular reputation as pernicious specie-draining agents working with British merchants, contributed materially to damaging the standing of the central bank. Thus, Norwood expands the reasoning behind the Jacksonian position to close the Bank of the United States beyond the traditional domestic

explanations of competing interests of coastal and western states, as well as nation-building.[2]

A central contention of *Trading Freedom* is that the China trade was an important element of American politics and culture in the long nineteenth century even when it was relatively marginal to overall American commerce. This is in line with recent scholarship on the history of capitalism that expands the field beyond a singular focus on economic analysis. Indeed, trade with China became less and less important to American commerce in the mid-nineteenth century. Norwood perhaps overstates his case for the influence of this trade with regard to transcontinental railroad promotion, basing his argument on the boosterism of Asa Whitney and his dream of tying the Union together commercially by the railroad to Pacific ports with access to the China trade. Particularly astutely, *Trading Freedom* maps the confluence of this trade with American racial politics and relations with Great Britain. Norwood posits that American elite and public interest in the First Opium War and its rush to establish formal relations with the Qing Empire at its end were driven by the fears of many American politicians, particularly the slaveholders who were in power for much of the antebellum period. They were not so much concerned with the potential loss of US merchants' profits (based in Northern ports) as with Britain's attack on Chinese sovereignty. They equated this with what they saw as British attacks on American sovereignty, through the proposed use of the Royal Navy to stop suspected slave traders at sea under the American flag and Britain's support of abolitionist politics, which in turn threatened American slavery. Conversely, a number of Northern politicians, such as John Quincy Adams, supported the British position. The Treaty of Wanghia (1844), which established formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the Qing Empire, enjoyed broad support because it both helped Northern-based merchants and supported competition with the United Kingdom. However, as Norwood points out, while the treaty brought in a new stream of official dispatches from diplomats and naval officers focusing American public interest on China, this new source of information did not necessarily benefit the China traders. Similarly, the debate over the "coolie trade" of indentured servants from China that erupted in the 1850s mapped on to a more explicit North-South divide. Norwood argues that this not only was due to Northern traders' engagement in this pernicious traffic but was also a product of Southern planters' fears that this labor force would successfully compete with enslaved labor. Southern Democrats attacked the "coolie trade," correctly if hypocritically, as not much better than the slave trade. Thus, the China trade contributed to sectional divides.

Trading Freedom posits that the Reconstruction Era American relations with China and attitudes toward Chinese immigrants were part of the same "unfinished revolution" of Eric Foner's famous work, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1989). In the chapter "A Propped Open Door," Norwood argues that the break in the stranglehold of the slaveholding elite over US foreign policy as a result of the American Civil War resulted in changed official attitude toward China and the China trade. The author describes both the 1868-70 Chinese mission to the West (headed by Anson Burlingame, previously US minister plenipotentiary to China appointed under the Lincoln administration) and Secretary of State William Seward's policy toward China and Chinese immigrants during Reconstruction as pushing away from white supremacy in world politics at the same time parts of the Republican Party were trying to revolutionize race relations in the United States. However, neither the "revolution" of Reconstruction in the South nor ties with China were finished or lasting. Norwood convincingly argues that racial tropes of Chinese immigrants as "coolies," slavish and involuntarily arrived in the United States, were built on earlier depictions by Southern publicists and helped push the argument against Chinese settlement, ultimately resulting in the Chinese

Exclusion Act of 1882. Finally, Norwood argues that the Gilded Age brought about a distinct conception of American commerce with China, which he dubs the “Chinese Market.” This approach saw China as a minor outlet for excess American manufacturing more than a source of luxury goods and less important to American self-perception.

Trading Freedom is a model of a book that is able to examine American history beyond not only the national lens but also established fields with broader scopes, such as Atlantic history, without any loss of coherence and readability. As Norwood points out, for nineteenth-century Americans, the world was “no less whole, no less round, and no less known to be so than our own” (p. 14). Indeed, perhaps “our own” world is in some ways less round, despite technological progress of communications and transportation. As Daniel Rogers noted in *Atlantic Crossings*, American policymakers often look at issues, such as health care, through a narrowly national lens, playing on an “exceptionalist theme,” which was not the norm before the Second World War.[3] *Trading Freedom* makes use of the truly global traffic of goods and people that encompassed the American China trade to define the United States in a century before postwar exceptionalism. Though possibly difficult to successfully replicate for all spheres, the book’s approach deserves to be emulated by scholars.

Notes

[1]. Gerald Leonard and Saul Cornell, *The Partisan Republic: Democracy, Exclusion, and the Fall of the Founders’ Constitution, 1780s-1830s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[2]. Michael Trapani, *Panic in the Senate: The Fight over the Second Bank of the United States and the American Presidency* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2021); and Jane Knodell, *The Second Bank of the United States: “Central” Banker in an Era of Nation-Building, 1816-1836* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[3]. Daniel Rogers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3-4.

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