Anglo-American Rivalry and the Origins of U.S. China Policy*

In the spring of 1843, after a number of lively and often heated debates, the U.S. Congress approved funds for the first U.S. mission to China. President John Tyler spoke of the mission as one of great “magnitude and importance,” and Secretary of State Daniel Webster called it “a more important mission than ever proceeded from this Country, and more important mission than any other, likely to succeed it, in our day.” Indeed, this mission, led by former Congressman Caleb Cushing, resulted in the first U.S. treaty with China (the Treaty of Wangxia, 1844), which secured trading privileges for American merchants and opened a host of Chinese ports to serve as outlets for surplus American production. Contained within the treaty was also the first appearance of a most favored nation clause—inserted in order to assure the United States of the same privileges in China as might be granted any other nation.

Historians seeking the origins of the United States’ China policy have, however, dismissed the Cushing mission and the Wangxia Treaty. They have instead placed the inception of U.S. China policy at the turn of the nineteenth century with the proclamation of the Open Door policy and the possession of the Philippines as means to access the China market. Working on the thesis that cooperation and comity existed between the United States and Britain, these scholars argue that prior to the Open Door policy the United States merely followed the lead set by Britain in China. Seeing the absence of a

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truly independent American China policy, the eminent China historian John King Fairbank termed the notion of a U.S. China policy prior to 1898 a “misconception.”

In contrast to this conventional interpretation, this article argues that U.S. China policy—that is, active government participation in promoting its merchants’ interests in China and a positive role in the penetration of the China market—began more than a half century before the Open Door notes and was in fact reflected in the Treaty of Wangxia. This article also challenges the assumption of Anglo-American comity in China in the early and mid nineteenth century—something that even the purveyors of this view admit was an anomaly to the general antagonistic state of Anglo-American relations in this period. Indeed, this article argues that it was a bitter rivalry with Britain for markets and influence in the Pacific that forced U.S. politicians and bureaucrats to assume a positive role in East Asia in the early 1840s. For decades, American merchants in China had requested greater U.S. government presence, but these requests went ignored until Britain gained new and improved trading rights in the wake of the Opium War in 1842. These new rights by their rivals forced American politicians either to move to formalize trade relations with China and secure similar privileges, or to face the possibility of the loss of a potentially large market to the British. The mission to China and the treaty that resulted from it was the reflection of a strong and autonomous China policy, a policy that found another voice in the Open Door notes half a century later.

What follows is an exploration of why and at what point U.S. politicians and officials became interested in direct intervention in China, and thus constructed the United States’ foundational China policy. This article shows how the dream

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4. Fairbank, “American China Policy to 1898.”
of access to the China market was a driving force in the early nineteenth century behind the American policy of westward expansion. From Thomas Jefferson to John Tyler, every president in the early nineteenth century constructed foreign, domestic, and economic policy around the lure and promise of the East Asian market. Americans’ hegemonic desires and growing economic maturity had already pushed China to the center of U.S. foreign policy and domestic economy in the early nineteenth century. But it was the threat of British monopoly of the Pacific markets that forced the U.S. government to move from a passive to an active role in Americans’ interaction with China, and which led to the direct articulation of a China policy in the form of the Wangxia Treaty of 1844.

This exposure of the Anglo-American rivalry at the heart of America’s early China policy also solves the puzzle of the purported aberration in Anglo-American relations in China often noted by past diplomatic historians. Where scholars previously saw comity and thus an anomaly, I show that rivalry and antagonism between the United States and Britain in China did exist, just as it did between the two powers everywhere else in the world. This understanding forces us to revise our views of the system of Western penetration into China (or the treaty port system) that emerged following the Opium War. This penetration did not occur, as often portrayed, as a collaborative conspiracy among Western powers to exploit China, but rather as a competition among them. Here we find each nation vying for economic power in a land of quiescent yet latent profit, and determined not to let the other gain an advantage.

**Interpretations of Cooperation in Anglo-American Relations in China**

China scholars have consistently emphasized cooperation rather than conflict in Anglo-American relations in China in the nineteenth century. A corollary to this view of Anglo-American comity downplays the independence of U.S. foreign policy in regard to China in deference to Britain’s dominant role. Scholars argue that Britain held the initiative in China, and the United States remained content to allow the British to dictate the terms of trade in China, accepting and taking advantage of British use of force to open the country to Western penetration. That is, the United States simply followed in Britain’s wake. In this context, the Treaty of Wangxia is commonly seen not as an American initiative but rather as a Chinese response, that is, in the words of Tong Tè-kong, as simply “a natural sequence of the growing Chinese policy of appeasement that followed the Opium War.”

This view grew out of Tyler Dennett’s *Americans in Eastern Asia*. Published in 1922, this was the first comprehensive work to cover U.S. foreign relations in East Asia in the nineteenth century, and has remained to this day the primary

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reference on the subject. Organized as a chronological, blow-by-blow account of American diplomacy, Dennett’s theme revolved around the necessity of American cooperation with other Western powers, especially Britain, in shaping a stable and peaceful Asian order conducive to U.S. commercial interests. This cooperative policy, according to Dennett, waxed in the midnineteenth century (only encountering minimal friction in the 1850s), and waned in the late nineteenth century with the emergence of an isolationist agenda and the 1898 occupation of the Philippines.6 In explaining the U.S. government’s decision to pursue a treaty with the Chinese in 1843, Dennett moved effortlessly from the complaints of American merchants in 1839 and their petition to Congress for greater representation, to the point where “Congress becomes interested.” Dennett simply credited the growth of trade and a newfound interest of the American public in China as the motive behind this action.7 But for Dennett, this action did not rise to an expression of an independent U.S. China policy.

John King Fairbank took this point to an extreme. In his article “‘American China Policy’ to 1898: A Misconception,” published in 1970, and in his general history The United States and China, Fairbank argued that the United States had no China policy prior to 1898. For Fairbank, Britain’s involvement and activity in China dictated American involvement in China for the entire nineteenth century. “The most basic decisions affecting American activity in China were

Figure 2: Saint Francisco Fort, Macao. Watercolor by George R. West, draftsman to the Cushing mission, 1844. (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Caleb Cushing Papers.)

made in London,” Fairbank wrote. For Fairbank, American Far East involvement can only be understood in the broader context of British imperial policy in the region. The United States did not have a voice in the treaty system institution, rather the entire institution ran on British decisions and for the eventual advantage of all Western capitalists. As such, the United States did not have a China policy, rather the British controlled everything and Americans took advantage of the benefits secured by the British. Fairbank noted that this situation led scholars to the misconception that the United States had purely economic rather than political interests in China. Because Americans articulated political neutrality at the time, Fairbank argued, they came to believe that the United States indeed maintained complete political neutrality. In fact, according to Fairbank, the international system backed by Britain allowed the United States the space to take a political interest in China but abstain from forming a political agenda, to reap the privileges gained by Britain while evading the moral burden that came with securing those privileges. “Our national interest was to keep up with the Joneses, and also be friends with the Wangs and Lins whose house the Joneses were breaking into.”

