

**‘THE WORLD WAS VERY BUSY NOW, IN SOOTH, AND HAD A LOT TO SAY’: DICKENS, CHINA AND CHINESE COMMODITIES IN *DOMBEY AND SON***

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*Abstract*

Dickens’s interest in transnational locales is evident throughout his oeuvre. Whilst his journalism is highly critical of some of these locales, Dickens’s novels offer a more nuanced perspective. This article addresses Dickens’s representation of China and of Chinese commodities, primarily tea but also silk and chinaware. It asks how Dickens uses these commodities, as well as ideas and terms relating to commercial trade, to explore the relationship between China and Britain. Focusing in particular on *Dombey and Son*, I show that transnational value is defined for the British readership in commodity terms in the novel, and I reflect more broadly on what this commercial value offers to the social fabric of nineteenth-century Britain and contemporary understandings of Britishness.

The passage around the globe is still a fetishized idea: visiting new countries and exploring new cultures continue to hold value in terms of personal, cultural and, indeed, social growth. Throughout his novels and journalism, Dickens defines his own cultural identity – and that of his readers – by drawing on a cultural frame of reference that goes far beyond Britain in order to shape an understanding of the increasing connections that were made in trading terms between Britain and other countries. *Dombey and Son*, which appeared in nineteen serialised parts between 1 October 1846 and 1 April 1848, reveals an interest in a new form of transnationalism, which, due to advances in transport, trade and commerce contracted global distances.

Interest in China and tea is well documented throughout the nineteenth century, and China can be seen to play an increasingly important role in commodity terms in British life. Dickens’s contemporaries were keenly interested in China and Chinese trade. A search of nineteenth-century British newspapers such as the *Observer* and the *Guardian* on Proquest generates more than 17,208 articles, published between 1812 and 1870, that relate to tea and China. In 1846, when Dickens started publishing *Dombey and Son*, the *Observer* and the *Guardian* published more than 843 articles relating to Chinese tea; this was an increase of more than 113 articles over the previous two years. This is indicative of a growing interest in China and its trading output, an interest that is also present in Dickens’s oeuvre where references to both the locale and the commodities of China reveal an awareness and engagement with this nation. Dickens’s curiosity about China and Chinese commodities was probably increased by British-Chinese trading links, by Dickens’s anxiety about the ramifications of trade after the first Opium war of 1839-42, as well as by the European revolutions which occurred in 1848 when Dickens was nearing completion of his novel. In the years following the publication of *Dombey and Son*, articles were

published in Dickens's magazines *Household Words*, *Household Words Narrative* and *All the Year Round* with titles such as 'Chinese Competitive Examinations', 'Colonies and Dependencies', 'Up and Down Canton', 'The Great Exhibition and the Little One', 'China with a Flaw in it' and 'New Year's Day in China' to name but a few.<sup>1</sup> Whilst not all of these articles were authored by Dickens, his intense editorial control of his magazines means that we can trust these articles to have been sanctioned by him for publication in his journals.<sup>2</sup> This interest in China and tea can be traced throughout the whole of Dickens's oeuvre but it is particularly conspicuous – and particularly significant for my own reading – in his novels which reveal that there was an increasing sense of unease about commodity trade with China. My article focuses on Dickens's fiction – rather than his journalism – as it is here, I argue, that Dickens's depiction of trade allows for a reading of cultural and social attitudes towards China that can be explored through the representation of commodities such as tea.

