Philip Freneau’s “On The First American Ship Empress of China” and the Early Sino-American Trade

Yue-zhang ZENG¹,ᵃ and Wei-bin CHEN²,b,*

¹,²School of Foreign Languages, Jimei University, Xiamen, Fujian, China
ᵃ646674552@qq.com, ᵇshakespeare@jmu.edu.cn

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. Philip Freneau, the poet of American Revolution, not only narrates the first American ship’s voyage to China in his poem “On the First America Ship Empress of China”, but also conveys his hope of the emerging direct early Sino-American Trade. By situating Freneau’s poetic narrative in the broad backdrop of the late 18th century when the newly independent America was anxious to earn economic independence, international recognition and national identity, this article attempts to reveal how this national hope and anxiety is expressed through the poet’s representation of the ship’s sailing to China. The ship, Empress of China, in the metaphor of the Bird of Jove, is empowered to usher in Sino-American trade, establish American economic independence, and build the American Identity, hence leading to a bright prospect of America in the world.

1. Introduction

“On the First American Ship Empress of China” is a poem written by Philip Freneau, the poet of American Revolution, to commemorate the first American ship’s voyage to China. This poem offers a window to see how Sino-American trade came into being. His optimistic depiction of early Sino-American trade in this poem undoubtedly reveals his personal patriotism. Most importantly, it enables us to see the general expectation of America on American economic independence and this new nation’s desire to build the American identity. As recent years have witnessed America’s tense trade relation with China, this poem might be revealing for America to better understand the importance of early Sino-American trade for its development and thus better handle its trade relation with China.

2. The Ship to Usher in Sino-American Trade

The Empress of China was the first American ship that sailed to China. It left New York and set sail for China on February 22, 1784. And many newspapers gave heart-stirring report of this great event. Philadelphia’s Independent Gazetteer, reported, “The Captain and crew ... were all happy and cheerful, in good health and high spirits; and with a becoming decency, elated on being considered the first instruments, in the hands of Providence, who have undertaken to extend the commerce of the United States of America to that distant and to us unexplored country.”[1] Another paper even offered a vivid description of those who came to see the sailing of the Empress of China. “If we may judge from the countenances of the spectators,” the New York Packet and the American Advertiser reported, “all hearts seemed glad, contemplating the new source of riches that may arise to this city, from a trade to the East-Indies; and all joined their wishes for the success of the Empress of China.”[2]
Philip Freneau also involved himself in the celebration of the first American voyage to China. He wrote this poem, “On the First American Ship Empress of China”, in commemoration of this momentous event in the history of Sino-American trade.

In this poem, the Empress of China is compared to the bird of Jove. This bird of Jove, with great strength, is used to indicate that the victory of the revolutionary war empowered America to gain its strength and become a powerful nation. And the Empress of China, like the bird of Jove “with eyes of fire, and lightning’s force”[3], is eager to leave its native place and fly to far-flung China:

“Thus, grown to strength, the bird of Jove,
Impatient, quits his native grove,
...
To countries placed in burning climes
And islands of remotest times
She now her eager course explores,
And soon shall greet Chinesian shores.”[4]

This showcases America’s desire and ambition to undertake commercial voyages to China after it got rid of British hindrance to China. Since the British could no longer prevent America from sailing to China, this bird of Jove desires to search for a new route to China, different from the old route taken by the British:

“To that old track no more confined,
By Britain’s jealous court assigned.”[5]

It demonstrates America’s determination not to follow British route to China. The British usually took the eastern route that involved sailing round the Cape of Good Hope. It was a traditional yet safer course often taken by European merchants who had already made their way to China. Yet the Empress decided to take a different route, the western route. Unlike the eastern route, the western route involved sailing round Cape Horn and then stopping in the Pacific Northwest to barter for furs before proceeding to Canton. The initial planned venture of the Empress involved sailing to the Pacific Northwest to purchase furs with which to trade for Chinese goods. However, the severe weather condition, fund shortage and other factors combined to overwhelm the initial fur scheme.[6] As a result, the Empress was obliged to give up the western route and followed the traditional eastern route to China:

“She round the Stormy Cape shall sail,
And, eastward, catch the odorous gale.”[7]

Though taking the British route to China, this bird of Jove displays enormous courage and determination, perhaps far stronger than the British. No matter how dangerous this eastward journey may be, this bird of Jove will overcome all obstacles. And the odorous gale will go with the bird and bless it to reach China smoothly. Then a picture of this bird’s arriving in China is fancied:
“From thence their fragrant teas to bring
Without the leave of Britain’s king:
And Porcelain ware, enchased in gold,
The product of that finer mould.”[8]