Other histories of modern China generally follow Fairbank’s lead. Warren I. Cohen glossed over U.S. diplomatic presence in China in the nineteenth century, summing up with the statement, “The Americans followed the British.” Immanuel Hsu, in his much-acclaimed and many times reprinted The Rise of Modern China, recounted this period of history by emphasizing the cooperation of the Western powers in China. He detailed how the U.S. plenipotentiary William B. Reed in the first treaty revision in 1858 was instructed to “cooperate” with the British and French while reassuring the Chinese that the United States had no designs on its territory. Hsu has also emphasized Commodore Josiah Tattnall’s famous utterance “blood is thicker than water” as he went to the aid of British marines under fire from the Chinese in a conflict at Tianjin in 1860.

RIVALRY IN ANGLO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

If such comity of Anglo-American relations actually existed in China, it appears as an odd exception to the enmity that shaped normal relations between the two powers. Everywhere else in the world, Britain and America harbored great hostility toward each other as they competed for markets. Bradford Perkins, who devoted a distinguished career to the study of Anglo-American relations, argued in The Great Rapprochement that the antagonism between the two countries did not subside until the First World War. “Generation after generation [of Americans] had learned to look upon England as

9. Ibid., 413.
the enemy,” he wrote. He noted that John Adams and his contemporaries developed the feeling from events surrounding the American Revolution. John Quincy Adams and his generation, including the merchants who would come to carry out trade with China, learned it from the War of 1812. John Quincy Adams’s grandson, Henry Adams, continued the Anglophobic sentiment when recalling his experiences in London during the Civil War: “It was the hostility of the middle-class which broke our hearts, and turned me into a life-long enemy of everything British.” Indeed, from the time of Thomas Paine, Americans saw their republic as a challenge to the European forms of monarchy and repression, a land of freedom and virtues that would herald a better future for the human race. Britain was the target of the American Revolution and later the foreign antagonist at which abuse would continuously be hurled for its aristocratic and unjust form of government and world domination. As historian Cushing Strout writes, “The role of England in American demonology has been a special one. As America’s most ancient enemy she has been the prime villain of the Old World.”

Yet more than just ideological differences divided the two peoples; very concrete conflicts of interest often put the two countries at odds, and at times very near war. Between 1815 and 1860, for example, the United States concluded commercial agreements with forty-three countries. In each case, and

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especially in Latin America, the United States came into conflict with British diplomats as they struggled to gain similar advantages as those already granted to British merchants. In his article “The United States and British Imperial Expansion, 1815–60,” Kinley J. Brauer showed the threat that British expansion in North America and throughout the world presented to the United States. American merchants saw the British acquisition of colonies as an obstacle to trade and their ability to compete with British merchants; Southern planters viewed British acquisition of African and Latin American colonies as a strategy to break the South’s monopoly in cotton production; and manufacturers worried that Britain would gain control over world markets, saturating them with goods cheaper than they could produce. In the early nineteenth century, 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. As Massachusetts Representative Francis Baylies put it in 1826, Britain pursued a conscious policy “to check, to influence, and to control all nations, by means of her navy and her commerce . . . she has pursued this grand design, with an energy and perseverance, which does infinite credit to her political sagacity and foresight.” Or as the New York Herald noted in 1841, “The progress of British aggrandizement in every part of the world, savage and civilized, ought to alarm all independent nations.”

The United States furthermore faced the threat of British territorial encroachment at home over what Congressman Caleb Cushing called “rival interests.” From very early on, Britain had designs on California and its deep-water ports. The Royal Navy had surveyed the California coast in 1827 and reported that San Francisco “possesses all the requisites for a great naval establishment, and is so advantageously situated with regard to North America and China and the Pacific in general.” By the late 1830s, Britain had a program to acquire California, Mexico, and much of what is today the southwestern United States. In the 1840s Britain actively discouraged Texas from becoming part of the United States, instead recommending that it continue as an independent state and come under the protection of the British Empire. And in the Pacific Ocean it moved on Hawaii. These acts led President Tyler to force the annexation of Texas and to extend the Monroe Doctrine to the Pacific Ocean to keep Britain from anchoring its naval ships there and turning Hawaii into a colony. The United States’ northeastern boundary with British Canada remained unresolved for nearly half a century, and continued to inspire criticism

15. Quoted in ibid., 23–34.
of “our greatest enemy” who has “endeavored to deprive us of this [codfishery in the northern seas],” as Congressman Cushing wrote in a letter to the Massachusetts governor over the border problem. “She sought to cripple our growing strength on the Ocean. She claimed to be allowed military possession of the Lakes. She demanded the use of the Mississippi, though it is wholly within the United States.”

In the late 1830s the “Aroostook War” exploded over the Maine boundary, the New Hampshire boundary had isolated private and public conflicts, and the New York-Niagara border saw inflammatory incidents such as a British Canadian force destroying an American steamboat moored on the U.S. side of the river. As these problems festered, American politicians began supporting an expulsion of Britain from Canada and a Canadian revolutionary movement. Some even began talking of war with Britain. “If the pretensions of Great Britain should unhappily force the United States into war,” Cushing told his congressional colleagues in 1839, “I shall not stop to dispute which of the two, my native land or its foreign enemy, is in the right; but I will be found in the tented field, where death is to be met, or honor won, at the cannon’s mouth.”

As contentious as the Northeastern boundary appeared, the Oregon Territory probably stood as the most potentially explosive confrontation between Britain and the United States, and which nearly did lead them to war. Territorial claims and crises rose and fell for nearly half a century until President James Polk averted war and negotiated a compromise in 1846. The crisis in the

