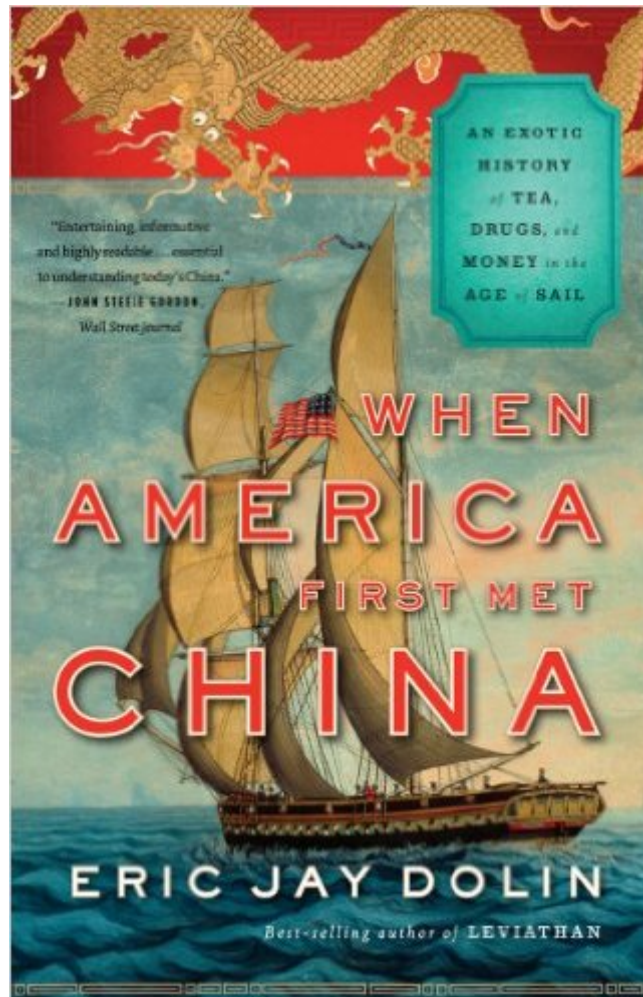


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# When America First Met China: An Exotic History Of Tea, Drugs, And Money In The Age Of Sail



## Synopsis

Ancient China collides with newfangled America in this epic tale of opium smugglers, sea pirates, and dueling clipper ships. Brilliantly illuminating one of the least-understood areas of American history, best-selling author Eric Jay Dolin now traces our fraught relationship with China back to its roots: the unforgiving nineteenth-century seas that separated a brash, rising naval power from a battered ancient empire. It is a prescient fable for our time, one that surprisingly continues to shed light on our modern relationship with China. Indeed, the furious trade in furs, opium, and beche-de-merâ •a rare sea cucumber delicacyâ •might have catalyzed Americaâ™s emerging economy, but it also sparked an ecological and human rights catastrophe of such epic proportions that the reverberations can still be felt today. Peopled with fascinating charactersâ •from the â œFinancier of the Revolutionâ • Robert Morris to the Chinese emperor Qianlong, who considered foreigners inferior beingsâ •this page-turning saga of pirates and politicians, coolies and concubines becomes a must-read for any fan of Nathaniel Philbrickâ™s *Mayflower* or Mark Kurlanskyâ™s *Cod*. 16 pages of color, 83 black-and-white illustrations

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Opium War of 1840-42 demarcated the ancient and the modern for China; it was arguably the most important turning point and defining moment in Chinese history. However, if you, like most Chinese who learn this part of history in middle school, believe that the Chinese were completely innocent victims and the British the heinous aggressors, your knowledge about the war is simplistic

at best. You have missed the crucial details that played a key role in leading to the war. Fortunately, they have come to light in Eric Jay Dolin's new (and so far his best) historical narrative, *When America First Met China*. Dolin's book unveils a major fault line between China and the West in the legal system and cultural tradition in addition to diplomatic awkwardness for the Qing officials and ethnic and cultural centralism for both the Qing and the British governments (they both viewed themselves the civilized peoples whereas their opponents the barbarians) before the 19th century. This is best illustrated in the detailed account of the Lady Hughes incident on the eve of November 24, 1784, when one Chinese was accidentally killed and three injured by a ceremonial cannon fire. In retributive justice, the British deemed the tragedy accidental and the gunner innocent, whereas the Chinese, holding the tradition of "Life for Life," insisted the gunner be executed. In legal procedure, the principle "innocent unless proven guilty" for the British was turned on its head for the Chinese ("guilty unless proven innocent") who saw no professional lawyer much less knew the concepts of jury and legal defense. When the British refused to turn in the gunner, the Chinese abducted George Smith, the supercargo of the Lady Hughes, forcing the British to their knees.

Eric Jay Dolin's, *'When America First China'* aims to detail the interactions that the early United States had with China so that today's Americans can better understand the long history that has connected the two nations. The book is written well, is succinct and includes some excellent use of material history - paintings, etc. The book compares nicely to another book about the United States' interactions with another Asian nation, *The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan*, which is more of a cultural history than an economic one. Beginning with the time when the US was a part of Great Britain, Dolin narrates an intriguing tale of just what brought the US to China's shores - profit. The title of the book tells you what are the main focuses of the book. First we begin with tea, that product that we Americans don't drink as much anymore, but that once fueled faster and faster Clipper ships across the world, seeking to bring the leaves of tea to the cups of Americans. But tea gave out to more lucrative goods. And the center of the book focuses on that one good that led to conflict and misery for many in China- Opium. It is in this section of the book that Dolin truly shines as he describes the Opium trade and the two wars that resulted from Chinese efforts to block its importation. But this section is more of a history of China and Great Britain, rather than China and the US (and the reason this review is only giving this work four stars rather than five).

This book tells the absolutely fascinating story of America's early relations with China. The overall

scheme is excellent, but I found myself frustrated by poor phrasing, missing pieces and intrusive editorializing. With respect to the editorializing: If a moral conclusion is inescapable, trust the reader to reach that conclusion on his own. If it is not inescapable, then let the reader reach his own conclusion. Don't force your opinion on him. Either way, don't tell the reader what moral judgments he must reach. It is unnecessary and obnoxious to constantly state one's own moral opinions in any written piece. If you can't trust the reader's innate moral sense maybe you should not sell books to him. As to missing pieces, I would think that any book about maritime commerce in the period after the American Revolution, might want to mention the role that concern about the safety of this commerce, and the resultant need for a powerful navy, played in the adoption of the Constitution. One thing I wonder about, even after finishing the book: Did much of the traffic go around Cape Horn? Did any of it?? Was there traffic between China and the U.S. West Coast. I also think it might have been helpful to include a brief description of Chinese history leading up to the beginning of the period treated, and a brief description of the workings of the Chinese government. A very interesting history of the trade between China and Europe is included, and that's great.

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