

## Imperialist Commerce and the Demystified Orient: Semicolonial China in Nineteenth-Century English Literature

Tamara S. Wagner  
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

In his preface to *The English in China: Being an Account of the Intercourse and Relations between England and China from the Year 1600 to the Year 1843 and a Summary of Later Developments*, published in 1909, James Bromley Eames stressed that his “original intention, in writing this work, [was] to present to the reader a description and an analysis of our interests in China, as they exist at the present day” (vii). It “soon became evident,” however, “that it is impossible fully to comprehend the present position without a knowledge of the past” (vii). The diverse imperialist interests in China alone already disclose important interactions between different forms of modernity. Crucial to the construction of China’s “semicolonial” status in the nineteenth century, these forms of modernity were themselves continually rethought as well as rewritten. China’s experience of imperialism and cosmopolitanism consequently prompts a renewed consideration of these concepts. What is more, China was uniquely positioned towards British commercial expansionism. There was keen awareness of this status in nineteenth-century popular culture. Intriguingly, in the course of the century exoticising orientalism became superseded by a deliberate demystification of exotic trade. In this demystification of work abroad, the Celestial Empire indeed took centre stage. The changing treatment of semicolonialism as well as of China in the fiction of the time thus illustrates the complexities not just of an emergent global interconnectedness, but more specifically of commerce’s cultural significance within the framework of colonial as well as semi-colonial modernity. How China featured in fiction changed radically in the course of the century, and this change at once reflected and significantly helped to reshape the popular understanding of the exotic and “the Orient,” of travel and work, of commerce and colonialism. A closer look at the hitherto underestimated awareness of China’s unique position facilitates a critical examination of semicolonialism and colonial modernity as vital concepts in dismantling persistent misunderstandings about long exploded clichés in the representation of the East.

That globalisation was not a twentieth-century (or twenty-first-century) phenomenon has now widely been acknowledged. Nevertheless,

its cultural representations at the time have remained a largely ignored point-of-entry into commercial imperialism's legacies. Although Edward Said has influentially directed critical interest to the overlapping cultural histories that were shaping European orientalism, pointing out its pervasiveness in everyday culture, domestic as well as imperialist, at home and abroad, his emphasis on complicity and conspiracies of silence has greatly simplified what really were much more intricate, complicated, and often self-reflexive cultural exchanges. As current scholarship on colonial discourse has begun to stress more than thirty years after the publication of Said's seminal *Orientalism*, it is vital to shift away from purely contextual approaches to ambiguities of form and structure: towards a more detailed exploration of the "texting" of the East beyond the critical tenets of Saidian criticism (Kuehn and Wagner 1). *Culture & Imperialism* stated even more pointedly that, to Said at least, the empire's function in metropolitan culture was predominantly, if not exclusively, restricted to its usefulness as "a reference, as a point of definition, as an easily assumed place of travel, wealth, and service" (63). Empire, like orientalism, "functions for much of the European nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction [...] scarcely ever more than named, rarely studied [...] or given density" (*Culture* 63).

Despite a proliferation of studies that continue to investigate intersections between imperialism and domesticity in nineteenth-century literature, and conversely, the "co-opting [of] domesticity for imperial aims" (Myers 5), it has become of increasing importance to acknowledge what Tani Barlow has termed "the extent of colonial heterogeneity" ("Eugenic" 372). This account of colonial modernity "shifts away from Said's preoccupation with hegemonic representation" to accentuate "the political and ideological dependency, or intellectual interrelatedness, of colonising powers and colonial regimes" (Barlow, "Eugenic" 376). Colonial modernity offers a revealing analytical concept for neo-imperialist as well as imperialist commercialism. This is especially true since the consequent emergence of various kinds of "colonies, subcolonies, indirect colonies, and semicolonies" (Barlow, "Eugenic" 376) cannot simply be understood in reference to a specific historical model that is only really applicable to the British Raj (Barlow, "Introduction" 5). Although it is impossible to overestimate the importance India indisputably had for the British Empire, any exclusive concentration on India threatens to generate a rather cross-eyed view of imperialist or neo-imperialist commercial and cultural networks. Such a focus by no means reflects imperialist realities *or* imaginaries. It elides an extensive part of a global trading world, as well as its intricate involvement in the formation of colonialism's different variants and, by extension, of intersecting modernities. An analysis of "colonial heterogeneity" needs to go beyond limiting discussions of the "colonial subject in the classic Anglo-Indian frame": beyond the "frequent reifications of 'India' that some scholars find objectionable in postcolonial criticism" (Barlow, "Eugenic" 360, 365), and likewise—*pace* Said—

beyond largely dismissive accounts of the exoticisation of the Middle East primarily in travel writing and colonial writing more generally.

