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# Consuming China in Early Modern England and Beyond: A Survey and Reexamination

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## Abstract

If we traveled back in time to the first half of the eighteenth century, we might notice that the cargo aboard an East Indiaman was rather diversified. But of these different products from different countries, a sizable number of them were manufactured in and originated from China. Why was China, alone among many other countries, able to secure its place as a world factory at the time? In this paper, I will suggest that we could not possibly understand how tea and porcelain became synonyms for China without tracing their histories back to the early modern world. We would not be able to deepen our understanding of Anglo-Chinese relations without taking into consideration the flow and circulations of goods between the two powers. My purpose here, therefore, is to outline these very connections throughout the early modern era, roughly from the late seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, based on the fascinating studies conducted by pioneering historians in the field over the past few decades. If we follow the life histories of some of the Chinese commodities, can we determine the ways in which those imported items interacted with the European market in general and the British in particular? Other than treating these commodities as marketable goods, are there any other intellectual perspectives available to help us better comprehend their associations with the early modern world?

## Keywords

China – commodities – consumption – early modern England – Chinese goods – commodity chain – production – canonization – popularization – the Qing empire

### 1 Prologue

If we traveled back in time to the first half of the eighteenth century, we might notice that the cargo aboard an East Indiaman was rather diversified. Raw silk, silk cloths, chinaware, lacquered ware, Chinese tea, copper, tutenague, borax, quicksilver, vermilion, musk, alum, sugar, sugar candy, rhubarb, china-root, camphor, sago, gold, and cowries were some of the items found in the crates.<sup>1</sup> Among these many imports, a sizable number of them were manufactured in and originated from China. Why was China, alone among many other countries, able to secure its place as a world factory for at least four centuries and across three historical eras, early modern, late modern, and contemporary? In this paper, I will suggest that we could not possibly understand how tea and porcelain became synonyms for China without tracing their histories back to the early modern era. We would not be able to deepen what we understand of Anglo-Chinese relations without taking into account the flow and circulations of goods between the two powers. My purpose here, therefore, is to narrate the very connections between China, its commodities, and Great Britain from the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. At each step along the way, I will address the following questions. If we were to follow their life histories, could we determine the ways in which “Chinese commodities” interacted with the European market in general and the British market in particular? Other than treating these commodities as marketable goods from an economic-historical angle that relies on figures, charts, and numbers, are there any other intellectual perspectives available to help us better comprehend their associations with the early modern world?

The history and study of commodities will thus be a major theme in the sections that follow. In recent decades the cultural history of commodities has left behind its old status as the Cinderella of Chinese history, which has long been dominated by political and economic historians. Through sustained engagement with sociocultural, transregional, global, and “glocal” studies, the study of commodities provides us with a fresh and revisionist approach to situating China within a much broader context that links Asia and the

<sup>1</sup> See Morse 1926, 90, 100, 110, 124, 144, 181, 172, 176–77, and 195.

external world. Hence, one of the underlying goals of this article is to survey the historiographical development of this field since the 1980s, which has been concretely shaped by a group of pioneering scholars such as Maxine Berg, Anne Gerritsen, Robert Finlay, Robert Markley, Giorgio Riello, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> Berg, Gerritsen, and Finlay, for instance, have touched upon the complex production process of porcelain in Jingdezhen, the influence of European taste on the design through the interaction between European traders and Chinese *hong* merchants, as well as how these luxurious goods became semiluxuries when European producers started to imitate them and sold them cheaper for middle-class consumers.<sup>3</sup> All of them have been instrumental in the consolidation of the field by locating Asian, Chinese commodities in the context of the wider social and economic transformation. Their scholarly contributions were timely and significant, stimulating debates over the conception of luxury, the diffusion of taste, the interrelations between gender and fashion, as well as the aesthetic of material culture with regard to imperialism, colonialism, and consumption. It is, however, by no means feasible to summarize all of their impressive research in one single paper. What I intend to do, as such, is to critically engage with some of their arguments and observations and to provide a few possible future directions for the study of Chinese commodities. In so doing, I will bring together various case studies in my discussion.

It would be impossible for the present study to depict all the Chinese commodities that circulated in early modern England. Instead our focus will be the social histories of tea, porcelain, silk, and Chinese wallpapers. Some readers might still argue that the net was cast too wide, as if I were lumping everything together without careful deliberation because each commodity might deserve its own comprehensive monograph-length study, while the studies of the selected commodities vary widely in quantity of attention given to them. For instance, tea is the subject of a huge literature, as is porcelain, whereas to some extent Chinese wallpaper has only recently been explored. By putting them together in this article, I hope to demonstrate that the history of Chinese commodities is both rich and diverse; at the same time, some of these products could be grouped in a shared category under the typological framework that I'll explicate in the subsequent section. In other words, although some commodities were not as popular and prevalent as others, they were in a way intertwined with each other. Moreover, they all left us meaningful and perceptible traces to better understand the political, social, cultural, economic, environmental, diplomatic, and transregional histories of China, Europe, and the world. Finally, although Chinese commodities had been circulating around

2 Berg 2005, Gerritsen 2020, Finlay 2010, Markley 2006, Riello 2015.

3 Berg 2005, Gerritsen 2020, Finlay 2010.

the globe since the early modern era, our focus here is early modern England because there are few richer historical contexts within which to explore the question raised in this article. This is an era when England became the birthplace of the consumer society<sup>4</sup> while consolidating nationalist pride through a set of rapidly expanding overseas trading networks.

## 2 The Commodity Chain

Like many other cultural historians, I am more inclined to treat every commodity, whether a local or global one, as a living subject rather than a static object. Only if we follow their itineraries as they move across space and time can we evaluate more closely the impact these commodities had on the early modern world. In tracing the journeys of these living subjects, the first step is to recognize the commodity chains as the trajectory of how a product was planted, cultivated, harvested, manufactured, financed, transported, distributed, sold, consumed, and eventually disposed of. Arguably, Adam Smith was the first among many intellectuals to contend that “consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production.”<sup>5</sup> Economists view a commodity as a direct agent that bonds consumption and production, whereas, according to Karl Marx, a product emerges for reasons of exchange under the institutional, psychological, and economic conditions of capitalism. Smith and Marx viewed commodities as being intricately tied to money, in an interpersonal market, and as having exchange value. All of these stages require that we first explicate the theoretical and conceptual ideas of a commodity chain.

