

**Imagining China and the Making of English Modernity:
Chinese Taste in English Literature from 1660 to 1770**

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This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge the content of this thesis is my original work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or other purposes.

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the representations of things Chinese in eighteenth-century English literature reveal China as a co-constitutive partner in Britain's emerging national identity. It recovers things Chinese as active agents that mediate, unsettle, and transform cross-cultural relationships, continually acquiring new meanings and identities in the intricate and reciprocal nature of knowledge transmission. There are long-standing scholarly traditions in art history, material culture studies, and literary studies that interpret things Chinese as an ever-changing aesthetic concept modified by Europe to represent as a passive other. By reading things Chinese as "things-in-motion" to recuperate their agency, this thesis traces their trajectories across collections, trade networks, diplomatic exchanges, and moral and aesthetic debates to show how eighteenth-century Sino-British cultural exchange is an active, dialogic process constructed through the iterative movement of objects and texts. By examining the mobility, hybridity, and resonance of things Chinese across diverse genres, from periodicals and personal correspondence to travelogues, pseudo-oriental tales, garden manuals and poetry, where Chinese knowledge is imagined, contested, and repurposed, this thesis reveals how the ambivalent imaginaries of China negotiate the tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism that shapes the English identity. Close readings of key case studies include the representations of Chinese porcelain and its female collecting practice in Joseph Addison's *Spectator* 37 (1711), Sarah Scott's *A Description of Millennium Hall* (1762), and Mary Delany's china closets and shellwork; accounts of the Chinese ritual of gift exchange in travel narratives by John Bell, Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins, and Edward Page; Oliver Goldsmith's cosmopolitan ideal voiced through a Confucian narrator in *The Citizen of the World* (1762); and the competing garden discourses of Sir William Chambers and William Mason, and the introduction of the *moutan* peony via Sir Joseph Banks. This thesis demonstrates that English identity and its emerging modernity were shaped less by the projection of European exceptionalism than by the co-constitution of Chinese culture through the motion of things and the circulating flow of knowledge, repositioning Sino-British material and imaginative exchange at the very core of the making of Englishness.

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Introduction

Furnishing Englishness: “Things Chinese” and the Sino-British Dialogue in Eighteenth-Century Literature

In the Introduction to *Panacea: A Poem Upon Tea* (1700), Nahum Tate extends a universal invitation to “all Ranks of Mortals” to partake of Tea, portraying it as a panacea that elevates every class and vocation, from priests and statesmen to poets and physicians, endowing them with divine inspiration, eloquence, and health.¹ Canto 1 then narrates the story of Palæmon, a retired scholar who journeyed to China, discovered Tea among the “*Eastern rarities*” (1.25), and introduced it to his native land in England.² Tate’s speaker Palæmon recounts China’s dark political past under the tyrant King Ki, followed by a virtuous revolt restoring good government. Palæmon tells a tale of how the tea was discovered: the Chinese people remained plagued by “Consumption, Dropsie, Gout and Stone” (1.264), until, on a solemn pilgrimage to “the Great Confucius Cell resort” (1.282),³ they discovered Tea springing from the barren earth as a divine cure for their maladies. The myth of the “gift of tea,” which tells of Confucius sending leaves to heal political and moral ills, is borrowed from Louis Le Comte’s *Memoirs of China* to animate tea as a self-propelling civilizer, instrumental in reshaping social practices.⁴ As Markman Ellis argues, Tate’s poem encourages readers to view tea as a “reforming agent” within British society, capable of cultivating greater politeness and social harmony.⁵ In Canto 2, Tate shifts the scene to Olympus, where

¹ Nahum Tate, “Introduction,” in *Panacea: a Poem Upon Tea: in Two Cantos* (London: Printed by and for J. Roberts, 1700), lines 1-68. All subsequent references to *Panacea* will be cited in the text by canto and line number.

² Palæmon’s native land is England, signaled by the opening line about living “By Avon’s Stream,” and recurrent allusions to English places, like Isis, Cam, Thames, and Albion.

³ In the poem, the “Confucius Cell resort” refers to a hermit retreat that Chinese court must repair. There the long-retired sage compiled laws said to be inspired by sacred powers. Tate sacralizes the site and so authorizes the later, wondrous emergence of tea as a divinely sanctioned cure.

⁴ For the source of Tate’s Chinese tale, see Markman Ellis, Richard Coulton and Matthew Mauger, *Empire of Tea: The Asian Leaf that Conquered the World* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2015), 80-82.

⁵ Markman Ellis, “The British Way of Tea: Tea as an Object of Knowledge between Britain and China, 1690-1730,” in *Curious Encounters: Voyaging, Collecting, and Making Knowledge in the*

Juno, Minerva, Venus, and others compete for tea's patronage. When Jupiter finally deifies tea, the leaf has both won European validation and undercuts Dionysian wine culture, supplanting Bacchic revelry with a temperate, healthy drink. Jupiter concludes the contest by declaring tea belongs to all the Goddesses, offering a unifying resolution that celebrates Tea's multifarious virtues and universal appeal: "A Plant that can so many Virtues boast, / He judg'd too rich a Prize to be Ingross'd; / And to no single Goddess Lot should fall, / That merited the Patronage of All" (1.332-335). By transplanting this Confucian gift into an Olympian council of Roman deities, Tate both legitimizes tea's Chinese pedigree and folds it into a neoclassical mythology. In *Panacea*, tea is neither a passive commodity nor a simple cultural token. Tate represents it as an active agent of knowledge, born of Chinese tradition and re-fashioned through British neoclassicism. This dynamic dramatizes how cultural authority circulates in eighteenth-century Sino-British encounters: Chinese narratives ground tea's legitimacy, British imagination reshapes its meaning, and tea itself emerges as an autonomous agent of cultural transmission.

Tate's poem on the mythological origins of tea speaks to a moment in the eighteenth-century English literary imagination of things Chinese when Chinese provenance and British ingenuity do not stand in isolation but intertwine through processes of transcultural transplantation, hybridization, and collaboration. The origin of tea, therefore, is represented neither as wholly Chinese nor fully British but as the product of a reciprocal cultural dialogue in which competing narratives coalesce to help define English identity. This thesis aims to offer an account of how the representations of things Chinese in eighteenth-century English literature negotiated a mutually constitutive Sino-British relationship. In contrast to a linear, teleological narrative of progress, one that moves seamlessly from the Enlightenment to modernity, from a progressive Britain to a stationary Qing China defined by an Orientalist binary of self and other, this thesis recovers "things Chinese" as active agents in the intricate and often reciprocal nature of knowledge transmission during the period to restore China as

Long Eighteenth Century, ed. Adriana Craciun and Mary Terrall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 38.

a co-constitutive partner in Britain's emerging national identity.

There are long-standing scholarly traditions in art history, material culture studies, and literary studies that interpret things Chinese as an ever-changing aesthetic concept modified by Europe to represent as a passive other in contrast to its own Enlightenment sensibility. Conventional art history and anthropology typically locate the meaning of chinoiserie in an object's provenance and authenticity, such as its country of origin, stylistic features, materials, and archival record. Chinoiserie is a specifically European decorative and representational style that borrows, invents, and stylizes motifs thought to be Chinese. Rather than faithfully representing things Chinese, it functions as a European aesthetic practice that reproduces an imagined, and often fanciful, image of China. In doing so, these studies frame "Chineseness" as a European construction rather than a reflection of Chinese culture. In his seminal study of chinoiserie, Hugh Honour contends that chinoiserie arose as a distinctly European invention, a fantasy shaped by fascination and misinformation. With limited and often unreliable knowledge about the realities of China, European artists, designers, and patrons conjured an imagined version of China, which Honour refers to as "Cathay." According to Honour, chinoiserie functioned as a whimsical and elite aesthetic, flourishing in aristocratic circles where it was valued primarily for its novelty and decorative appeal, rather than for any profound aesthetic, cultural, or political significance.⁶ As Stacy Sloboda observes, art-historical accounts that frame chinoiserie as a derivative, "mute" ornament, detached from serious aesthetic or theoretical inquiries, have profoundly steered subsequent scholarship, which treats chinoiserie as an ornamental foil to dominant classical or Rococo styles.⁷ By deploying a Eurocentric approach that interprets "Chineseness" primarily through what it meant for European makers or viewers in symbolic terms, conventional art historical discourse risks marginalizing the multiplicity of things Chinese, framing them more as emblematic exotica than as active participants in cultural exchange.

⁶ Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: J. Murray, 1961), 1-3.

⁷ Stacy Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 6-7. Those works include Oliver Impey, *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration* (New York: Scribner's, 1977) and Dawn Jacobson, *Chinoiserie* (London: Phaidon Press, 1993).

Questioning the art historical and anthropological emphasis on authenticity and provenance in studies of chinoiserie, literary scholars such as Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins reframe “Chineseness” as “an English literary effect that is ascribed to objects rather than an ethnic quality that inheres in objects.” As Zuroski clarifies, her own use of “the terms ‘chinoiserie’ and (as it appears more often in eighteenth-century writing) ‘china’ does not refer to any measure of cultural authenticity.”⁸ Instead, she highlights the “fluidity and instability” of the meanings attached to things Chinese in eighteenth-century literature.⁹ While Zuroski’s approach to “Chineseness” acknowledges China’s role in generating English selfhood, it maintains that rather than being agent that introduces “Chineseness” into English culture, “Chineseness” is something endowed or shaped by English literature. This thesis concurs with Zuroski’s assessment of things Chinese as a shifting and unstable cultural construct, but argues that their role exceeds passive reconfiguration by English culture. Instead, they operate as active agents that mediate, unsettle, and transform Sino-British relations. To demonstrate this, I expand the scope of “things Chinese” beyond nonhuman objects—such as Chinese export commodities and European imitations of Chinese-style goods (including porcelain, gardens, and plants)—to include literary chinoiserie that explores how English writers weave Chinese cultural values into their writings. Bringing Chinese values into the discussion of things Chinese allows us to consider Chinese objects in active roles that enable and mould the actions, emotions, and moral values of eighteenth-century Britons. This redefinition of things Chinese suggests that Chinese imagery acquires new meanings and identities through its associations with mobility, hybridity and illegibility, and through its resonances with English cultural debates over exoticism, cosmopolitanism, and national identity.