A closer look at the sheer variety of the narrative potential as much as the commercial potential yielded by connections between the British and the Celestial Empires in the nineteenth century alone already testifies to colonial modernity's complexities in the shaping of "modern" cultural institutions around the world. At the same time, of course, an attendant typecasting undeniably showcases how the formation of these institutions has been instrumental in forging narrative structures that still shape popular film and fiction. This is exactly why their significance for cultural interchanges continues to call for a more encompassing critical reassessment. But since colonialism and modernity both constitute indivisible features in the history of industrial capitalism, colonial modernity as an analytical concept does more than simply provide a framework for a much needed reconsideration of East Asia's complex cultural histories. As Barlow has suggested, "[c]olonial modernity can be grasped as a speculative frame for investigating the infinitely pervasive discursive powers that increasingly connect at key points to the globalising impulses of capitalism" ("Introduction" 6). To what extent this includes their interconnectedness with the so-called "West" (or Euroamerican powers) needs to be newly assessed, not sidestepped in compartmentalised studies of individual national developments. The divergent forms of modernity, after all, emerged simultaneously at the height of imperialist expansion.

Semicolonial China, in short, crucially complicates "the Orient" of popular culture. This is why nineteenth-century domestic fiction produced in the British Empire provides a revealing case study of sundry imperialist fantasies and anxieties that have shaped its continued representation abroad. Since the chief interest in the treatment of semicolonies rested on commercial exchanges, it tracked a crucial shift towards rendering work abroad unexotic, even anti-exotic. This demystification engendered a prevalent trope in English domestic fiction. Imperialist fantasies of commercial success rewarded through a desired return to embowered estate at home—what Raymond Williams has pointedly termed an idealised vision of rural England as the reward for service in "the tropical or arid places of actual work" (282)—were replaced by frustrating delineations of the sameness and dead ends of work abroad. At one end of the spectrum, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) still references China as a dreamy retreat for the withdrawn heroine. This exotic Far East is far removed from any of the imperialist implications that have been associated with the novel's notorious allusions to West Indian plantations. At the other end of the spectrum, the renegotiation of foreign affairs in W. Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil* (1925) self-consciously plays with the ends (and potential dead ends) of any orientalist and/or imperialist fantasy concerning China. A trajectory of disillusionment evokes expectations of exotic escape only to dismantle such cultural myths. Work abroad features as a complex point of access into a set of pressing

imperialist and domestic issues that still inform current perceptions of global commercial relationships in their impact on everyday life. Semicolonialism as depicted in popular writing serves as an analytical representational strategy of various forms of commerce and a metonymy for emergent modernities ruled by expanding empires of trade. In particular, domestic fiction's metaphorical negotiations of commercial exchange crucially transform the cultural meaning of imperialist commercial forces.

In a triangulation of texts that bring home, in markedly divergent ways, the imperialist, globalising effects of intersecting colonial modernities, this analysis of semicolonialism's changing functions concentrates on negotiations of work abroad. It pushes the figure of the colonist, the returnee, and especially the disappointed returnee into the foreground to reassess their significance as precursors of the expatriate syndrome. Most extensively harnessed for its narrative potential by Maugham, this syndrome's underpinning identification of commerce, cosmopolitanism, and colonial guilt already proves strikingly pervasive throughout nineteenth-century fictionalisations of commercial expansion. Framed by the ambiguities of fantasies of China traced in *Mansfield Park* and *The Painted Veil*, the third key text, therefore, consists of the notably offstage passages of work experience in China that are retrospectively detailed in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857). A paradigmatic episode of disappointing return prefigures an ultimately literalised collapse of business and business networks—a collapse that the novel maps out by merging presumably “exotic” geographies of the East and the East End at home. Commercial imperialism as a critically treated theme adds significant twists to the “East” of the popular imagination.