Similar to other key concepts in history, the definition of a commodity chain has not had a fixed meaning over time. According to Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, a commodity chain is “a network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity.”<sup>6</sup> In *Empire of Things*, Frank Trentmann reminds us that a commodity chain is also a life cycle of a commodity from demand to acquisition to use, collection, and disposal.<sup>7</sup> The attention given to these meanings is then transformed into another conceptual thread entitled “a global commodity chain.” This consists of various interregional networks clustered around one commodity or product, linking customers, sellers, distributors, and producers to one another within the world economy. These networks, as further defined by Gary Gereffi and Miguel

4 McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982.

5 Smith 1776, vol. 2, 159.

6 Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986, 159.

7 Trentmann 2016, 4.

Korzeniewicz, are “situationally specific, socially constructed, and locally integrated.”<sup>8</sup> They were facilitated by “big buyers” in the market, who also help shaped the production networks established in the world’s most dynamic exporting countries, in which China was, no doubt, one of them since the early modern era.

According to Robert Ross and Kent Trachte, the so-called global commodity chains are also closely linked to “the production system that gives rise to particular patterns of coordinated trade” that characterizes global capitalism. It is a system that enables technological advancement to develop, while at the same time, it also serves as a stimulus to consolidate or expand the organisational networks which permit traders “to develop, manufacture, and distribute specific commodities.” As argued by the above scholars, due to the formation of such transnational production systems, “economic activity is not only international in scope, it is also global in its organisation.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to such transregionality, the global commodity chain is also considered a “buyer-driven system, which is far from static.”<sup>10</sup> Consumers are often affected by economic, cultural, and even political factors. These patterns of consumption, ranging from consumers’ motivation to consumer loyalty, are not only apparent in the present century but were also traceable to the early modern world, if not earlier. In a nutshell, the global commodity chain, derived from the process of industrialisation, is primarily “the result of an integrated system of production and trade.”<sup>11</sup>

Considering what the above researchers – most of them political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists – have theorized, I would like to put forward a new type of commodity chain. This one was derived from analytical tools developed by theorists and historians and brought into the picture in studies of commodities. Tracing the flows of some Chinese commodities across the globe, and particularly in England, I would suggest that these commodities went through the following processes: production, canonization, and popularization. The proposed commodity chain possibly bears a resemblance to the “essential continuity” found between the various aspects of consumption by Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, these aspects being “production, distribution, marketing, advertising, and sales.”<sup>12</sup> My attempt, however, is to merge some of these phases together while underscoring the significance and uniqueness of my three stages, using a few Chinese commodities as cases in point.

8 Gereffi Korzeniewicz 1994, 2.

9 Ross and Trachte 1990.

10 Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994, 115.

11 Ibid, 95.

12 Fine and Leopold 1993.

Fundamentally, these processes can be regarded as the various stages in the life cycle of a given commodity, each stage being the commodity's encounter with a different economic/social force: the global system of trade and consumption (globality), the social networks of response and acceptance (society), and the habits and everyday lives, or *Alltagsgeschichte*, of ordinary people (identity).<sup>13</sup> Some of the selected commodities went through all three stages, while some only experienced one or two. The present approach also treats the movement of commodities through these stages as a nonlinear circuit rather than an absolute linear chain. So far from the perspective associated with the global commodity chain, one largely focused on a "process of negotiation/conversation"<sup>14</sup> between retailers and buyers (or the crude polarizations between suppliers and consumers), the approach I will suggest puts the commodity under the spotlight by outlining the ways both consumers and suppliers created, shaped, forged, maintained, and conceptualized product identities. In addition, rather than focusing on the beginning and ending points in the commodity chain, our attention will be directed toward the culturally inflected dynamics of the relationships between movements of these goods and their reception by consumers in different times, places, and phases of the commodity's circulation.

First, this framework attempts to offer an alternative account of the social history of the Chinese commodities that underlay the genesis, structure, and evolution of an interregional network on a global scale. Secondly, and more constructively, I also wish to offer, through an essentially cultural-historical methodology, a typological description of the life histories of some of the selected Chinese commodities considered here. In this way, I will recast the ways in which Chinese commodities interacted with the global system through this commodity chain; and, hopefully, the typology of life histories will become a potential methodology that will shed a little light on the intrinsic connections between China and the world. Admittedly, the proposed commodity chain is by no means exhaustive enough to marshal the biographical history of every commodity; and there are situations of extreme hardship, such as warfare, political upheavals, and natural disasters, that might be seen

13 Discussion of everyday life has become one of the hot topics these days. Gudrun Andersson and Jon Stobart provided us with a thorough historiographical discussion in relation to the daily lives and daily routines across different parts of Europe and beyond throughout the long eighteenth century in their latest publication. See Anderson and Stobart 2022.

14 The use of the term "negotiation" in this context is derived from Sally Clarke's discussion on the history of consumption. See Clarke 1997, whereas "conversation" from Hancock 1998.

as interruptions to these three stages. I also have to confess that the framework is not an entirely new discovery but a condensation of thoughts, if not a shared framework of examination, that stems from the critical literature in this field.

### 3 Production

Let's begin with the process of production. I interpret this process as the layered procedures by which a commodity is produced. Almost all marketable commodities in the early modern era needed to undergo certain processes when they were being transformed from raw materials into profitable goods. These processes could be long and complicated and required skillful refinements. After planting and cultivating, Chinese black tea, for example, had to go through at least four vital stages, namely withering, rolling, fermenting, and baking. In the case of Oolong tea, the processes were even more intricate and involved additional procedures such as tossing, oxidation, and fixation ("kill green" in Chinese). Figure 1 shows the complexities of these processes in relation to different types of Chinese tea. Similarly, Chinese silk, porcelain, and wallpaper also required lengthy production processes before the age of machinery. For instance, high-quality Chinese wallpaper could take up to years to produce because it was all produced by hand using the block-printing

Green Tea	"Kill Green" (Steaming/ Pan Firing)							Rolling/ Forming	Drying	
White Tea	Withering (Indoor/ Outdoor)						Rolling/ Forming	Drying		
Oolong Tea	Withering (Outdoor & Indoor)	Tossing/ Bruising (Turning Over)	Oxidation (Partial)	"Kill Green" (Pan Firing/ Baking - semi oxidation)		Rolling/ Forming	Drying	Firing		
Black Tea	Withering		Oxidation (Full)		Rolling/ Forming		Drying			
Pu-Erh Green	Withering		"Kill Green" (Pan Firing - full fermentation)			Rolling/ Forming	Sun Drying	"Steaming/ Shaping"	Storing/ Aging	
Pu-Erh Black	Withering		"Kill Green" (Pan Firing - full fermentation)			Rolling/ Forming	Sun Drying	"Cooking" (Piling/ Heaping)	"Steaming/ Shaping"	Storing/ Aging