Prior to the nineteenth century China had been viewed as a highly developed country and one that was, in many ways, far more developed than European countries. As Roy Porter has noted, in the eighteenth century and 'at variance with Foucault's stress on discipline, surveillance and control, much enlightened thinking was directed towards dissent and disestablishment, was about dismantling "the thing" – or doing your own thing'.<sup>3</sup> This liberality of thought did not continue in the nineteenth century, and this can be particularly noted with regard to China. As Susan Shoenbauer Thurin asserts: 'A dominant view of China during the second half of the nineteenth century was of a decaying culture deserving to be reconstructed with Western values'.<sup>4</sup> By imaginatively 'reconstructing' China, the British were able to create a cultural picture of this other country that fulfilled a very clear social function. Dickens does not present an enlightened view of China, indeed he frequently commodifies China and uses the commodities the nation produces in order to define its culture. It is through the discussion of these commodities that Dickens pictures the

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<sup>1</sup> Anon., 'Chinese Competitive Examinations', *All the Year Round*, 12 (17 December 1864), pp. 445-53; Anon., 'Colonies and Dependencies', *Household Narrative* (January 1850), pp. 17-19; Anon., 'Up and Down Canton', *All the Year Round*, 14 (29 July 1865), pp. 16-19; [Charles Dickens and Richard H. Horne], 'The Great Exhibition and the Little One', *Household Words*, 3 (5 July 1851), pp. 356-60; [Henry Morley], 'China with a Flaw in it', *Household Words*, 5 (3 July 1852), pp. 368-74; [Charles Dickens], 'New Year's Day in China', *Household Words*, 19 (12 February 1859), pp. 258-60.

<sup>2</sup> Important work has been undertaken on commodity culture in *Household Words*. See Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Household Words: The Social Life of Goods* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 482.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Shoenbauer Thurin, *Victorian Travellers and the Opening of China, 1842-1907* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), p. 51.

threat that China allegedly posed due to its desirable commodities. By including tea in this way, Dickens raises important questions about Britain's increasing commercial dependence on China and about the influence this has on British identity. Shanyn Fiske acknowledges that 'China could neither be homogeneously absorbed into nor excluded from England's imperial identity'.<sup>5</sup> This inability to be either absorbed or excluded is central to a Dickensian sense of the world beyond Britain. Britain needed China to maintain its exoticism in order for its produce to be fetishized and this could only be achieved by homogenizing the culture of this vast country. By ensuring that China was defined by a set of commodities, its broader societal importance could be limited. As Fiske continues to assert:

The study of Sino-British relations in nineteenth-century England provides a vital component in the understanding and reinvention of this relationship not only because it forces us to confront the sources of stereotypes and ineffectual categories that persist in limiting current relations but because it offers the possibility of rediscovering productive models of ideological exchange and cross-cultural dialog.<sup>6</sup>

Fiske's argument helps to form a cultural dialectic which acknowledges the importance of paying attention to the representation of commodities from transnational locales. For the purposes of this article Dickens is the primary focus and, whilst Fiske is speaking more broadly about nineteenth-century concepts, the theoretical framework she develops is a valuable one. Fiske recognises that through the process of reinvention one is forced to confront stereotyped cultural images. This cross-cultural dialogue provides a compelling means of engaging with Dickensian depictions of China and tea, and it prompts us to investigate how Dickens links his portrayal of foreign commodities to his exploration of both Chinese and British identity.

### **Geography, Transport and Time: China's Place in *Dombey and Son***

The movement of sailors and tradesmen around the world and the introduction of foreign commodities into British culture enabled commodity travel, if not physical travel, and Dickens reveals an increasing awareness of the world beyond Britain – a world that was shaped in commodity terms. As Arjun Appadurai has suggested, 'it is in the fertile ground of deterritorialization, in which money, commodities, and

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<sup>5</sup> Shanyn Fiske, 'Orientalism Reconsidered: China and the Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Victorian Studies', *Literature Compass*, 8 (2011), pp. 214-26 (p. 218). <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00788.x/full>>.

<sup>6</sup> Fiske, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', p. 223.

persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world, that the mediascapes and ideoscapes of the modern world find their fractures and fragmented counterpart'.<sup>7</sup> The imagined fragmentation of territories has the paradoxical double effect of giving rise to a sense of interconnectedness as well as disconnectedness, and both notions contribute to the culturally fabricated meanings of nationality and nationhood. Appadurai's choice of the verb 'chasing' has a somewhat predatory inflection and in fact this predatory inflection captures the nature of nineteenth-century Britain's trade abroad, which privileged the rights of the homeland Britain over the transnational 'Other' of China. *Dombey and Son* discusses British trade in these terms, but it is also possible to find in the novel what Appadurai calls 'fractured counterparts' – aspects that forge connections between the process of Othering and British identity.

