

Chinese Commodities and British Characters: Tea, Opium and Silk in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865)

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Introduction

Our Mutual Friend (1864–1865), Charles Dickens's last finished novel, may not be an obvious first choice to discuss the representation of China within Dickens's work. It does not allude to any actual travels to the country, unlike *Dombey and Son* (1848), *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), or *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), and the setting of the story is restricted to Victorian London. Chinese influence is felt primarily in the form of representation of commodities, which is arguably more subtle than Dickens's discussion of China in other novels. However, the oblique references to China in *Our Mutual Friend* arguably enable 'contrapuntal' reading, in Edward Said's celebrated phrase, which uses attention to apparently minor elements within a text to uncover the structural dependence of Victorian literature on empire, taking account of both the shaping presence of imperialism and possible strategies of resistance to it. This paper examines the image of China in *Our Mutual Friend*, especially through the discourses of three commodities that are often connected to Chinese trade, namely tea, opium and silk. My intention is to give light to an objectified China which is "silenced or marginally present or ideologically represented" (Said 66) in imperialistic contexts, and to examine how narrative structure partly overlaps with the imperial-political attitudes that Victorian Britons took towards China, as a source of convenient wealth which they controlled in terms of trade.

Why is China significant in Dickens's imagination, and to what extent is it interchangeable with other Oriental places? Of course, commodities from countries like India and Turkey appear in the novel too, sometimes in juxtaposition, and it cannot be denied that Chinese commodities are given some general Oriental valence as well. However, I emphasize the role of China for its ambivalent and hybrid position it has come to acquire in a long tradition of

Britain's literary imagination for the below background (Nakagoe 9). As noted by scholars such as Raymond Dawson and David Porter, China has long acted as an antithesis to Britain, becoming transformed in the British imagination from a romanticized utopia in the 17th and the 18th century to an abjectly regressive nation in the 19th century. However, as Elizabeth Chang has argued, such images of China also become a foil for the creation of individual and collective self on the British side. As Shayn Fiske states, "China could neither be homogeneously absorbed into nor excluded from England's imperial identity" (Fiske 218). Also, Hannah Lewis-Bill remarks that "this inability to be either absorbed or excluded is central to a Dickensian sense of the world beyond Britain" (Lewis-Bill 30). I consider that China in *Our Mutual Friend* can be situated within such a hybrid literary genealogy.

I wish to focus in particular on the connections between Chinese objects and the identities of characters in the novel. The connection between objects, consumption and identities, including that of individuals and nations, has been a debated topic in recent criticism. Russel W. Belk has argued that "we are what we have and that this may be the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior" (Belk 160), with material objects aiding in the construction of an "extended self", which "operates not only on an individual level, but also on a collective level involving family, group, subcultural, and national identities" (Belk 160). Frank Trentmann, in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (2012), described how scholars have "reclaimed [consumption] as a fertile ground for subcultures, hybridity, self-fashioning, and transgressive identity politics" (Trentmann 8). The above arguments are also applicable to fictional worlds: the object-world serves to construct each character's identity, through repetitive mentions of objects and interactions.

The above discussion provides a context for my choice of tea, opium and silk as the Chinese commodities to be examined in this essay; it is for their paradoxical status as simultaneously Oriental exotica, marker of Britishness, and satirical critique of British attitudes towards the empire. Although they have their own history and are not naturalized in the same way, the characteristic they have in common is that these commodities, all by Dickens's time integrated in British material culture, are connected to the growing Victorian consumption and internalization of far-flung reaches of the empire. Critics such as David Suchoff and Patrick Brantlinger have considered Dickens to be an imperialist and

ethnocentric; however, in her critique of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Miriam O’Kane Mara asserts that Dickens “criticizes colonialism by juxtaposing British domestic consumption with the effect of empire” (Mara 233) and suggests that “the appetites of the British themselves, rather than some taint or infection from the colonies, adulterates the colonial system and, in turn, England itself” (Mara 233). In this essay, I will examine how this argument can be applied to *Our Mutual Friend*.