18. “Claims of Citizens of the United States on Denmark” (1826), Cushing Papers, box 200, p. 16; Boston Daily Advertiser and Patriot, July 11–14, 1837, 3; Cushing on the Northeast Boundary, Cushing Papers, box 204.
20. See Articles in the New York Daily Express, December 1837, Cushing Papers, box 204.
mid-1820s ratcheted up tensions when the British seized Astoria, war averted only by declaration of joint occupation in 1827. The British fur trading company, the Hudson Bay Company, was established on the north Pacific coast in 1825, and even as the fur trade declined, the growing importance of the China trade increased the desirability of the Pacific coast ports. “The commerce of the whole world in the Pacific Ocean,” commented the French minister in Washington in 1843, “is going to acquire a development that will give to all places on its shores, susceptible of being used for ports of repair or of commerce, a considerable importance.” As American migration into Oregon increased, and trade grew, the rivalry with Britain flared again. “I think it is our duty to speak freely and candidly, and let England know she can never have an inch of Oregon,” said Congressman John Wentworth of Illinois over the controversy. Missouri Congressman Thomas Hart Benton proposed that “thirty thousand rifles on Oregon will annihilate the Hudson’s Bay Company.” The 1844 elections sent several hawkish and Anglophobic Democrats to the twenty-ninth Congress who called to retain every inch of Oregon. The cry became “fifty-four forty or fight,” in reference to not giving up any land south of the parallel at 54°40’. Elected on the Democratic platform of holding all of Oregon, President Polk felt he had to hold the line, though as tensions rose he privately questioned “whether the judgment of the civilized world would be in our favor in a war waged for a comparatively worthless territory north of forty-nine degrees, which [my] predecessors had over and over again offered to surrender to Great Britain, provided she would yield her pretensions to the country south of that latitude.” Publicly he held fast and the British press grew more antagonistic, with the London Times writing that the British people are “prepared to defend the claims of this country to the utmost, wherever they are seriously challenged.” Even the U.S. minister in London, Louis McLane, wrote home to say that Britain would rather fight than concede more than the territory south of the forty-ninth parallel.

This Anglo-American rivalry went to the heart of U.S. foreign policy. From Canada to Latin America, the respective governments and diplomats constantly attempted to outdo one another. At stake were the markets of the world and economic hegemony. For Britain, with its empire spanning the globe, the aim was to maintain its trade advantage and access to markets and ports. For the United States, the young nation of incipient merchants with a growing economy, the objective was to break into as many markets as possible. These two goals ultimately came into conflict with each other in China.

**Anglo-American Rivalry in China**

By positing cooperation and not rivalry between Britain and the United States in China, scholars have created an anomaly in the history of U.S. diplo-

24. Ibid., 104–5.
matic history. Kinley J. Brauer’s excellent study of Anglo-American conflicts in economic expansion from 1815 to 1860, for example, explores the rivalry between the two powers around the globe, stating that “in virtually all instances . . . [American diplomats] found themselves in conflict with British diplomats. . . Only in China did British and American merchants function in substantial harmony.” While puzzling, or even suspicious, in the face of Anglo-American rivalry elsewhere in the world, this picture of Anglo-American harmony in China has largely been accepted on the authority of the works cited above. Nonetheless, by merely scratching the surface of the archives, one can in fact find a plethora of correspondence and speeches pronouncing the animosity between British and Americans in China.

Early American trade with China has been well documented. Emerging from their newly won independence into a world devoid of the advantages of British colonial marketplaces, the now free American merchants were forced to find new markets. The profitable markets in the Atlantic and the East Indies remained restricted to subjects of the British Empire, which forced American merchants to go anywhere and everywhere else. As J. N. Reynolds, the diarist of the four-year voyage of the USS Potomac into the Pacific Ocean in the early 1830s, put it, “When the war of our revolution had been so gloriously terminated in establishment of our independence, that the maritime spirit and intelligence of our own merchants, no longer shackled by oppressive colonial restrictions, looked abroad to all parts of the globe.” In 1784, the first American merchant ship—the Empress of China—reached Canton carrying ginseng and returning with black tea. The cost of the voyage came to around $120,000, while returns yielded an insubstantial $37,727. Although not profitable, it captured the imagination of the American merchant community, so that by the end of the decade American trade in Canton had become firmly established. The christening voyage carried American ginseng, yet given the American consumer’s growing appetite for Chinese tea, and the limited need of the Chinese for American ginseng, the United States needed to find more trade goods to sell to China. Struggling to keep a trade balance, American merchants soon discovered the attraction of Oregon furs to the Chinese. By 1801, at least fourteen American merchant ships took part in the fur trade, buying pelts from northwestern American Indians to shuttle to China and sell for high profits and returning to New York loaded with tea. High profits attracted more traders so that prior to the outbreak of the War of 1812, over forty

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27. Reynolds, Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac, 373.
28. See Dennett, Americans in Eastern Asia, 7.
American merchant ships frequented Canton each year, delivering almost $6 million worth of U.S. goods annually.  

This growing American presence in the Chinese ports came at the expense of their British counterparts, which ultimately pitted the two powers against each other. Peddling furs in Canton, Americans could beat the British to market and sell teas and silks in England. This created what historian J. Wade Caruthers calls “ill feeling and mistrust.” A comparison of the number of ships trading between the American northwest coast and China shows the correlation between the rise of American ships and the decline of British ships. From 1788 to 1794, Britain had thirty-five ships and America fifteen. From 1795 to 1804, British ships had declined to nine and America’s had increased to fifty. From 1805 to 1814, Britain had only three ships and America forty.

Still, on average, British merchants outdid their American counterparts. They generally exported four or five times as much tea as the Americans, and sometimes over fifteen times as much, and continuously had more vessels exporting the product. During the War of 1812, American merchants nearly stopped visiting China altogether out of fear of capture by the British, and those that did continue found themselves victim to British blockades and pirating. In one instance, a clash between U.S. and British merchant ships resulted in the

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death of the U.S. captain and the seizing of his ship. Indeed, as J. N. Reynolds wrote in the early 1830s, “Our grand competitors, the English, are looking out for every advantage which the new state of things may offer in China—we cannot be idle or indifferent spectators.”

U.S. trade with China resumed with increasing vigor after the lull due to British military activity against American merchants during the War of 1812. By the early 1830s, for example, over sixty U.S. ships visited Canton yearly, exchanging over US$8 million in trade annually. The U.S. House Committee on Commerce remarked as early as 1822 that “with China the American trade is inferior to that of no nation, Great Britain excepted.” Included in this burgeoning trade were new products that contributed directly to the U.S. economy. Cotton, for one, first went out to China in 1826, and increased steadily over the following decades. By the end of the 1830s, U.S. cotton exports to China had increased almost twenty-fold to over a quarter million U.S. dollars. In 1845, the United States exported US$2 million worth of cotton to China—making China an important market for U.S. agriculture. At the same time, many Americans also found enormous profits to be gained by participation in the burgeoning illegal opium trade with China.