Dickens's interest in transnational locales such as China, India and Africa is evident throughout his oeuvre and it is apparent that there is a fascination on both the part of the author and on the part of his readers, whose delving into Dickens's fictional worlds allowed them to travel imaginatively to foreign countries. Whilst Dickens limited his physical travels to Europe, America and North America, he sent his sons further afield: Charlie to Australia, Walter to India and Alfred to China. It is interesting to reflect on this sending away: whilst Dickens himself did not travel to these shores, members of his family did. This travelling by proxy mirrors that of the reader who, by reading Dickens's works, goes on mental journey to these lands. Dickens not only conceptualised these unknown worlds for his readership, he did so for himself. Whilst much of Dickens's journalism relating to China points to a negative portrayal of this land his novels, due in part to their length, enable a far more nuanced reading of foreign countries. As Sabine Clemm has noted with reference to Charles Dickens's and Richard Horne's article 'From the Great Exhibition to the Little One', published in *Household Words* on 5 July 1851, the Chinese were 'summarily and stereotypically ridiculed as stagnant, superstitious, pompous, ignorant, despotic, dirty, starved, pigtailed and parochial'.<sup>8</sup> This highlights explicitly what I would state to be the central difference between Dickens's approach to China in his journalism and in the novels. Whilst Dickens in *Dombey and Son* and other novels includes commodity and place references to China, he rarely comments on Chinese people or their physical characteristics. In his journalism, however, he frequently references these latter aspects which clearly identifies a functional difference between his methodologies in the two modes of publication and serves to underscore the important role that commodities, such as tea, play in establishing cultural reference points and markers of Chinese influence on British culture in the

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<sup>7</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Sabine Clemm, *Dickens, Journalism, and Nationhood: Mapping the World in Household Words* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 26.

novel.

Whilst *Dombey and Son* identifies key Chinese commodities and their infinite interest to the nineteenth-century consumer, they are used as cultural markers and, as such, they become representative – be this accurate or inaccurate – of the locale. Jeff Nunokawa considers this in terms of advertisement and suggests that

[i]n a book like *Dombey and Son*, the commodity form doesn't need the agency of advertising to make itself known; its native talents are their own publicity. According to the view of the Dickens novel, the commodity is not merely advertised or exhibited; it is itself already advertisement and exhibition.<sup>9</sup>

This is a highly productive way of considering the commodities produced by China in *Dombey and Son*. Whilst Nunokawa's reading of commodities in *Dombey and Son* considers these in domestic terms and in relation to personal property, my reading of the novel considers the commodities in trading terms and foregrounds the effect they have on British identity. Nunokawa's discussion of commodities in terms of 'advertisement' and 'exhibition' is fruitful for my own approach to the novel. If the commodities are able to facilitate an advertisement of the locale independently then their inclusion in the novel becomes even more highly charged. The placement of tea in the narrative can, therefore, be read as a way of shaping cultural awareness and emphasising the power and influence of foreign locales, such as China, on Britain and Britishness. This also engenders questions about the stability of British identity and the influence of other cultures that have the potential to modify traditional cultural and social mores. This highlights the potential threat that can be read into the representation of China in the novel.

