

“The Great Exhibition and the Little One” : Chinese Display in Victorian London

「大博覧会と小博覧会」

—ヴィクトリア朝ロンドンにおける中国の展示品

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要 旨

1851年に世界最初の万国博覧会がロンドンで開かれた。当時のイギリスの代表的な文学者、W. M. Thackeray がこれに対して大賛辞を呈しているのに対し、Charles Dickens の評言は冷やかであった。しかし、Dickens は *Household Words* に R. H. Horne と共同執筆した “The Great Exhibition and the Little One” (大英帝国の展示品と中国の展示品) では異なった考えを述べている。彼はイギリスの展示品については、先進技術を誇るものときわめて肯定的な見方をしている。他方、中国の展示品は時代遅れのものとする否定的である。本論では、その Dickens の考えを解明すると共に、1842年以後ロンドンで続々と展示されていた中国の “Little Exhibition” がイギリス人に与えた印象を考証する。それは必ずしも否定的なものではない。むしろ、“Little Exhibition” は、その形として、中国の文化を初めて紹介する役割を果たすものとして評価されている。特に1848年の “Chinese Junk” はロンドンに異国情趣を呼び起こした。

キーワード： Great Exhibition, Chinese Junk, Dickens

Introduction

“The Great Exhibition and the Little One” was written in collaboration with R. H.

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Horne by Charles Dickens and appeared in his established periodical journal *Household Words* in July 1851. Here, “The Great Exhibition” means the British exhibitions exhibited at the Crystal Palace in 1851, while “the Little One” refers to Chinese displays in London, a few years earlier. Harry Stone, a world renowned American Dickens scholar, has spent the past 60 years, examining the evolution of Dickens’ writing style and building his personal Dickens collection, literally, piece-by-piece. In his *Charles Dickens’ Uncollected Writings from Household Words 1850–1859*, he explained that “the Little One” is “Dickens’ name for the Chinese Gallery in Hyde Park Place and Chinese junk at Temple Stairs” (319). The article shows his view of the “Progress” of the Great Britain and the “Stoppage” of China. My interest is that Dickens, nearly at the same time, showed a totally different response on the Great Exhibition in his letter to Mrs. Watson.

In this paper, I will investigate into Dickens’ real reflection on the Great Exhibition through his essay, “The Great Exhibition and the Little One” and his letter to Mrs. Watson. In addition, I will analyze the role of the Chinese Display done in London during the 1840s, as an experiment introducing Chinese culture into Victorian England.

1. The Great Exhibition: the Crystal Palace of 1851

On May Day 1851, Queen Victoria opened the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, at the newly constructed Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London. During the 141 open days up to the 11th of October 1851, the Crystal Palace and the exhibition attracted a daily average of over 40,000 visitors of all social and economic classes to visit the works of arts and industry from all over the world. Through the Great Exhibition, with its motto of “Peace, Progress and Prosperity”, Great Britain proved itself not only the first industrialized nation and the “workshop of the world”, but also the most powerful and advanced country in the world.

William Makepeace Thackeray, one of the representative literary figures of the time, joined the chorus of praise of the event with his “May-Day Ode,” which celebrates the Crystal Palace as,

A palace as for fairy price,
A rare pavilion, such as man
Saw never since mankind began,

“The Great Exhibition and the Little One” : Chinese Display in Victorian London

And built and glazed !¹

(ll. 13 – 16)

While Charles Dickens’ attitude towards the Great Exhibition was totally different from Thackeray’s, Dickens was rather cold and distant, and even poignantly critical in some aspects of the Great Exhibition. This is very surprising. Because, as a popular novelist and journalist, Dickens, who was usually actively concerned with social public affairs, would have been expected to show enthusiasm for the event of national pride.

Dickens’ letter to Mrs. Watson dated on the 11th of July, 1851, expresses what troubled him about the Great Exhibition.