Mr Venus’s Tea

As Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, although Mr Venus in *Our Mutual Friend* is not a “businessman” but a taxidermist, his shop is scattered with “allusions to the facts of empire” (Said 73). In the following excerpt from the seventh chapter of Book One, Mr Venus welcomes his acquaintance Silas Wegg:

‘Oh dear me, dear me! [...] the world that appeared so flowery has ceased to blow! [...] A Wice. Tools. Bones, wariou. Skulls, wariou. Preserved Indian baby. African ditto. Bottled preparations, wariou. Everything within reach of your hand, in good preservation [...] Say, human wariou. Cats. Articulated English baby. Dogs. Ducks. Glass eyes, wariou. Mummied bird. Dried cuticle, wariou. Oh, dear me! That’s the general panoramic view.’ (Dickens, *OMF* 81)

Piling up nouns after nouns, this grotesque miniature offers a satirical panorama of the once glorious British Empire: a “world that appeared so flowery”, now filled with the preserved relics of various regions of the earth. Mr Venus’s suggestion that “everything [is] within reach of your hand” connects to Said’s suggestion that works of metropolitan culture attempt to maintain and order the British empire (“the empire must be maintained, and it was maintained” (Said 53)) but also hint at the writer’s sceptical attitude towards imperialism: every piece from the collection is inanimate, dead and preserved, alluding to the darker sides of imperial control.

In this environment, the numerous appearances of Mr Venus’s Chinese tea are not coincidental. Hannah Lewis-Bill comments, with particular reference to

Dombey and Son, that “commodities, such as tea” serve to establish “cultural reference points and markers of Chinese influence on British culture in the novel” (Lewis-Bill 31–32), and she also maintains that the inclusion of tea in Dickens’s works “raises important questions about Britain’s increasing commercial dependence on China and about the influence this has on British Identity” (Lewis-Bill 30). Similar arguments can be made regarding *Our Mutual Friend*; here tea is often mentioned and Mr Venus’s gradual consumption of the oriental beverage is depicted to the end of the chapter, where he “proceeds to pour himself out more tea” (Dickens, *OMF* 85). The consumption of tea, and Mr Venus’s dependence on it, is emphasized to the point that it defines his identity, and as Julie E. Fromer states, “each cup of tea contributes to the larger picture of character being drawn throughout the novel” (Fromer 21).

To clarify Dickens’s use of tea as a double marker of British and Oriental identity, this commodity must be placed in a broader historical context. In its early days of its introduction to Britain in the mid- 17th century, tea was marketed as a foreign and exotic product, initially restricted to court circles. As its popularity grew, it was increasingly consumed at home by the middle classes by the early eighteenth century, acquiring in the process its distinctive status as an English drink and social pastime. Fromer argues that such liminal rituals of the tea table helped to build community, forging a unified national identity out of disparate social groups, classes and genders (Fromer 11). In the context of imperialism, “tea bridges the gap between colony and metropole and between an exotic product of the empire and the domestic consumer” (Fromer 18). Also, hybrid ways of consuming tea by “combining the products of the empire and England”—such as English milk, sugar from West Indies, and Chinese porcelain—were commonplace: “to be truly English was to consume the world” (Fromer 46).

Initially, Mr Venus offers Wegg some Oriental tea and an English muffin before they engage in conversation, saying “My tea is drawing, and my muffin is on the hob, Mr Wegg: will you partake?” (Dickens, *OMF* 78) Not only does this reflect the hybrid colonial consumption of Britons in the metropole, but it is an act of establishing connection or community, which allows the characters to “interact in ways that would be more strained or awkward, or even impossible, without tea” (Fromer 22). Indeed, the conversation between Mr Venus and Wegg is initially rather awkward; Wegg asks whether he himself could be of value,

and Mr Venus continues “blowing his tea” (Dickens, *OMF* 82), and answers: “‘Well,’ replies Venus, still blowing his tea, ‘I’m not prepared, at a moment’s notice, to tell you, Mr Wegg. [...] You might turn out valuable yet, as a—’ here Mr Venus takes a gulp of tea, so hot that it makes him choke, and sets his weak eyes watering; ‘as a Monstrosity’” (Dickens, *OMF* 82). Tea functions as a conversational device creating humour and permitting more candid social interaction.