#### Beyond and Beneath Imperialist Adventure: Semicolonial Commerce as Neo-Imperialism in the Making

A comparison of these three key texts facilitates a detailed analysis of the changing meaning of semicolonialism at the height of the British Empire's commercial influence in East Asia. They span the opening of China and its absorption into depictions of imperialist trade. Work places abroad stand exposed as at once fairly indistinguishable from those located at the empire's financial centre (the City of London) and as nevertheless disconcertingly alienating. This is in part precisely because of a startling, unexpected sameness. Red tape, as the main output of the infamous Circumlocution Office in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, encompasses the globe. Its critical delineation becomes substituted for largely offstage, exotic sites of unknowable orientalist desire. A critical dissection of demystifying commercial networks consequently entails a necessary assessment of semicolonialism's usefulness as an expandable analytical concept. If the Victorian novel has long been acknowledged “as postcolonial theory's favourite stomping ground” (O'Connor 219), its careful rereading becomes all the more crucial. In traditional colonial discourse analysis,

Erin O'Connor has provocatively suggested that a form of "Victorientalism" can be seen to operate through a "mining of a distant, exotic, threatening but fascinating literature to produce and establish a singularly self-serving body of knowledge elsewhere" (227). It is high time to develop, in O'Connor's terms, a "Post-Postcolonial Criticism." The perceptual and representational shifts from the often touted exoticising orientalism to a deliberate demystification of exotic trade—a demystification in which the Celestial Empire took centre stage—do not merely reflect, but are central to semicolonial commerce's cultural significance within the framework of colonial modernity.

In 1909 Eames identified the inevitable need to take the history of Sino-British encounters into account when we wish to assess "interests in China, as they exist at the present day" (vii). What is most important to remember in this context is that during the nineteenth-century fictionalisations of commercial exchanges between "East" and "West" had considerably less to do with orientalist exoticisation than with critiques of commercial expansion. Especially when it related to semicolonial spaces rather than to formal empires, commercial imperialism was all the more likely to work as a metonymy for capitalist aggression at home. Since China was never part of a formal foreign Empire, it lends itself particularly well to an investigation of commercially driven modernities. Its semicolonialism, Shumei Shi has convincingly argued, is "closer to neo-colonialism than to formal, institutional colonialism" (35). James Hevia takes this argument an important step further when he states that it is not only that "[f]rom this perspective, therefore, China was not outside of the 'real' colonial world," but that "we might consider all the entities produced in the age of empire as forms of semicolonialism" (*English* 26). The parallelism as well as precursor relationship between semicolonialism and neo-colonialism is an intriguing point. Current reassessment of both these manifestations of commercial imperialism unsurprisingly hinges on their interrelationship. "[E]xpatriates are only 'semi'-colonials" (1), Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes suggest in their introduction to a study entitled *Semicolonial Joyce*. Stressing that the term is explicitly evoked in *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), they proceed to define "semicolonial." In one sense of the term, Joyce's works could be seen as semicolonial "in their dealings with questions of nationalism and imperialism" as they "evinced a complex and ambivalent set of attitudes, not reducible to a simple anticolonialism but very far from expressing approval of the colonial organisations and methods under which Ireland had suffered during a long history of oppression" (3). This notably loose usage of an already intrinsically elusive term may well be seen as symptomatic of a general indeterminacy—some might say, incommensurability—of colonial and postcolonial terminologies at large. It has now become a critical convention to urge a move away altogether from restrictive paradigms that "define semicolonialism as a colonial formation specific to the Chinese situation" or that, in other ways, retain its original conscription (by Mao, among others) to "communist rhetoric" alone (Shi 31).<sup>1</sup>

The acknowledgement of such indeterminacy is not the least important contribution of current discussions of semicolonialism. The flexibility of the “semi” alone already compels a questioning of conventional binaries and dichotomies. Barlow has stressed that this “strictly lexical issue” is symptomatic of the inapplicability of “a lexicon forged in conditions of binary opposition of colonizer/colonized work”: the “Self/Other paradigm is quite simply inappropriate, or at the very least, not up to the task” when it comes to dealing with what she terms “a field of semicolonial flux” (“Introduction” 10). What remains the most vital is the indeterminacy of terminology—if only as a reminder that “Postcolonial studies is perhaps most usefully defined as a series of intractable but productive problems or tensions, rather than as a set of propositions or conclusions” (Attridge and Howes 4). In this context, it is particularly crucial to acknowledge the corresponding elusiveness of the concept of “the West” (or Occident) as much as that of “the East” (or Orient). As Stuart Hall has already pointed out, “the West” is “no longer only in Europe, and not all of Europe is in ‘the West’” (185). This is why James Hevia has coined the term “Euroamerican,” for example. But this only sidesteps rather than confronts the real issues underlying a seemingly terminological problem. It is not just that “the West” is a vague geopolitical point of reference that masquerades as a geographical one. As Neil Lazarus stresses in “The Fetish of ‘the West’ in Postcolonial Theory,” “the West” as an often unthinkingly evoked concept really “has no coherent or credible referent” at all: it is not a polity or a state, but “something altogether more amorphous and indeterminate” (44). This has of course not stopped its stereotyping, no more than the East’s own elusiveness has prevented it from being variously lumped together in discussions of “Western” forms of exoticisation.<sup>2</sup>