FIGURE 1 How Chinese tea is made  
 THE CHINESE TEA SHOP WEBSITE, [HTTPS://THECHINESETEASHOP.COM /PAGES/HOW-CHINESE-TEA-IS-MADE](https://thechineseteashop.com/pages/how-chinese-tea-is-made)

process, which was slow and labor intensive. And to make a fine piece of porcelain from start to finish, Anne Gerritsen tells us that this required the hands of a highly skilled potter, “who can feel whether the clay is well-enough prepared, who can reliably throw a pot and shape its form, knows about pigments and glazes, who has the painterly skills to decorate the pot with the finest patterns, and knows about firewood and oven temperature.”<sup>15</sup>

My interpretation of the production process is that it did not end after these commodities were produced. It also included a series of additional stages to help the commodity set sail for the market: packaging, marketing, and transportation. These three phases were imperative and very much interconnected. Studies of Chinese commodities show that each of these stages also had a long history. Packaging, for instance, began in China approximately two thousand years ago. As early as the Zhou dynasty, the Chinese began using treated mulberry bark to prepare food for transport over a certain distance.<sup>16</sup> In the centuries that followed, this technique developed into papermaking; in fact, paper is considered the oldest example of flexible packaging in global history. Later, in the Ming and Qing eras, manufacturers could also access other resources to pack their merchandise, such as glass, wood, metal, porcelain, and silk.<sup>17</sup>

Without question, the history of packaging in China, as elsewhere in the world, began with proper preservation and protection of commodities for transport. Ultimately, this process was inseparable from attempts to make the packaging attractive and this stage is closely related to the marketing stage within the production process. Taking as an example a Chinese tea container marketed in eighteenth century England (see figure 2), we can see that the bohea tea was packed in an exquisite porcelain container. The word bohea, which derives from the name of a geographical district in China known as the Wuyi Mountains in what is now Fujian, was clearly crafted on a ceramic surface that was decorated with a pattern of an artistic and colorful wreath. Similar to this small container, Chinese tea boxes were even made of glass or silver. As tea imported from China was considered a luxury in early modern England, the designs on some of these tea boxes were sophisticated and even came with locks and keys.

In 1766, for instance, Thomas Chippendale billed Sir Lawrence Dundas Bart (c.1710–1781) for “a very neat mahogany tea box with two wood canisters lin’d

15 Gerritsen 2020, 182.

16 Cheng 2009, 62.

17 Fu and Cao 2019, 332.





FIGURE 2 Fine bohea tea (eighteenth-century England)

TEA IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN: A PROJECT CONDUCTED BY QUEEN MARY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, [HTTPS://QMHIStoryOFTEA.WORDPRESS.COM/2016/07/12/NOTES-TOWARDS-THE-CULTURAL-HISTORY-OF-BOHEA/](https://qmhistoryoftea.wordpress.com/2016/07/12/notes-towards-the-cultural-history-of-bohea/)

with lead.”<sup>18</sup> The wooden interiors were covered with a tin-lead alloy to seal off the wood from the tea and keep out dampness and air. George Hepplewhite (1727–1786), another renowned furniture maker, had a page devoted to tea chest design. In eighteenth-century England, the Chinese tea packaging that used what became known as the Hepplewhite style was regarded as exceptional due to its “having no feet, being of square, oval, oblong, polygonal, or

18 Crouthamel 2012a.

elliptical shape.”<sup>19</sup> In addition to its practical function, the Hepplewhite tea box was also artistically pleasing and highly marketable. In a way, Chinese tea represents a remarkable example of an Asian commodity that was also part of the history of packaging and marketing in Europe. The various ways the tea was packaged could be seen as a stimulus that drove and shaped the marketing trend that connected China and England, in which the origin and identity of such a sought-after Eastern commodity was visually revealed and fashioned, through the process of packaging, to a wide range of consumers in Great Britain. It was also a production process that involved both Chinese and Brits along the chain in order to fulfil market demands.

If the production process of Chinese tea is considered to have been a trans-regional effort between China and England, then the production process of Chinese wallpaper was even more intercultural and global in multiple ways. Chinese wallpaper, in fact, owes its very existence to the crosscultural exchange of ideas concerning interior decor. Although wallpaper was thought to have been invented in China around 200 BC, hanging up bright, colorful, exotic wallpapers was not regarded as an essential element in interior design within the domestic setting in imperial China. Most Chinese wallcoverings before the Ming dynasty were “plain and monochrome.”<sup>20</sup> The European and Arab practice of adorning walls with paper that featured floral designs and ornamental motifs was only introduced to China through traders and missionaries in the late seventeenth century. Still, for the Chinese, this did not spark a trend in decorating their quadrangles’ walls with birds and flowers.

Just as the practice of pictorial wallpaper traveled eastward into China, traditional Chinese painting, another form of Chinese art, likewise traveled westward into Europe, thereby stimulating an interest in Chinese style and iconography. Wen Fong and Alfreda Murck argue that Chinese painting normally depicted flowers, birds, and landscapes from a flattened, low-lying perspective, which was unfamiliar, yet appealing, to the Europeans.<sup>21</sup> The Scottish botanist Robert Fortune (1812–1880), for instance, once described Chinese paintings as having “told a long tale as distinctly as if it has been written in Roman characters.”<sup>22</sup> Fortune’s appreciation of Chinese painting was shared by many of his upper-class British counterparts, who had begun importing similar artworks from China, through Portuguese traders, in the sixteenth century. These wealthy homeowners then arranged these paintings into floor-to-ceiling

19 Crouthamel 2012b.

20 de Bruijn 2017, 30.

21 Wen and Murck 1991, xvii–xviii.

22 Fortune 1857, 76.

collages, essentially utilizing them as proto-wallpaper in country homes across Western Europe, such as Oud-Amelisweerd in the Netherlands and Saltram in England. This trend in interior design gradually stimulated demand for wallcovering produced in a Chinese style. Chinese painters and craftsmen, inspired by the trend in the West of decorating houses with pictorial wallpaper, began to produce Chinese wallpaper in response to the growing demand in Europe. They increasingly adapted the choice of colors from the West as well as the materials and painting techniques from Europe and the Middle East in order to “cater to the requirements and tastes ‘of their targeted foreign consumers.’”<sup>23</sup> In one such technique, Chinese wallpaper makers substituted the tans and whites of traditional Chinese painting for “bolder colours including red, sepia, and China blue.”<sup>24</sup> These bolder pigments, being nonnative, were probably introduced by the Italian Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione (more commonly known as Lang Shining, 1688–1766), and since then had been regularly imported by overseas Chinese merchants. Other colors, such as indigo, ultramarine, and scarlet, were introduced from India, Afghanistan, and Phoenicia, respectively.<sup>25</sup> According to the East India Company records, a robust private trade in Prussian blue was also conducted in Canton. In 1775, the revenues earned from trading this exotic blue color were around 4,000 taels; by 1816, they had almost tripled to 13,563 taels.<sup>26</sup>