Restoring things Chinese as active agents in eighteenth-century Sino-British encounters gains particular resonance through the lens of literary studies, which treats literary representations as active sites where meaning is continually imagined,

⁸ Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

⁹ Zuroski, *A Taste for China*, 1.

contested, and circulated. My key intervention in debates on eighteenth-century English literary representations of China is to foreground what Leela Gandhi terms “minor narratives of cross-cultural collaboration.”¹⁰ These narratives, according to Gandhi, explore overlooked or alternative accounts that move beyond simplistic binaries, such as cultural nationalism versus hybridity, toward more nuanced, creative, and self-reflective forms of anti-imperialist critique.¹¹ Instead of positing a monothetic cultural authority for understanding Sino-British encounters, I argue that various genres including poetry, prose, oriental novels, and travel narratives, by diverse English writers including intellectuals, merchants, officials, and travelers, perform distinct yet interrelated functions in shaping English identity. The lens of literary studies, with its focus on discourse and rhetoric, enables us to uncover silences, ambivalences, and contradictions that archival records might obscure. It brings to light minor or marginalized texts, like plays, poems, or letters that did not make it into official histories but reveal a mutually defining Sino-British relationship. The relatively overlooked travel accounts of East India Company officer Edward Page and Scottish physician John Bell, along with narratives pieced together from scattered letters and critical commentary on figures such as British female porcelain collectors and the Chinese merchant Whang At Tong, exemplify the uneven and negotiated terrain of transculturation. These perspectives deepen our understanding of eighteenth-century Sino-British interactions by showing not only how literary texts emerged from their material encounter with imported Chinese objects, but also how those texts, in turn, wove Chineseness into the very fabric of English selfhood, ultimately reshaping the English cultural context in dialogue with things Chinese.

Recent theoretical developments, particularly in material culture studies, Orientalism, and global eighteenth-century studies, have prompted scholars to reassess the ideological and aesthetic significance of “things Chinese.”¹² Scholars have increasingly challenged reductive views of Chinese taste by highlighting the

¹⁰ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.

¹¹ Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 6.

¹² I will return to these theoretical concerns in greater detail later in the discussion.

interconnected and reciprocal networks in which Chinese objects circulated—an approach that has, in turn, inspired research into the cosmopolitan and idealized dimensions of eighteenth-century Sino-British relations.¹³ My argument regarding a co-constitutive Sino-British relationship unfolds through two complementary theoretical lenses: Bill Brown’s Thing Theory, which foregrounds the agency of material objects, and Srinivas Aravamudan’s notion of Enlightenment Orientalism, which shows how literary forms likewise mediate and transform cross-cultural imagination. Brown puts forward the concept of “thingliness” to approach “the sense of things” by suggesting a mutually constitutive relationship between things and human subjects.¹⁴ Building on Martin Heidegger’s objection to the Kantian view of things as

¹³ In art history, Sloboda approaches chinoiserie as a “network constituted by its cross-cultural makers, users, consumers, and critics,” each playing a role in continually reshaping the style and setting its designs into both literal and figurative motion. Departing from earlier scholarship that positioned chinoiserie as a purely European fantasy disconnected from Chinese practice, Sloboda demonstrates that “through networks of trade, Chinese and European artists and merchants collaboratively produced the semiotic language of exoticism that European artists and craftsman took up under the style of chinoiserie.” See Sloboda, *Chinoiserie*, 13, 14. In literary studies, Laurence Williams shows that, beginning in the late 1750s, British authors, traders, and envoys, faced with mounting commercial frictions, turned to visions of cross-cultural civility as a means of easing tensions with China. He demonstrates how this cosmopolitan, idealized perspective took shape in two distinct genres: imaginative stories portraying Chinese visitors in England and firsthand travelogues recounting British experiences in Canton and Beijing. See Williams, “Anglo-Chinese Caresses: Civility, Friendship and Trade in English Representations of China, 1760-1800,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 2 (2015): 277-96; In a similar vein, William Christie draws on two dinner entertainments recorded in William Hickey’s journal to craft an alternative history of Britain’s engagement with China—one that uncovers moments of “global hospitality,” an Enlightenment-rooted openness to otherness that fosters genuine accord without erasing difference. See Christie, “Cultural Cross-Dressing in the House of Pankeequa,” in *Tribute and Trade: China and Global Modernity, 1784-1935*, ed. William Christie, Angela Dunstan and Q. S. Tong (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020), 53-77.

¹⁴ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 1-22. Brown’s *Thing Theory* is a significant development of the broader “material-cultural turn” since the latter half of the twentieth century. Scholars began to argue that materiality—objects, bodies, spaces, technologies—plays an active role in shaping human consciousness, social structure and cultural values. Their theoretical approaches range from Martin Heidegger’s philosophical inquiry into the thingness of things—which transcends mere objecthood and reveals a multifaceted relationship with the world—to Raymond Williams’s view of culture as a lived, material process rooted in everyday practices; from Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of commodities as symbolic and simulacral forms of power, to Marcel Mauss’s anthropological account of gift exchange as carrying social obligations and relational meanings; from Donna Haraway’s notion of the cyborg, a hybrid of machine and organism that challenges stable, naturalized identities, to Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, which redefines the active agency of things in ever changing networks of relationships. All these leading thinkers challenged the rigid divide between subject and object, and reinstated the significance of things as active participants in their interactions with human subjects and the world they situate. See Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967); Jean Baudrillard, *The System of*

mere objects, Brown refuses to see things as passive, utilitarian items. Instead, he invites us to consider how things, a term he carefully distinguishes from “objects,” acquire presence and agency in moments when their functionality breaks down or recedes from view. Brown argues, “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us [...] The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”¹⁵ Instead of viewing things as something encoded with significance by human actions, Brown suggests that things can shape our consciousness, mediate relationships, and even disrupt our sense of self.

Brown further probes the affective bonds between things and subjects in a shifting social network,¹⁶ drawing on Arjun Appadurai’s anthropological analysis of the economic and social value different cultures assign to commodities that emphasizes the idea of “things-in-motion.”¹⁷ Appadurai views things as gaining significance not through their inherent qualities, but through the social networks they enter and the relationships they mediate, as things are constantly circulating, transforming, and acquiring new meanings through interactions with people, other objects and various cultures.¹⁸ Brown extends Appadurai’s notion of the social life of things by conceiving of things as having a “sensuous presence” or “metaphysical presence” via which “objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems.”¹⁹ Things, in this sense, can shape and unsettle our subjectivity and negotiate conflicting sentiments of desire, pleasure, frustration, and anxiety. He thus highlights a series of questions that literary scholars

Objects (London: Verso, 1996); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 2002); Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 2, no. 4 (1987): 1-42; Bruno Latour, “Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer,” *Social Problems* 35, no. 3 (June 1988): 298-310.

¹⁵ Brown, “Thing,” 4.

¹⁶ Brown, “Thing,” 6.

¹⁷ Appadurai argues that that “even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.” See Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

¹⁸ Appadurai, “Introduction,” 3-5.

¹⁹ Brown, “Thing,” 5.

should consider: “how they [things] move them [subjects], how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects.”²⁰ By foregrounding the “thingness” of Chinese objects, Brown’s framework reorients our view of Sino-British exchanges as moments in which material agency reshapes both cultures. In this light, literary texts become active sites where the “thingly” circulation of goods is narrated, imagined, and contested. When William Wycherley describes Chinese porcelain in a London drawing room,²¹ or William Chambers celebrates exotic plants in Chinese gardens,²² these representations do more than evoke distant lands. They enact the very entanglement of material and cultural agency that Thing Theory uncovers. An imported porcelain vase or an exotic shrub does not merely carry Chinese aesthetics into England; it establishes imaginative resonances and shapes English selfhood. Central to this approach is the idea that Chinese things exert affective power over their users by provoking curiosity, desire, or even frustration, and in doing so, mediate cultural encounters. By insisting that things possess their own form of presence, what Brown calls a “sensuous” or “metaphysical” dimension, this approach shows how nonhuman actors can disrupt and reorient human subjectivities on both sides. Each moment of breakdown or unfamiliar interaction, as well as each representation in English literature where a Chinese object defies expectation, generates new intersubjective formations between China and Britain. In this web of material and social entanglements, things do more than travel: they speak, persuade, unsettle, and transform. As they circulate, these artifacts forge and refashion the identities, practices, and power structures of both China and Britain, grounding the reciprocity of Sino-British relations in the very agency of the things themselves.

While Brown’s Thing Theory provides the material foundation—highlighting nonhuman agency and the dynamic networks through which things Chinese circulate—Srinivas Aravamudan’s concept of Enlightenment Orientalism sheds light on the literary-historical stakes of recovering forms of imaginative Sino-British exchanges

²⁰ Brown, “Thing,” 7.