Semicolonialism’s analytical potential does more than develop a way to read “Victorian China” anew. It produces a new framework for the study of colonial modernities. The interdisciplinarity of approaches to semicolonialism as well as to colonial modernity opens up new opportunities for close readings of the ways in which different parts of the East have been “texted.”<sup>3</sup> While it is essential finally to leave behind a dichotomous perspective in which Asia and Asian modernity can only be interpreted through comparisons with “the West,” the abandonment of dichotomous perspectives even more urgently compels a critical reassessment of the once so easily dismissed “orientalist” representation. Despite the opportunities provided by semicolonialism’s extension to the discussion of different forms of imperialist and neo-imperialist developments, nineteenth-century China provides an illustrative example of commerce’s significance for a curiously anti-exotic impulse in British imperialist cultural fictions. Beginning with the first Opium War (1839-1842) and culminating in the Boxer Uprising of 1900, conflict between China and Britain revolved around the “deeper issue” of a commercial “opening up” of “greater intercourse” between commercial powers (Hevia *English* 4). A new look at colonial modernities showcases how

semicolonialism facilitates a reviewing of imperialism's neglected imprint on "metropolitan colonial relations" (Coombes 2). A re-charting of colonial modernity, both as a source for literary imaginaries at the time and as a useful analytical concept in retrospect, needs to proceed in more than one direction. Beyond just indicating imperialism's hold on the popular imagination, highlighting the predominantly critical focus on commercial ventures may cast a revealing light on (neo-) imperialist networks of trade then and now.

### Cosmopolitan Modernities and the Ends of Exotic Work

The opening of China in the nineteenth century closed off its function as an exotic space. In Austen's *Mansfield Park*, the quiet, withdrawn, dependent heroine, Fanny Price, could still display fondly mocked Romantic sentiments in an imaginary trip to Lord Macartney's China. This purely textual place of "composure" (570) is attainable in the tellingly named "East room," originally her own exilic space within her wealthy uncle's mansion. This space of the imagination is in pointed contrast to the similarly offstage, but (as Said has so famously, or infamously, pointed out) commercially exploited, West Indies in the same novel. Whereas Sir Thomas Bertram's plantations on Antigua are connected, in a significant parallelism, to the micropolitics of the novel's eponymous estate back in England, China is the object both of an educational venture and of a dreamy escape into an exotic realm of the imagination. This imaginary site forms part of Fanny's "nest of comforts" (568) where she can retire, as one of her cousins puts it, from domestic persecution: "*You* in the meanwhile will be taking a trip into China, I suppose. How does Lord Macartney go on?" (570). This potentially consoling flight of fancy is abruptly brought to a halt by domestic disorder (caused by Sir Thomas's absence in the colonies): "but there was no reading, no China, no composure for Fanny" (570). A purely literary site in this early nineteenth-century novel, China figures as a third space, providing an imaginary—literary, Romantic—counterpart to colonial and domestic estates. By midcentury, East Asia was to become accessible to, if not incorporated into, Britain's expanding commercial empire. Accounts of Lord Macartney's embassy to China in 1793 may still offer an entry into exotic journeys of the mind in a novel of 1814, yet China's "opening" had already begun to turn it into a semicolonial space.

The European settlement in Canton (Guangzhou) became not simply an integral part of a newly extensive, almost global, network of trade. It encapsulated expansion of commerce and the sense of confinement experienced in the semicolony's commercial heart. A cosmopolitan space in which "were to be found British, American, French, Dutch, and Parsee merchants, as also Swedish, Austrian, Danish and Spanish," it was located outside the city walls and based on minimum contact through middlemen: "foreigners could not learn Chinese, European women were not allowed in the settlement, Chinese servants could not work in the European

factories,” and yet it is routinely acknowledged that “Canton came into being through European colonialism” (Tambling 37-38). This downplays the very lack of “exotic” encounters, of any kind of “othered” work, as it were. As Susan Schoenbauer Thurin emphasises in *Victorian Travelers and the Opening of China, 1842-1907*, “[a]s a rule, foreign merchants traveled little in China. They were notorious for not learning the language and avoiding the Chinese population. To some extent these patterns were a response to the treaty-port regulations in that foreign businesses and housing were confined to the concession areas” (60). At the expense of any of the ethnographic travel with which Victorian scientific imperialism (as well as an incipient tourist industry) is often associated, the realities of (in Raymond Williams’s terms) “the tropical or arid places of actual work” (282) disallowed any exoticisation.

