

The US – China Trade:
Capitalism, Consumption and
Consumer Identity

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PhD

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2009

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Claire P. Dappert

For my Grandmother,
Eileen Coultas

Abstract

Since the fifteenth century the rise of capitalism and the expansion of global trade networks have ensured that a wide range of consumer goods has become available to people from all walks of life. Paralleling these developments, our attitudes and beliefs about consumer goods have also changed: goods that were once considered luxuries have become commonplace in domestic households. This study celebrates the diversity of this material culture and the variety of symbolic meanings people attach to it. The US – China trade, as a facet of the Spice Trade, is inextricably linked to the development of capitalism and long-distance shipping that ensured the movement of consumer goods to markets around the world. Inevitably, many of these ships sank and archaeologically their cargoes and the artifacts associated with their crew provide an opportunity to glimpse the development of our modern world. This thesis uses the shipwreck *Frolic* (1850) as a case study to discuss how those involved in, and those who were supplied through, this trade used a range of consumer goods to construct distinct identities for themselves and those around them. This study also draws on a wide variety of source material, including material culture (museum collections and archaeological assemblages), images and documentary sources (courtesy literature and newspapers) to paint a broader picture of the US – China trade and consumer society than any one source is capable of doing itself. This study ultimately argues that the range in consumer goods associated with the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century US – China trade is symptomatic of the increasing complexity of consumer markets able to facilitate the establishment and maintenance of a wide array of consumer identities, necessary under the many new social, economic and ideological relationships constructed under capitalism.

Acknowledgments

Many people compare undertaking a PhD to a journey, and my journey would not have been possible without the help of my primary supervisor Associate Professor Mark Staniforth and my secondary supervisor Associate Professor Heather Burke. During my PhD candidature, Mark also gave me the opportunity to become a part-time lecturer in the Department of Archaeology and to act as Series Editor of the Flinders University Maritime Archaeology Monograph Series (MAMS). Although these experiences may not have contributed directly to this dissertation, they were part of the journey of becoming an academic and have fostered professional growth in many ways that will prove to be invaluable for the future. Thank you, Mark, for these opportunities and your guidance along the way.

There are many other individuals and institutions that I am indebted to for providing support and resources. Dr. Sheli Smith of the PAST Foundation provided me with an internship, during which I was granted access and given permission by the California State Parks Cultural Heritage Division to use the *Frolic* artifact database as part of this study. This was absolutely integral to my research, as *Frolic* is the only US – China trading shipwreck that was outbound from Canton and that has been archaeologically investigated. Additionally, as a Research Fellow with Victor Mastone of the Massachusetts Board of Underwater Archaeological Resources (BUAR), I was awarded an internship with the BUAR, during which time I was involved in a survey to locate *Semirimus*, an US – China trading vessel wrecked off the coast of Massachusetts in 1804. I would like to thank those who were involved in this fieldwork including Mark Munro and Arnie Carr of American Underwater Search and Survey.

I would also like to thank Karin Corgan, Curator of Asian Export Art at the Peabody Essex Museum, for showing me some of the Chinese export porcelain in storage at the museum, and Robert Mazrim of the Sangamo Archaeological Center in Illinois for a great discussion on nineteenth century ceramics and for helping to identify some of the details about the *Frolic* artifacts. Also thanks to Mike Nash for inviting me to join the *Sydney Cove* shipwreck survivor camp 2006 excavations and allowing for a side trip to Kent's Bay on Cape Barren Island, Tasmania. Others whom I am indebted to include Tom Emerson and David Nolan, for providing support to past employees such as myself, Bradley Rodgers, for laying the mental groundwork to get

through this journey, and Nathan Richards, for introducing me to my primary supervisor.

The search for the schooner *Independence* construction site would not have been possible without the assistance of many people and organisations. My gratitude extends to the field crew including Mark Staniforth, Jennifer McKinnon, Jason Raupp, Rick Bullers, Karson Winslow, and Toni Massey, as well as to Ian Moffat for analysing the geophysical survey data. I would also like to thank several individuals who conversed with me about the historical interpretation of *Independence*, including Mary Thacher and Anne Tate of the Stonington Historical Society, Bill Peterson of Mystic Seaport, Richard Ryan of the Townsend Society of America, the late Terry Arnott of the South Australian Department of Environment and Heritage, Anthony Brown, Joan Fawcett, and the Klieve Family of American River.

I would also like to thank many of the institutions who graciously opened their doors for historical research, particularly the Richard A. Woolworth Library, Mystic Seaport, the Townsend Society of America, the American Geographical Society, the New South Wales State Library, the South Australian State Library, and the South Australian Department of Environment and Heritage, the Peabody Essex Museum, the Phillips Library, the US National Archives and the US Library of Congress. I also would like to thank Flinders University for providing funding in the form of an Endeavour International Postgraduate Research Scholarship, a Flinders Overseas Travelling Fellowship, a Flinders University Research Budget grant, and two Research Student Maintenance grants.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents Michael and Janis, my aunt Carol Dappert, for illustrating my maps, and Chris McMahon for the much need and sometimes comical support, and John Paul Coonrod, for visiting me in Australia and providing me with encouragement along the last leg of my journey. To all of you I am extremely grateful for the sharing of knowledge, inspiration and support that you provided for this long, yet rewarding journey.

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Abbreviations

EIC	English East India Company
HRA	Historical Records of Australia
MNA	Minimum Number of Artifacts
MNV	Minimum Number of Vessels
TORR	Tubin Oceanic Research and Recovery
US	United States
VOC	<i>Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie</i>
WAMM	Western Australian Maritime Museum