Mr Venus’s tea serves more specifically as an effective method to overcome melancholy or escape reality, and its depressive consumption and increasing dosage somewhat resembles that of opium. Mr Venus “with a look and in an attitude of the deepest desolation [...] drinks more tea by gulps”, and says “It lowers me. When I’m equally lowered all over, lethargy sets in. By sticking to it till one or two in the morning, I get oblivion” (Dickens, *OMF* 84). His addictive consumption fails to lift his spirit up; rather it is obsessive and compulsive, accompanied by depression. But what is Mr Venus evading? He is refusing to face the exploitative side of imperialism, which is symbolized by his melancholy love for Pleasant Riderhood. Regarding Mr Venus’s business, he says that “She knows the profits of it, but she don’t appreciate the art of it, and she objects to it” (Dickens, *OMF* 84). He also mentions that she has once written to him “I do not wish [...] to regard myself, nor yet to be regarded, in that boney light” (Dickens, *OMF* 84). Pleasant Riderhood, however, refuses any union with a man whose business is grounded on the preservation of the empire.

Though not exactly tea itself, the imagery of teapot appears in Chapter Six of Book Two in the context of conspiracy by Silas Wegg and Mr. Venus. However, in reality, Mr. Boffin is aware of Wegg’s plan on fooling him and Mr. Venus is only pretending to cooperate with Wegg on this matter. Deception is working on a number of levels, and the teapot intervenes as a key motif in this chapter, offering a delusion to Wegg. Here, Wegg, who has begun to live in the Boffin estate as Mr. Boffin’s teacher, invites Mr. Venus to the place to look for something valuable. That is when Mr. Boffin accidentally comes in and Wegg introduces Mr. Venus to his employer.

‘Why, I’ve heard of you,’ cried Mr Boffin, ‘I heard of you in the old man’s [Old John Harmon’s] time. You knew him. Did you ever buy anything of him?’ With piercing eagerness.

‘No, sir,’ returned Venus.

‘But he showed you things; didn’t he?’

Mr Venus, with a glance at his friend, replied in the affirmative.

‘What did he show you?’ asked Mr Boffin, putting his hands behind him, and eagerly advancing his head. ‘Did he show you boxes, little cabinets, pocket-books, parcels, anything locked or sealed, anything tied up?’

Mr Venus shook his head.

‘Are you a judge of china?’

Mr Venus again shook his head.

‘Because if he had ever showed you a teapot, I should be glad to know of it,’ said Mr Boffin. And then, with his right hand at his lips, repeated thoughtfully, ‘a Teapot, a Teapot’, and glanced over the books on the floor, as if he knew there was something interesting connected with a teapot, somewhere among them.

Mr Wegg and Mr Venus looked at one another wonderingly: and Mr Wegg, in fitting on his spectacles, opened his eyes wide, over their rims, and tapped the side of his nose: as an admonition to Venus to keep himself generally wide awake.

‘A Teapot,’ repeated Mr Boffin, continuing to muse and survey the books; ‘a Teapot, a Teapot. Are you ready, Wegg?’ (Dickens, *OMF* 480)

To Wegg, it seems that this enigmatic repetition of the word “teapot” and Mr. Boffin’s queer obsession to it comes from Daniel Dancer’s (a notorious miser in 18th century England) story of money left in a teapot, which Wegg has read aloud to Mr. Boffin. As Stanley Friedman suggests, “Wegg believes that Noddy’s [Mr. Boffin’s] behaviour is being influenced by the stories” (Friedman 50). This image of china (the pronunciation coincides with the name of the country China) as a means of deception and its potential fragility of being broken up and revealed comes back again in Rokesmith’s China House discourse, which I will discuss later.