Hence it should not surprise us that the shattered, melancholy antihero of Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*, Arthur Clennam, is introduced as “an Englishman, who has been more than twenty years in China” (18), but who has nothing much to say about his work there. He reports that the family business is failing. Much more disconcertingly, he feels it has wronged someone somehow, either at home or in its overseas connections. At his father’s deathbed, Clennam receives a watch with the harrowing description “Do Not Forget.” A notably vague sense of guilt leads him to look for any and all ways in which “some one may have been grievously deceived, injured, ruined” amidst all the “grasping at money and in driving hard bargains” (49). He then encounters Little Dorrit serving in his old home and tracks her to a debtors’ prison in London’s East End. Exotic to him, it replaces, indeed stands in for, his previous business in the East. Both spaces significantly sport an uncanny resemblance to several prisonlike environments he has encountered around the world, and which symptomatically include quarantine areas on his way back from “the East.”

Despite its overarching focus on the nooks and corners of the debtors’ prison in Victorian London, the novel features an extensive range of “exotic” locations. Italy as well as Italian emigrants notably play an important role. Highlighting a global interconnectedness that comprises commercial relations, criminal networks, and infections, but also new connections between travellers, sojourners, and also emigrants, the novel opens up in Marseille. There Clennam is held up since he comes “from the East, and as the East is the country of the plague” (15), as it is put in a tongue-in-cheek evocation of a ridiculed xenophobia. Like the confined settlements in nineteenth-century Canton, this place of quarantine forms part of the novel’s larger symbolic structure in which commercial expansion is associated with confining, claustrophobic spaces and (ultimately literally) crumbling, collapsing houses of business. It is closely associated with and indeed next door to a prison that houses foreign characters who are to infiltrate London, including the self-proclaimed “cosmopolitan” stage villain Rigaud, a “citizen of the world” who “own[s] no particular country” (9), a double of Clennam, the self-styled “waif and

stray” (19). This stateless Frenchman is the horror of an Italian refugee who finds a happy home in London—his fellow prisoner in Marseille, his foil, and a contrasting foreign import.

Marseille, apart from bringing together quarantined travellers and miscellaneous prisoners, moreover, is a port city and a commercial centre at which traders from all parts of the globe, including China, converge: “Hindoos, Russians, Chinese, Spaniards, Portuguese, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Genoese, Neapolitans, Venetians, Greeks, Turks, descendants from all the builders of Babel, come to trade at Marseille” (1). Jeremy Tambling has even suggested that since both commercial settlements in Canton and Marseille were established in the course of European colonialism, they become identified in the novel: “in its alterity and with the alienation it gives on account of its virtually tropical heat,” Dickens’s Marseille “may be an allegory, or displacement of Canton” (38). Rather than specific to imperialist commerce abroad, guilty “grasping at money” is exposed as the driving principle of capitalist enterprise around the world.

Clennam’s harrowing feelings of guilt yoke together “a colonial guilt that cannot be articulated” (Tambling 35) and a more general self-reproach that has been termed “the first fully developed case of liberal guilt in English literature” (Born 29). Semicolonial settlements abroad thereby metonymically stand in for ruthless commercial expansionism all over the globe. Clennam’s often remarked “silence” about China hence very appositely bespeaks at once the pervasiveness of guilty businesses here and there and a marked lack of expected exotic detail. The first postcolonial readings of the novel perhaps expectedly made the most of this absence. Wenying Xu has suggested that the “total silence about Arthur’s twenty formative years in China is an anomaly” that is nonetheless necessary to the narrative structure as “[u]nfolding the China secret will rob the text of its very interiority” (54). This is an intriguing point, but as Xu reads the novel entirely within the “theoretical framework of Self/Other” (53), the resulting focus reminds us all the more forcefully why this paradigm is “inappropriate, or at the very least, not up to the task” (Barlow “Introduction” 10). Such readings simply expanded on the Saidian preoccupation with the now infamous “dead silence” about the slave trade in *Mansfield Park* (*Culture* 73).

In Austen’s novel, an already halting dinner conversation comes to a complete standstill when the dependent niece (Fanny) raises a question about the slaves’ situation in Antigua, a topic in which the returned nabob’s own children symptomatically take no interest. For Said, this silence implies that “one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both” (*Culture* 115). As recent reassessments have stressed, however, the “problem is not, as Said would have it, that stories of empire cannot be told at the Mansfield dinner table” (Irvine 142). It has instead become a critical commonplace that Austen’s recourse to potentially provocative overseas references is expressive of a critical (not complicit) alignment between suppression at

home and abroad. She makes her habitually subdued heroine speak up to draw parallels between suppression at home and abroad. Still, as Franco Moretti reminds us, sometimes the main function of sites abroad is simply the convenience that they are offstage: Fanny's uncle goes abroad "not because he must *go there* – but because *he must leave Mansfield Park*" (Moretti 27).<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, Clennam's missing years have only exacerbated his feeling of being "such a waif and stray everywhere" (19). That his place of work abroad is unexotic, however, becomes a vital issue.