I find I am “used up” by the Exhibition. I don’t say “there’s nothing in it” — there’s too much. I have only been twice. So many things bewildered me. I have a natural horror of sights, and the fusion of so many sights in one has not decreased it. I am not sure that I have seen anything but the Fountain and perhaps the Amazon. It is a dreadful thing to be false, but when anybody says “have you seen—?” I say “Yes,” because if I don’t, I know he’ll explain it— and I can’t bear that. (428 – 29)²

A reader might well be puzzled by Dickens’ enigmatic phrase “natural horror of sights” and the blank with a question mark “—— ?” What sights could they have been to that caused him to have “a natural horror”?

I would like to put aside our puzzlement before discussing Dickens’ viewpoint of the Great Exhibition. According to his letter, Dickens visited the Crystal Palace twice. So his cold attitude to the Great Exhibition doesn’t necessarily mean that Dickens was indifferent of the Great Exhibition. In addition, in February 1851, under the guidance of Joseph Paxton (1801 – 65), who was the architect of the Crystal Palace, Dickens made a tour of the building which was still under construction, making a private viewing of the huge glass palace.³

1) Thackeray, *Ballads and The Rose and the Ring*. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 15 Waterloo Place, 1891, 43

2) Dickens, “To the Hon. Mrs. Richard Watson, 11 July 1851.” The Pilgrim Edition, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. VI, 1850 – 1852. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, 428 – 29

3) Masaie, Matsumura. *The story of Crystal Palace*, Tokyo: Tikuma Syobou, 2000, 206

2. “Progress” and “Stoppage”

Reflections on the progress of the nations mentioned in the introductory part of the article, “The Great Exhibition and the Little One”, are rather generic and abstract. However, it is not long before we come to realize that this article is not a comprehensive study of the Crystal Palace, but a comparison between China and England, between “Stoppage” and “Progress”, between “the exclusive principle” and “all other principles” and the last but not the least, between the display in the Thames by the Temple Stairs of 1848 and the exhibition at the Crystal Palace of 1851. It is particularly noteworthy that “the Great Exhibition” in Dickens’ notion straightly stands for England itself against “the Little One”, which stands for China.

Harry Stone’s studies have demonstrated that the following passage seems most evidently written by Dickens’ hand not by R. H. Horne’s.

As it is impossible in allowable space to “go through” the whole Exhibition, or touch upon a tithe of its Catalogue, let us suggest as curious subjects of comparison, these two countries which display (on the whole) the greatest degree of progress, and the least —say England and China. England, maintaining commercial intercourse with the whole world; China, shutting itself up, as far as possible, within itself. The true Tory spirit would make a China of England, if it could. Behold its results in the curious little Exhibition now established close beside the great one. It is very curious to have the Exhibition of a people who came to dead stop, Heaven knows how many hundred years ago, side by side with the Exhibition of the moving world. It points the moral in surprising manner. (357)

It’s not necessarily Dickens’ individualism, but a general tendency of Victorian England to look down upon China as a contemptible country. Many British people believed that the Celestial Empire’s (Ching Dynasty’s) walled gardens and forbidden cities caused for the whole nation of China stagnancy, despotism, and repressed consciousness. They insisted on defining China as both backward in time and isolated in space, unable to see or move beyond the boundaries of the Great Wall.

Another example which I would like to cite, comes from Henry Sutherland Edwards’ *Authentic Account of the Chinese Commission, which was sent to report on the Great Exhibition; wherein the opinion of China is shown as not corresponding*

“The Great Exhibition and the Little One” : Chinese Display in Victorian London

*at all with our own.*⁴ It is a long, satirical poem that reflects the attitudes about both Britain and China at that time. In short, Edward’s story details two representatives of the Chinese Emperor’s court who were sent to London to report back on the Great Exhibition. While one of the representatives reported an enlightened, curiously Western appreciation for the exhibition, the other obstinately refused to open his eyes to see the progress and splendor of Britain. When they reported back to the Emperor, the latter, the critic of the West, is paid with high praises, while the former, his Europhile partner, is sentenced to death for his poor judgment.