In the end of Mr. Venus’s story, nonetheless, the marital union between Pleasant Riderhood and Mr. Venus does take place under a compromised condition. In Chapter Fourteen of Book Four, it is significant that the encounter between Silas Wegg and Mr. Venus opens with the below sentence; “It being evening, he found that gentleman, as he expected, seated over his fire; but did

not find him, as he expected, floating his powerful mind in tea” (Dickens, *OMF* 780). The formerly emphasized presence of tea in Mr. Venus’s taxidermy shop is completely lacking, and the readers can suspect that something has changed in a positive direction. Tea has been acting as a constant companion to Mr. Venus in his sorrowful and miserable times throughout the novel so far. Then, Mr. Venus tells Silas Wegg that “after marriage, I [would confine] myself to the articulation of men, children, and the lower animals, it might not relieve the lady’s mind of her feeling respecting being as a lady—regarded in a bony light” (Dickens, *OMF* 782). (According to Frederick Busch, “[t]he variations ‘boney’ and ‘bony’ are based on Dickens’s decision or oversight” (Busch 154), because Dickens himself has proof-read the reprint versions.) Mr. Venus has agreed to limit his specimens to that of male only. Busch argues that Pleasant Riderhood “does not want, as a woman, to be illuminated by the insights of a man who rebuilds dead women—perhaps what she sees as dead embodiments of herself” (Busch 154). Similarly, Michael Costell maintains that Pleasant’s initial rejection is due to the issues of “respectability generally, and sexual propriety in particular” (Costell 112). However, there may be another way of interpreting Pleasant’s compromise. That is to say, it could be argued that the dismissal of females from killing is to preserve the species and lower the risks of extinction, because it is the females that bear the next generation. Thus, Pleasant’s partial mercy on the colonial Others could be read as Dickens’s relatively softer attitude on the periphery in terms of imperial control, which is in parallel with Mr. Venus’ decreased consumption of tea.

Mr Wilfer’s Opium

While Pleasant Riderhood disavows exploitation of the empire, Bella Wilfer indulges herself in repeated imaginative imperial excursions, a process which Dickens uses to delineate her identity. As Baumgarten points out, Bella is concerned with the “construction of her self-image as a marriageable woman” (Baumgarten 56), imagining herself as a “lovely woman” (Dickens, *OMF* 318) or “charming daughter” (Dickens, *OMF* 318): Oriental fantasy features within this process, such as in Bella’s fantasy of herself as “a modern Cleopatra” (Dickens, *OMF* 319). Chinese opium enters the fantasy with a section in Chapter Eight of Book Two, in which Bella returns home and goes for a walk with her

father in Greenwich:

Now, Pa [...] was tacking away to Newcastle, to fetch black diamonds to make his fortune with; now, Pa was going to China in that handsome three-masted ship, to bring home opium, with which he would for ever cut out Chicksey Veneering and Stobbles, and to bring home silks and shawls without end for the decoration of his charming daughter. (Dickens, *OMF* 318)

This passage may be read as an expression of the “free trading impulse” (Tambling “Part One” 34) underlying British imperialism and also a representation of the historical trading networks in which Newcastle coal was the driving fuel for a global mercantilism which enabled the acquisition of diamonds and Chinese opium. However, opium was not completely Othered as an exotic import, as it had been in its early introduction in the 17th century; by the 18th and 19th century, it had also mixed into British culture to some extent (Nakagoe 7). Opium in Victorian times was an important medicine in domestic use, and in some fictional works such as Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871) laudanum or opium is not explicitly associated with the Orient (Nakagoe 7). This affordable commodity permeated the country and was consumed by people of various social classes; apart from medical use, it was frequently employed by the middle or upper class as a form of recreation as in Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), and used as a way to fight against the starvation and agonies of life for the poor, as portrayed in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848).