Both *Dombey and Son* and Dickens's journalism are interested in the idea of discrete cultural and national identities, but they also acknowledge a sense of global interconnectedness which, due to advances in transport, brought a large world ever nearer. There is also, significantly, a recognition of the ramifications of this: Dickens explores in what ways such interconnectedness and ever-increasing dependence on foreign commodities and trading nations might present a danger to British cultural identity. Whilst Dickens recognises the advantages of these relationships – although primarily for the British public rather than for the Chinese – he also recognises the reciprocity of the relationship where, in commodity terms, these transnational locales were needed by the British consumers to fulfil their commercial desires. In this sense, the Other worlds that Dickens writes of can be perceived as being less dependent on Britain and instead as more inter-dependent. This, I would argue, reveals Dickens's anxiety about an increasing dependence on Chinese commodities – an anxiety that suggests more broadly a fear of a cultural dependence. Here, Benedict Anderson's work, most notably his study *Imagined Communities*, is helpful. Anderson thinks of

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<sup>9</sup> Jeff Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 47.

these ‘imagined communities’ not only in terms of a cultural community but also as ‘an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’.<sup>10</sup> When applying this concept to Dickens’s work, it is clear that his concern with British national identity was not simply a cultural concern but a political one too, in part due to anxieties about the Empire’s future success but, in equal measure, due to a political awareness that dependence and co-dependence came from these commodity transactions which, it was believed, could be controlled through taxation.

Elaine Freedgood identifies the ways in which the Victorian novel featured objects and things, and the significant role they played in acting as cultural signifiers:

The Victorian novel describes, catalogues, quantifies, and in general showers us with things: post chaises, handkerchiefs, moonstones, wills, riding crops, ships, instruments of all kinds, dresses of muslin, merino and silk, coffee, claret, cutlery – cavalcades of objects threaten to crowd the narrative right off the page.<sup>11</sup>

Freedgood’s argument prompts us to consider how objects – such as Chinese tea in *Dombey and Son* – can become cultural signifiers and barometers.

Ideas about globalisation are also central to this analysis and as Tope Omoniyi has stated: ‘Whereas colonisation invokes a binary relationship between the colonisers and the colonised, globalization operates within a wider, more complex network of relationships of power and capital distribution; including linguistic and language power and capital’.<sup>12</sup> This distinction between the term coloniser and the more expansive term globalisation acknowledges the importance of the ‘network of relationships’.<sup>13</sup> Whilst the nineteenth-century relationship between Britain and China was fraught, in terms of power and capital, the relationship is productive as it privileges the value of commodities in establishing a transnational consciousness. Dickens’s representation of a global network of commodities contributes to this transnational consciousness: these commodities do not form a basis of global balance or equality but instead serve to support the idea of a method of engaging with spaces in terms of their trading output which is separate from their cultural heritage. This notion is reinforced when Dickens describes the scenes by the London docks where:

Just around the corner stood the rich East India House, teeming with

<sup>10</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Tope Omoniyi and Mukuk Saxena, ‘Introduction’, in *Contending with Globalization in World Englishes*, ed. by Mukul Saxena and Tope Omoniyi (Buffali: Multilingual Matters, 2009), pp. 19-40 (p. 3).

<sup>13</sup> Omoniyi and Saxena, ‘Introduction’, p. 21.

suggestions of precious snuffs and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookahs, umbrellas, palm trees, palanquins, and gorgeous princes of a brown complexion sitting on carpets with their slippers very much turned up at the toes. Anywhere in the immediate vicinity there might be seen pictures of ships speeding away to all parts of the world; outfitting warehouses ready to pack off anybody anywhere, fully equipped in half an hour; and little timber midshipmen in obsolete naval uniforms, eternally employed outside the shop doors of nautical instrument makers in taking observations of the hackney coaches.<sup>14</sup>

This cornucopia of objects is striking; the origin of the objects is clear – the East – but in Orientalist terms as established by Edward Said,<sup>15</sup> it is the Otherness of peoples and objects that is being held in tension here. The fact that the East India House is ‘teeming with suggestions’ indicates that the docks are a hive of activity and trade is playing a central role – yet these are just hints and suggestions, they are not necessarily the reality. A wide range of exotic objects is referenced which conform to stereotypes about transnational locales such as India or Africa. There is a sense of a cataloguing of commodities and this cataloguing of a country’s produce syncretises with the soon-to-be-organised Great Exhibition of 1851, a mere three years after the novel’s publication. It is apparent that in commodity and trading terms, global spaces are contracting and there is an increasing engagement with the world’s commodities at the London docks. There is a great sense of potential movement created in the passage; the ‘pictures’ of the ships, described as ‘speeding’, add to the sense of a world connecting rapidly and the network of the seas is the initial focal point and yet, as they are pictorial, they are static.

