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book review of

Beyond Chinoiserie: Artistic Exchange between China and the West during the Late Qing Dynasty (1796–1911) edited by Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Jennifer Milam

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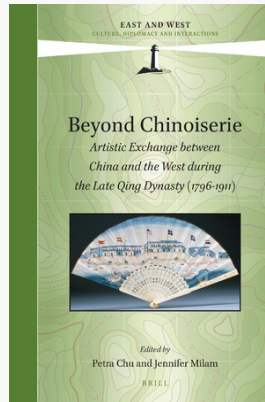
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Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Jennifer Milam, eds.,
Beyond Chinoiserie: Artistic Exchange between China and the West during the Late Qing Dynasty (1796–1911).

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Beyond Chinoiserie presents ten essays that offer multiple perspectives on artistic exchanges between the West and China during the period from 1796 to 1911, corresponding to the late Qing dynasty. It investigates the lesser-known artistic encounters and cultural contacts between China and the West that followed the craze for *chinoiserie* in the previous century. As editors Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Jennifer Milam note, eighteenth-century *chinoiserie* and its Chinese counterpart, *européennerie*, or *occidenterie*, have received much scholarly attention, but the nineteenth-century versions of these phenomena have been rather overlooked. The introduction attributes the neglect of artistic exchanges between China and the West to the fact that many of them occurred in so-called “minor art forms” (2), to the rise of Japonisme, and to European imperialistic attitudes towards China within the general context of the Opium Wars and their aftermath. Chu and Milam remind readers that despite the apparent “mutual disenchantment” and contempt for things Chinese, sinology developed enormously in the nineteenth century, reflecting the century’s deep interest in Chinese culture, art, and material culture, as testified by the wide circulation of Chinese artifacts in Europe and America.^[1] The book reveals the ambivalent political and cultural context of the nineteenth-century in which, on the one hand, the growing field of sinology testified to an ever-developing scholarly interest in and curiosity for China, while on the other hand, politics often revealed a more negative vision of the Middle Kingdom. The suggestion that the eighteenth century was marked by less ambiguity and by mutual admiration in the form of *chinoiserie* and *occidenterie* minimizes the contradicting points of view that already existed, such as those expressed by civic humanists, partisans of the neo-classical style, and philosophers and writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Daniel Defoe. The volume insists on going “beyond *chinoiserie*” to investigate the role played by collectors (especially female collectors), art dealers, journalists, writers, politicians, artists, artisans, and consumers not only in the creation and acquisition of a specific knowledge on Chinese art and culture, but also in the dissemination of this knowledge. Through a transdisciplinary approach and methodology drawing together art history, cultural studies, the history of collecting, and

material culture, the volume investigates the field of cultural history on a global scale, with studies focusing on Sino-Western exchanges in Europe, America, and Asia.

The volume is not subdivided into thematic sections, which might have foregrounded the links between certain chapters. Instead, it follows a chronological order. The first three chapters focus on Sino-Western exchanges around 1800. Then the volume focuses on mid-nineteenth-century France with three essays covering French classicist critic Etienne Delécluze's view on Chinese art, a study of the interest in Japanese, Siamese, and Chinese art displayed at the Universal Exhibition of 1867 in Paris, and then a study of the decoration of Victor Hugo's Chinese rooms and their revival of rococo chinoiserie. The next three chapters are devoted to the reception of Chinese art and its influence in the fields of botany and gardening, the history of collecting, and fashion at the end of the nineteenth century. The volume ends with a study of the artistic and material transfers of carved wood ornaments made by Chinese orphans in Shanghai in the Tushanwan Orphanage and sold to Belgian king Leopold II for the decoration of his Chinese pavilion in Laeken.

One of the fascinating aspects of the volume is its transnational perspective, showing reactions to Chinese art from various parts of the globe, including America, Japan, and Europe. The strength of the book lies in its ability to show the degree of similarity found in the ambivalent Western reactions to Chinese art, where admiration, appropriation, fantasy, and scholarly interests were entangled with commercial and imperialistic views.

The first chapter deals with the fascination for China during the Federal period (1783–1820) in America. Patricia Johnston offers an insightful view on the hybrid nature of historical references used by the young nation to build its identity. She argues that in addition to invoking Greco-Roman antiquity, the political and mercantile elite of the United States used Chinese and Asian artistic forms, as well as allusions to Confucian ideas and Chinese economic models, to suggest that their identity was built on global and imperial knowledge. Of particular interest is Johnston's exploration of the contents of large personal libraries and subscription libraries such as Salem's Social Library, founded in 1760, where travelogues and the works of the Jesuit fathers in residence in China could be consulted. Knowledge about China constituted a source of sociability, but also reflected America's growing place in Sino-Western and international trade. The second chapter focuses on one case study: the use of China and Chinese artifacts on Thomas Jefferson's plantation of Monticello, in Albemarle County, Virginia. Jennifer Milam reads the domestic incorporation of a Chinese gong in Monticello's neo-classical decorative program as testimony of Jefferson's interest in Chinese garden design, discussed in particular in the works of William Chambers, and as a result of American commercial exchanges with China. Monticello offers an example of a cosmopolitan aesthetic which takes after the aesthetic of the *jardins anglo-chinois* in Europe. As Milam demonstrates, the tendency to incorporate Chinese lattice-work and other Chinese-inspired elements was not unique to Monticello but was also found on other American estates.