Dickens's novel certainly contains more than "one brief, passing reference to China" (53), as Xu has suggested. Tambling even terms *Little Dorrit* the Dickens novel that "makes the most significant use of China" (34). The Englishman's return from China is followed not only by repeated references to "the East," comprising both its literal and its symbolic evocation (such as the sphinx-like air of secrecy [543] displayed by the female head of the Clennam family business). Disappointed Chinomanie is made the subject of a comical interlude that also works as an important characterisation device, while great disappointments form a central theme. Clennam is ironically quarantined because he comes from "the East," but his first vision of home is "a Britain far more blighted than the China he has left behind" (Moore 16). In *Dickens and Empire*, Grace Moore analyses Dickens's acerbic depiction of a London Sunday rendered "gloomy, close and stale" by sabbatarian strictures that ensure that "Everything was bolted and barred that could by possibility furnish relief to an overworked people," and in which a stifling silence is rent only by "[m]addening church bells [...] throbbing, jerking, tolling, as if the Plague were in the city and the deadcars were going round" (*Little* 28). This post-apocalyptic world "recalls London's cholera victims of 1854 and, further in its exposure of a general abjuration of responsibility, suggests a spilling over of the devastation of battlefields abroad" (Moore 16-17).<sup>5</sup>

Clennam's return is indeed a failure as a homecoming on two levels. He comes home to report the family business's decline and is at the same time disappointed in the unaltered dark and depressing places of his childhood. This past home has signally failed to become miraculously transformed into desirable embowered estate. Clennam, moreover, may simply not have that much to tell. Satirised attempts to fill in orientalist paraphernalia are part and parcel of the failed homecoming. His silly former sweetheart, Flora Finching, silences the returnee with her symptomatically scatterbrained chinomanie. It literally drowns out whatever he might have had to say about their years apart. She expects that he is

married to some Chinese lady, being in China so long and being in business [...]. I only hope she's not a Pagodian dissenter [...] oh do tell me something about the Chinese ladies whether their eyes are really so long and narrow always putting me in mind of mother-of-pearl fish at cards and do they really wear tails down their back and plaited too or is it only the men, and when they pull their hair so very tight off their foreheads don't they hurt themselves, and why do they stick little bells all over their bridges and temples and hats and things or don't they really do it! [W]hat a

country to live in for so long a time, and with so many lanterns and umbrellas too how very dark and wet the climate ought to be and no doubt actually is, and the sums of money that must be made by those two trades where everybody carries them and hangs them everywhere, the little shoes too and the feet screwed back in infancy is quite surprising, what a traveller you are! (152)

Of course it is not only that Clennam could not have been a great traveller at all. Although much has of course been speculated about the business's possible involvement in the opium trade (one of the "two trades" Flora haphazardly refers to), the novel's emphasis really rests on the dullness as well as the shadiness of all commercial enterprise. The lack of exoticism, the lack even of an easily identifiable instance of colonial guilt, however, is precisely the point. It accurately reflects the descriptions of foreign settlement in China as well as general critiques of commercial imperialism. Direct arraignments of its effects on both metropolitan and colonial culture were directed both at free trade policies and at a hampering bureaucracy. The latter is by far the most pointedly evoked by Dickens's Circumlocution Office, and this is what makes *Little Dorrit* a key-text for the re-presentation of demystified work in the "Victorian Orient."

The same parallelism between commercial rapidity and restrictive red tape became a defining feature of nineteenth-century references to semicolonial China. Charles Reade's tellingly titled sensation novel *Hard Cash* (1863), for example, evokes East India trading routes as it tracks the eponymous "Cash's" journeys home from a bank in India, carried in the captain's pocket. Most of its adventures involve pirates, storms, and shipwrecks. The crew of pirate ships generally is "a mixed one" (92), "a wild crew of yellow Malays, black chinless Papuans, and bronzed Portuguese" (109). Troubles on board ship are caused by an indeterminately "oriental" servant: a "male Oriental in charge [of a colonist's spoilt child], the strangest compound of dignity and servility, and of black and white" (89). Equipped with "brat and poodle" (89), the colonist's wife herself is just as troublesome. She is a stereotyped shipment bothering the dutiful captain. Amidst this litany of typecast adventures, China symptomatically stands for rigid bureaucracy in the way of free trade. A "chop," or permission to leave China, blocks up the free flow of ships, of goods, of commerce: "China being a place as hard to get into as Heaven, and to get out of as – Chancery" (89). No wonder it also features in the same novel as the Circumlocution Office, Dickens's epitome of modern bureaucratic obstacles.