About the machinery tool, the article “The Great Exhibition and the Little One,” says: “The railway engines, and agricultural engines, and machines; the locomotives, in all their variety; the farm-engines, such as the compound plough, the harrow, the clod-crusher, the revolving sub-soiler.....(358) they reflect the progressive, dynamic global power of Britain. While concerning about China, the article goes like this: the “rude expedient has never been improved from the hour of its first construction.” (358) Of the Chinese tools “We know very little... but judge from their knives and razors and carpenters tools, they must be sufficiently primitive and curious.” (359)

The following passages, using the word “consider” three times by Dickens form a very impressive expression of comparison.

Consider our English raw materials, and our engines and machinery. We do pause to particularize; there they are, and may be seen. Enormous blocks of coal, great masses of stone, and timber, and mineral and vegetable substances.(358)

Consider the materials employed at the great Teacup Works of Kiang-tiht-Chin (or Tight-Chin) the “bedaubing powder, ready mixed” and the “bedaubing material.” (358)

Consider the greatness of the English results, and the extraordinary littleness of the Chinese. Go from the silk-weaving and cotton-spinning of us outer barbarians, to the laboriously-carved ivory balls of the flowery Empire, ball within ball and circle within circle, which have made no advance and been of no earthly use for thousands of years.(358)

4) Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, Yale University Press, 1999, 174

The third one is more notable: “silk-weaving and cotton-spinning” represent the modern machines which are on-going activities, while the “laboriously-carved ivory balls” represent a mode of production figuratively ancient and outdated even if it is still in use.

On the one hand, it can be conceived that through this comparison of the material artifacts, the two empires were engaged in an ongoing and violent dispute over trade goods. For example, the opium market was created by the British with the purpose of trying to balance trade surplus. Undoubtedly, the trade of opium increased because it was so addicting and it was valued highly by both the users and the traders, although the government knew it was poisoning to people. The war eventually broke out between Great Britain and China. The result of the war caused China to cede Hong Kong to Britain. However, even after the opium war, China still was self-sufficient economically, and they couldn't immediately show great interest in buying goods from the British. Thus the fact that China possessed a rival trade to Britain, to a certain degree, influenced the British journalists' documentary reports, including that of Dickens'.

By contrast with China, “an odd, barbarous, or eccentric nation”,(356) the English people's pride in their racial superiority was reinforced by Dickens. This is reflected in his *A Child's History of England*.

The English-Saxon character...has been the greatest character among the nations of the earth. Wherever the descendants of Saxon race have gone, have sailed, or otherwise made their way, even to the remotest regions of the world, they have been patient, persevering, never to be broken in spirit...(148-49)

According to Harry Stone's study, Dickens probably wrote a substantial share of the “little Exhibition” portions of “The Great Exhibition and the Little One”.(319) His attitude towards the Great Exhibition is quite clear through his portions discussed above. He is quite proud that a great number of advanced working machines and inventions, which brought great improvement for human life, were displayed in the United Kingdom's Pavilion.

There lies the point which merits debating: “How should the British have seen the Great Exhibition?” Queen Victoria invited all the nations of the world to London, from Europe to Africa, from America to the Far East, colonial and uncivilized states,

“The Great Exhibition and the Little One” : Chinese Display in Victorian London

not only to exhibit their products, but at the same time to make Londoners see and learn about the world and its people as well.

3. Chinese Display:

i. The Chinese Junk

As mentioned before, Harry Stone's studies have demonstrated that Charles Dickens had probably never been to the Chinese Pavilion during the Great Exhibition. What he meant in the article of “The Great Exhibition and the Little One” is in fact not the Chinese displays at the Crystal Palace, but the Chinese junk which was exhibited in the Thames River in July of 1848.

Three years earlier than the Great Exhibition (In 1848), in the *Examiner*, (a weekly paper in the nineteenth century in which Charles Dickens made a significant number of contributions), Charles Dickens proposed the superiority of the West to the East in a paper entitled “The Chinese Junk”. It describes the exotic Chinese craft called “Keying”, which had just come round the world to be put on display in London and Dickens' impression of the visit the “Keying”.