The Hackney coaches passing by the river are watched by the wooden midshipmen; there is at once the sense of the eternal action of the city, and the arrival of objects reflects this, yet this rushing by seems to be problematic for Dickens. This is a world, as well as a nation, on the move. There is no sense of stasis apart from that which is artificially introduced and the ramifications of such progress are addressed by Dickens in commodity terms as a challenge to British independence. As Juliet John has stated, ‘a new structure of literary communication [...] a far more powerful structure of communication than any political movement could contemplate’ was being developed.<sup>16</sup> It is within this structure, I would suggest, that Dickens’s literature enabled exotic locations to be conceived, conceptualised and made part of the national psyche whilst recognising the inter-dependence that was being developed between these nations and Britain. As John Plotz posits:

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 46. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>15</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 33.

The developing logic of portability in the Victorian cultural realm, though, suggests that so long as the aesthetic objects through which identity was constituted and solidified could both represent and engender a sense of seamless identity on the move, the ‘absence of mind’ that allowed a culture to finesse or ignore its immersion into global circulation could continue.<sup>17</sup>

By importing Chinese commodities into the narrative, Dickens at once acknowledges the foreignness of the objects whilst simultaneously recognising their ability to be naturalised in the home space. In so doing, Dickens shapes a nineteenth-century consciousness of the world beyond Britain that recognises the very real threat that foreign locales and, for the purpose of this article, China especially, possessed which is what the second strand of this article addresses.

### **‘Mr Dombey and the World’: China, Britain and Britishness**

The spaces traversed through trade are made to seem ever nearer in *Dombey and Son*’s narrative and this highlights, as Arjun Appadurai has argued, that: ‘Consumption creates time, but modern consumption seeks to replace the aesthetics of duration with the aesthetics of ephemerality’.<sup>18</sup> Through the process of consumption an ephemeral time is formed. This is achieved by the creation of a new consumerist culture that is – even now – preoccupied with passing trends rather than traditions. Silk screens, chinaware and tea were popular foreign commodities of the moment in at the middle of the nineteenth century and in that sense they were ephemeral. These commodities were purchased because of their exoticism, or because of their initial Otherness, yet as soon as they arrived within the home space they were naturalised. This can be seen in *Dombey and Son* where foreign commodities are included but are surrounded by British objects in what can be seen as a means of developing a commodity balance. Chinese commodities such as tea hold their exoticism until they arrive in the home space: however, at the point of entry into the British home, they become naturalised. It is this process of naturalisation that Dickens’s novel acknowledges and in which Dickens recognises an inherent danger in the immediacy of the integration of the commodities into the home space; if an item which was once foreign can be naturalised so seamlessly into the home space, it raises questions about the stability or fixity of British identity and the ultimate adaptability of transnational locales. This also jeopardises nineteenth-century British identity in that it questions the absolute fixity of it. It further suggests that the cultural influence of transnational locales such as China on Britain was growing more powerful.

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<sup>17</sup> John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 85.