As red tape ousts red lanterns in the very face of what has long been seen as the typical Victorian fascination with orientalism, this anti-exotic impulse becomes a source for new literary imaginaries and social critiques. It is, in fact, the two-pronged aim of this rereading of representative texts both to reassess orientalism's demystification and to answer the question why precisely some of the most critical fictionalisations of exploitative commerce choose a semicolonial space for their points of reference. A closer examination of this narrative choice

provides new insight into the shifting perception of divergent forms of colonial modernity across surprisingly global and at times startlingly unexotic commercial networks. In order to highlight its cultural legacies—the continuation of this narrative choice in particular—the following discussion of the ends of colonial adventure in Maugham’s *The Painted Veil* will therefore conclude with a critical analysis of the novel’s recent film adaptation.

The homeless exiles, directionless (if not necessarily always villainous) cosmopolitans, and disappointed returnees of Victorian fiction can be seen as the direct precursors of the increasingly decadent expatriates that become the focus of Maugham’s fiction. But if his poignantly ambiguous treatment of a growing expatriate syndrome may be seen as the hallmark of his writing, the most intriguing feature remains the way he indulges an exoticism that is at the same time ironically presented. *The Painted Veil* is premised on an already exploded narrative structure of colonial escape. The young woman “coming out” to the colonies is a much rehearsed trope, especially in late-Victorian fiction. As Maugham redeploys it, its already gender-inflected adaptation of fortune-seeking adventure is vitiated with a double irony. The result is an essentially tongue-in-cheek sending up not simply of imperialist (and, by extension, more general, commercial) strategies of appropriation, but of work abroad generally, including the expatriate community in Hong Kong (renamed Tching-Yen after a threatened libel case). More accessible than in Dickens’s time, areas outside its international quarters become associated with “filth” produced by the colonisers: Kitty Fane “hated the Chinese city and it made her nervous to go into the filthy little house off the Victoria Road in which they were in the habit of meeting” (13). The “Chinese city” is separate from the dull replication of English suburbia among less influential expatriates; it is off a road named after Queen Victoria; it is where “they were in the habit of meeting,” and “they,” it soon transpires, are Kitty, the wife of the Government bacteriologist, and the Assistant Colonial Secretary. They are in the habit of committing adultery in a “curio shop” (16), in an “other” space apart from colonial confines.

Exploding the most common clichés of an exotic East while trading on the allure of mysterious beauty (including a “magic palace” that quickly loses its “airy, fantastic, and unsubstantial” twilight mystery in the “hard light of mid-day” [97]) and equally mysterious women (the Manchu woman attached to a strikingly hideous Customs officer), Maugham plays with markedly satirised associations with disease, filth, and foreign affairs. A cholera outbreak features as their natural outgrowth. It is therefore with a peculiarly ironic twist that a recent film version counteracts Maugham’s implicit critique (or satire, at least) by once again celebrating scientific imperialism. In both versions, Kitty has an affair with “the most popular man in the Colony” (59), and her humiliated husband consequently volunteers to replace a medical missionary who has just died in a cholera epidemic in a remote part of China (62). The estranged wife’s uselessness in the midst of the epidemic draws her to a French convent, yet while the

novel capitalises on the exoticism of Catholicism and Frenchness, the film elides such difference to reduce all European influence to competing imperialist powers: “everybody comes with an agenda,” as the bacteriologist sarcastically remarks. He dies of cholera, whereas his wife gives birth to a child who might or might not be his. But the pity she learns to feel for him in the original text is far removed from the heartrending love scenes of the 2006 adaptation. More significantly still, while the novel continues to detail Kitty’s sense of dislocation, her feeling that her experience in China was “nothing but a dream,” “like a story that she was reading,” and perhaps even “a joke” (208), the film almost elevates her dead husband to martyrdom and entirely invents his heroism in constructing a new way of supplying clean water.