In a similar vein, the painting techniques used to produce Chinese wallpaper were also a blend of East and West. Even though craftsmen continued to employ traditional Chinese techniques such as “threading” to paint realistic bird feathers and the Song-era “rule-line painting style” for buildings, pagodas, and gardens, as observed by Elaine Gibbs, they also incorporated the European techniques of shading and single-point perspective.<sup>27</sup> Some also drew inspiration from Western copper engravings known as old master prints. Apparently, these practices were unusual in traditional Chinese painting, indicating the extent to which the global exchange of ideas had influenced the Chinese wallpaper production process. Similarly to the way in which Chinese tea was elaborately packed and marketed in Britain, the completion of Chinese wallpaper was also a joint effort between Chinese painters and Western paperhangers. In most cases, Chinese wallpaper was manufactured in China, either in family-run painting shops in Canton and Yangzhou or in

23 Baird 2007, 97.

24 Banham 1997, 1362.

25 Gibbs 2012, 250–54.

26 Pritchard 1957, 131.

27 Gibbs, 247–54.

wood-block printing workshops in Suzhou. Its installation process, however, was only completed by professional paperhangers in the destination countries. Even though painters in China could not directly communicate with paperhangers in Europe and, later, in North America, there was nonetheless a degree of cooperation between them in the production process. For instance, Chinese painters often left the tops of the panels blank, so that the paperhangers could decide either to cut them off or supplement them with their own designs, depending on the height of the wall.<sup>28</sup> (An example is the Chinese wallpaper displayed in Harewood House with a sky added by Thomas Chippendale.<sup>29</sup>) In some cases, even architects would be involved in the production process, as when the owner of Felbrigg Hall in Norfolk specified that he'd like his architect, James Paine (1717–1789), to provide drawings to match the Chinese wallpapers that were hung there. Taken together, Chinese wallpaper was “a commodity born out of a process of early globalization, while its production process was linked to the exchange of ideas in a cosmopolitan way.”<sup>30</sup>

Transportation is also a stage of vital importance in the commodity chain. Most stages during the production process are conditioned by the transportation network that routed raw materials, parts, and finished goods from extraction and manufacturing sites to port cities, harbors, markets, and economic blocs. Western economists and political scientists, with few exceptions, have long taken it as a matter of faith that the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century was the origin of a globally connected market system. This perception, however, is not shared by global historians who paid more attention to the power generated by transportation, namely the discoveries made by the expeditions of Vasco da Gama (1469–1524), Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), and their followers. In addition to these navigators, some historians pursued different evaluative criterion by focusing on the flow of commodities through these transportation linkages. Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, for instance, precisely dated the moment of the birth of globalization, as they argued that it occurred “in 1571 with the establishment of direct and permanent linkages between the Americas and East Asia” via the intermediary port of Manila, while the Cape of Good Hope trade route connecting Asia and Europe was still in place.<sup>31</sup>

28 de Bruijn 2017, 203.

29 *Ibid.*, 104.

30 One of my students from the course “HY330: From Tea to Opium: China and the Global Market in the Long Eighteenth Century” brought up this idea in her/his term paper. But since all papers were submitted anonymously, I can only thank him/her here for coming up with such stimulating observation.

31 Flynn and Giraldez 1995, 201.

If we agree that the flow of commodities through these transportation linkages gave birth to the process of globalization, I would suggest that certain Chinese commodities played an indispensable role here. It is beyond question that Chinese tea, silk, porcelain, and to a substantial extent, Chinese wallpaper, furniture, and watercolors, had a marked influence on the development of these long-distance voyages, not to mention that these commodities were imported alongside other Asian products into Europe via the Cape of Good Hope route. It was very much the “rise of the consumer culture of oriental goods” in the seventeenth century that stimulated the intensification of such long-distance sea trading, where merchants constantly faced the danger of hurricanes, squalls, typhoons, pirates, as well as scurvy, hypertension, and other illnesses of the sea.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, some theorists tended to argue that these Chinese goods were merely of secondary importance to determining the structure and development of the global market. Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019) noted that “what Asia provided for Europe at this time was just luxuries.”<sup>33</sup> What Wallerstein did not touch upon was the profitability of an Asian trade that was mostly due to these Chinese commodities. Even though food was apparently more essential in many respects, the profitability brought by Chinese commodities was considered worthy of the cost of more than a million men lost at sea or in the tropics between 1500 and 1795.<sup>34</sup> In summary, Chinese commodities were no doubt one of the crucial factors that gave rise to the expansion of these long-distance connections and very much served as a compass that directed the routes of the transportation networks that forged ahead. This is probably one of the reasons the German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) chose the name he did when he said the renowned overland trade link between China and Western Europe should be called the Silk Road.

#### 4 Canonization

The concept of canonization is often referred to in literary studies. Scholars broadly define it as the process by which institutional elites and experts assess a poem, play, story, or novel as being of remarkable value and at a superior level. This lends a level of prestige to work and author, so that the literature and its forms are remembered and studied over long periods of time. For example,

32 Berg 2003, 228–44.

33 Wallerstein 2011, 333.

34 de Vries 2003, 72.

university lecturers in English departments have spent the past few centuries deciding which works of fiction and poetry are among “the great works.” These literary treasures and their authors thus become part of anthologies, which are by default assigned to students in their academic syllabuses.

In this section I say why I think some commodities also go through a process of canonization before they become popularized on the market. Intrinsic to the process is the commodity’s evaluation against cultural yardsticks chosen, for the most part, by the socially elite and others of the well placed: monarchs, institutional elites, educated experts, and celebratory figures renowned for their accomplishment. Either consciously or not, British consumers of this sort defined, standardized, and shaped the meaning of some of these commodities. After all, controlling the meaning of a subject or object is a form of social power projection. In the words of Frank Trentmann, “our identities, politics, the economy, and the environment are crucially shaped by what and how we consume.”<sup>35</sup> Focusing on the historical trajectories of some of the more noteworthy Chinese commodities, brings out the connections between canonization, values, and power. What were the grounds for such canonization in the early modern era? Who had the legitimacy and authority to determine these cultural canons? Did these canonical forms or definitions have essential features? In considering these issues, I intend to point in the direction Lawrence Levine articulated when he noted that, “[I]f we understood the canonical process and dynamics better than we do, if we had a truer comprehension of the canon’s relation to the larger culture, we would more clearly understand the process of change ... within our society.”<sup>36</sup>

After a commodity had completed the production process, it would not immediately become a profitable good on the market. In most instances it had to go through the process of canonization to have its monetary and cultural values determined. The idea of canonization I propose in this article is different from the processes of marketing or advertising of today, as the latter two stages are usually effected by the producers or manufacturers who directly benefit from big sales. Canonization in this context is a process that is shaped by the consumers, the actual users of a specific commodity. Throughout the phase of canonization, a social and cultural meaning of a product is formulated and defined. In other words, the “canonizers” are usually the first group of consumers who give shape and meaning to the social life and identity of a commodity. It might take years or even decades for a canonization process to take place, and the process can vary in space as well. Some would argue, however,

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35 Trentmann 2016, 1.