In this chapter, I will provide an interpretation of the Chinese junk, and show what happened to the “Keying” during that period. Then I will examine what Dickens described and thought of the “Keying” through his article, “The Chinese Junk” and lastly give a discussion of the “Keying”.

The word “junk” came into English from both Portuguese “junco” and Dutch “Jonk”. However, some have sought the origin of the word in Chinese ch'wan (ship or sailing vessel) from Min Nan (福建省) pronunciation. So junks usually mean Chinese sailing vessels made of wood with bamboo-matting sails. As early as the second century, junks were efficient and sturdy ships that were traveling across oceans. They incorporated numerous technical advances in respect to sail and hull designs that were later adopted in Western shipbuilding.

The junk “Keying” was a three-masted, 800-ton Chinese trading junk. In August 1846, it was purchased by four English businessmen. This was seen as a brave action because they broke a Chinese law which prohibited the sale of Chinese ships to foreigners. Charles Alfred Auckland Kellett was the captain of the “Keying”. He was famous for having sailed the “Keying” from Canton to Great Britain between October 1846 and March 1848 with the crew of thirty Chinese and twelve English seamen. The course of voyage is nearly equal in length to the entire circuit of the

globe. A more detailed description of the “Keying” can be found in a booklet called *Description of the Royal Chinese Junk, “Keying”* which is printed for the proprietors of the junk, and sold only on board at East India Dock of London in 1848. Due to this booklet, we can understand and be informed more about the “Keying”. I will discuss it in details later. First, let us see the courses of her voyage. Fig. 1 shows the tracks of the sailing course from Hong Kong to London.

In December 1846, the “Keying” left Hong Kong.

In March 1847, she rounded the Cape of Good Hope.

In April 1847, she stopped at St. Helena.

In July 1847, she was in New York.

In November 1847, she visited Boston.

In April 1848, she arrived in England.

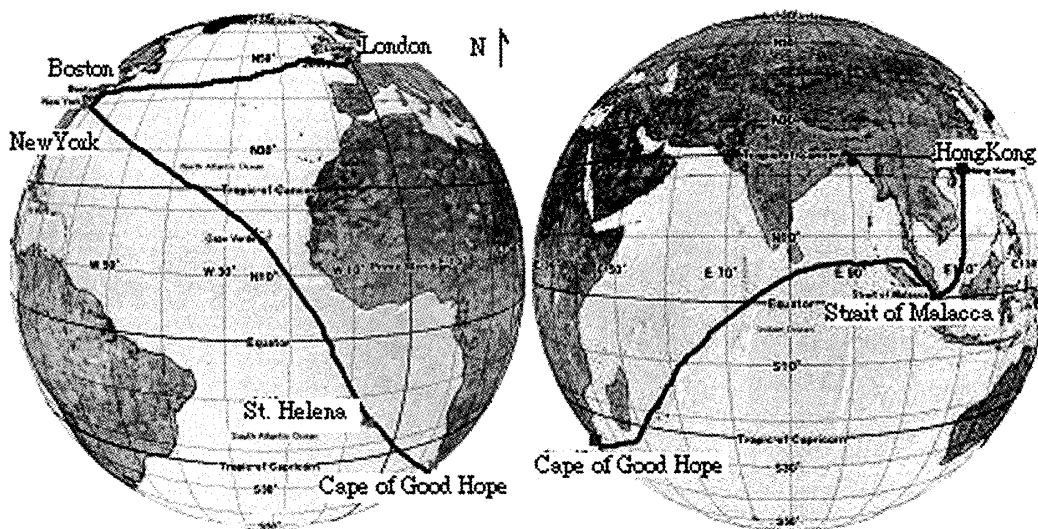


Fig. 1 the tracks from Hong Kong to London

As the “Keying” was only a junk which had never crossed the Atlantic, and what is more, hurricane, tropical storm, gale, squall and lurch would frequently occur during the whole of the voyage, it seems necessary to mention what happened to this teak-built junk on her long and unprecedented voyage.