Dickens's fascination with the produce available to the nineteenth-century consumer can be seen within his own private letters. A rich example of this interest can be found in his description of a dinner party at Emile Girardin's mansion, where he found:

On the table are ground glass jugs of peculiar construction, laden with the finest growth of Champagne and the coolest ice. With the third course is issued Port Wine (previously unheard of in a good state on this continent), which would fetch two guineas a bottle at any sale. The dinner done, Oriental flowers in vases of golden cobweb are placed upon the board. With the ice is issued brandy; buried for 100 years. To that succeeds coffee, brought by the brother of one of the convives from the remotest East, in exchange for an equal quantity of Californian gold dust. The company being returned to the drawing-room – tables roll in by unseen agency, laden with cigarettes from the Harem of the Sultan, and with cool drinks in which the flavour of the lemon arrived yesterday from Algeria, struggles voluptuously with the delicate Orange arrived this morning from Lisbon. That period past, and the guests reposing in divans worked with many coloured blossoms, big tables roll in, heavy with massive furniture of silver, and breathing incense in the form of a little present of Tea direct from China – table and all, I believe; but cannot swear to it.<sup>19</sup>

The variety of produce from across the globe brought together in this room for the occasion of this dinner seems to have intrigued Dickens. The finely detailed description of the Oriental flowers in 'vases of golden cobwebs' and the tea which is 'direct from China' shows that Dickens is very familiar with – and yet still in awe of – the ability to essentially construct a commodity picture of the world in one sitting. The absence of people from the countries where these commodities originate, shows that Dickens can appreciate the produce but is at present still reluctant to acknowledge the indigenous population. Such a separation between commodity and population serves to create a perceived distance that enables such objects to be at times separated from their place of origin whilst still fetishized.

The British, as Suvendrini Perera has argued, were eager to develop trade links with China that served narrowly-conceived British interests:

English foreign policy worked to ensure that more and more trade passages were 'open to the English'. The First Opium War of 1840, when Chinese ports were besieged to force the free passage of English narcotics, was the logical conclusion of an aggressive free trade policy.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), VIII, p. 33-4.

<sup>20</sup> Suvendrini Perera, 'Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation: Empire and the Family Business in

The trade in opium as opposed to silver was hugely advantageous to the British but resulted in financial loss for the Chinese. There are, I would argue, two methods of conceiving Chinese commodities in Dickens's novels: commodities that are interpreted positively, such as tea, silk and chinaware and commodities that are cast in a negative light, such as opium (particularly in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* [1870]). The way in which Dickens holds in tension these conflicting views of Chinese commodities is highly suggestive of the reasons why he may have found China problematic. Due to the speed at which boats could traverse the waters, China was now in close trading proximity and there was an increasing British dependence on these commodities; China was no longer a threat from afar. The Limehouse settlement in London saw a huge rise in Chinese immigrants and in this sense Dickens was seeing not only a commodity presence but also a growing physical presence of the Chinese in Britain.

The trade in tea was perhaps preferable for the Chinese traders, however, the high rate of taxation at 180% meant that again the Chinese were losing out financially. As Regenia Gagnier has argued:

India and China did not enter modernity as the helpless 'lands of famine' enshrined in Western Imagination. They were made so by British policy on trade deficits and export drives, over taxation and merchant capital, foreign control of key revenues and developmental resources, imperial and civil warfare, and a gold standard favouring Britain.<sup>21</sup>

That Britain refigured and conceptualised China in this way shows a determination to ensure it maintained its own supremacy at any cost. This point is underscored when one considers that Britain was only subject to a 6% tax on articles imported to China. The continued interest in Chinese commodities meant that their desirability was sustained but the potential for this to impact in a financially negative manner for China cannot be underestimated. The presence of these commodities in Dickens's novels, and indeed, in his journalism, reflects a growing interest in tea, china and silk originating from China and it points to his recognition of the continued trading relationship between the two nations, but his prose does not register concerns about the exploitative aspect of trade.

In *Dombey and Son*, an interesting commodity pattern emerges when commodities enter the novel's space and are introduced in a set word order and then re-introduced later in the same passage in a slightly different order. Such subtle word juxtapositions begin to create a commodity consciousness that builds a sense of the

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"Dombey and Son", *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1990), pp. 603-20 (p. 609).