36 Levine 1997, 101.

that consumers who are involved in the canonization process might be closely linked with the sellers; they might even be sponsored to promote the products. I agree that these types of collaborations between users and sellers are not unusual today, and they are explicitly one kind of advertising strategy. But from my investigations of the early modern period, this type of canonization had not yet been developed as a usual practice among consumers. It was only after the interwar years in the early twentieth century, when “mass-produced, standardised goods took off, that companies and advertisers made the customer the king of the marketplace,”<sup>37</sup> thereby generating a new consumer society, where producers would rely on public figures to help promote their products. Hence, there are some subtle differences between the contemporary way of advertising and the canonization process that I am about to elaborate.

The process of canonization could take place locally and globally. By locally I mean that, within its societal setting, a commodity would go through the process in the country where it originated and was manufactured. For instance, an analysis of the canonization of Chinese tea in imperial China allows us to better comprehend this “localized” system. In her book *Tea: The Drink That Changed the World*, Laura C. Martin situated the Chinese tea market within the Tang and Song dynasties. Both periods reflected moments of great sophistication and wealth in medieval China. As a result of these cultural and economic environments, there developed an increase in the scholarship of tea as a refined commodity.<sup>38</sup> Through works such as the *Cha jing* (Classic of tea) authored by Lu Yu (733–804), the founding father of tsiology, or the art and science of tea, Chinese tea was canonized subsequent to the establishment of detailed specifications concerning the consumption of tea, with tea was constructed as a salubrious, coveted, and respectable beverage.<sup>39</sup> Although the *Cha jing* was written in the eighth century, the art, attitude, and complexity of drinking tea as a cultural tradition continued to diffuse throughout scholarly and ordinary communities across the Ming and Qing dynasties. A script entitled the *Chage* (Tea song) authored by Luo Jiugong in the early Qing (see figure 3), for instance, serves as an illustrative example of how tea culture canonized by Lu Yu was preserved for generations.

37 Trentmann 2016, 3.

38 Martin 2007, 37.

39 It is worth noting that tsiology is a nineteenth-century expression. It was coined in a polemical account entitled *Tsiology: A Discourse on Tea: Being an Account of that Exotic; Botanical, Chymical, Commercial and Medical, with Notices of Its Adulteration, the Means of Its Detection, Tea Making, with a Brief History of The East India Company, etc.*, published in London in 1826.

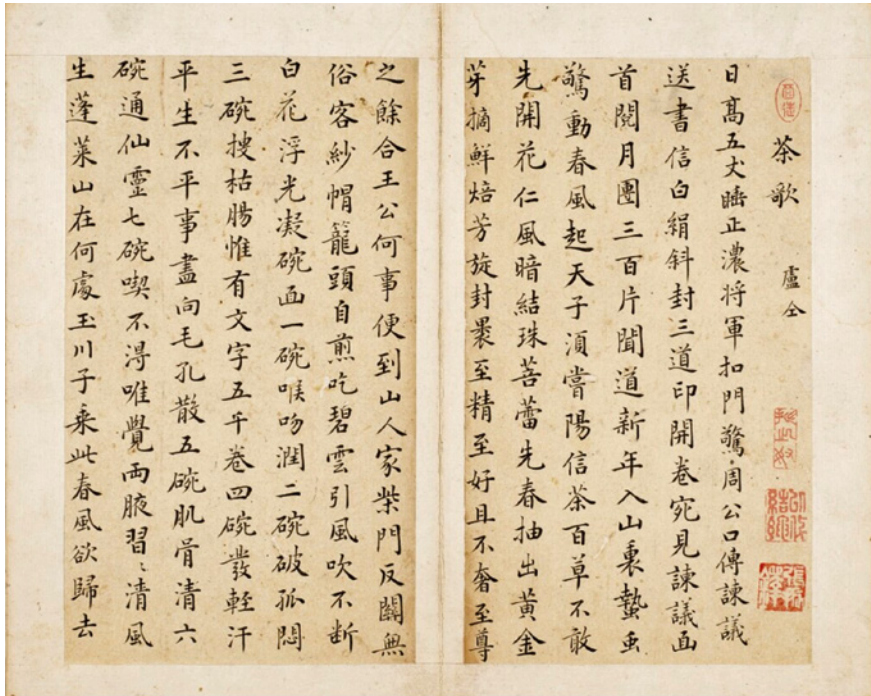


FIGURE 3 The *Chage* (Tea song) of Luo Jiugong. In this poetic text, the author cherished the cultural significance and medicinal qualities of drinking tea in the Qing era. Such admiration was very much inspired by Lu Yu's ideas as recorded in his *Cha jing* (Classic of tea). This image was advertised on Sotheby's website during a series of auctions entitled, respectively, "Tea Treasures: Rare Vintage and Premium Puerh," "Inaugural Tea Sale," and "Echoes of Fragrance: Evolution of Tea Culture from the Tang to the Qing," (<https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/the-evolution-of-chinese-tea-culture>). The price to obtain Luo's text was expected to be between £2,000 and £4,000, an estimate that suggests the continued importance of tea to Chinese history and society.

Along a similar vein, the history of Chinese silk also underwent the process of canonization locally. Particular types of silk (and also porcelain) were classified as high-end or relatively more popular. Instructions and manuals were produced in the Ming and Qing era to help customers identify real silk through the method of "handling, eye-observation," and even inflammation, with a sample being burnt to determine its type. In my view, the canonization of silk in China was even more complicated than that of Chinese tea. For silk, the process had also been closely linked to a series of transcultural integrations that had been taking place across the Inner Asian frontier since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Extraordinary and unprecedented crosscultural



integrations between China and the Middle East resulted in artistic and technological innovations related to silk production, which intensified and complicated the process of the canonization of Chinese silk. The various types of Chinese silks derived from these frontier interactions, such as *kesi* and *Shujin*, were then canonized in China as superior textiles of outstanding quality.<sup>40</sup>

By “globally,” in a broad sense, I am referring to the process of canonization that occurred elsewhere, beyond the local geographical perimeter. If we focus on the flowing trajectories of Chinese tea, porcelain, silks, wallpaper, and lacquerware furniture that were exported from China to Western Europe, we can see that there’s no question that these exotic and well-made products were considered luxury items in early modern England and Western Europe. Although Berg has suggested that luxury articles appealed to both aristocrat and nonaristocrat, so that “the boundaries between classes became increasingly blurred,”<sup>41</sup> we must remember that fascination does not necessarily equate to consumption. Goods brought all the way from China cost more than most people could afford. In a way, the process of the canonization of a commodity was often closely associated with trends in luxurious consumption. People of a certain social standing were the most likely to be the first consumers of Chinese commodities and the first to comment on their quality, based on personal taste, and then give them meaning by cherishing or writing about them. The archbishop of Braga, for instance, described Chinese porcelain to Pope Pius IV as pieces that “dumbfound the eyes, seeming a combination of alabaster and sapphires.”<sup>42</sup> The makers of such masterpieces, as implied by the archbishop, were extraordinary and highly skilled.