In all these difficulties and perils which attended the voyage, the “Keying” proved herself an admirable sea-boat; she encountered the most violent storms, and behaved well in them all, as the extracts which are given from the log-book will prove... “Throughout the gale, which is hardest we ever experienced in the vessel,

“The Great Exhibition and the Little One” : Chinese Display in Victorian London

she has never shipped any water.” ... “A terrific high cross sea running at the time, the vessel behaving herself beautifully and not shipping a drop of water, though a continual spray was blowing over her.” (6 – 9)

The above quotation is from the booklet, *Description of the Royal Chinese Junk, “Keying.”*, which described the real condition of the “Keying” at that time. It shows, in one respect, the “Keying” which possessed substantiality to resist severe, heavy weather. In another respect, because of its remarkable feature, its enormous elevation of the bow and stern and its gorgeously painted interior and exterior (Fig. 2), it aroused many people’s curiosity and attracted the crowd to visit it when it was open to the public. At St. Helena, an island in the South Atlantic Ocean where the “Keying” anchored, it was visited by nearly every person on the island including Sir Patrick Ross and Sir Charles Hotham, the governor and Naval Commander of the Station. It also stayed in New York for several months because the supplies and water were running short. At that time, it was daily visited by as many as 7000 to 8000 people, who were paying 25 cents to board the ship and observe its design. When the “Keying” was open for exhibition in the Thames, the Londoners were amazed by its huge, exotic style, and a multitude of people, including Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and various members of the Royal family⁵ boarded it. The *Times* gave the following description of the “Keying”.

“Grand Saloon, gorgeously furnished in the most approved style of Chinese Curiosities, &c. There is not a more interesting Exhibition in the vicinity of London than Chinese Junk; one step across the entrance, and you are in the Chinese world; you have quitted the Thames for the vicinity of Canton.” (*Times*, 1848)⁶

Similarly, the *Illustrated London News*, one of the finest weekly pictorial magazines of the nineteenth century, placed a detailed report and illustrations about the “Keying”.

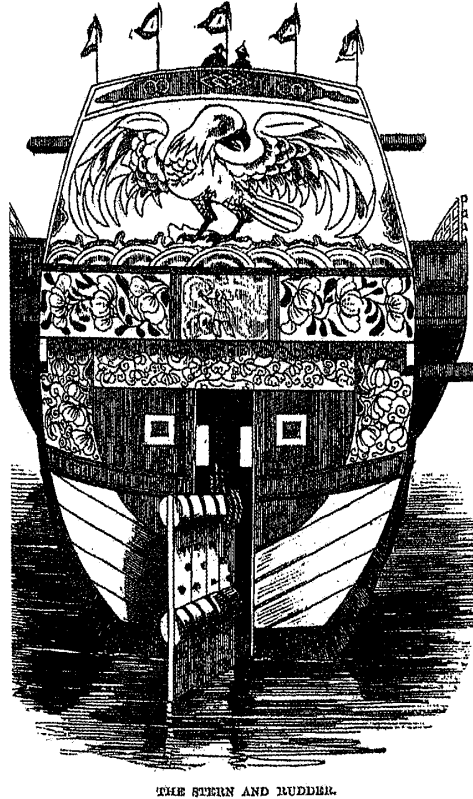
She proved herself an excellent sea-boat; and her powers of weathering a storm

5) *Illustrated London News*, May 20, 1848, 331

6) *Times*, 1848, cited by the booklet, *Description of the Royal Chinese Junk, “Keying.”*, the last page

equal, if not surpass, those of vessels of British build.⁷

This most interesting Exhibition, which has been justly called “the greatest novelty in Europe,” has been visited by all the nobility and foreigners of distinction in London.⁸



THE STERN AND RUDDER.