Americans had long had aspirations to tap the wealth of the China market and the importance it would certainly come to hold for the U.S. economy. In the imagination of her citizens, America was the long-sought passage to India that their forefathers had pursued centuries ago; it stood as the land that would link the old markets of Europe with the fabulous wealth of the East, complete with ivory and apes and peacocks and gold. As merchants took to the seas to discover the wealth of the China trade, editorials assuaged the fantasies of a young America, and politicians waxed on the glory it would bring. Thomas Hart Benton, the senator and congressman from Missouri, noted that Thomas Jefferson “was the first to propose the North American road to India, and the introduction of Asiatic trade on that road, as well as the strength of growth that it would infuse in the U.S.” Indeed, American politicians and merchants saw Asia as the foundation of commerce from the earliest times, responsible for the rise and fall of nations, and the basis of Britain’s strength and greatness in the nineteenth century. Americans fancied how the seizure of Far East trade would bring the United States to its rightful seat of permanent grandeur. A speech Benton delivered in the Senate captured this mood:

32. Latourette, The History of Early Relations between the United States and China, 49–52.
34. Ibid., 380.
The trade of the Pacific Ocean, of the western coast of North America, and of Eastern Asia, will all take its track; and not only for ourselves, but for posterity. That trade of India which has been shifting its channels from the time of the Phoenicians to the present, is destined to shift once more, and to realize the grand idea of Columbus. The American road to India will also become the European track to that region. The European merchant, as well as the American, will fly across our continent on a straight line to China. The rich commerce of Asia will flow through our center. And where has that commerce ever flowed without carrying wealth and dominion with it?238

Or, as the New York merchant Asa Whitney put it in an address before the Pennsylvania legislature: “Here we stand forever. We reach out one hand to all Asia, and the other to all Europe, willing for all to enjoy the great blessings we possess, claiming free intercourse and exchange of commodities with all, seeking not to subjugate any, but all . . . tributary, and at our will subject to us.”39

Out of this conviction of the United States as the land straddling the old markets of Europe and Asian wealth, the United States, from very early on, formulated a policy of penetration into the Pacific and active commercial engagement with China. Although policymakers did not articulate a China policy per se, the U.S. government did plan the enactment of a more expedient and efficient means to tap the wealth of the Asian market. Or, as Congressman Benton put it in a speech before the Boston Mercantile Library Association, “The channel of Asiatic commerce which has been shifting in its bed from the time of Solomon, and raising up cities and kingdoms wherever it went—(to perish when it left them)—changing its channel for the last time—to become fixed upon its shortest, safest, best, and quickest route, through the heart of our America.”40

Prominent historians of American history have made the case that westward expansion in the nineteenth century took place at the impetus of accessing Asian markets. Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* calls Jefferson “the intellectual father of the American advance to the

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240. Quoted in ibid.
Pacific.” As American and British trappers struggled for economic domination of the Northwest, Jefferson began to entertain the idea of an overland route to the Pacific. He sent Lewis and Clark into the West to navigate the waterways to the Pacific. Although Jefferson did not mention China or Asia markets, Smith says that “Jefferson could hardly have discussed the possibility of a transcontinental route without having the China trade in mind.” Indeed, an examination of the correspondence between Jefferson and Lewis, as undertaken by Joseph Schafer in “The Western Ocean and Oregon History,” reveals the orientation of the mission to Asian commerce. Upon returning from their journey, Lewis wrote to Jefferson that “in obedience to your orders we have penetrated the Continent of North America to the Pacific Ocean and sufficiently explored the interior of the country to affirm that we have discovered the most practicable communication which does exist across the continent by means of the navigable branches of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers.” Lewis goes on to discuss the “immense advantages” to trade the route will have for commerce to China. When the route was discovered the task of occupation began. Norman Graebner, in Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion, argues that the American government and people had clear calculated policy to undertake the possession of the West coast (as opposed to the innate calling of Manifest Destiny). The motivation for this policy came by way of mercantile interests seeking deep-water harbors at the edge of the Pacific which would allow easy penetration into Asia and determine the course of American empire. Key to Graebner’s argument is that the United States had a unified plan for westward expansion that moved it across the North American continent and into the Pacific Ocean for the sake of acquiring ports as launching points into Asia. Congressional debates in the early 1820s clearly reflect this. In December of 1822 and January of 1823, the House took up a bill to make provisions for the occupation of the mouth of the Columbia River, which empties “into the Pacific” which meant merchants’ “trade will naturally be China, Japan and the Philippine Islands.” This trade, New York Congressman Cadwallader D. Colden noted on January 13, 1823, has yielded “profits so large, that they formed the capitals of several mercantile houses, which were considered among the opulent of the city.” Or as Ohio legislator Caleb Atwater stated in 1829, “That this will be the route to China within fifty years from this time, scarcely admits of a doubt.”

41. Ibid., 15.
42. Ibid., 20.
47. Quoted in Smith, Virgin Land, 23.
Despite this interest in the East, the U.S. government did not concern itself directly with China. Decades of American merchant and consular requests for government involvement and diplomatic action failed to elicit even a response from the State Department. This was in part due to the fact that the United States was still small and government resources limited—the government had not the funds to freely spend on diplomacy. But furthermore, a positive government role in the private sphere stood against the philosophical convictions of Americans who railed against monarchical control and the invasion of the state into the affairs of its citizens. Yet there would come a point—indeed many points in time—in which the state needed to play a positive role not only to guarantee economic advantages for its subjects but also for the sake of its very own survival. In China that point would come when Britain negotiated superior trade advan-

tages through military means. Then, and only then, the United States saw the need to send an official mission to China to negotiate a treaty of its own. It was Anglo-American rivalry then that pushed the United States to move from a neutral role to a positive one and act in China.

As Americans’ interaction and fascination with China grew, conflicts with the Chinese government arose which became more than just grievances, and actually hindered Americans conducting trade in China. There were no set taxes or duties in China, but rather a collection of fees that fluctuated arbitrarily. On top of these trade fees, items such as measurement duties for the size of the ship, a “cumshaw tax” in the form of extralegal fees and percentages to Chinese officials, and linguist and comprador fees also were paid out to the Chinese. For example, the owner of the ship Lion from New York had a fine of $2,000 charged to him in 1816 “by the Hoppo [the Western name for the Chinese official in charge of trade at Canton] for suspicion of smuggling on board ship,” which his Chinese trade partner said he had better pay without complaint. On top of this, the Chinese government placed various restrictions on trade, such as the prohibition of ships carrying only specie, trading in opium, or the export of bullion or rice. And saltpeter—a key ingredient in the making of gunpowder—could only be sold to the government. Furthermore, the government put strict limitations on the movement of foreign merchants. This became a serious issue among all foreign merchants doing business in China, not just Americans, as they were confined to only the single port of Canton to trade and could not enter the cities, could not bring women, and were limited in the number of servants they employed. All this created a general feeling of inequality and resentment among all foreign merchants residing and doing business in China. But even more so, the merchants had no channel through which to address grievances; no diplomatic envoy existed to represent their interests. The ransacking of the ship Wabash of Baltimore and the killing of its crew by fifteen Chinese as it anchored at Macao in 1817, for example, could only be written home about in a letter to the State Department. Then there was the case of Francis Terranova, who accidentally killed a Chinese woman in 1821. Chinese authorities demanded that the American captain of the ship which employed Terranova turn him over so that justice could be served. To achieve this end, the Chinese enacted an embargo against American trade. Without any diplomatic channels, the American merchants could do nothing but oblige. Terranova was subsequently executed by strangulation by the Canton government.