Freneau delineates clearly to trade for Chinese tea, porcelain as well as silk is the main purpose of this commercial voyage. He envisions that this bird of Jove, when reaching China, will have a favourable deal with Chinese merchants and thus succeed in bartering for Chinese tea, porcelain and silk. Besides, the bird of Jove is expected to bring back a cornucopia of commodities that can please varying American tastes. The commodities include not only Chinese products, but also other Asian goods such as Indian looms and Java’s spicy woods:

“Thus commerce to our world conveys
All that the varying taste can please;
For us, the Indian looms are free,
And Java strips her spicy tree.
Great pile proceed!—and o’er the brine
May every prosperous gale be thine,
Till freighted deep with Asia’s stores,
You reach again your native shores.”[9]

The fancy of bringing back various commodities is also revealed in Freneau’s another poem, “The Happy Prospect”:

“O, still may health her balmy wings o’er these fair fields expand,
While commerce from all climates brings the products of each land.”[10]

In this poem, the America is endowed with balmy wings and it is expected to fly to all parts of the world and bring back products of each land to its native grove. In other words, this new-born nation is expected to be a global trader.

As is discussed above, Freneau’s delineations suggest America’s optimism about early Sino-American trade. The Empress of China is expected to usher in Sino-American trade and bespeaks a bright prospect in the commercial ties between these two countries.

3. The Ship to Establish American Economic Independence

The Empress of China as shown shall usher in Sino-American trade and render America a global trader. Furthermore, it bears a wish for American economic independence. Before the revolution, the American colonies under the reign of the British monarchy indeed had taken part in the global trade network centering China, but their presence in the global market was confined to a very
periphery position via British traders. To change this unfavorable situation and become a real player in the network, America, after the Revolution, had to shake off the British obstacles and earn its economic independence. Such a eagerness again is reflected in Freneau’s poem.

In this poem, Freneau first extols the revolutionary war because it also represents a means to establish economic independence. America, like the bird of Jove depicted, with bless “won from Bellona”[11], defeated the British armies and achieved its political independence. After that, America “spreads her wings to meet the Sun”[12] to “explore those golden regions where George forbade to sail before.”[13]

Apparently, the “golden regions” refer to China. When America was still fettered by the British Empire, it was prohibited from sending ships to Canton. In theory, all the Chinese goods entering the colonies were supposed to have come via England, and more specifically, through the British East India Company (BEIC), which had the monopoly on Far Eastern trade within the British Empire.[14] For over a century, the British had forced American colonists to passively consume tea and porcelain while denying them the chance to actively compete in the China trade.[15] Caroline Frank in her work Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America points out that Americans had regarded this treatment by the British as emasculating.[16] Her words give an accurate description of the British economic exploitation of American colonists. By coercing American colonies, a huge consumer market, to passively consume a variety of Asian commodities including tea and porcelain while preventing them from undertaking commercial voyages to Asia, BEIC made a huge commercial profit, thus galvanizing the prosperity and national strength of the British Empire. In a sense, the British Empire’s hegemony in global trade in lieu of Netherlands through the eighteenth century benefited a great deal from its economic exploitation of American colonists. Thus, Frank’s words seem to make sense. Imposed by Britain’s economic exploitation, America was emasculated severely.

If America was to regain its original masculinity, the most effect way was to undertake commercial voyages to the East, China in particular. Actually, during the American revolution, Benjamin Franklin had once envisioned defying Britain’s political and economic grip on the colonies through commercial ventures into the East and West Indies. Direct trade with China to exchange cargoes of various kinds for Chinese tea was essential to his strategy.[17] Franklin once wrote to the London press, saying that “What will they say, when they find, that Ships are actually fitted out from the Colonies (they cannot, I suppose hinder their fitting out ships) for all Parts of the World; for China, by Cape Horn; for Instance, to sail under Prussian, or other Colours, with Cargoes of various Kinds, and to return loaded with Tea, and other East India Goods?”[18] Apparently, Franklin believed that to undertake commercial voyages to China held the key to American economic independence. However, Franklin’s vision would become a reality only when the Empress of China set sail for Canton after the American Revolution.