This integration of opium into British culture gave rise to the question of how “the nation-as-body [can] be unequivocally British when it consistently consumes commodities that are not British?” (Milligan 29). Dickens’s works can be seen to express anxiety about the incorporation of opium into the nation: as Jeremy Tambling summarizes, “the anger, anxiety and disturbed tone that constructs Dickens’s sense of China” (Tambling “Part One” 30) can be found in relation to opium in a number of his works. Although opium is not historically connected with China alone—indeed, in the triangular trade among Britain, China and India, it was mainly Britain who exported Indian opium to China in order to finance its purchase of tea—in Dickens’s works, the image of China and

opium are intimate, habitually made hidden and with dark impressions (Nakagoe 14). In *Bleak House* (1854), the mystery man Nemo dies of opium overdose in his filthy room; Louise Foxcroft connects it with a “sense of alienation” (Foxcroft 52). As for *Little Dorrit* (1857), Wenyng Xu argues that the Clennam family’s silence on their trade in China may drive from the possibility of them being involved in trading of opium and thus their guilty conscience forbids them to talk about it (Xu 57), which can be interpreted as “an internalization of a national guilt” (Xu 58). Also, Susan Thurin mentions that, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), “the added references to a Chinese competitor and exchanges between the Chinese and English patrons of the den convey a critical view of England’s dealing with China” (Thurin 109).

However, this negative perspective on opium is interestingly absent in the above quoted passage from *Our Mutual Friend* (or, perhaps, “silent” in the Saidian sense (Said 66)). Bella is still a mercenary girl who is determined to marry for money, and in her get-rich-quick scheme the opium trade is mentioned once in a superficial manner. The opium trade in her imagination serves as a stepping stone towards the silks and shawls upon her own body, and such fantasy enables her to look away from her real life as a daughter born into a family of more modest means. For Bella, her focus of her delusion is on the wealth and pleasure acquired from the Empire, and any expressions of concern for its damaging impact on China—apparent to Dickens and his contemporaries as a result of the Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60)—are absent.

Bella’s use of China as a vague repository of fabulous riches and personal fulfilment is in contrast, therefore, with Dickens’s habitual use of opium as a dangerous foreign import, and with readers’ awareness of the dubious morality of the opium trade (the subject of contemporary political debates). This effect can also be found in Bella’s other Oriental fantasies, in which China, India and Turkey are combined. She imagines herself to be courted by “a merchant of immense wealth (name unknown)” (Dickens, *OMF* 318) and “married to an Indian Prince, who was a Something-or-Other” (Dickens, *OMF* 319). In her consciousness, the Orient is not something tangible, but merely a means of obtaining her father’s “sole profit and advantage” (Dickens, *OMF* 319). This lack of consideration of the details of imperial history emphasizes the delusional quality of Bella’s imagined romantic relationship with the Orient, which allows her to avoid seeing her actual situation as a powerless girl who has lost her

chance to marry an heir, John Harmon, and ironically suggests the hallucinatory fantasies created by opium.

Bella's Silk

If, as Baumgarten suggests, *Our Mutual Friend* can be read as the bildungsroman of Bella Wilfer (Baumgarten 57), the Chinese commodity that appears as the marker of her transformed identity is silk. In Chapter Sixteen of Book Three, Bella has given up her dreams of wealth, leaving the Boffin estate and returning home in her ragged clothes. When she tells her father that she does not aspire to be rich anymore, after seeing how the Boffins have been corrupted by gaining wealth, and that she intends to marry Rokesmith, Mr Wilfer reacts thus: “I admire this mercenary young person [...] more in this dress than if she had come to me in China silks, Cashmere shawls, and Golconda diamonds” (Dickens, *OMF* 608).

Although the introduction of silk into Britain, through the Silk Road and European trade, was as early as the Middle Ages, this commodity, like tea and opium, continued to be viewed as a hybrid of British and Oriental identity in Victorian times. Madeleine C. Seys comments that “silk is inherently ambiguous” as a historical commodity, sharing both European and Oriental aspects (Seys, Chapter 2). By the 12th century, sericulture in Italy was developed and silk weaving began in England in 1717 and flourished after the Napoleonic Wars, relying on techniques and styles adopted from Italy (Hooper 21). At the same time, demand for Oriental silk grew for its designs and styles, and silk was one of the most popular Asian imports in the Victorian era. Brenda King argues that silk was considered “fashionable exotica” (King 1), existing at the intersection of British fashion and exotic cultures. Oriental silk designs had an impact on British goods, creating aesthetic hybridity. Simultaneously, silk became more affordable, making it a commonly featured material in Victorian fashion, at least for people belonging to middle class or upper. Thus, silk was both a foreign artefact and a “marker of proper Englishness” (Daly 237).