Confronting such an atmosphere, American merchants in China had, from the beginning, petitioned the U.S. government for representation. Although a

52. For a full account, see Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*, 1–2.
U.S. consul in Canton was appointed as early as 1786, the appointees were either supercargoes or merchants who stayed on from a journey to oversee trade; they had no funds or resources and often did not draw a salary. As early as 1807 a group of thirteen American merchants, headed by Daniel Stansbury of Perkins and Company, penned a letter to the president of the United States requesting “a more efficient consular establishment be formed.” They further bemoaned that “every European nation has one or more experienced physicians attached to their factories, who take no pay for their services; this has brought the Americans of all classes to the situation of paupers, degrading to themselves as individuals, and to the flag they sail and live under.” In his records of the Pacific voyage of the USS Potomac, J. N. Reynolds suggested that “it is time our public vessels were on the ground, under judicious instructions, that our knowledge may keep pace with the events as they transpire. . . . At no period of our history has this knowledge of China been so essential to our interests as at the present moment.” He went on to quote a British writer who suggested that Her Majesty’s Government pursue a more active policy in China and demand diplomatic equality from the Chinese. Reynolds writes that “we too, must be on the alert, to show the Chinese that we have naval power to any extent we please.”

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**Figure 8:** Green Island, Macao, surrounded by Chinese junks. Watercolor by George R. West, 1844. (Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Caleb Cushing Papers.)
1830s the U.S. consul in Batavia, John Shillaber, wrote a letter to the U.S. president and another letter to the secretary of state about the need for a greater U.S. role in China, even suggesting to send a U.S. naval force to the China coast to protect merchants there. “American interests would probably be more or less served by a consul with some peculiar powers and instructions to meet the expected changes and exigencies . . . and with official Powers from the American government to present himself to the Chinese authorities, as its representative, and for the care and protection of American citizens and their rights and property.”

The U.S. government remained aloof to these merchant cries in the first half of the nineteenth century. Happy that their citizens had met with success in the Far East and prospered in trade, the United States expressed only its contentment to have trade continue with minimal interferences. Merchant requests for diplomatic representatives and a naval force went unanswered. Even the portrait of an impending crisis painted by the experienced Consul Shillaber, and his urgent recommendations for a U.S. ministerial presence in China, fell on deaf ears. As President Andrew Jackson put it in his annual message to the Congress in 1831, “To China and the East Indies our commerce continues its usual extent.” He elaborated no further, and said nothing of diplomatic representation with China throughout his presidency, nor did any of his nineteenth-century predecessors or successors until Tyler in 1842.

Not until Britain threatened to monopolize China trade did Washington politicians begin to listen to its merchants’ cries. From 1839 to 1842, Britain engaged China in what became known as the Opium War. Facing the same confining conditions of trade and movement in China as their American counterparts, Britain did not fail to press the case through military pressure when the opportunity presented itself. Acting on the “illegal” seizure of British opium bound for the China market, the British government demanded redress, and failing to get it, shelled Canton and sent gunboats north toward the Chinese capital. As part of the settlement of the war, signed in 1842 as the Nanjing Treaty, Britain secured for its merchants a host of trade privileges, including greater access to Chinese markets through the opening of more ports to British ships.

Cooperation between Britain and the United States in exploiting China was not a feature of the Anglo-American relationship during this war. In fact, American suspicion increased as Britain prepared for hostilities against China in 1839. Catching word of the impending British blockade of Canton in early 1840, U.S. Consul P. W. Snow wrote a stern letter to the senior officer commanding the British fleet: “I now enter my most solemn protests against the establishment

57. See ibid.
of a blockade so illegal, and consequently, unjust. And I do hereby declare, in behalf of my Government, that I shall hold the Government of Great Britain responsible for any act of violence on citizens of the United States, or their property.”  

Or Cushing, who took the floor in the House in March 1840 and decried not the behavior and attitude of the Chinese but rather British action, and who denounced rumors that the United States was “to join heart and hand with the British Government, and endeavor to obtain commercial treaties from the authorities in China.” Such a disposition of cooperation, Cushing said, “is a great misconception. . . . God forbid that I should entertain the idea of co-operating with the British Government in the purpose—if purpose it have—of upholding the base cupidity and violence, and high handed infraction

of all law, human and divine, which have characterized the operations of the
British, individually and collectively in the seas of China.”

Conflict between Britain and China did, however, provoke new calls for
action by Americans in China. On the eve of British hostilities, American
merchants sent a number of pressing letters to Washington politicians warning
of a possible British monopoly and requesting immediate government diplo-
matic and naval support. The first of these letters, dated May 25, 1839, and
signed by eight American merchants, recounts the beginnings of the Opium
War then stirring between Britain and China, and how, as Western merchants,
they had been caught in the middle. The merchants’ letter relates how Chinese
officials seized and destroyed British opium, made the Americans prisoners in
their own factories, and threatened them with severe penalties for refusing to
sign a bond prohibiting the trade of opium, the breaking of which would
sentence the trader to death. Vexed at the “injustice of China to arbitrarily end
opium trade and seize property,” the merchants drew up a list of six demands for
the U.S. government to press upon China. These demands included a minister
in Beijing, fixed tariffs, a system of warehouses, opening of more ports, compen-
sation for the loss of trade, and only the enactment of U.S. laws for American
citizens. The eight cosigners “express our opinions that the United States
Government should take immediate measures” to send a commercial agent to
negotiate a treaty with China and to send a naval force for the protection of
Americans’ property. In similar tone, but with greater urgency, came another
letter signed by thirty-eight Boston and Salem, Massachusetts merchants in
China sent directly to the House of Representatives. The merchant consortium
wrote to inform their government that British hostilities had indeed broken out
against China, and that pirating on the China coast disrupted trade. “We have
reason to fear that hostilities will ensue between British and Chinese, during
the spring and summer, and that, upon the general ground of protection to our
citizens and property from the violence and chaos which always accompanies
war, American interests require the presence of a respectable national force in
the China waters.” Under the new circumstances accompanying the Opium
War, these letters found an audience in the House. Massachusetts Congressman
Abbott Lawrence presented the first letter to the House on January 9, 1840,
which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs. His colleague,
Massachusetts Congressman Levi Lincoln, presented the memorial from the
Boston and Salem merchants on April 9, 1840, which also went to the Com-
mittee on Foreign Affairs.