One of the reasons Chinese porcelains were regarded as “white gold” in Western Europe was very much the canonization of the products’ cultural identity by leading writers and other famous figures of the West. The canonization of certain Chinese commodities in early modern England also coincided with the development of a newly sanctified sphere of high culture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A regime of “correct” taste was erected so that the upper classes could “continue to distinguish themselves in a commercialist age from the promiscuous hordes of parvenus at their heels.”<sup>43</sup> As a consequence of this cultural turn, writers regularly compared the distinguished features of Chinese commodities to Western traditions. Largely owing to their

40 Watt and Wardwell 1997, 57–58; Schäfer 2012, 53.

41 Quoted from Valenze 2008, 119–120.

42 Cited from Finlay 2007, 426.

43 Porter 2013, 22–23.

novelty, these Chinese commodities “seemed to occupy a similar conceptual category as their Western counterparts and to represent a competing aesthetic standard worthy of comparison to classical and Renaissance norms.”<sup>44</sup> In this regard, the canonization process of these Chinese commodities in the West, and especially in early modern England, should also be considered a factor that constituted a challenge to the traditional conceptions of aesthetic values within the Western context.

It is dangerous to assume that canonization depended on the practices of writing or comparison in the early modern era. The process sometimes took place in a far more direct and simple way. A wealthy aristocrat in London, for example, might purchase a Chinese porcelain vase because he noticed a similar one in the home of the queen. He might not have thought too hard about whatever cultural meaning was infused in a porcelain vase shaped for the privileged; he would have bought the vase merely because the royal family had one. Accordingly, the canonization of Chinese tea owed a great deal to three successive queens of England: Catherine of Braganza (1638–1705) followed by King James II’s daughters, Mary (1662–1694) and Anne (1665–1714). The three women loved drinking Chinese tea; they offered no commentary on it, but their serial examples made the difference to shaping the cultural value of tea drinking in England. Apparently, the choice of consumption is largely arbitrary, but we should not deny the fact that leading figures could easily spur on and directly generate a kind of collective desire among society, a desire that spurred the canonization process. As Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) argued, for any given type of cultural production, whether in music, clothing, or interior design, to appeal to a given class of consumers, it must conform to a specific configuration of taste and lifestyle preferences corresponding to the social condition and self-perception of that group.<sup>45</sup> I would contend, then, that the “social condition and self-perception” featured in Bourdieu’s analysis was usually bound to configurations of taste and stylistic trends among the upper classes. In most cases, the prestige the elite attached to the cultural value of a commodity is what rendered it attractive and comprehensible to a segment of the population.

Needless to say, the canonization process of each Chinese commodity could be much more complex and intricate than what I have outlined here. For example, ginseng might also have been regarded as a luxurious item in the first place but was canonized by medical writers and practitioners, more so than by aristocrats, due to its medicinal, therapeutic, and aphrodisiac values. Given the

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44 Porter 2002, 400.

45 Bourdieu 1979, 9–96.

scope of this article, I am only able to delineate the contours and key concepts of my assessment. The thrust of this discussion is very much to remind our readers that Chinese commodities gradually became popular in the market not only because they were by nature fancy or exotic, as an aesthetic feature, but also precisely because their meanings, identities, and values were shaped, codified, and constructed by a group of people who held certain social capital and maintained the authority to endorse a series of labels for those commodities. Whether or not their endorsements were justified on moral or aesthetic grounds, these “canonizers” constructed elaborate networks of social rituals and private fantasies through a process wherein these commodities were featured in the construction of cultural meanings within various societal settings.

## 5 Popularization

Popularization is the final stage of the commodity chain I proposed in this article. This is the process of domesticating a commodity, where it becomes more affordable to ordinary members of the community. After undergoing the process of canonization, most commodities become popular and no longer exclusively consumed by a small fraction of the population. Understanding how a commodity goes through the popularization process gives us a fuller picture of the collective and trending responses to that specific commodity over time. It also helps us better examine the cultural norms and social mores, if any, that are derived from a commodity that is situated within a broader societal setting. Linking this idea more closely to the thesis of the present paper, we will be able to navigate how a Chinese commodity penetrated various social classes, touching different age groups, races, and genders, by following the story of how it became a popularized item in the marketplace in both China and in other parts of the world.

The idea of popularization can also enlighten us about the cultural encounters that took place outside of China during the early modern era. In the European setting, for example, how did the popularity of Chinese commodities influence other stylistic trends, such as classicism and romanticism? What new meanings and values did Chinese commodities make available to the wider range of consumers, say, in eighteenth-century England? And perhaps, what specific functions did Chinese commodities take on within the broader material and visual culture of the time? My working premise here is that the popularization of Chinese commodities in eighteenth-century Europe, particularly in England, involved not merely a superficial shift in tastes (or the

concept of utility) and consumption patterns but rather a profound transformation of the underlying constructs of culture, national pride, and desire.

After the process of canonization was complete, in most cases a foreign exotic commodity would be given a certain cultural and monetary value in the market. In my assessment, it was more crucial for a commodity to have some cultural value for it to reach the popularization stage. A trend needs to be established before consumer demand grows. Once demand became fairly apparent, traders, from entrepreneurs to private sellers, would give their full measure to increase the supply of the commodity and maximize their profits. Governments and their trade policies also played a vital role here; for example, tariff rates added to the prices that domestic consumers paid for imported goods. Taking as an example the circulation of Chinese tea in England, if William Pitt the Younger's British government (1783–1806) had not promulgated the Commutation Act of 1784, which slashed the tax on Chinese tea from 119 percent to 12.5 percent that year, then this Asian beverage would hardly have experienced the wave of popularization that led to its gradually becoming a necessary everyday cuppa among various levels of British society. We also have to understand that the Commutation Act was an attempt to suppress the problem of tea smuggling during the 1780s.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the central government, the British East India Company also established regulations that specified the amounts and types of private trade and the perimeters within which exporting and importing should be conducted. For instance, raw silk from China steadily increased in importance and became more popular in England after 1817 because the East India Company permitted private traders to transport this commodity. The creation of the New East India Company in 1698 and competition between the two companies in the century that followed also led to some relaxation in the Old Company's restrictions, thereby allowing more licensed private traders to bring Chinese commodities into the British market.<sup>47</sup>

While both the government and the East India Company played vital roles in fostering the process of the popularization of Chinese commodities in the British market, illegal traders and the shadow market were no less important. Once a commodity had been canonized and a cultural trend had emerged, potential profits caused smugglers to ignore legal restrictions. A case in point is the popularization of Chinese silk products in eighteenth-century England. As part of its mercantilist policy to protect domestic textile products, the

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46 Liu 2007, 151.