²¹ William Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, ed. James R. Ogden (New York: Norton, 1991).

²² William Chambers, *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (London: Printed by W. Griffin, 1773).

that transcend the later imperial paradigm. Rather than viewing the eighteenth century as a prelude to the overtly racist Orientalism of the nineteenth century, Aravamudan argues that “a transcultural, cosmopolitan, and Enlightenment-inflected Orientalism existed at least as an alternative strain before ‘Saidian’ Orientalism came about.”²³ “Enlightenment Orientalism,” as Aravamudan argues, should be understood not as a rigid institutional framework for controlling the East, as Edward Said suggests, but rather as “a fictional mode for dreaming with the Orient—dreaming with it by constructing and translating fictions about it, pluralizing views of it, inventing it, by reimagining it, unsettling its meaning, brooding over it.”²⁴ Resisting a teleological view that sees Orientalism as leading to the ultimate rise of the empire, Aravamudan emphasizes the diverse and multiple functions of Orientalism. He argues that this approach “enables a sympathetically nuanced reformulation of [Said’s] altogether useful critique of the politics of knowledge.”²⁵ Such a rich, cosmopolitan exchange characterized by mutual critique and generic plurality was later marginalized when the realist novel emerged and monopolized literary authority. To restore the generic diversity and transcultural imagination, Aravamudan recovers a vibrant, utopian, and imaginatively experimental Enlightenment Orientalism in which fictional modes, from oriental tales and travel narratives to pseudo-ethnographies, serve as true “apparatuses of mediation”²⁶ between East and West. These genres create hybrid forms that are neither purely “British” nor “Chinese” but profoundly transcultural. Under this paradigm, knowledge of China circulating in Britain becomes part of an active, dialogic process in which British writers appropriate, critique, and even refine their Oriental sources, staging a continual negotiation of cultural authority.

By bringing Brown’s emphasis on the agency of “things” into dialogue with Aravamudan’s account of Enlightenment Orientalism as a cosmopolitan, diversity-inflected literary practice, this thesis sees eighteenth-century Sino-British cultural

²³ Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3.

²⁴ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 8.

²⁵ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 10.

²⁶ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 4.

exchange as a dynamic, co-creative process in which material culture and narrative form alike mediate, critique, and transform cultural identities. Brown's argument that things are active mediators rather than part of a passive backdrop underpins my reading of how imported Chinese objects reshape English identity. Aravamudan complements this by showing how Orientalist genres similarly functioned as a cultural mediator, critiquing European assumptions and projecting cosmopolitan alternatives. Together, they reveal a two-way traffic in which Chinese objects reconfigure British literature even as British literary forms translate and adapt their oriental influences, co-constituting Sino-British subjectivities. The epistemic reciprocity not only highlights the utopian potential latent in material-textual hybrids but also spotlights moments where things and tropes disrupt, rather than reinforce, imperial hierarchies, thus uncovering the reciprocal dialogue at the heart of Sino-British encounters.

Things Chinese in Motion and Chinese Knowledge in Circulation

In mapping the intellectual trajectory of new materialism, Maurizia Boscagli notes that many contemporary thinkers are returning to earlier philosophical traditions, most notably those of Henri Bergson and Baruch Spinoza, to craft a “counter-narrative of a quasi-vitalist materiality in lively interaction with subject actants.”²⁷ This emerging paradigm foregrounds a quasi-vitalist materiality, one that is not static or passive, but instead dynamically entangled with human and nonhuman actants. At the heart of this reorientation, as Boscagli suggests, is Bruno Latour's influential concept of the quasi-subject/quasi-object, which proposes a radical rethinking of ontological boundaries.²⁸ In this view, subjects and objects are no longer stable categories but rather mutable, interpenetrating entities that continually affect and constitute one another within an open-ended and shifting field of relations. As Stacy Alaimo notes, new materialist theories, through concepts such as “material agency and intra-action,” work to embed

²⁷ Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2014), 3.

²⁸ Boscagli, *Stuff Theory*, 3. Latour develops this concept in his essay, “Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together,” 298-310.

the human within “the dynamic and emergent flows of the world.”²⁹ To adopt this framework is to recognize that the complex, entangled networks in which humans and nonhuman entities continuously shape and are shaped by one another.

Building on Brown’s focus on the object-subject relationship, which restores things as central to the formation of subjectivity, and drawing on scholarship that reconceives them as “things-in-motion” circulating through intricate networks, Ileana Baird encourages scholars to reconceive of the global eighteenth century through the trajectories of circulating objects, rather than their points of origin or final destination.³⁰ As Baird observes, eighteenth-century culture witnessed a significant transformation in how “things” were perceived, used and represented in “the relationship between people and things, between objects and the phenomenological rooms they inhabit, between widely circulated commodities, exotic objects [...] and the geographical spaces they bring together.”³¹ She proposes that the “age of things” and a truly global consumer culture must be traced back to the eighteenth century, not the nineteenth.³² Through tracing the circulatory paths—the “things-in-motion”—that connect producers, consumers, and intermediaries across imperial networks, things become epistemic agents: as they travel, they acquire meaning, agency, and cultural power, actively reshaping political geographies, consumer desires, and aesthetic conventions. In this sense, a “things-in-motion” lens upends conventional, nation-based literary histories. Instead of pigeonholing objects into national canons, it reveals their hybrid identities and the shared cultural logic that emerges through circulation. Baird further reframes objects and texts as fellow travelers in the eighteenth-century world, highlighting that both participate in a global mutual intercourse that dissolves East/West binaries and invites us to read things as well as texts as mobile, relational, and transformative.

²⁹ Stacy Alaimo, “Foreword: Gender, Ecology, and New Materialisms,” in *Gendered Ecologies: New Materialist Interpretations of Women Writers in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Dewey W. Hall and Jillmarie Murphy (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2020), 5.

³⁰ Ileana Baird, “Introduction: Peregrine Things: Rethinking the Global in Eighteenth-Century Studies,” in *Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory in a Global Context: From Consumerism to Celebrity Culture*, ed. Ileana Baird and Christina Ionescu (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 14.

³¹ Baird, “Introduction,” 9.

³² Baird, “Introduction,” 2.

According to Baird, material trade and linguistic transmission are analogous processes of exchange, neither inherently hierarchical nor unidirectional.³³ In other words, building a parallel between the movement of material things and the circulation of their literary representations—showing how both acquire new meanings, functions, and identities as they travel across cultural and geographic boundaries—recuperates the agency of “peripheral” sites and reveals how metropolitan and marginal cultures co-constitute one another through material and textual flows.

This process of co-constitution is particularly evident when tracing the trajectories of the cultural exchanges between China and Britain during the long eighteenth century. It was a period when, as economic historians such as Andre Gunder Frank and Kenneth Pomeranz contend, China occupied a dominant position in the global economy,³⁴ while Britain, aware of its relative marginality, was expanding its reach through global trade, exploration, and imperial expansion. As David Porter argues, this era ushered in a historical cosmopolitanism—“a recognition of the contemporaneity of historical time across national and cultural boundaries”—one that calls for “an unthinking not only of national identity, but also of nationalist historiography and of the European exceptionalism.”³⁵ Porter reminds us that early modern English people saw themselves as participants in a global, cosmopolitan world alongside Eastern powers that often outstripped them in wealth and influence. Rather than the later Victorian posture of imperial triumphalism and condescension, eighteenth-century writers responded to Eastern civilizations with a mix of admiration, envy, and respect for their material and cultural achievements.³⁶

³³ Baird, “Introduction,” 15-16.

³⁴ Andre Gunder Frank contends that Asia, especially China, was the center of the world economy until around 1800, with high levels of productivity, trade networks, and demand for silver. Frank sees Europe’s rise not as internal progress but as benefiting from Asia’s temporary decline and the inflow of resources from the Americas. Kenneth Pomeranz similarly sees regions like the Yangzi Delta as economically on par with Western Europe until 1800, attributing Europe’s later divergence to geographic advantages like coal and colonial resources, rather than cultural or institutional superiority. See Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³⁵ David Porter, “Sinicizing Early Modernity: The Imperatives of Historical Cosmopolitanism,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 299.

³⁶ Porter, “Sinicizing Early Modernity,” 304.

The translation of Chinese knowledge through this intricate process of cultural transmission reveals how meanings “travel” across linguistic and cultural boundaries through ongoing negotiations and raises the question of whether “Chineseness” existed as an innate essence or emerged through those very exchanges. Porter suggests that early modern Europeans imposed a genealogical paradigm of “representational legitimacy” on everything Chinese to privilege notions of fixed origin and unbroken descent as the basis for meaning and authority.³⁷ Across language, religion, aesthetics, and trade, Europeans projected this framework onto things Chinese—treating Chinese characters, Confucian classics, chinoiserie ornament, or even Canton trade protocols as if each derived from a single, unambiguous source of truth—both to make China intelligible and to shore up their own emerging modern identities.³⁸ Porter distinguishes his project from colonial and postcolonial narratives by focusing instead on how “interpretive strategies,”³⁹ understood as the drive for legitimacy, authenticity, and coherent self-definition, shaped European encounters with China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

However, what Porter does not point out is that by treating things Chinese as if their authority and meaning were fully contained in their moment of “originary” creation and transmitted unchanged through unbroken descent, the genealogical paradigm neglects the ongoing process of cross-cultural exchange in which things Chinese, once set in motion, acquire new meanings rather than simply reproducing a single, fixed origin. This oversight dovetails with Peter Kitson’s observation that Chinese knowledge continually takes on new identities through cross-cultural exchange, mirroring translation studies’ move from linguistic fidelity to viewing translation as a fluid, culturally grounded practice. Kitson notes that this is especially true in Chinese-English translation, where the ideogrammatic script demands that translators attend to both semantic nuance and visual form.⁴⁰ In this view, Chinese meaning “travels”

³⁷ David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 6.