60. Congressional Globe, 26th Cong., 1st sess., 275.
63. House Journal, 26th Cong., 1st sess., 189; Congressional Globe, 26th Cong., 1st sess., 109;
64. House Journal, 26th Cong., 1st sess., 781.
It was at this point, then, that U.S. politicians began to take an intense interest in the affairs of China and the rights of its merchants. Certainly trade with China had grown to a point at which it was “only exceeded by that of trade with Britain, France and Spain,” as Congressman Cushing pointed out in 1840 in a letter to the secretary of state and copied to the president. Trade, and the facilitation of trade, did play a role in the U.S. decision to secure its own treaty with China. As Cushing said, “I feel strongly persuaded that the foremost . . . [illegible] . . . is to enter into relations with China.” 65 

But Britain loomed large. When the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, on which Cushing sat as a leading Whig, passed a resolution on February 7, 1840, requesting all White House and Treasury reports on China, it also called for an investigation into British intentions in China. 66 Thus, the British threat in combination with growing trade drew American attention to this issue. A secret letter to Secretary of State Webster from an American in Britain summed up the situation in China: “England can have the whole empire if they want it. I have seen a letter from a [British] Gentleman in Ningpho who wrote that he is a civil Governor and Judge, and that he proceeds from place to place, in carriage, with two Chinese, with Bamboos, to clear the road for him of the multitude . . . and that he governs nearly a million of people without difficulty.” 67 

Through such correspondence, politicians in Washington came to find the British assuming greater and greater control in China, which they feared could ultimately be used to exclude the United States.

The next January (1841), as hostilities between China and Britain raged, President Martin Van Buren and Secretary of State John Forsyth held a special meeting with Peter Parker, a Protestant medical missionary who had lived in China since 1834. Parker had returned home for a visit and to argue the need for an official diplomatic treaty between the United States and China. He met later that month with Daniel Webster—who would become the secretary of state with the new administration in March—and explained “the expediency of improving the present unprecedented Crisis in the relation of this Government and China, to Send a Minister Plenipotentiary, direct and without delay to the Court of Tao Kwang [Daoguang, the emperor of China].” 68 Parker met again with the highest echelons of the U.S. government before he returned to China, holding audience with President Tyler and Secretary Webster on September 14, 1841. Congressman John Quincy Adams, whom Parker visited after his meeting, wrote, “Dr. Parker said . . . he had seen the President, who assured him that he had his eye fixed upon China, and would avail himself of any favorable opportunity to commence negotiation with the Celestial Empire.” 69

65. Cushing to Forsyth, January 9, 1840, Cushing Papers, box 21.
68. Wiltse and Moser, eds., The Papers of Daniel Webster: Diplomatic Papers, 1: 885.
U.S. merchants cried vehemently in their letters, and politicians passed resolutions in Congress, yet still the U.S. government took no action to actively address the situation in China. Not until the British signed the first commercial treaty with China in August 1842 did the U.S. administration find itself in a position where it could no longer afford to remain diplomatically aloof from developments. This resulted in the president’s special message to Congress, drafted by Webster, requesting funds to send to China what would become the Cushing mission.

Britain’s position in East Asia and the Pacific threatened the Americans and an increasingly important American market. Or, as Caleb Cushing put it in a personal letter to President Tyler,

It is said that [British diplomat and first governor of Hong Kong] Sir Henry Pottinger contemplates if permitted by his government to move his forces against Japan and compel the government of Japan to open its ports to the
commerce of England. If the British Empire should accomplish this further object possessing as it now does a strong position on the Columbia River in constant intercessions with Canada it needs only then to seize on the Sandwich Islands [Hawaii] to have a complete belt of fortresses environing the globe, to the immense future peril, not only of our territorial possessions, but of all our vast commerce on the Pacific.  

When Cushing dashed off this letter to the president in December 1842, Britain had just signed the first commercial treaty with China securing greater trading privileges and giving them unparallel influence and markets in the region. Cushing believed that in order to counter this threat, the United States needed to act swiftly and sign a commercial treaty with China giving American merchants similar if not better trading privileges than their European counterparts, and it was Cushing, the ardent Anglophobe, who would lead the charge.

**Role of Caleb Cushing**

Caleb Cushing takes center stage in the formation of early U.S. China policy, if not stealing the show. As a representative in the U.S. Congress, he was one of the first politicians to argue for a U.S. government presence in China to protect the interests of American merchants. He was a close friend of both President Tyler and Secretary of State Webster, and served as an adviser to both men. The speeches and documents of the president and secretary of state in their own arguments for a China mission reflect the arguments and at times even wording of Cushing’s private correspondence with each of them. It thus comes as no surprise to find Cushing leading the mission to China and his signature on the treaty beside his Chinese counterpart’s.

As important an agent as Cushing was in the formation of U.S. China policy, we must view the man not as an individual subject who promoted and developed policy, but rather as the embodiment of the forces and attitudes that gave rise to the policy. Cushing represents both literally and figuratively the interests of Americans in China and their Anglophobic sentiment. As a U.S. congressman he represented the interests of his Massachusetts constituents, most of whom owed their wealth and prosperity to overseas trade. As the eldest son of a merchant family, he had personal ties with the China trade. His father had a trading establishment in Oregon, which, as detailed above, was poised to access the China market, and his cousin, J. P. Cushing, was head of Perkins and Company, one of the largest American merchant houses in China. Furthermore, Cushing, like many of his contemporaries, held the deep convictions of the moral supremacy of the United States and its destiny to expand to all quarters of the earth through the strength and character of its people, not the power of its government. Likewise, his bitter and often rapacious hatred of the British resounded the sentiments of most Americans. In Caleb Cushing, therefore, we find not an exception who bent

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70. Cushing to Tyler, December 27, 1842, Cushing Papers, box 35.
the age to his will, but rather the embodiment of Americans’ interests, ideologies, and desires through which America’s China policy was articulated.

Cushing was born in 1800 on the coast of Massachusetts in the port town of Newburyport. At seventeen years old, he graduated from Harvard as what his biographers describe as a “master botanist and brilliant linguist.” Ralph Waldo Emerson considered Cushing the most eminent scholar of the era, and House member Robert Winthorp wrote of his then colleague’s “wonderful versatility... and prodigious intellectual and physical energy.” Even those who found fault with Cushing’s personality gave him their utmost respect. As Washington observer Benjamin B. French said, “Brilliant and cold as an icicle. A man of splendid intellect and of the best possible education, but of unbounded ambition.” Cushing entered law and established his own very successful law practice in Newburyport. At twenty-four years old he was elected to the state legislature, and two years later made a failed bid for the House. Nine years later, in 1835, he was elected to the House on an anti-Jackson ticket and held his seat for three terms before stepping down in 1841. He worked on presidential campaigns and was later appointed attorney general of the United States in the Pierce administration.