<sup>21</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 22.

world beyond Britain and engages with the notion of an increasing dependence on Chinese commodities. This layering and textual patterning of a country's commodities is inserted in the narrative before the country (China) itself is mentioned. By increasing the number of references to tea and tea drinking paraphernalia, Dickens is able to secure the place of China in the reader's psyche, encouraging them to consider the commodity and the country in tandem. This ultimately serves to reveal an increasing dependence on a nation that was frequently depicted as dependent upon Britain in nineteenth-century literature and unsettles the balance of power. This introduction of tea and China can be noticed for the first time with the appearance of tea paraphernalia: 'With that Miss Nipper untied her bonnet strings, and after looking vacantly for some moments into a little black tea-pot that was set forth with the usual homely service, on the table, shook her head and a tin canister and began unasked to make the tea' (p. 291). Initially, the tea-pot – the receptacle of the actual tea – is the focal point, but the conclusion of the sentence focuses on the tea itself. A British commodity, the 'tin-canister', frames the image of the foreign tea and naturalises the foreign object in the home environment, allowing Susan Nipper to engage with it with ease.

A little later in the novel Mrs Perch 'is in the kitchen taking tea; and has made a tour of the establishment, and priced the silks and damasks by the yard, and exhausted every interjection in the dictionary and out of it expressive of admiration and wonder' (p. 541). Again here is a character in a familiar British domestic setting and yet she is 'taking tea'. The allusions to Chinese products do not stop there however as she begins to pull out 'silks'. By layering commodities in the text in this way a sense of the global provenance can be gleaned without China being specifically mentioned; the commodities China produces are known to the readership and as a consequence this context does not need to be made explicit. The commodities appear in the narrative and act as visual markers of a land beyond Britain; the silks are admired and treated with wonder; they are fetishized as desirable commodities.

This layering of allusions to China's commodities continues and serves to emphasise the trading connections between China and Britain. Dickens next moves his readers to consider Captain Cuttle's talk with Florence:

It was not until the twilight that Captain Cuttle, fairly dropping anchor, at last, by the side of Florence, began to talk at all connectedly. But when the light of the fire was shining on the walls and ceiling of the little room, and on the tea-board and the cups and saucers that were ranged upon the table [...] the Captain broke a long silence. (p. 745)

The reference to the 'tea-board and the cups and saucers' again ensures that the commodity paraphernalia is introduced and a relationship between the commodity and its origins is established. By building up references to Chinese commodities the

reader is almost mentally ‘transmigrated’ which is how a nineteenth century American journalist described reading Dickens’s *Bleak House*.<sup>22</sup> A similar effect can be seen in *Dombey and Son* as the objects are syncretised in a narrative sense and connections between the commodities and the country are underscored. I would suggest that through the subtle inclusion of these foreign commodities in the novel the reader is encouraged to look beyond his country of origin and called on to consider the relationship between Britain and China.

What happens next is an interesting inversion of words: Dickens states first that ‘[t]he captain hastily produced the big watch, the tea-spoons, the sugar-tongs, and the canister, and laying them on the table, swept them with his great hand into Walter’s hat’ (p. 750). Here we have images of the tea – suggested by the tea-spoons – from China and sugar from Demerara. ‘[L]aying them on the table’ creates a linear ordering which ultimately leads to a sweep of the items into Walter’s hat. This sweep acts as a metaphorical movement of the Other into an area that can be neatly encapsulated under the heading of Walter’s travels. Each place he visits has its commodity signifier. Yet a few sentences later Dickens re-introduces the objects, and reorganises the references to them. In this sense, I propose, Dickens is taking control and ordering the geographical commodity references to underscore the importance of such objects and the trade with China. The anxiety with which the Captain engages with the objects is acknowledged when Dickens states that ‘[t]he Captain could be induced by no persuasion of Walter’s to wind up the big watch, or to take back the canister, or to touch the sugar-tongs or tea-spoons’ (p. 754). What happens here is a reorganising of the order in which Walter travelled; the reader goes on a commodity journey whilst Walter himself traverses these geographical spaces. The sugar tongs and the tea spoons, all ephemeral pieces of tea-making equipment, are foregrounded and invested with meaning, and yet Captain Cuttle does not want to touch them. I suggest that this is a realisation or an acknowledgment that these commodities from transnational locations have found their way into the British home and, in the final moments of the scene, the meaning of their inclusion and the potentially negative implications of this British reliance on transnational commodities is brought to the reader’s attention.