This return to long exploded clichés in a twenty-first-century adaptation of a much more critical, more ironic, novel places the trajectories of semicolonial China’s ongoing re-presentation in popular culture into a different light. Triumphant scientific imperialism counterpoises the breakdown of imperialist ideologies that conceptualise colonialism as a bringing of civilisation: a breakdown with which nineteenth-century fiction already struggled in the face of a prevalent jingoism. Semicolonialism at the height of the British Empire’s influence in Asia chiefly showed colonial red tape overpowering any mysticism of a land of “red lanterns.” Work experience abroad boiled down to dullness or a sense of unreality. This makes it all the more disconcerting that the semicolony reviewed in retrospect in current popular culture (as in the 2006 adaptation of Maugham’s novel) invites a colonial nostalgia curiously free from anxieties of imperialist guilt. In fact, China’s semicolonial status ironically seems to render history open to such a treatment. A reconsideration of the individual histories undoubtedly engenders a more encompassing revision of various kinds of global (colonial as well as semicolonial) interdependencies, but the really disturbing aspect of the 2006 *The Painted Veil* is the triumph of scientific progress/imperialism. Present-day popular culture seems less likely to acknowledge the limitations of exported modernities. Perhaps a knowledge of past narratives—from Dickens’s tongue-in-cheek demystification of “Pagodian” expectations to Maugham’s play with already ossified clichés—may assist in generating a better comprehension, in Eames’s words, “of our interests in China, as they exist at the present day” (vii).

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## Notes

1. Shi has perhaps most extensively endeavoured to “theorize semicolonialism as a social formation distinct from formal colonialisms” (x). The “semi-” herein does not so much “denote ‘half’ of something, but rather the fractured, informal, and indirect character of colonialism, as well as its multilayeredness” (Shi 34). Attridge and Howes further suggest that another justification for the use of semicolonial outside strictly Marxist or communist rhetoric is “the fact that Joyce’s writings emerge from, and take as their major historical subject, a country whose status vis-à-vis the imperial power, although it can be illuminated by the colonial model, cannot be understood straightforwardly in its terms” (4).

2. Over the last decades, studies of occidentalism as a counterpart to orientalism have amply shown that occidentalist typecasting as the “stylised images of the West” produced in “the East” need to be reassessed as well (Carrier 1). Revising his own earlier proviso that “no one is likely to imagine a field symmetrical to orientalism called

occidentalism” (*Orientalism* 1), even Edward Said stressed, in one of his last interviews, the need to expose “the Occident” as well as “the Orient” as cultural constructs: “I say even the notions of the Occident and the Orient are ideological fictions and we should try to get away from them as much as possible” (50). This is also the reason more critical interest is now expanded on such diverse forms of colonialism and imperialist expansion as semicolonialism, settler colonialism, internal colonialism, as well as interrelated versions of commercial imperialism and neo-imperialism. As Annie Coombes has recently stressed in a collection on the different forms of settler colonialism, to expand “on the project of comparative research” means “cross-cultural and intranational comparison” as well as a rethinking of the boundaries of colonial and postcolonial studies more generally (2-3). As Hevia has more recently stressed, such studies really need to get away from “older interpretations that presumed a static China opposed to a progressive West” as well as from an equally unbalanced “China-centered approach” (*English* 16). Instead, after “interrogating reified objects such as ‘the West’ and historicising them,” engaging with nineteenth-century instances of imperialism and colonialism might additionally “illuminate the complex relationships between global processes and their local manifestations in China” (Hevia, *English* 17).

3. Semicolonialism and colonial modernity constitute “problems for postcolonial theory,” as Barlow puts it in the title of a more recent essay. It is not only that one of the points that “remain outstanding for modern China historians” is the question of how “local articulations of modernity [are] enmeshed, inextricably, with colonialism” (“Eugenic” 359). Even as “the informal empire and accidental colonies theses prove more influential in China scholarship than ever before,” the “general characteristics of postcolonial theory” remain tangential and, more significantly still, “the signifier China constitutes a useful reminder to historians and postcolonial theorists of the extent of colonial heterogeneity” (“Eugenic” 367, 370, 372). “Perhaps with time and patience,” Barlow importantly proceeds to suggest, “the implicit relation of model to theory—India and England, colony to colonial, politics to culture—that the subaltern studies paradigm has entrenched will eventually erode sufficiently to allow for its own displacement” (“Eugenic” 372).

4. In the mid-1990s, Susan Fraiman already pointed out that “while reviewers friendly to Said repeatedly cite Austen as definitive proof of his claim, hostile reviewers invoke her with even greater vehemence as the figure most implausibly tied by Said to imperialist wrong-doings” (806). For a more recent reassessment see Irvine (especially 136-140).

5. In a more recent article, published in a special issue on the “Victorian Orient,” Moore further stresses that Dickens was intrigued by “returning figures”: they include transported criminals, men of business

and sailors, and Dickens frequently uses these characters as a way of providing an outsider's perspective on the Condition of England Question" (74-75)