In chapter 3, Maggie M. Cao looks at Chinese reverse paintings on glass and at the artistic transfers this technique entailed. The essay delves into the foreign origin of glass painting, revealing its technical link with oil painting. It also underlines the importance of glass imports in China as a "technology of reproduction" that led Chinese artists to develop new

ways of playing on the concept of reflectivity (such as inversion, reproduction, playing on the “gazing game”) and “engage [. . .] foreign viewers in complex games oriented toward the procedures and effects of reproduction” (78).

The next section of the volume comprises three articles on France and the use, creation, and interpretation of *chinoiserie*. In chapter 4, Kristel Smentek offers an original analysis of French art critic Étienne-Jean Delécluze’s view on Chinese art, which he expressed in an article entitled “Studio of a Chinese Painter.”^[2] Although Delécluze was known for his support of classicism, he reveals his admiration of Chinese art in his article, in which he discusses the value of Chinese art in comparison with classical art. Delécluze’s comparison of the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* with Italian Renaissance art, Smentek argues, can first be read as a cultural statement about the immobility of China in contrast to the Western concept of progress. However, Delécluze also found reasons to praise Chinese and European art equally, particularly, for example, in relation to the technique of modeling. Smentek argues that Delécluze viewed Chinese art in the light of tradition and thought parallels could be drawn between the latter and Greek and Roman objects, or Egyptian antiquities. In chapter 5, Meredith Martin examines the material and artistic presence of China, Japan, and Siam at the 1867 Paris Universal Exposition. The Paris exhibition emphasized the image of a declining Chinese nation through diorama-like displays of living Chinese individuals at a time when the French army had raided and destroyed the Qianlong emperor’s summer palace of Yuanming Yuan. However, Martin suggests that the staging of East and Southeast Asia did not simply convey an imperialistic agenda reflecting the domination of the French empire over Asian nations, but rather implied participation from their ruling elites, especially from the king of Siam, to foster their own political agenda and strengthen diplomatic and commercial contacts with Europe.

In chapter 6, Petra ten-Doesschate Chu provides a case study on Victor Hugo’s Chinese room that he originally set up in the early 1860s for his mistress Juliette Drouet on Guernsey. The creation of the *chinoiserie* room is situated in the context of the nineteenth-century rococo revival, showing that the eighteenth-century vogue for Chinese material culture not only led to creative responses in Britain, as shown by recent scholarship, but also in France.^[3] Hugo’s creative assemblage of various Chinese and Chinese-inspired items is compared to the Lévi-Straussian concept of *bricolage*. The essay offers an interpretation of the meaning of *chinoiserie* in nineteenth-century France as well as its relationship to the poet’s interest in dreams and wonder. Hugo was a fervent collector of Chinese artifacts and developed his knowledge of China through familiarity with Chinese material culture. He made drawings of his own collection that combine Gothic and Chinese ornamentation and explore the monstrous, the bizarre, the unfamiliar, and the eerie. Both Chinese and Gothic styles dominate the decorative scheme in Hauteville House, a feature that Chu identifies as a process of self-identification between the author and his house and terms “self-mythicization” (165). She argues that Hauteville Fairy (Drouet’s house) was conceived with a different agenda, as a dream-like room, a fairyland where one is transported to China by the imagination and experiences effects of Freudian “displacement and condensation” (174).

In chapter 7, Elizabeth Chang investigates the image of the chrysanthemum in the Victorian periodical *The Garden* and the gardening press, as well as in Victorian fiction, to show the connection between the flower and expressions of *chinoiserie* and *japonisme*. She underlines

the change in perception of the chrysanthemum once transferred to the Victorian middle-class garden, where it acquired a new British identity without relinquishing its Asian origin. The integration of the chrysanthemum imagery in an Anglo-Asian aesthetic informed discussions on the natural and the artificial in floriculture. It fuelled the on-going debate on the over-cultivation of chrysanthemums that aimed at developing gigantic specimens for exhibitions, and led to a “chrysanthemum reform” (180) that advocated for a return to an ostensibly more harmonious form for the flower, inherited from Japan. The feathery Japanese chrysanthemum was seen as more natural and graceful than the gigantic British breed. The chapter offers an insightful analysis of the connection between natural and cultural history, and between visual and textual representations. It discusses the Victorian imagination through the vernacular integration of the exotic in botany, using the metaphor of transplantation as a horticultural image of cultural transfers, and a methodology drawn from literary analysis, environmental history, and eco-critical theories.