47 Farrell 2016, 268–94.

British government banned the sale of fully manufactured silk imports and maintained proportionately high duties on other silks. Notwithstanding these constraints, black marketers were relentless in their efforts to smuggle Chinese raw silk into England because they deemed it both marketable and lucrative. As a result, even though much of the free trade in silks was highly organized and regulated, an illegal but lucrative trading sphere also developed in eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>48</sup> As these contraband items were distributed in more informal and personal ways, the process of popularization permeated society. This was especially so for a product such as silk, which was light, easy to carry, and could be folded up and hidden inside packages. Other factors could also play a part, of course. When silkworm disease ruined European sericulture in the nineteenth century, for example, Chinese silk, including silk textiles and raw silks, fulfilled a need in a demanding Euro-American market and became one of the most popular global commodities of the time.<sup>49</sup>

The popularization of Chinese commodities in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England was also complemented by the emergence of Britain as an enterprising imperial power. Scholars of British history such as Linda Colley and Kathleen Wilson have argued that waging a string of conflicts from the War of the Spanish Succession to the struggle with Napoleon had shaped an assertive national identity in Great Britain, a country that substantially defined itself as being against its imperial rivals across the European continent.<sup>50</sup> At the political level, by the second half of the eighteenth century this process of identity formation mirrored the emergence of newly confident British taste and culture. While other scholars, namely Gerald Newman, Michele Cohen, Sidney Mintz, and Carole Shammas, stressed the importance to these new British tastes of imperial connections across the European and American continents,<sup>51</sup> we should not overlook the influence of certain Chinese commodities, particularly tea, silk, porcelain, and wallpaper, which had already firmly established their prominence in British society and culture. Looking at the popularization of these Chinese commodities demonstrates that China was as important as Europe or the Americas in fueling the desire of British consumers to establish a cosmopolitan global power. As argued earlier, the historical significance attached to these Chinese commodities leads one to imagine that they evoked a far more complex cultural and historical tradition than fashions and possessions from elsewhere, including Britain itself. China's

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48 Ibid.

49 Li 1981, 5.

50 Colley 1992, 18, 53; Wilson 2011, 1294–1322.

51 See, for instance, Newman, Brown, and Fruchtman Jr. 1997, 13.

striking history suggested not only a site of ancient splendor but also an entire array of remarkable cultural achievements that Britain, a power that had only recently emerged from civil war and dynastic tumult, was prone to admire.<sup>52</sup>

In addition, the popularization of Chinese commodities was made possible also because of the growing acceptance of innovation by English consumers. As argued by John Styles, “the two centuries from 1550 to 1750 did witness extraordinary and unprecedented innovations in English material culture.”<sup>53</sup> Joan Thirsk found that it was largely because of such innovation that a consumer society began to emerge,<sup>54</sup> and Peter Thornton suggested that product innovation was also closely associated with the ethnicization of European design and the invention of modern domestic comfort.<sup>55</sup> The British did prove particularly receptive to new commodities between the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries, as Styles reminds us, but we should not jump to the conclusion that “novelties secured their market effortlessly.”<sup>56</sup> In a meticulous examination of product innovation in early modern England, Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold found that “up to 90 per cent of new products failed.”<sup>57</sup> For his part, Styles suggested that, though novelty had its appeal for many, “its attractions were always offset by consumers’ attachment to established tastes, by their investment in notions of hierarchy, order and stability which extended to their material world, and in particular, by their failure automatically to ascribe a use or a meaning to new products.”<sup>58</sup> These explanations are all sensible and sober; but I would suggest that, if only 10 percent of new products succeeded, most of the winners were from China. As demonstrated in the previous sections, the design of products from China, the quality of their materials, and the exoticism of their origins all made them popular with British consumers, to whom they were made available in a variety of forms.

Some historians have remained sceptical about the significance of Chinese commodities in early modern England. Jan de Vries, for instance, argued that Asian goods played only a small part in European trade and that shipping companies faced constant difficulty in making a profit from them.<sup>59</sup> John Styles also questioned the extent to which Chinese textiles influenced European producers. He noted that the use of floral motifs and the search for lighter fabrics

52 My argument here is very much inspired by Porter 2010’s fascinating study, 131–53.

53 Styles 2000, 124–69.

54 Thirsk 1979.

55 Thornton 1978.

56 Styles 2000, 125.

57 Fine and Leopold, 210.

58 Styles 2000, 126.

59 de Vries 2003, 26.

had begun in the late Middle Ages, long before the rise of direct seaborne trade with China.<sup>60</sup> Differences over the importance to England of Chinese commodities reflect wider arguments about the validity of the conception of their popularization during the consumer revolution. Of the goods imported to Britain during the long eighteenth century, the highest quantities weren't always of Chinese raw silk, furniture, wallpaper, or any other commodity from China. But I would insist that the demand for these commodities in Britain, if not in continental Europe, had its own dynamics and audience, and that the earlier awareness of floral motifs and lighter materials did not necessarily divert customers toward native British products nor keep them from being enamored of Chinese ones. The actual number of goods being imported and circulated on the market is not the only factor that gives impetus to a commodity's popularization. We should also take into account the wider public's cultural acceptance and responses to a commodity. Whether or not a British consumer was a Chinese tea fanatic, the experience of unfamiliarity in gazing upon a Chinese teapot, according to David Porter, "must invariably have been mediated through some recognition, however vague, of the curious disjuncture of the cultural difference to which it alluded and hence of its potential saturation with largely unintelligible meanings."<sup>61</sup> There can be little doubt, then, that those Chinese commodities with smaller caloric loads also served as physiological stimulants consumed by a wide spectrum of individuals.