³⁸ Porter, *Ideographia*, 1-14.

³⁹ Porter, *Ideographia*, 1.

⁴⁰ Peter J. Kitson, *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange, 1760-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4.

through a series of interpretive exchanges, each rendering both a reflection of, and a departure from, its source, so that translatability is revealed not as a fixed property but as the outcome of ongoing dialogue. From this iterative movement of texts, a truly reciprocal Sino-British encounter emerged.

Tracing the trajectory of things Chinese alongside the evolving British understanding of China, shaped by misunderstanding, appropriation, adaptation, and repurposing, also allows scholars to problematize and pluralize the teleological narrative of Orientalism. The challenge to the entrenched binary opposition between the West and the East has prompted a significant rethinking of approaches in eighteenth-century studies. One influential response to this shift is what Felicity Nussbaum terms “critical global studies.” Moving beyond the constraints of traditional national histories, critical global studies foreground “indigenous and native ways of knowing in order to question, or at least to complicate, Europe’s assumed superiority in defining what counts as learning.”⁴¹ This critical framework emerges in response to the conditions of the eighteenth century, a period marked by “the increased mobility of commodities and ideas, the unprecedented expansion of global trade, improved navigational techniques, and cultural and racial mixing.”⁴² Against this backdrop, critical global studies aims to trace the “mutually implicated” relationship between “the local, regional, national, transnational.”⁴³ Scholarship has thus turned toward conceptualizing models of “cultural convergence” and “reciprocal enculturation,”⁴⁴ which illuminate how European and non-European cultures co-produced knowledge, aesthetics, and social meaning in ways that resist simplistic narratives of domination and diffusion.

Such reassessments of how the East has informed Western conceptions of culture and identity have led to the emergence of what Bärbel Czennia describes as “network-centered approaches.”⁴⁵ Rather than focusing solely on macro-level forces, such as

⁴¹ Felicity Nussbaum, “Introduction,” in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003), 9.

⁴² Nussbaum, “Introduction,” 8.

⁴³ Nussbaum, “Introduction,” 11.

⁴⁴ Nussbaum, “Introduction,” 11.

⁴⁵ Bärbel Czennia, “Introduction: Oriental Networks in the Long Eighteenth Century,” in *Oriental Networks: Culture, Commerce, and Communication in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Bärbel Czennia and Greg Clingham (Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2020), 8.

empires or government, network-centered readings highlight the intricate web of “local alliances, private groups, and public institutions” involved in transnational exchanges. As Czennia argues, network-centered approaches “have redirected attention from macrosocial factors to the many interpersonal levels along the way at which intercultural exchanges were negotiated and maintained,”⁴⁶ bringing to the fore the messy, often unpredictable nature of cultural contact. The vast number of actors involved in global exchanges, as Czennia notes, meant that no single institution, not even an empire or a trading company, could maintain full control over the circulation of people, goods, and ideas. In this sense, turning our focus to the interpersonal level allows for a nuanced understanding of “local specifics” and the “complexity of dynamics” that shaped eighteenth-century transculturation.⁴⁷

Both Nussbaum’s “critical global studies” framework and Czennia’s “network-centered approaches” emerge from a shared recognition that eighteenth-century encounters between Europe and non-European worlds cannot be adequately understood through simple narratives of Western dominance or unilinear diffusion. They both stress the eighteenth century’s unprecedented mobility, with commodities, people, techniques, and beliefs all in motion, and urge us to attend to how things Chinese and their meanings were constantly negotiated and transformed. Their interventions together frame eighteenth-century Sino-British encounters as a web of mutual influences, moving from viewing China and Britain as opposing monoliths toward seeing them as co-creative partners in a shared world of circulating things, ideas, and people. This dual lens, macro-critical and micro-networked, allows us to appreciate both broad patterns of cross-cultural interactions and the detailed negotiations through which cultures met, clashed, and ultimately reshaped one another.

Informed by these critical insights, this thesis argues that Sino-British interactions were shaped less by the projection of European exceptionalism than by the co-constitution of cultures through the motion of things and the circulating flow of knowledge. British writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came to view

⁴⁶ Czennia, “Introduction,” 8.

⁴⁷ Czennia, “Introduction,” 8.

things Chinese as woven into the same global network that bound Britain to the wider world. In engaging with Chinese taste, from porcelain, gift rituals, plants and garden designs, they found that Englishness itself was being negotiated and defined. It was a mutually constitutive process in which Britain and China continually mirrored, inverted, adapted and imitated one another. What Aravamudan highlights as the rise of nationalism and xenophobia, which prevented oriental tales from ever being fully integrated into the British novel, partly explains the repudiation of Chinese values and customs in English writings of Chinese tales and travel accounts. As I will explore in Chapter 2, this trend is evident in Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins's sinophobic account of George Anson's experience in China.⁴⁸ Yet, echoing Aravamudan's argument about the plural functions of oriental tales—including “withdrawal, exchange, and porous identification,” which resist the nationalist and domestic form of the British novel—this rejection is never absolute. Alongside narratives of neglect and demonization, a continued fascination with Chinese culture persisted, as seen in John Bell's travelogue,⁴⁹ and Edward Page's rival account of George Anson's stay in China,⁵⁰ which offers a more sympathetic identification with Chinese values. It unfolds that hybridity and plurality characterize Sino-British cultural exchanges during the Enlightenment.

Ambivalent Imaginaries of China: Negotiating Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism

In *Windsor-Forest* (1713), Alexander Pope famously frames England's landscape not only as a pastoral Eden but as a site of global moral and economic order. Yu Liu argues that, writing at the cusp of the Treaty of Utrecht that marked the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, Pope draws on biblical and classical myths of loss and recovery to depict an idealized vision of peace and prosperity following crisis.⁵¹ Indeed, *Windsor-*

⁴⁸ Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins, *A Voyage Round the World in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV by George Anson*, ed. William Glyndwr (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁴⁹ John Bell, *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Diverse Parts of Asia*. 2 vols. (Glasgow: n.p., 1763).

⁵⁰ Edward Page, *A Little Secret History of Affairs at Canton in the Year 1743 When the Centurion, Commodore Anson was Lying in the River*. November 18, 1765. MS 2894 Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.

⁵¹ Yu Liu, *Seeds of a Different Eden: Chinese Gardening Ideas and a New English Aesthetic*

Forest celebrates Britain's rise as a commercial empire after the War by envisioning Britain as the civilizing center of a new global order in which Englishness is compatible with, even responsible for, a cosmopolitan ideal of harmony and flourishing. This poem mythologizes the Thames, in particular, as a limitless, open artery, which is a symbol of free trade and universal access. Pope writes that "The time shall come, when free as seas or wind, / Unbounded Thames shall flow for all mankind."⁵² The river, flowing "for all mankind," becomes a stand-in for Britain's role as a benevolent imperial power, supposedly offering the fruits of commerce and civilization to the world. Pope's cosmopolitan ideal, however, is coupled with national aspiration; while the Thames is imagined to "flow for all mankind," it flows from London outward, reinforcing Britain's central place in the global order. This portrayal of England as an imperial cosmopolis becomes especially clear in Pope's depiction of Eastern prosperity as ultimately subordinate to British power. He writes, "Let *India* boast her plants, nor envy we / The weeping amber or the balmy tree, / While by our oaks the precious loads are borne, / And realms commanded which those trees adorn."⁵³ Pope's acknowledgement of the natural abundance of the East gives way to imperial assertion: it is British ships—symbolized by "our oaks," evoking the Royal Navy—that carry these goods, and it is Britain that commands the lands from which they come. The cosmopolitan ideal, an interconnected world enriched by shared goods, is underwritten by a deeply hierarchical structure in which Britain remains sovereign.

This seemingly ambivalent articulation of cosmopolitanism, as Zuroski points out, reveals that in Pope's vision of England, "cosmopolitanism and national identity are not in conflict;" rather, they work in tandem to support the rise of "a national culture based on the acquisition and display of imported objects."⁵⁴ Aravamudan similarly observes that, during the Enlightenment, exoticism led to two divergent outcomes: the rise of cosmopolitanism and the entrenchment of nationalism. The encounter with the exotic

Ideal (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 84.

⁵² Alexander Pope, "Windsor-Forest," in *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Robin Sowerby (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2002), lines 395-396.

⁵³ Pope, "Windsor-Forest," 29-32.

⁵⁴ Zuroski, *A Taste for China*, 18.

led some to shed native prejudices and embrace distant affinities—an orientation toward cosmopolitanism—while prompting others to retreat into the familiar and reject the foreign, reinforcing nationalist sentiments.⁵⁵ Exoticism, in this sense, serves both as a gateway to cosmopolitan ethics and as a justification for nationalist cultural identity. The intricate interplay between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in encounters with the exotic, particularly Eastern cultures, calls for a revisionary account of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism. One that, as Zuroski argues, shifts focus from a “transcendent universal ideal” to “particular sets of intercultural postures and practices that generate new ways of knowing, feeling, and being.”⁵⁶ This approach recognizes the ideological heterogeneity within Enlightenment thought itself, in which ambitions for colonial expansion coexisted with genuine curiosity about, and at times respect for, cultural difference.