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Cushing was from the very beginning an Anglophobe. He hated the British whom he referred to as “our greatest enemy,” and waged a verbal war against England his entire career. So often did Cushing revile against Britain that his senior colleague in the House, John Quincy Adams, said, “Cushing thought that inflammatory declamations against England upon all possible topics was the short cut to popularity, and he speechified accordingly.” Cushing’s biographer Claude M. Fuess draws this Anglophobia back to his childhood, when the Napoleonic wars put New England ship owners in danger of destruction by British cruisers and President Jefferson prohibited all export trade. This subsequently ruined the livelihood of Cushing’s hometown, not to mention his father’s trading business. “Even a visit to England,” Fuess writes of Cushing’s trip to Britain in 1830, “could not eradicate Cushing’s insuperable prejudice against the people of that country.”

Cushing’s abhorrence of Britain went beyond mere childhood resentment, however. Like his contemporaries, and the Founding Fathers, his philosophy railed against the monarchs of Europe and the aristocracy of the Old World—which, he said, “held the whole country and drained its population to augment their own already overgrown opulence and luxury”—to embrace what he saw as “the highest civilization of Christendom,” in the form of the United States. Britain represented “monarchy in its worst form,” while American superiority in political institutions, scientific knowledge, and moral cultivation led it above and beyond its European counterparts. Indeed, Protestantism combined with constitutional liberty created the American culture which encouraged both material and moral greatness. Cushing thus compared the United States to those “nations, distanced by us in the race for wealth and power, who gaze on our marvelous progress with admiration and awe.” He felt, however, that Britain did not gaze upon the United States as it so deserved, but instead showed marauding contempt and pretentious insolence, continuously infringing upon U.S. territory and rights. As he declaimed in a speech before the House in May 1838 on the Oregon conflict, “The conduct of Great Britain has, I am compelled to say, been marked by rapacity, illiberality, and gross disregard of our just rights.” British activity in the Americas, infringing upon what Cushing saw as American territory, and around the world, attempting to thwart American trade and progress, infuriated Cushing so that “to the end of his days,” Fuess writes, “Cushing had a distrust of England and the English.”

72. “Claims of Citizens of the United States on Denmark” (1826), Cushing Papers, box 200, p. 16.
75. Speech on Treaty with Great Britain, August 26, 1842, Cushing Papers, box 205.
76. See Belohlavek, “Race, Progress and Destiny: Caleb Cushing,” 24–25.
Cushing had begun to nurture an interest in the China trade in the late 1830s. Undoubtedly his constituents, the Massachusetts merchants and traders, influenced their representative and his policy positions. But it also appears that his father, John N. Cushing, had brought the matter to his attention through a series of letters to Cushing from Oregon. “It is destined to be what I have ever told you,” his father wrote to him in 1842, “a great country, it can’t be otherwise from its nearness to China, Manilla [sic] and all the Islands in the Pacific which are daily becoming of more importance.”

A merchant who had lost his business during the War of 1812, John N. Cushing was attempting to find his way back into the trade through Pacific commerce. Correspondence on the issue between father and son had actually begun sometime in late 1836 or early 1837, with father Cushing imploring Representative Cushing to take up the issue of Oregon before the Congress. Correspondence on the matter continued at least through 1838. Within those two years Cushing delivered at least two speeches before the House on “The Subject of the Oregon Territory,” and gained a reputation as someone in government who would fight “for the protection of citizens of the US in the territory of Oregon,” as the secretary of the Oregon Provisional Emigration Society remarked. Such developments tied Cushing to China, and when, in early 1840, the issue came before the Committee of Foreign Affairs, on which he sat as a ranking member, Cushing began to fervently press

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79. John N. Cushing to Caleb Cushing, November 13, 1842, Cushing Papers, box 34.
80. Caleb Cushing to John N. Cushing, February 2, 1837, Cushing Papers, box 14; John N. Cushing to Caleb Cushing, December 20, 1838, Cushing Papers, box 18.
81. F. P. Tracy to Caleb Cushing, December 19, 1838, Cushing Papers, box 18.
his case. On the same day that Congressman Lawrence presented the memorial from the eight American merchants in China (January 9, 1840), Cushing wrote to the secretary of state to argue the case of opening official relations with China.\textsuperscript{82} Given that Lawrence and Cushing were both representatives from Massachusetts, we can surmise that Cushing very probably had previously seen the merchants’ letter and that the two congressmen perhaps even coordinated their petitions.

Not until the following year, however, when Tyler occupied the White House and Webster ran the State Department, did Cushing, with his rampant Anglophobia, wield an unparalleled influence on the China issue through his strong personal friendships with both men. Tyler admired Cushing’s vast intellect, and constantly called on him asking for advice and comments on issues on everything from foreign affairs to the postal system in the northeastern United States. Cushing visited the White House frequently to meet with Tyler, often joining him for dinner with other distinguished guests. With Webster, Cushing had an even closer relationship. He would dine at Webster’s home at least once a week, and between 1837 and 1843 Cushing lent Webster upward of $10,000 dollars with no mention of interest or date of repayment.\textsuperscript{83} Through these intimate relationships with the country’s most powerful men, Cushing became integral in the formation of policy, and his views on China resonated with both the secretary of state and the president. For these policymakers the time had come to act; Cushing argued that the United States could no longer passively observe the China trade and hope that its merchants succeed. Now that the British had taken the initiative and gained an advantage in the Far East, the day was coming for a showdown in the Pacific between the old West and the new. “The British government,” Cushing wrote to President Tyler on December 27, 1842, “has succeeded in forcing China to admit British vessels into five ports in the Chinese Empire and to cede to England in perpetual sovereignty a commercial depots . . . [illegible] . . . on the coast of China.” If the United States did not act in the Far East, Cushing warned, the British would seize Japan and Hawaii, giving them control of the Pacific “to the immense future peril, not only of our territory possessions, but of all our vast commerce on the Pacific.” Cushing recommended dispatching a mission to China to negotiate a commercial treaty for the United States.\textsuperscript{84} Three days later, in a special message to Congress, Tyler announced the Pacific Ocean and Hawaii within the U.S. sphere of influence, effectively extending the Monroe Doctrine to the Pacific, and asked Congress for funds for a commissioner to reside in China.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{82} Cushing to Forsyth, January 9, 1840, Cushing Papers, box 21.

\textsuperscript{83} Fuess, \textit{The Life of Caleb Cushing}, 397–98.

\textsuperscript{84} Cushing to Tyler, December 27, 1842, Cushing Papers, box 35.

DISPATCHING THE CUSHING MISSION

These developments appeared amid a crescendo in the rivalry between Britain and the United States. In fact, 1842 had almost brought the two sides to war. Tyler’s annual message to Congress (today’s State of the Union), delivered on December 6, 1842, opened by recounting the past year of conflict between Britain and the United States, which had “threatened most seriously the public peace.” Indeed, the first two and one half pages of the address dealt with “the question of peace or war between the United States and Great Britain.”