In chapter 8, Elizabeth Emery returns to nineteenth-century France and looks at the history of Clémence d’Ennery’s collection of Chinese and Japanese artifacts and the transformation of her private collection, which she donated to the French state, into the national Musée d’Ennery. Chinese and Japanese objects in D’Ennery’s Parisian home on the avenue Foch were perceived by visitors such as the Goncourt brothers as “Chinese monsters” and seen by d’Ennery herself as *chimères* (a term meaning both chimera and fantasy in French). Emery shows how the supposedly monstrous aspects of these objects were understood as typical of the feminine taste for *chinoiserie* and *japonaiserie*. The collection was thus dismissed as a bazaar full of trinkets instead of being taken as serious art fit for display in a museum. However, Emery argues that such taste led to Western innovative artistic experimentations with *japonisme*. The essay situates Clémence d’Ennery’s collection within the context of other famous museums founded by women, such as Empress Eugénie’s Chinese museum in Fontainebleau, dating from 1861–63. It also stresses the agency of d’Ennery in the organization of the way the objects were displayed. The author discusses how the d’Ennery collection was initially supposed to join the Musée Guimet, opened in 1889, before Clémence decided to keep the collection in her house. The Musée d’Ennery retained its feminine association with the fantastical for a long time and stood in contrast to museums gendered as masculine, in part as a result of their supposedly rational classificatory systems.

In chapter 9, Sarah Cheang considers chinoiserie clothing as a complex site of transnational exchanges and investigates the conflation of Japanese and Chinese idioms in hybridized garments made for European and American markets. She offers a fresh approach to design history by investigating the meanings of Chinese clothes integrated into the Western wardrobe, where they were read as signs of imperialism as well as tokens of modern national identities. In addressing the “fluidity, instability and interactivity” (240) between *japonisme* and *chinoiserie* at work in these garments, she suggests that there is no need to try and solve multi-layered fashion narratives, and that our fragmentary knowledge about these garments may nonetheless be used productively to posit historical hypotheses that may challenge, for example, an imperial Eurocentric vision of the circulation of foreign goods.

In chapter 10, William Ma investigates the history and meaning of the construction and decoration of the Chinese Pavilion in Laeken Park near Brussels commissioned by King Leopold II. Focusing on an analysis of the wooden and gilded external façade, the chapter

unearths the transnational circulation of its decorative program. The ornaments were carved and gilded by Chinese orphans under the supervision and the teaching of Jesuit priests in the Tushanwan Orphanage workshop in Shanghai. Ma argues that the Jesuits reconfigured vernacular Chinese cultural knowledge to propagate the Catholic faith. The chapter provides a fruitful analysis of the similarities between medievalism and the ornamental techniques practiced in the workshop, “reappropriating Chinese decorative elements to fit a program of revived medievalism in the missions” (282). Leopold II commissioned French architect Alexandre Marcel to build the Japanese tower and the Chinese Pavilion. In Laeken Park, the Chinese Pavilion suggests multiple interpretations: the interior follows the style of rococo *chinoiserie* and is thus reminiscent of *ancien régime* traditions, thus allowing Leopold II to assert his royal authority. At the same time, the influence of *japonisme* in the decorative program reveals the king’s political agenda “to expand Belgium’s sphere of influence in Asia” (292).

As stressed in the volume’s conclusion, interest in Chinese art and material culture did not decline in the nineteenth century with the growing taste for Japanese artifacts and culture. On the contrary, *japonisme* and *chinoiserie* often showed mutual points of contact for Western artists and collectors, offering new aesthetics, forms, artifacts, and cultural encounters that shaped national discourses and images in Europe and in America. The book does not engage, however, with Edward Said’s conceptual framework of orientalism, which remains absent from theoretical discussion but could have been used in the introduction and following essays. The concepts of framing, staging, and transplanting could have been applied, for example, to chapters covering botany, collecting, exhibiting, displaying, and decorating.

In sum, this book provides an original contribution to studies of nineteenth-century *chinoiserie* and *japonisme*, as well as to the history of collecting and display. Much new information is presented on objects, places, sites, and collectors, while *chinoiserie* and *japonisme* are framed in strikingly innovative ways. *Beyond Chinoiserie* is a very valuable read for anyone interested in cross-cultural perspectives and transnational approaches to history, and it will prove useful to scholars of both Asian and European art.

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Notes

[1] Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1989), 116.

[2] Étienne-Jean Delécluze, “Atelier d’un peintre chinois,” *Revue française* 10 (December 1838): 272–85.

[3] See Elizabeth Hope Chang’s *Britain’s Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).