The symbiosis of cosmopolitanism and nationalism in eighteenth-century Britain was mutually reinforcing through a rhetorical strategy of assimilation-repulsion. As David Simpson observes, the “sense of connection to a ‘bigger world’” during the long eighteenth century exposed Britons to a “significant otherness” that was “too multifarious to be immediately assimilable.”⁵⁷ This presents challenges to British writers who seek to form the nascent English identity amid Britain's relative marginality on the global stage. In a historical reexamination of the global economy, both Pomeranz and Frank persuasively contend, long before the famed “rise of the West,” eighteenth-century China already embodied many of the hallmarks of modernity. The Chinese empire featured a thriving market economy, an efficient meritocratic bureaucracy, and standards of living that, in comparison to Europe, were remarkably high.⁵⁸ The works of Pomeranz and Frank provide a framework to contextualize early European narratives that often described China as a model of rational governance and

⁵⁵ Srinivas Aravamudan, “Response: Exoticism beyond Cosmopolitanism?” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 25, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 229-230.

⁵⁶ Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, “Introduction: Exoticism, Cosmopolitanism, and Fiction’s Aesthetics of Diversity,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 25, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 3.

⁵⁷ David Simpson, “The Limits of Cosmopolitanism and the Case for Translation,” *European Romantic Review* 16, no. 2 (April 2005): 148.

⁵⁸ Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, 3-27; Frank, *ReOrient*, 1-12; 110-117.

cultural refinement. From the sixteenth century onward, European writers drew on accounts of China to rethink their own “modern” society. An extensive body of literature produced by Dutch merchants and Jesuit missionaries, driven by the ambitions of commercial expansion and religious conversion, offered detailed portraits of Chinese society. These accounts consistently depicted China as a densely populated, highly urbanized, and economically dynamic civilization, distinguished by its sophisticated infrastructure and complex administrative systems.⁵⁹ This idealized image of China helped shape debates about religion, government and progress, positing China’s ancient and virtuous constitution as an alternative exemplar of civilization to that of contemporary Europe.

However, British images of China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were produced within a contested, transcultural dialogic framework. As Porter argues, there are two opposing modes in English imagination of China: Jesuit attempts to understand China through familiar Western ideas of order, language, and genealogy, and the exoticized portrayals by radical Whigs and commercial nationalists like the Earl of Shaftesbury and Daniel Defoe, who imagined China as utterly foreign and indecipherable.⁶⁰ British representations of China were shaped as much by various political and ideological imaginaries as by complicated commercial and cultural exchanges between Britain and China. For a pro-commerce commentator and committed Protestant like Defoe, as Robert Batchelor argues, in order to define England against expanding global trade networks and forge a distinctly national system of circulation, one had to willfully “disavow” China by portraying its meritocratic institutions as an alluring void.⁶¹ Robert Markley argues similarly that, though Defoe, like many of his peers, welcomed the commercial prospects of China and the East Indies,

⁵⁹ The English translations of these accounts that were widely read in Britain include Johannes Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces, to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperour of China* (London: Printed by J. Macock, 1669); Louis Le Comte, *Memoirs and Observations Topographical, Physical, Mathematical, Mechanical, Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical Made in a Late Journey through the Empire of China* (London: Printed for Benjamin Tooke, 1699); Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *The General History of China* (London: Printed for J. Watts, 1741).

⁶⁰ Porter, *Ideographia*, 193-240.

⁶¹ Robert Batchelor, “Concealing the Bounds: Imagining the British Nation through China,” in Nussbaum, *The Global Eighteenth Century*, 80-81.

he was deeply unsettled by “a ‘pagan’ empire resistant to his critiques of tyranny and idolatry.” That sense of challenge drove him to deploy overblown rhetorical onslaughts in defense of a “godly commerce” designed to thwart the ambitions of Chinese monarchs.⁶² Under the Pomeranz-Frank paradigm, Defoe’s attitudes toward China emerge as historically strategic rather than merely ignorant. Frank and Pomeranz’s global economic framework shows that Europe’s sense of itself as modern, progressive, and uniquely free was already in dialogue with, and indebted to, Chinese precedents. Through his ambivalent writing of China as a pagan void and as a foil to commercial prosperity, Defoe not only erects ideological barriers between China and Britain but also weaves China into the very terms by which English identity and English modernity are defined.

Such an ambivalent attitude toward China ensured that no single, monolithic image of China could prevail, but instead gave rise to a dynamic and ongoing contest of competing representations. As Batchelor argues, images of China “neither stabilized into a passive and timeless representation of the East nor fit into neat discursive paradigms.”⁶³ Even within seemingly pro-trade Whig circles, there was debate. In *Spectator* 69, published on May 19, 1710, Joseph Addison, through the voice of the fictional Mr. Spectator, championed commerce with China as a mutually enriching exchange rather than a one-sided exploitation. He famously praised the Royal Exchange as a cosmopolitan hub where “our rooms are filled with Pyramids of *China*” and noted that “the Chinese [are] our Potters,” signaling Britain’s dependence on Chinese porcelain alongside other imports.⁶⁴ Addison’s optimism about “mutual Intercourse and Traffick among Mankind” contrasted sharply with the view of his contemporaries like Defoe, who saw China as a threat to free trade.

The same period that saw commercial expansion and its accompanying nationalist rhetoric also witnessed an unprecedented circulation of people and ideas. Jesuit

⁶² Robert Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 191.

⁶³ Batchelor, “Concealing the Bounds,” 80.

⁶⁴ Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 69, May 19, 1711, 137-138, [Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online II](#).

missionaries in China sent maps and scholarly treatises back to Europe, while independent British merchants, East India Company officers, and physicians arrived in China, either accompanying diplomatic missions or under the direction of privateering ventures and admiralty orders. Imagination of China varied widely: a Tory patriot might portray it as a stable, virtuous empire untouched by factionalism, whereas a liberal Whig might present it as a stagnant society in need of reform. Despite Britain's economic marginality in comparison to China in the eighteenth century, English literature portrayed China in ways that both admired and diminished it.⁶⁵ What emerges is a disjunction between material reality and discursive ambition. Britain's global power had not yet fully materialized in the eighteenth century, but literary and ideological production had already begun to lay claim to imperial dominance. This imaginary claim over global supremacy prefigured the actual geopolitical transformations of the nineteenth century. The symbolic inversion, where dependency on Chinese imports is rewritten as a cosmopolitan display of cultural inclusivity, and economic weakness masked by narrative strength, sheds light on the complexity and dynamics of cosmopolitan inclusion and nationalist self-assertion in the formation of Englishness. Ultimately, the eighteenth-century British imagination of China was part of imagining Britain itself—a process shaped by ambivalence and conflict, unfolding as a dynamic site of negotiation at the intersection of commerce, politics, and culture.

These contested reflections on China undermined dominant narratives of Sino-British relations as adhering to a neat historical trajectory, particularly the transition from the largely positive accounts of China in Jesuit writings in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the disillusionment and vilification of China in the late eighteenth century.⁶⁶ Recent scholarship on Sino-British interactions,

⁶⁵ For example, Porter finds that Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), a work representative of nationalist efforts to "reconstruct an ancient English literary heritage," "both drew upon and simultaneously obscured Chinese models." See Porter, "Sinicizing Early Modernity," 304. For detailed discussion on Thomas Percy's sinology, see David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 154-183.

⁶⁶ Some scholars tend to view 1750 as a watershed year in the Western imagination of China. The tide of Chinese vogue began to recede in the middle of the eighteenth century, and with it came a change in how China was perceived in the West. China was constructed as a negative Other, intellectually illiterate, morally decayed, historically stagnant, and politically despotic in the grand

particularly the work of Chi-ming Yang, has shown that following “a linear trajectory of de-idealization” of China would “easily gloss over the strong ambivalence toward the East at work throughout the eighteenth century.”⁶⁷ This ambivalent attitude toward China prompts eighteenth-century British writers to adopt various strategies in their representations of China. Markley situates seventeenth-century British writing within the context of a global economy that, up until 1800, was dominated by China, Japan, and India.⁶⁸ Markley contends that the English literary imagination of China reveals various “compensatory strategies to deal with Europe’s marginalization”⁶⁹ in global trade during the early modern period. As “European conceptions of historiography, theology, and national identity”⁷⁰ were threatened by China’s economic might and its high-quality goods, English writers employed compensatory techniques to allay these concerns.

In line with Markley, Porter, Zuroski, and Yang also weave the revisionist interpretation of Eurocentric histories of the emergence of English modernity into the discussion of the eighteenth-century literary imagination of China. Porter argues that “the extension of the Pomeranz paradigm into the cultural sphere” establishes the “basic commensurability” between China and Britain in the long eighteenth century.⁷¹ He finds that the “ancient English literary heritage in the eighteenth century both drew upon and occluded Chinese models.”⁷² Porter renders this ambivalence as “instrumental amnesia” to explain why eighteenth-century English writers, on the one hand identified with, while on the other hand scorned Chinese culture to form English

narrative of progress and freedom of western Enlightenment. For example, William Appleton in his survey of the Chinese vogue in England asserts that “By 1750 China was no longer generally esteemed among English intellectuals.” See Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay: The Chinese Vogue in England During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 62.

⁶⁷ Chi-ming Yang, *Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century England, 1660-1760* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 25.

⁶⁸ Markley, *The Far East*, 10-11. Markley draws on historical revisionist scholarship that challenges Eurocentrism by rejecting the idea that Europe occupied a central position in the world system between 1500 and 1800. He engages particularly with the work of Frank and Pomeranz. See Frank, *ReOrient*; Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.