Fig. 2 The Chinese Junk (*Description of the Royal Chinese Junk, “Keying.”*)

Whereas, as one of the visitors, Charles Dickens’ description of the “Keying” in his article “The Chinese Junk” is totally different:

“If there is any one thing in the world that it is not at all like, this thing is a ship of any kind. So narrow, so long, so grotesque, so low in the middle, so high at each end (like a China pen-tray) with no rigging, with nowhere to go aloft, with mats for sails, great warped cigars for masts, gaudy dragons and sea monsters disporting themselves from stem to stern, a gigantic cock of impossible aspect, defying the

7) *Illustrated London News*, April, 1, 1848

8) *Illustrated London News*, May, 20, 1848

“The Great Exhibition and the Little One” : Chinese Display in Victorian London

world (as well he may) to produce his equal—” (403)

Dickens would never expect that such a monstrous, awkward, clumsy sailing vessel could sail across the Atlantic. Far from being entertained by the junk, Dickens thought the visitors would be surprised at its rough work, rude construction and grotesque form. As for a gigantic cock and a dragon which are engraved on the ship as Dickens described in the article, it can be assumed that Dickens paid little concern for Chinese tradition and culture. In fact, these are symbols indicating good luck in Chinese tradition. A gigantic cock (actually, a gigantic bird) is a symbol to show that the “Keying” was like a big bird, soaring high over the immeasurable ocean. A legend among the Chinese said a dragon lived in the clouds. When the dragon became angry, it created typhoons and storms. Bright flags, with Chinese characters on them, were meant to please the dragon. Red was the best color that would likely make the dragon help the sailors. And the “mats for sails, great warped cigar for masts” denoted that the vessel was so shabby and so crumbly that it could never be a comparison with British steamships. Five years before in 1843, the first ocean-going to have an iron hull and a screw propeller, the SS Great Britain launched at Bristol Harbour of England. It was the largest vessel made of iron that was ever afloat. However, if Dickens had made a thorough examination of the Keying’s sails made from “mats” (actually, from bamboo), he would have found that what had made the junk easy, safe and stable was the flexibility given by this special materials. That is why it was able to sail on the rough ocean for over four hundred days. As far as masts are concerned, they are supporters of the junk’s sails. They must not have been “great warped cigar”, but have been solid and firm. It is likely that for the purpose of the junk’s service life extension, the teak-wood masts were wrapped by something like mats, which gave the shabby impression to Dickens, and of protecting mats from decay of the sea.

ii . The Chinese Collection in Hyde Park

The Chinese displays first drew attention of the British people early in 1842, nine years before the Great Exhibition. On 23rd June, 1842, in a two-story pagoda which was built at Hyde Park Corner, the Chinese Collection was opened to the public. It was created by an American merchant Nathan Dunn (1782–1844), who had resided in China for 12 years. The following illustration and description dated on the 6th of

August, 1842 of the *Illustrated London News* offers a report of the interior of the exhibition. (Fig. 3)

"...by means of this collection, we may, in some sense, analyse the mental and moral qualities of the Chinese, and gather some knowledge of their idols, their temples, their pagodas, their bridges, their arts, their sciences, their manufactures, their trades, their fancies, their parlours, their drawing-rooms, their clothes, their finery, their ornaments, their weapons of war, their vessels, their dwellings, and the thousand *et ceteras* which make up their moving and living world."⁹



THE CHINESE COLLECTION.

THE CHINESE COLLECTION, HYDE PARK CORNER.

Fig. 3 The Chinese Collection (*Illustrated London News*, Aug. 6, 1842, 205)

The above depiction is as important as the image that was presented to the public.

9) *Illustrated London News*, August 6, 1842, 205

“The Great Exhibition and the Little One” : Chinese Display in Victorian London

It might also be said that the exhibition was held during the time of the Opium War, because Dunn, an American gentleman, opposed to the opium trade, and believed that he could sway the British public against the trade through making them better acquainted with the Chinese society and culture. There was a report that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert visited and inspected the contents of the Chinese Collection.¹⁰ It was not clear whether Dickens and his collaborator R. H. Horne visited there or not. But quite a few of issues stated the fact that the British nobility and scholars had flocked to Dunn's Chinese Museum, and that for the following two years the Pavilion enjoyed considerable success.¹¹