The previous week of White House correspondence with the Congress further illustrates the tension: on December 23, the Congress was informed of the breakdown of the Treaty of Washington (over the northeast boundary conflict) and the reasons which prevented “any agreement upon the subject at present.” That same day a State Department report from the minister in London informed the Senate of the British refusal to assume state debts. On December 29, the Congress also received correspondence between the U.S. minister in London and the British government on the conflict over slave trading.

The significance of the British treaty with China was not lost on Washington policymakers. Former Secretary of State, President, and now Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, John Quincy Adams, took up the cause of pushing for official relations with China. Just months after his meetings with Peter Parker in 1841, for example, he delivered a speech before the Massachusetts Historical Society on the need to press China to allow diplomatic relations. And in the debates following Tyler’s request, although he himself stood on the opposite side of the political divide from the president, Adams led the charge against Tyler’s political enemies to secure the necessary funds for a mission for the purpose of “providing the means of future intercourse between the United States and the Government of China.”

The three-hour debate that ensued in the House on February 21, 1843, touched on the absolute economic necessity for the U.S. government to do all in its power to promote and expand trade with China. As South Carolina Congressman Isaac E. Holmes put it, “The trade of South America and Europe is fixed on an established basis. But, by the opening of intercourse with China, three hundred and twenty millions of people (hitherto shut out from the rest of the world) would be brought within the entire circle of commercial republics.” The depression at the end of the 1830s weighed heavily on politicians’ minds, and constant concern of a commodity glut forced them to think in terms of new and larger overseas markets. They knew very well that this put them in direct competition with Britain, a race, if you will, for the markets of the world. As Holmes articulated that day, “When England is advancing in this matter, and preparing to take to herself the exclusive benefits of the new state of things in China—is it wise for us to stand still until that nation

should have arranged the treaties between herself and China, so as to exclude the United States from all advantages whatever?  

The House approved funds for the mission to China by a vote of ninety-six to fifty-nine, paving the way for what Secretary of State Webster likened to the most important mission in history. The details of the preparation for this mission, and the mission itself, have been thoroughly explored elsewhere. Here it is important to note two developments: that the mission’s most vocal advocate, the British-hating Cushing, was chosen to lead the mission, and that the nature of the instructions to Cushing, which were composed by himself and Webster, pertained specifically to securing trading rights weighed in relation to Britain. Through an understanding of the Anglo-American rivalry of the day it becomes clear that the United States acted first and foremost to counter British influence and the perceived threat of British monopoly of markets in East Asia. Viewed in this way, the emphasis of the mission in Cushing’s instructions shows not just the United States trying to gain most favored nation status but actively countering the threat of Great Britain:

A leading object of the mission in which you are now to be engaged is to secure the entry of American ships and cargoes into these ports on terms as favorable as those which are enjoyed by English merchants. . . . It cannot be wrong for you to make known, where not known, that the United States, once a country subject to England, threw off that subjection years ago, asserted its independence, sword in hand, established that independence after a seven years’ war, and now meets England upon equal terms upon the ocean and upon the land.

Here, in the archival records, the rivalry between Britain and the United States shines through as the predominant factor shaping U.S. governmental interest and action in China in the midnineteenth century. Belying common assumptions of Anglo-American cooperation, the first U.S. mission to China was as much about America’s rivalry with Britain as it was about America’s maturing trade with China.

**Conclusion: The Politics of Rapprochement**

Diplomatic historians and scholars of East Asia have overlooked the inherent rivalry between Great Britain and the United States in China in the early and midnineteenth century, and instead have posited a comity between the two powers. Such a view reflects the Anglo-American rapprochement of the post-


World War I world when Tyler Dennett wrote his groundbreaking opus on America’s relations with East Asia—in which this view of Anglo-American comity first appeared. Dennett and his academic successors worked in an age when they could not imagine a time of hostilities between the two English-speaking partners. It is not by chance that Dennett’s work came out as the Washington Conference was underway, creating treaties to limit armament and establish a lasting peace through the cooperation of states. For historians of the day, Western involvement in China was seen as an action that resulted in something positive—namely the modernization of China—and was accomplished through cooperation. As a result, they read their sources in a way reflective of their worldview, sweeping aside any dissonance. Take, for example, John King Fairbank, when forced to confront blatant animosity toward the British by a U.S. trade official: “The real American policy,” Fairbank checked, “was usually to acquiesce . . . with British policy.”

This article has shown that the real American China policy did not acquiesce with British policy, nor did it follow in the British wake, or evolve solely from growing trade with China. Rather, official U.S. China policy developed in reaction to the threat of British monopolization of East Asian markets. Americans had indeed long held a fascination with the China market, believing that there lay the keys to the riches of world trade, and that America, straddled between Europe and Asia, stood as the doorway to this trade. As trade increased and the American economy grew, China became an important market, but still the U.S. government took no action to establish formal relations. Even at the request of its merchants and trade officials for involvement and diplomatic representation, the U.S. government stood silent. Not until Britain used military force to press the Chinese government into signing a treaty and open more markets did the U.S. government act. This action was not, however, just a matter of the United States taking advantage of an opportunity provided by the British victory. Rather, fearful that Great Britain, their rival for the world’s markets, would establish itself in China and completely monopolize Pacific trade, the U.S. government hastily assembled a mission to China to be led by Caleb Cushing, the ardent Anglophobe, to secure similar trade advantages for the United States.

Recognition of the role of Anglo-American rivalry should change the conventional understanding of the development of U.S.-China relations and lead us to revise our premises of Western penetration in China. We can no longer view the wars of aggression against China in the nineteenth century as acts of cooperation among Western powers who worked together to exploit China. Rather, a very real fear of the advantages the other power might secure shaped each country’s foreign policy. This went to the very heart of the matter. If Britain secured privileges and monopolized the Pacific market, it would endan-

ger the U.S. economy. This made a mission to China of immediate and utmost importance, just as those in the highest political offices in the United States articulated.

It was under these circumstances that the U.S. government came to establish an independent China policy that had remained unspoken since the beginnings of the Republic: the penetration of and facilitation of access to the China market, over which the U.S. economy would rise or fall. Americans consistently saw their future as one of expansion westward to the markets of East Asia, where the riches of China could be had and the clutches of the Old World discarded. The U.S. government formed domestic policy around this vision, and moved the nation westward in construction of a natural infrastructure to access this market. When the time came in Washington to enter into formal state-to-state relations the United States did so reluctantly, and only under threat of dire economic and political consequences if it remained mute. Here we find the origins of U.S. China policy—not at the turn of the nineteenth century—but born with the Republic and manifest with the Treaty of Wangxia.