Owing to the process of popularization, moreover, some specific guidebooks for choosing commodities wisely and accurately were available to consumers. Supercargo diaries and customs reports tell us about imports; for consumer tastes, the era has no systematic records to provide. But apparently silk found buyers, enough of them that a market developed for printed guidance on how to buy the material intelligently. These types of publications also touched upon British buying standards and Chinese practices of the eighteenth century with regard to the China silk trade. For example:

China wrought silks are of numerous sorts, cheap, and good. In choosing them, care should be taken that they are received dry, or else they will mildew and spoil, as they are sold by weight, and are often damped to make them heavier. The fineness and price are agreed upon by muster. They should not have too much gum or congee in them, which increases their weight, and makes the silk lie close, whereby the fineness of it is not so well seen, and it always mildews them. A fine limber silk, clear

<sup>60</sup> Styles 2011, 37–46.

<sup>61</sup> Porter 2013, 29.

of knobs, and uneven threads, fine and glossy on the back, as well as on the right, is the best. The pieces should be unrolled and measured, as they will sometimes want a yard or two in length, and be of two or three colours.<sup>62</sup>

The popularization of Chinese commodities in early modern England also featured a significant and distinctive characteristic: gender. According to Aubrey J. Toppin, a disproportionate number of consumers found in London china shops, many of which were clustered near the New Exchange of the eighteenth century, were women.<sup>63</sup> We also know that the ships that transported these commodities often seemed to have been owned and frequented by women. Women's participation in selling, purchasing, and consuming these fine, translucent pieces of china made them not just passive followers and buyers but active purveyors of oriental fashion and style.<sup>64</sup>

In a nutshell, tea drinking, like appreciation of Chinese porcelain in a china shop, helped define gender in England through the popularization process. Although tea drinking was by no means limited to women, it became a rapidly feminized social more during Great Britain's first century of tea consumption. As Chinese tea became more and more popular in the eighteenth century, there also emerged a cultural trend of using tea tables within a domestic setting. Unlike coffee houses in early modern England, which functioned as an exclusively male-oriented, masculine, and public cultural landscape, tea tables represented a relatively more feminine and private preserve. As argued by Thomas Z. Gertrude, the emergence of the tea table pioneered a novel kind of social life, providing a medium where men and women, especially the latter, could meet with propriety.<sup>65</sup>

## 6 Concluding Remarks

The consumption of Chinese commodities dramatically increased across the globe, particularly in Western Europe, beginning as early as the closing decades of the sixteenth century. It then accelerated throughout much

62 Milburn 1825, 496.

63 Toppin 1934, 44–46.

64 However, it should be noted that men in early modern England were also important shoppers. As Maxine Berg pointed out in her study that men also cared about the clothes they wore and the furnishings of their houses, particularly those household items that demonstrated their "male respectability and independence." See Berg 2005, 204.

65 Gertrude 1965, 104.



of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this article, I endeavored to follow the life histories of certain Chinese commodities, tracing the time during which they were produced, packed in chests, carried by coolies and seafarers, tasted and haggled over by merchants and agents, transported across the seas in vessels' damp storage compartments, and then warehoused, reloaded, advertised, distributed, sold, consumed, and domesticated through a three-stage commodity chain of production, canonization, and popularization. These proposed stages are by no means an exhaustive account of every single detail of the biographical approach to a commodity, and they certainly aren't the most comprehensive framework with which to explain how a commodity was being consumed during this period. As mentioned earlier, some commodities might only have gone through one or two stages of the proposed commodity chain set up in this paper. And as Igor Kopytoff has reminded us, "things can move in and out of the commodity state, that such movements can be slow or fast, reversible or terminal, normative or deviant."<sup>66</sup> By lining up these three stages (P-C-P) more systematically, we can at least map out some of the crucial processes that certain commodities would have gone through; and above all, to provide an intellectual pathway that links China and the early modern world, from a historical perspective, pertaining to the studies of consumption and material culture. In fact, for some commodities such as porcelain, the P-C-P chain does not stop at the stage of popularization. It could even go through another phase of "post-popularization" as it could be melted down and reworked. Some porcelain productions might also be preserved as precious artifacts or private collection for generations.

In addition, one of the most prevalent views of Chinese history in the West is the problematic assumption that the arrival of the Western powers was the most significant factor in late imperial Chinese history.<sup>67</sup> Europe and America are seen as uniquely protomodern and the true agents of change in China, which presumably awaited them like "a mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin."<sup>68</sup> Even though this paper has very little to say about the historical turning points or critical conjunctures in Chinese history and Sino-foreign relations, one of the underlying objectives here is to echo with scholars such as Berg, Gerritsen, and Riello to complicate the above narrative by calling attention to the cultural encounters that took place between China and Great Britain through the flow and circulation of a series of Chinese

66 Appadurai 1986, 13.

67 See for instance the latest Guardian article by Jones 2023.

68 Li 2010, 4–5.

commodities. The circulatory networks that were traced in this paper clearly don't point in the direction we are accustomed to imagining; further, it is no longer tenable to support the idea that the British, or Europeans in general, were the sole actors to have discovered the ingredients of a modern China.

As Kenneth Pomeranz, Bin Wong, Andre Gunder Frank, Timothy Brook, J. C. Sharman, and other revisionist historians told us, a macroeconomic vantage point reveals Western Europe to have occupied a rather peripheral position in the early 1800s, a contrast with the strong and competent economic power maintained by China at the other end of Eurasia. At that time world trade was arguably Sinocentric, not Eurocentric.<sup>69</sup> To take seriously the question of the impact that Chinese commodities had on the early modern global market is to extend this revisionist enterprise into the cultural realm, and to revise our existing sense of the ramifications of a less rigidly Eurocentric prototype of modernity. As for the term *Chinese commodities*, I would like to remind my readers that looseness is a danger here. Best to situate the term within the cultural and historical context of the early modern era, in which China was one of the active participants in driving the flow and exchange of goods, ideas, and conceptions in complex and polyvariant ways.<sup>70</sup>

The history of the Chinese commodities that concern me in this paper does not end with the early nineteenth century. Chinese tastes, or the so-called wind of China (*Zhongguo feng*), remain alive and well in Britain and throughout the world, a fact demonstrated by some of the commodities discussed here. The Chinese wind continues to shape consumption patterns and inflect local practices in cuisine, fashion, architectural design, cinematography, gardening, and musical composition. We still speak of the globalization of consumer culture as if it were a contemporary development, and we are astounded to see that the rise of China and the "spirit and identity" of certain Chinese commodities have come to exert a profound influence on capitalist societies in the new century. Conversely, a historical point of view might suggest that after an interlude of close to two hundred years, beginning when the first cannon balls were fired during the Opium Wars, China is now only returning to a prominent position in a world of crossnational and intercultural encounters that it had enjoyed for a few centuries in the early modern era, when Chinese commodities were illuminated in motion, glamor, and vivacity.

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69 Wong 1997, Frank 1998, Pomeranz 2000, Sharman 2019.

70 Po 2023.

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