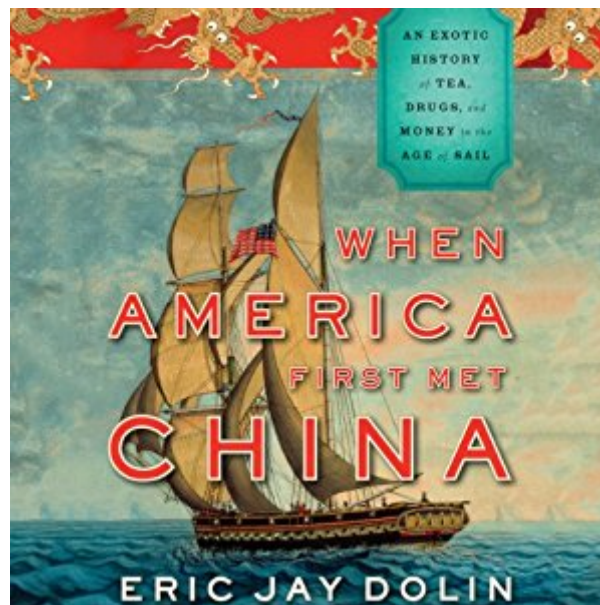




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# When America First Met China: An Exotic History Of Tea, Drugs, And Money In The Age Of Sail



## 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 bche-de-mer - a rare sea cucumber delicacy - might have catalyzed America'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 characters - from the "Financier of the Revolution" Robert Morris to the Chinese emperor Qianlong, who considered foreigners inferior beings - this pause-resisting saga of pirates and politicians, coolies and concubines becomes a must-listen for any fan of Nathaniel Philbrick's *Mayflower* or Mark Kurlansky's *Cod*.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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). As Dolin states later, the Opium Wars are largely forgotten today in the US, but in China they are remembered and are a source of resentment against the West. But as Dolin states so well, Opium was not the cause for China's downfall - it was already seriously declining for a host of other reasons. The last section of the book focuses on the movement of Chinese people to the Americas. It is probably the most horrific part of the book, especially as it relates to Coolies in Latin America, but also one of the more eye opening. And if this book whetted your appetite for more books on interactions between the US and Asia, then the above link should take you to another book that continues a part of the story.

Again, Eric Jay Dolin has captured my attention. I grew up in eastern Long Island, a birthing area of early America, in the 1950s and as I got older gravitated to its abundant and fascinating history. There is a substantial amount written about regional and local historical events but Eric's books *Leviathan*, *Fur*, *Fortune and Empire* and, *When America First Met China* present a correlation with the history of the East End. He takes the regional New England historical story out into the world mixes it up with international trade, commerce, relationships, politics and adventure that provide insight and clarification to better understand early American history and, better yet, who I am and where I came from. Although research may be impeccable in some historical books they can be a tedious read. His story-telling style of writing with a colorful narrative offers a sequential and fluid presentation of comprehensive and pertinent facts. This writing style combined with the use of time related imagery makes for a better story and a desire to continue reading and therefore learn.

Someone please tell me Dolin did NOT just defend foot binding after giving a graphic and

nauseating description of the process. The book is highly readable and written in a very non scholarly fashion even though it is footnoted and sources listed in the back. Dolin's style is chatty and laconic with just a touch of humor. The title is a little misleading since the POV switches to the British when he approaches the Opium War of 1844. Dolin also talks about the human trafficking that went on between China and Latin America after the importation of Blacks became illegal. He doesn't go into extreme depth on the topic but he pulls no punches over the inhumanness and horrors of the peoples involved. Overall he does paint a fair image of the people on either side of the issue and makes no attempts to paint the Americans in an unrealistically flattering light. They may not have participated in the opium trade as much as the British but their hands were far from clean. If I were to lodge any criticism of the book it is that the POV is entirely from the American and British perspective. Don't go into this book expecting to learn anything about China, its history, civilization or culture. What little Chinese perspective there is, revolves entirely around Canton and the trading "factories" there and a couple paragraphs in the part about coolie export. There are hundreds of American and British men referred to by name but only a handful of Chinese. This may, of course, be a reflection of the availability of source materials, but it does flatten the book somewhat.

Eric Jay Dolin brings to light and to life a seminal period in Chinese and U.S. history -- a time when fortunes were being made and lost in maritime trade. Merchants, politicians, sea captains, hongers, consumers, crimps, coolies and clipper ships all play a role in this significant and highly readable book. Drawing heavily on first hand accounts and observations, the author discusses the development of the Canton System, the Opium War, the trade in tea and coolies, and gold fever. An important addition to maritime studies; includes black and white images, notes, bibliography and index.

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