Clothing has long been used as a means of expressing identity, signifying the wearer's class, gender, and so on, but in literature its role is of much more importance. In *Henry James and the Art of Dress* (2001), Clair Hughes suggests that clothing is not only essential for establishing characters, but is also a key

factor for reinforcing thematic and symbolic patterns in James's narrative as a whole. Similar arguments can be made with regard to Chinese silk in *Our Mutual Friend*, although it is only "marginally present" within the text (Said 66). In the passage above, the imperial luxuries both contrast with the shabby clothes Bella is wearing, signifying her altered identity as a less "mercenary" self (the military phrase suggesting an explicit connection with British imperialism), and also suggesting a patterned reappearance of Oriental themes which remind the reader of the 'silks and shawls' (Dickens, *OMF* 318) from Bella's riverside fantasy scene. These delusional images of Oriental wealth are corrected by Mr Wilfer, who reassures Bella that there is a deeper happiness elsewhere.

Chinese silk appears again in a delusional context in Chapter Five of Book Four, when Rokesmith, still not revealing his real identity, takes a job in a China House, which Bella treats as a subject of fantasy rather than an actual financial institution. Bella trusts her husband's explanation of his expedition to the City as "satisfactory, without pursuing the China house into details than a wholesale vision of tea, rice, odd-smelling silks, carved boxes, and tight-eyed people in more than double-soled shoes, with their pigtailed pulling their heads of hair off, painted on transparent porcelain" (Dickens, *OMF* 681). The discourse of the China "house"—a word which can be read as signifying both a national 'home' and a 'household'—suggests the structural dependence of the British nation on Chinese trade and wealth (in the form of tea and "odd-smelling silks") while the image of restrictive Chinese domesticity connects with Bella's own developing identity as a British housewife. In addition, the connection of the word "China" with the concept of "porcelain" suggests not only the fragility of British ideas of China but also Rokesmith's deception: in Chapter Twelve, he confesses to his wife that "I have left the China House ... [it] is broken up and abolished. There is no such thing anymore" (Dickens, *OMF* 766).

Dickens's presentation of 'China' as an object of British fantasy, divorced from the historical reality of trade and the Opium Wars, serves to highlight the parochial and ethnocentric imaginations of his characters. Although Bella's imperial fantasy at the riverside is eventually followed by renunciation of her "mercenary" identity, this is not accompanied by insight into the world outside Britain; while Rokesmith's rhetorical demolition of the "Chinese" house suggests a casual attitude towards China which may be seen as parallel to British attitudes towards the country, disregarding its consequences for the Chinese

themselves.

Conclusion

As discussed above, tea, opium and silk are connected in Victorian discourse as symbols of the consumption and internalization of the imperial peripheries, which contributes to the formulation of a hybrid British identity. In addition, each of these commodities, despite being “silenced” or “marginally present” within the text, contributes to the construction of its British characters’ identities in *Our Mutual Friend*: the tea in Mr Venus’s taxidermy shop suggests the British Empire in a miniaturized form; opium and silk from China in Bella’s Oriental fantasy celebrates the rhetoric of “free trade” in opium while evading the political consequences of this project, and the “China House” discourse suggests British financial dependence on and imperial violence towards China. These Chinese commodities serve the purposes of the British characters, offering convenient delusions for them to look away from or to evade reality. For Mr Venus, tea is a way to console himself from being rejected for his job; for Bella, dreaming about opium and silk is a way to disregard her meagre position in real life; and for Rokesmith, the China House allows him to conceal his business in London. The relations established between characters and commodities can thus be interpreted as a form of satire on the unacknowledged exploitative tactics of the British Empire, and may suggest Dickens’s own shifting attitude towards a more critical stance on imperialism.

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