iii. Chinese Pavilion in the Great Exhibition

Silk, wax, mineral, silk fabrics, metal goods, lacquer wares, fans and Chinese tea were the main displays in the Chinese Pavilion at the Crystal Palace. It is a pity that there were very few detailed records left about the Chinese displays in the Great Exhibition, because it was just the time when the Taiping Rebellion (1851. 1~1864. 11) (太平天国の乱) happened, which exhausted the forces of the Ching Empire. The British consulate in China got instructions from London that they should urge China to participate in the Great Exhibition. But the seriousness of the Taiping Rebellion caused the Emperor to remain uninterested in participating. So the Chinese Pavilion was mainly organized by the British consuls and the Chinese merchants who stayed in London. Xu rongcun, (徐榮樹) (Fig. 4) a Canton merchant was the only one exception. At that time Xu rongcun acted as a comprador in the Dent Company in Canton which established by the businessmen from England. Due to his acute commercial awareness, Xu immediately realized that he could catch great potential opportunity in the Great Exhibition. He himself took the silk which had been elaborately selected from many parts of the country to London and marked his silk goods as Yun-Kee (榮記). According to *Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851. Reports of the Juries on the subjects in the thirty classes into*

10) *Times*, June 23, 1842, 6, Cited by Saxbee, Helen, *The Exhibition of Chinese Collection in England in the 1840s*. (Thesis submitted for the degree of Phd, Royal College of Art, January, 1990), 35

11) Saxbee, *The Exhibition of Chinese Collection in England in the 1840s*. (Thesis submitted for the degree of Phd, Royal College of Art, January, 1990), 7

which the exhibition was divided,¹² Yun-Kee's exhibition had received a remarkable attention and had been honorably awarded the prize medal by Queen Victoria.¹³

In spite of the fact that it received the prize, more frankly to say that most observers at the time agreed that the Chinese Pavilion was one of the most disappointing pavilions.¹⁴ Probable assumption is that China sent no official representatives to the Great Exhibition. Xu rongcun was only a private associate to London for his own exhibits and also some of the exhibits were collected not by the Chinese, but by the East India Company.¹⁵ In other words, the displays at the Crystal Palace were less reflective of the authenticity of China of those days.



Fig. 4 Xu rongcun (*China and World Exposition History Records, 1851—1940, 49*)

Conclusion

Up till now, I tried to demonstrate here in this essay is that the displays in London as “the Chinese Collection in Hyde Park”, “the Chinese Junk” and “the Chinese Pavilion at the Crystal Palace” showed the phases of typical Chinese culture existed

12) *Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851. Reports of the Juries on the subjects in the thirty classes into which the exhibition was divided*, London: William Clowes & Sons, 1852, 163. It says, “In the Chinese Department, the quality of the silk developed in the native country of the silk-worm is worthily illustrated by the specimens exhibited by Yun-Kee, of Shanghai (p 1418), to whom the Jury therefore, adjudge the Prize Medal.”

13) *China and World Exposition Historical Records, 1851—1940*, Shanghai: 2002, 52

14) Auerbach, Jeffrey A, *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, Yale University Press, 1999, 176

15) Auerbach, Jeffrey A, *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, Yale University Press, 1999, 177

“The Great Exhibition and the Little One” : Chinese Display in Victorian London

at that period. When these artifacts were shown in London, they performed the role of visual media to convey the informations about China and the Chinese ways of life to the English people through their outlines, construction and pattern. Their existence was very important not just as displays, but an opportunity offered to have a better acquaintance with Chinese history, customs and specific artifacts. Nevertheless, Dickens’ two essays, “The Chinese Junk” and “The Great Exhibition and the Little One” declare what seem to be contrary to the popular opinion: that the Chinese portion of the exhibition was found uninterested. It could be inferred that the articles reflect Dickens’ strong consciousness of his nationality and his lack of understanding of the contemporary Chinese aspects.

Yet the question still lies in “a natural horror” in his letter to Mrs. Watson as mentioned above. I wonder why he felt confused about the exhibitions at the Crystal Palace, while he was very proud of his country’s progress presented in the Great Exhibition. This is going to be the theme of my further research.

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Newspaper and Periodical

<i>Times</i>	1842
<i>Illustrated London News</i>	1842, 1848, 1851