⁶⁹ Markley, *The Far East*, 3.

⁷⁰ Markley, *The Far East*, 17.

⁷¹ Porter, “Sinicizing Early Modernity,” 301.

⁷² Porter, “Sinicizing Early Modernity,” 304.

subjectivity when faced with China's superiority in aesthetic production.⁷³ Such "ambivalence of the potential status of Chinese objects as a site of both imperial envy and imperial pride," as Porter suggests, "can enable us to recognize the semiotic fluidity and transformative potency" of Chinese objects.⁷⁴ Zuroski undertakes a project similar to Porter's, charting the formation of the English self by tracing the long eighteenth-century English attraction to, and later disenchantment with, all things Chinese.⁷⁵ This ambivalent stance is explained through how Sino-British material and cultural communication were first incorporated into English selfhood to support England's emergence as a cosmopolitan nation, and then transformed in the English mind as symbols of an alien culture. These two methods of forming English subjectivity by assimilating or rejecting a foreign culture correspond to the two phases of nation-building known as cosmopolitan chinoiserie and nationalist protectionism. Yang also probes this ambivalent perception of China's participation in the formation of English morality, examining how the myriad ways in which China was enacted or staged within English culture as a kind of spectacle influenced the English concept of virtue and commerce. She argues that "modern orientalism was a structure of ambivalence resulting from the desire for East Indies markets and the encounter with their superior moral and economic example."⁷⁶ China, as a result, is a "contested symbol of both imperial excess and Confucian moderation."⁷⁷ Yang explains China's exemplarity in terms of its mediating function between controversial systems of value.

Markley, Porter, Zuroski, and Yang demonstrate that the eighteenth-century literary imagination of China hinged on dynamic ambivalence, positioning China as a contested cultural mediator through which English identity was paradoxically forged by both embracing and rejecting "Chineseness." This ambivalent engagement unfolded

⁷³ Porter explains "instrumental amnesia as "a deliberate occlusion of rival claimants to exemplarity, and of the memory of a more truly cosmopolitan early modern past." See Porter, "Sinicizing Early Modernity," 305. He makes a case study of Horace Walpole's refusal to acknowledge Chinese influence on English horticulture and Thomas Percy's decision to conceal his indebtedness to Chinese culture in his translation of *Hau Kiou Chooan; or The Pleasing History*. See Porter, *The Chinese Taste*, 78-91; 154-183.

⁷⁴ Porter, *The Chinese Taste*, 7.

⁷⁵ Zuroski, *A Taste for China*.

⁷⁶ Yang, *Performing China*, 25.

⁷⁷ Yang, *Performing China*, 10.

along two complementary axes—one of hospitable adaptation and one of hypothetical exclusion—each shaping a cosmopolitan Englishness in reciprocal dialogue with China, alternately casting it as exemplar and antithesis. The first approach, as James Watt notes, exemplified by the works of Ros Ballaster and Srinivas Aravamudan, focuses on earlier literary periods and foregrounds a largely positive, at times even utopian, vision of cultural openness to the other.⁷⁸ Watt argues that Ballaster and Aravamudan’s readings suggest that literary texts from this period participated in a discourse of hospitality—a concept informed by the philosophical writings of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, which foregrounds ethical engagement and receptivity to alterity.⁷⁹ Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Citizen of the World*, in this sense, is a quintessential example of playfully reflexive eighteenth-century oriental tales which, as Aravamudan suggests, do not reinforce monolithic imperial ideologies but instead resist the emerging narrative monoculture of the realist novel by aspiring toward mutual understanding across cultural differences.⁸⁰ Cultural distortion, as a result, opened up new possibilities for cross-cultural meaning-making, allowing Chinese ideas to circulate—albeit transformed—within English literary discourse. Thomas Percy’s translation of the Chinese novel *Haoqiu zhuan*, published as *Hau Kiou Choann; or the Pleasing History* (1761), should be read as a negotiation of cultural difference through playful adaptation rather than straightforward appropriation, despite its misinterpretation of Chinese proverbs, moral apothegms, and its adaptation of the plot to suit British tastes. It was even seen as inaugurating what Peter Kitson calls “the beginning of this alternative British Protestant tradition of writing on China.”⁸¹

The other approach, as Eric Hayot demonstrates, deploys China not as a real interlocutor but as a hypothetical limit case against which European sympathy and

⁷⁸ James Watt, *British Orientalisms, 1759-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4. Ros Ballaster argues that the formation of the Western novel during the era of imperial expansion should not be seen solely as an inward turn that reinforces a sovereign self against an Eastern other. Instead, its distinctiveness lies in its outward projection—a willingness to imaginatively occupy the position of the other, particularly the eastern other. See Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England, 1662-1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14.

⁷⁹ Watt, *British Orientalisms*, 4.

⁸⁰ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 3-10.

⁸¹ Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*, 30.

modernity are tested and defined. Drawing on Adam Smith's 1759 thought experiment, where an earthquake in distant China elicits minimal response in the European sympathetic imagination, Hayot shows how Europeans situate China on the moral periphery, where Chinese suffering is abstracted into a test of European sympathy rather than recognized as genuine human pain. This unique imagination of China's otherness, Hayot argues, is rooted in China's material preeminence—its mastery of porcelain, tea, and other coveted goods, which Europeans sought to erase as their own power grew.⁸² In this light, the sympathetic identification between British readers and the suffering Chinese becomes a mirror of actual trade relations: British anxieties over commercial deficits and imperial impotence found emotional compensation in depicting China as incapable of self-salvation. By exposing sympathy as a form of affective capital entwined with commodity exchange and colonial power, Hayot shows that Britain's alleged cosmopolitan identity was a mechanism for defining and reinforcing its own economic and moral superiority. Throughout the long eighteenth century, English writers never settled on pure hospitality or total exclusion in their representations of China; instead, the very tension between these modes—one characterized by hospitable adaptation and another by hypothetical exclusion—proved generative, forging Englishness in a crucible of ambivalence. Far from implying a utopian encounter, this mutually defining Sino-British relationship was shaped by asymmetries of power and competing economic and ideological interests, such that hospitable description could slip into appropriation just as sympathetic imagination could reinforce imperial superiority.

The reciprocal nature of Sino-British encounters that foregrounds hybridity, negotiation, and mutual constitution is discussed particularly in Romantic scholarship, represented by Peter Kitson and Ross Forman. Kitson finds that the eighteenth-century ambivalent imagination of China extended into the Romantic era. Despite the substantial presence of China in Romantic Sinology, there seemed to be an unusual lack of interest in China in Romantic poetry. Echoing Markley and Porter, Kitson similarly

⁸² Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-35.

argues that such collective “forgetting or evasion” of China was a discursive effort to counter China’s influence and defend British identity.⁸³ However, he goes further to argue the “cultural transmission of knowledge about China to Britain” was “a part of a broader process of “co-constitution,”⁸⁴ in which “British Romantic-period and mid-Qing thinkers, politicians, and writers were all bound up in the same global networks sharing common and modern thoughts, concerns, and ideas.”⁸⁵ The translation of Romantic Sinology, in particular, as Kitson notes, reflects the complex processes of cultural transmission. These translations were often carried out by Protestant missionaries and East India Company officials who, despite their dominant position, were heavily reliant on Chinese intermediaries, such as linguists, scholars, and informants, to complete their work. These translations may appear to confirm Edward Said’s model of Orientalism, where knowledge is unilaterally produced by the colonizer to assert dominance over the colonized. However, as Kitson has convincingly argued, when examined at the level of individual encounters and textual negotiations, the transmission of texts and ideas emerged as a result of negotiation, contestation, and mutual influence. In a similar vein, Forman demonstrates the complexity and intertextuality of the Victorian imagination of Qing China from approximately 1840 to 1911 by viewing the two nations as “empires entwined.”⁸⁶ The term “entwined” underscores what Forman describes as “multiple, interrelated, and mutually constitutive notions of agency.”⁸⁷ Forman argues that “China and the Chinese appear as imagined figures within British literature and as textual objects precisely because they were important social actors across the British Empire.”⁸⁸ This suggests that the Victorian imagination of China presupposes its integration into the British global imperial network. By comparing works by British writers living in treaty ports and Hong Kong with those produced in Britain, Forman insightfully shows how the pluralized

⁸³ Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*, 10.

⁸⁴ Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*, 3.

⁸⁵ Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*, 22.

⁸⁶ Ross Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁸⁷ Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination*, 5.

⁸⁸ Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination*, 5.

representations of China and its people point to a mutually constitutive process in which both China and Britain form the self and the other.

Although eighteenth-century writers did not engage with Chinese literature, poetry, and philosophy as directly or extensively as nineteenth-century sinologists—such as Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China and compiler of the first Chinese-English dictionary—and other missionary scholars or writers of the treaty ports would later do, the ambivalent imaginaries of China negotiate a mutually defining Sino-British relationship in which cosmopolitan aspirations and nationalist self-assertion are inextricably intertwined. Through a strategic ambivalence, oscillating between hospitable adaptation and hypothetical exclusion, English writers simultaneously appropriated and repudiated “Chineseness” to forge a distinctly English modernity within emerging global networks. By examining English writing about China from the 1660s to the 1770s, this thesis engages with a period that Ballaster and Aravamudan have characterized as reflecting a more utopian and imaginative vision of the Other, in contrast to the more instrumental or imperialist depictions that would become dominant later. While anchoring itself in this earlier moment, the study also deliberately extends its scope into the late eighteenth century to demonstrate that discourses of utopian idealization and cultural anxiety about China were not sequential or mutually exclusive, but instead coexisted, overlapped, and evolved in complex and nonlinear ways. This extended chronology enables a broader view of how British writers engaged with the plural and dynamic encounters with the Chinese Other in an increasingly globalized and networked world. It explores a vision of cosmopolitan Englishness that, as Hayot suggests, remains attentive to asymmetrical power relations while resisting reductive or essentialist conceptions of cultural differences. Rather than treating representations of China as fixed reflections of British dominance or fantasy, this approach emphasizes the contact zones where cultural meaning emerges through misreading, negotiation, and hybridization. In this light, eighteenth-century English writing on China emerges as a form of dialogic Orientalism—a site where early global thought, cross-cultural exchange, and literary experimentation converged.