The victory of the revolutionary war enabled America to send ships to China, the offspring of which was the Empress of China. When this ship departed from New York Harbour and set sail for the “golden regions”, it is expected by the whole America to establish American economic independence. Freneau and his countrymen wish this ship, when returned, shall demonstrate to the world that America has got rid of British economic shackles and achieved its economic independence.
Indeed, this wish to establish American economic independence came true in the not-too-distant future. After the Empress of China set sail for Canton and initiated the direct Sino-American tea trade, the United States grew to be the second-largest importer of tea.[19] A growing number of American merchants participated in China trade. They made frequent commercial voyages to China, and then carried tea imported therefrom not only to their native shore, but also sold it to continental Europe, from which they made considerable profits. The United States emerged as a competitive force in China trade once monopolized by European countries such as British and Holland, and spared no effort to make itself equal to or even surpass its European rivals. In a word, the Empress of China demonstrated and shaped American economic independence successfully as is wished in Freneau’s poem.

4. The Ship to Build the American Identity

The Empress of China bears the whole America’s wish to shape and demonstrate American economic independence. Moreover, it bespeaks this new nation’s desire to build the American identity.

In this poem, Freneau refers to those on the Empress of China as the “chosen crowd”, meaning they are chosen by God. And he makes a clear distinction between these “chosen crowd” and other foreigners. Only the “chosen crowd” can be aboard the Empress of China. Foreign sailors and merchants are forbidden from mingling with them. Besides, a picture of the “chosen crowd” returning to America is fancied. They are very proud of themselves and boast of their triumph to the countrymen:

“No foreign tars are here allowed

To mingle with her chosen crowd,

Who, when returned, might, boasting, say

They shewed our native oak the way.”[20]

Freneau’s imagination of the pride of the “chosen crowd” on the Empress of China conveys a desire to build the American identity. According to Freneau, the American identity means God’s chosen crowd. Those on the Empress are different because they are the first to be chosen by God to undertake commercial voyages to China. Most importantly, they are expected to establish the American identity when they finish this commercial enterprise designated by God. Freneau envisions the first “chosen crowd”, when returned, shall help their countrymen to establish this American identity so that all the Americans can be given enormous confidence and be held together. The ship sailing to China seems to carry both the goods that can fulfill the dream of an affluent America and the good that can offer a spiritual privilege necessitated by a nascent American identity. This ship, similar to the May Flower and the Arbela that carried the first English settlers to the American continent in the early seventeenth century, is elevated by Freneau as the elect to a sacred height. Different from those pious puritans on the two English ships with the main purpose to get rid of religious persecution from their motherland and build a new holy kingdom, the “chosen crowd” on the Empress of China headed for China with a much more secular aim—making money. Such a practical group of merchants are entitled by Freneau with divinity since they may also build a new nation for the Americans, though not a holy one. By such an analogy to the pilgrims, the
secular merchants on the Empress of China seem to undertake to build a rich nation both commercially and spiritually.

As a matter of fact, America’s freedom came at a terrible cost. After the war, the nation was mired in an economic depression, much of its commerce hobbled, its central government in disarray, and the states were squabbling with one another over their powers and responsibilities.[21] Considering the political and economic uncertainty, many Americans began to doubt the viability of this new-born nation and wonder whether their country had the ability to compete in the international arena. John Adams, the second president of the United States, observed in 1811 that the thirteen colonies had little in common during the revolutionary period. They were composed of “a great variety of religions” and “so many different nations,” their “customs, manners, and habits had so little resemblance.” Given this overwhelming diversity, “to unite them in the same principles in theory and the same system of action, was certainly a very difficult enterprise,” an enterprise Adams described as “thirteen clocks made to strike together.”[22] Hence, the victory of the American revolution could not provide a national confidence and was not strong enough to hold together such a heterogeneous populace. This difficult enterprise, Freneau believes, shall be achieved by the Empress of China.

The triumphant voyage of this American-built ship with an American cargo, American crew, and officer corps composed mostly of Revolutionary War veterans is expected to bolster national confidence by proving to every American that America, though new-born, is capable of competing in the world arena. Most importantly, the Empress of China is expected to enable all the Americans to establish the unique American identity so this heterogeneous nation can be held together.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Freneau’s poem “On the First America Ship Empress of China” not only narrates the first American ship’s voyage to China, but also conveys a hope of the emerging direct early Sino-American Trade. By situating Freneau’s poetic narrative in the broad backdrop of the late 18th century when the newly independent America was anxious to earn economic independence, international recognition and national identity, the discussion above reveals the underlying national hope and anxiety reflected in the poet’s representation of the ship’s sailing to China. The ship, Empress of China, in the metaphor of the Bird of Jove, is empowered to usher in Sino-American trade, establish American economic independence, and build the American Identity, hence leading to a bright prospect of America in the world.

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