This is not an isolated example within the novel and can, indeed, be seen within the whole of Dickens’s oeuvre. Moving momentarily beyond the representation of China in *Dombey and Son*, it can also be seen in the inverted sentence structuring that introduces the famous bottle of Madeira in the same novel: ‘Other buried wine grows older, as the old Madeira did in its time; and dust and

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 12. See also Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1853). *Bleak House* was initially published in 20 serialised parts between March 1852 and September 1853 and then in volume form in 1853.

cobwebs thicken on the bottle'.<sup>23</sup> This description is then modified a little later in the same chapter: 'Buried wine grows older, as the old Madeira did' (p. 947). Such rhetorical techniques allow transnational locales to enter the reader's consciousness. In doing so, Dickens constructs a complex view of transnational commodities, one that is applicable both to the Other and to the home space.

In a later chapter, Captain Cuttle discusses Walter's actual journey to China, and the journey within that journey:

'Aye!' nodded Captain Cuttle. 'The ship as took him up, when he was wrecked in the hurricane that had drove her clean out of her course, was a China trader, and Wal'r made the woyage, and got into favour, aboard and ashore – being as smart and good a lad as ever stepped – and so, the supercargo dying Canton, he got made (having acted as clear afore), and now he's supercargo aboard another ship, same owners. And so, you see' repeated the Captain, thoughtfully 'the pretty creature goes away upon the roaring main with Wal'r, on a woyage to China'. (p. 847)

The passage gives attention to the specific details of how Walter arrived in China and where: Canton. Canton was a key Chinese port and the site of much trade in the nineteenth century. Canton was in fact initially one of the few ports open to British trade until after the Opium War of 1839-42 and the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 when further Chinese ports at Shanghai, Ningbo and Amoy were opened. This increased and improved trade links between Britain and China and resulted in an influx of Chinese commodities to British shores. That Dickens chooses to name an area of China, Canton, in this way and to send two of the central characters there, is suggestive of his awareness of the increasing significance of this locale (beyond the past negative interactions during the Opium wars of 1839-42) which, in turn, heightens the reader's awareness of China. Dickens's attention to Chinese commodities, it can be argued, encourages his readers to think further about the origins of the products they consume in their houses. However, his vision of Britain also situates the nation within an increasingly connected global world system. As Suvendrini Perera has stated:

Walter and Florence embark on a trading voyage to a China forcibly opened to England's opium trade; Dombey sends Walter aboard the prophetically named 'Son and Heir' to act as a junior clerk in his factory in Barbados and Uncle Sol uses his scientific skills to work his way as a seaman from Demerara to China in search of his missing nephew.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, p. 942.

<sup>24</sup> Perera, 'Empire and the Family Business in "Dombey and Son"', p. 609.

What Perera addresses only implicitly is that Dickens's dispatching of his characters to various ports around the globe encouraged his nineteenth-century readership think about the world beyond Britain and the ramifications of such transnational relationships. I am not arguing that Dickens presents an enlightened world view and I would not want to denigrate the significance of Britain's offensive trade drive abroad. However, I suggest that Dickens questions Britain's relations with abroad and highlights the nation's role in transnational spaces which leads to a consideration of cultural changeability. In revealing a British dependence on commodities from China, Dickens highlights a cultural interdependence that serves to underscore the perceived threat that China posed to Britain through Britain's increasing dependence on commodities such as tea, silk and chinaware that might otherwise go unrecognised. By including multiple instances in the novel in which cultural boundaries are crossed and cultural identities re-defined, *Dombey and Son* invites the reader to question how the increasingly interdependent relationship between Britain and its foreign trading partners can be managed.

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