Imagining China and the Making of English Modernity

This thesis argues that eighteenth-century English literary representations of things Chinese negotiate a mutually defining Sino-British relationship by tracing the trajectory of the cultural transmission of Chinese knowledge—whether through objects, moral ideals, or the activities of various people—and by unpacking the ambivalent imaginaries of things Chinese that gave rise to a competing English identity continuously pulled between cosmopolitan engagement and emergent nationalism.

This thesis begins with a re-examination of the feminization of Chinese porcelain. Rather than treating porcelain as an emblem of feminine fragility, Chapter 1 foregrounds it as a plastic, porous medium that enables female engagements with taste, commerce, and knowledge production. As porcelain shifted from rare curiosity to everyday commodity, its mutable surface became a metonymic repository in which meanings and identities were written, erased, and reshaped. Close readings of Joseph Addison's *Spectator* 37 (1711) and Sarah Scott's *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762) show how porcelain's hybrid aesthetics are transformed from supposed disorder into a productive material epistemology and narrative strategy. The chapter further examines Mary Delany's shellwork and her disordered china closet to demonstrate how female collectors deploy porcelain's unstable semiotics to contest aesthetic and epistemic hierarchies. The material mutability of Chinese porcelain ultimately makes it an active mediator in a reciprocal cultural exchange, enabling an iterative process by which taste and identity are negotiated and remade through the object.

Chapter 2 explores how representations of the Chinese rituals of gift exchange in British travel writings negotiate Englishness between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. John Bell's *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Diverse Parts of Asia* (1763) frames the Qing court's rituals of gift exchange as performances of shared civility, overriding imperial rivalry with gestures of mutual respect. By idealizing Chinese hospitality and emphasizing reciprocal understanding, Bell constructs a utopian vision of transcultural civility that contributes to fostering future trade with China. By contrast, Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins in *A Voyage Round the World* (1748) cast the ritual of gift exchange in Canton as an illegitimate obstacle to free trade, representing

China as an unassimilable Other. Their attempt to reassert English identity in the crisis of frustrating Pacific voyages, however, is unstable. Edward Page's unpublished *A Little Secret History* (1765) reframes the Canton confrontation sympathetically to bridge cultural differences and national conflicts between English and Chinese merchants and officials. Across the three travel accounts, nationalism and cosmopolitanism operate symbiotically to forge a fluid Englishness.

Chapter 3 examines the cosmopolitan ideal in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* (1762). By giving voice to a Confucian narrator and serializing the letters to intertwine Chinese and English perspectives, Goldsmith transforms the work into a performative forum for reciprocal Sino-British exchange. Through adapting Confucian proverbs—some drawn from Jesuit reports, some invented—Goldsmith constructs an imagined convergence of English and Chinese values that echoes Jesuit advocacy of Confucian-Christian synthesis. Yet this cosmopolitan experiment is inherently ambivalent: the Confucian voice depends on selective missionary sources and editorial framing, and its authority is mediated by the commercial periodical marketplace. Moreover, by casting the narrator Lien Chi Altangi as a London-roaming modern metropolitan, Goldsmith intensifies this ambivalence, enabling reciprocal mockery that both commodifies and flattens Chinese culture while exposing British imperial-commercial hypocrisies and material follies. Goldsmith's Chinese letters reveal the ambivalence of eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism, modeling dialogic engagement with Chinese culture while exposing the representational and commercial constraints of Orientalist narratives.

Chapter 4 reads the English garden as a contested arena where the introduction of exotic plants reshapes aesthetics, imperial ambition and national identity amid an emerging cosmopolitan nature. In *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1773), Sir William Chambers celebrates Chinese gardening, particularly its transplanting of exotic plants and its sensory experiments in variety and surprise, to create a hybrid, cosmopolitan garden discourse. In contrast, William Mason's *The English Garden* (1772-1782) champions native nature to affirm English identity. In Book I, Mason promotes an English gardening art that pairs patriotic protection of native nature with a

tempered aesthetic of variety, rejecting the excesses of Chinese gardens while still embracing the global circulation of plants. In Book IV, Mason's tale of the imperial greenhouse reveals how botanical variety both encloses exotics as imperial trophies and blurs the boundaries between native and exotic to form a cosmopolitan garden. Yet the greenhouse's fragile illusion of control over nature suggests true variety must temper imperial ambition and acknowledge nature's autonomy. This chapter also explores Sir Joseph Banks' successful introduction of the *moutan* peony into Britain, highlighting the plant's material agency and the Chinese cultivation practice that enables its transplantation and cultural integration. Botanical exchange ultimately fosters a cosmopolitan nature, continually shaped through reciprocal adaptation and hybrid aesthetics.

Focusing on the active role of things Chinese and mapping their trajectories through diverse literary genres and settings, from drawing rooms and imperial courts to greenhouses, this study uncovers a transnational network in which culture, commerce, and power co-constituted one another. Through periodicals, travel narratives, moral treatises, pseudo-oriental tales, and even garden manuals, English writers and thinkers negotiated a Sino-British relationship that shaped both the contours of English identity and the global circulation of knowledge, objects, and people. Ultimately, the ambivalent imaginaries of "things Chinese" offered eighteenth-century England a mirror in which to envision its own emerging modernity: at once enthralled by the promise of global cosmopolitanism and unsettled by the demands of national self-definition. This thesis thus restores China not to the margins of British literary history but to its very heart, showing that the making of Englishness was inseparable from the material and imaginative labors of Sino-British exchange.

Chapter 1

Mutable China, Agreeable Confusion: Women, Porcelain, and the Performance of Knowledge

In the *Lover* 10, published on March 18, 1714, the paper's eidolon Marmaduke Myrtle¹ uses his thwarted courtship of Mrs. Anne Page as a springboard for a broader satirical and moralizing critique of women's obsessive passion for fragile, fashionable Chinese porcelain:

Mrs. Anne was in a particular manner very fond of China Ware, against which I had unfortunately declared my Aversion. [...] China Vessels are play-things for Women of all Ages. An old Lady of four-score shall be as busie in cleaning an *Indian* Mandarin, as her Great Grand Daughter is in dressing her Baby. [...] The Potters of *China* have, it seems, their Factors at this distance, who retail out their several Manufactures for cast Cloths and superannuated Garments. I have known an old Petticoat metamorphosed for half a Punch Bowl, and a Pair of Breeches into a Tea Pot. [...] I shall further recommend to their serious consideration these three Particulars: First, That all *China* Ware is of a weak and transitory Nature. Secondly, That the Fashion of it is changeable: and Thirdly, That it is of no use.²

Myrtle casts Chinese porcelain itself as a jealous interloper in his failed courtship,

¹ Here, Joseph Addison is writing in character of Marmaduke Myrtle. Periodicals in the eighteenth century frequently employed a persona as a conduit for authors to express their views on issues such as politics, art, morality, marriage, love, etc. As Kathy Ivey observes, "Writers of the early eighteenth century struggled to present to readers a self that serves the rhetorical needs of their writing and yet preserves, or even improves, their actual public image, status, or reputation." See Ivey, "My Persona, My Self: The Political Periodical Personae of Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Jonathan Swift, and Daniel Defoe" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1991), 3. Manushag Powell also contends that eighteenth-century periodicalists often tended to "generate fictional stand-ins with the qualities of an 'ideal' professional author, a neutral individual unhampered by allegiance to private concerns." The cultivation of fictional personas allows authors to establish and maintain their public personas, engage in literary debates, and shape the cultural discourse of the time. See Powell, *Performing Authorship in Eighteenth-Century English Periodicals* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012), 4.

² Joseph Addison, *Lover* 10, March 18, 1714, 393, [Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online II](#).

turning a decorative object into a romantic rival for Mrs. Anne's love. By blaming "China Ware" for the breakdown of their relationship, he wryly undercuts the idea that a trivial commodity could govern a woman's affections. He goes on to lampoon the perverse economy it creates, where useful, hardy garments are traded away for brittle baubles of no real utility. He shows how porcelain's fragility, its ever-shifting fashions, and its high cost render it a pointless status symbol. In Myrtle's eyes, this luxurious cycle impoverishes households and stands in contrast to the "useful Products of our *British Potteries*," which are "intolerably cheap, and most shamefully durable and lasting."³ Through Myrtle, Joseph Addison anticipates a philosophical line—later systematized by Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)—that true beauty lies in an object's fitness for use, and that disinterested, moral taste must subordinate mere fashion-driven passion to utility.⁴

Treating Chinese porcelain as ornamental rather than functional dovetailed with denying women as thoughtful consumers with expertise and impartial judgment, circumscribing female consumption of porcelain as mere vanity. This exemplifies a tactic common to eighteenth-century satirists' framing of Chinese porcelain as feminine to deflate Chinese cultural authority. Female obsession with things Chinese was eventually portrayed as a deviant fascination, an undignified desire, and an excessive and hysterical pursuit of objects. The debasement of Chinese taste emerges in this representation of the craze for chinoiserie, especially Chinese porcelain, which scholars have demonstrated to be deeply entangled with contemporary anxieties about women's tastes and social power. As Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, David Porter, Stacey Sloboda, and Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding have established, male commentators constructed

³ Addison, *Lover* 10, 394.

⁴ Adam Smith argues that though we admire the beauty of a well-ordered institution, its real worth lies entirely in the tangible benefits, its utility that it confers on people. As he observes, "We take pleasure in beholding the perfection of so beautiful and grand a system, and we are uneasy till we remove any obstruction that can in the least disturb or encumber the regularity of its motions. All constitutions of government, however, are valued only in proportion as they tend to promote the happiness of those who live under them. This is their sole use and end." Likewise, while aesthetic appreciation can enhance our experience of craftsmanship, it is ultimately the practical utility of an object—how effectively the object fulfills its purpose and contributes to our well-being—that defines its real value. See Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 216.

chinoiserie as inherently “feminine,” frivolous and mentally unstable, through periodical satire, visual culture and prescriptive writings, thereby portraying female collectors’ appetite for Chinese porcelain as a sign of personal and ultimately national decline.⁵

The feminization of china was vividly enacted in popular arts, particularly William Hogarth’s visual arts, which juxtapose women’s moral decay with opulent but superficial Chinese porcelain.⁶ In Plate 2 of *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732), William Hogarth foregrounds a young woman Moll Hackabout’s riotous display of finery, using the combination of her bare breast and sumptuous dress to signal her social ascent through vice. The centerpiece, a lacquered tea table laden with fine china, is violently upended as she kicks it over to distract her Jewish keeper while her lover slips away. Here, the delicate porcelain, prized for its exoticism and elegance, is reduced to a prop in a scene of licentious defiance. Across the series, Hogarth assembles a mini cabinet of curiosities in which seemingly unrelated objects serve as metonyms for facets of Moll Hackabout’s moral decline. In Plate 1, the goose Moll brings—an emblem of gullibility” and “self-destruction,” as Ronald Paulson observes—announces her naivete.⁷ In Plate 2, the mask on a small table—“a notorious aphrodisiac” linked to prostitutes and the “perverse heightening of passion,” in Terry Castle’s words—signals her embrace of erotic artifice.⁸ And in Plate 4, set in Bridewell prison, the expensive glove Moll wears while beating hemp, as Tracey Hutchings-Goetz suggests, makes her “an object of ridicule, discipline, and theft.” Instead of signaling “respectability,” the

⁵ See Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, “Women, China, and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 153-167; David Porter, “Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35, no. 3 (2002): 395-411; Stacey Sloboda, “Porcelain Bodies: Gender, Acquisitiveness, and Taste in Eighteenth-century England,” in *Material Cultures, 1740-1920: the Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, ed. John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 19-36; Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding, “‘Frailty, Thy Name is China’: Women, Chinoiserie and the Threat of Low Culture in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Women’s History Review* 18, no 4 (September 2009): 659-668.

⁶ Scholars have explored extensively on the moral purposes of Hogarth’s arts. See Frederick Antal, “The Moral Purpose of Hogarth’s Art,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 15, no. 3-4 (1952): 169-197; Ronald Paulson and Ronald Marshall, *Hogarth: The “Modern Moral Subject”, 1697-1732* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

⁷ Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth’s Graphic Works* (London: Print Room, 1989), 78.

⁸ Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 87.

glove marks Moll as accustomed to luxury despite her imprisonment, drawing attention to “her status as a prostitute.”⁹ Eroticized gloves, as Hutchings-Goetz argues, embody the eighteenth-century fear of fetishism, reflecting as “the desire for an intimate, tactile relationship with things” that was deemed “a threat to modern sociability.”¹⁰ Taken together, these three tokens map a trajectory of Moll’s gradual moral decay: from gullible innocence, through theatrical seduction, to obsessive fetishism, forming a coherent visual lexicon of vice. In a similar vein, the shattering of china in Plate 2 not only literalizes Moll’s own self-destruction but also allegorizes the fragility of a society that prizes surface refinement over robust virtue. The collision of feminine extravagance and Chinese porcelain thus becomes an indictment of a national culture drifting from its moral foundations.

This feminization of Chinese porcelain in the eighteenth century is what David Porter sees as an ideographic model of cross-cultural representation that inverts earlier paradigms of Chinese authority. As Porter notes, the predominant genres of representing China shifted from “scholarly writings”—most notably Jesuit tracts dating roughly 1600-1740—to the aesthetics embodied in the “decorative arts,” roughly 1675-1775. Porter traces this dominant, aestheticized representation of China across Restoration and eighteenth-century English literature, from William Wycherley and Alexander Pope to John Gay and William Beckford.¹¹ As Porter argues, allusions to chinoiserie deconstructed the myth of Chinese authority that Jesuit missionaries and linguists had built—grounded in rational script, Confucian orthodoxy, and stable order—by turning Chinese imperial and philosophical authority into shallow decorative motifs and replacing them with chaotic, meaningless, sensually pleasurable exotic fantasies. As a result, whereas Jesuit missionaries and European philosophers once sought in China’s language and religion a stable, legitimizing ground of meaning, the consumers and critics of chinoiserie reveled in the surface play, anarchic proliferation,

⁹ Tracey Hutchings-Goetz, “The Glove as Fetish Object in Eighteenth-Century Fiction and Culture,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 31, no. 2 (2019): 328.

¹⁰ Hutchings-Goetz, “The Glove,” 336.

¹¹ David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 137.

and sheer illegitimacy of exotic signs.¹² In this light, the feminization of Chinese porcelain, as an emblem of superficial indulgence and playful otherness, signals a broader shift in Europe's engagement with China: from a pursuit of authoritative knowledge to an aesthetic reframing of China's illegitimacy, a move that projects European anxieties onto an imagined China to shore up Europe's own cultural legitimacy.

Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, expanding on Porter's account of chinoiserie's fall from grace, shows how early eighteenth-century material culture and poetry first collaborated to construct, and then to unravel a modern female subjectivity centered on domestic displays of Chinese ornament.¹³ She compares two modes of construction of female subjectivity as exemplified by Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* and Jonathan Swift's scatological poetry, showing that while Pope celebrates women's power to impose a harmonious order through Chinese objects, Swift's mid-century satirical verses invert the aesthetic project, exposing the counterfeit nature of beautification by saturating it with filth, grotesque mixing, and scatology. Women and china are now mutually degrading, and the private sphere becomes a site of visceral disorder rather than harmonious display. Zuroski contends that this poetic upheaval marks a transition in eighteenth-century notions of selfhood, from "poetic self-management" defined by external display to "inward-looking forms of discipline."¹⁴ Whereas Porter attributes chinoiserie's shift from emblematic elegance to a symbol of irrationality to changing political-economic conditions, Zuroski argues that this negative transformation reflects a reconfiguration of subjectivity, which ultimately eclipses earlier positive associations between women and china.

However, the negative resonance between women and their consumption or collection of Chinese porcelain can sometimes be tempered by ambivalent associations that acknowledge women as active economic agents. Kowaleski-Wallace notes that women and their Chinese porcelain are sites onto which anxieties about mercantile

¹² Porter, *Ideographia*, 133-192.

¹³ Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 122-146.

¹⁴ Zuroski, *A Taste for China*, 146.

capitalism, orientalism, and gender are projected. She demonstrates that the china trope in eighteenth-century literature carries double resonance: it simultaneously figures women as commodities—fragile, surface-bound objects—and as consumers—agents with appetites for luxury. These twin images of women allowed contemporary writers to construct and contest female subjectivity amid the rise of consumer culture.¹⁵ While Kowaleski-Wallace shows that mapping “china” onto women endows them with brittleness, superficiality, and moral excess, she also sheds light on more ambivalent, and even positive resonances between women and porcelain by recognizing them as active consumers. The figure of “china-loving” woman can be deployed to indicate a shallow, materialistic subjectivity tied to urban consumer culture, but it also inadvertently admits her as an economic actor, a connoisseur, and a participant in transnational flows of goods and ideas.

In William Burnaby’s play *The Ladies Visiting-Day* (1701), the two female characters Lady Lovetoy and Fulvia engage in a discussion about the legitimacy of women’s pleasures in owning foreign servants and objects. Fulvia, a young lover who is currently confined for debt, initially criticizes women for preferring foreign men to their own countrymen, questioning “Why can’t our Diversions be more solid, and our Pleasures more reasonable?”¹⁶ Fulvia’s call for “solid” pleasures echoes the conventional attack on women’s frivolity, implicitly endorsing the same patriarchal hierarchy that devalues female activities. Lady Lovetoy, on the other hand, is a wealthy widow who enjoys worldly pleasures and exotic novelties. She defends her taste for having servants of different nations as a way to experience the rarity of different cultures. She further confronts the monopoly of men in controlling “all the Pleasures of Life” (24), and claims that purchasing exotic objects can be a substitute for traveling and experiencing the world firsthand:

Ful. [...] I wonder your Ladyship, that has such a Passion for those Parts of the World, never had the Curiosity to see ’em.

¹⁵ Kowaleski-Wallace, “Women, China, and Consumer Culture,” 153-167.

¹⁶ William Burnaby, *The Ladies Visiting-Day. A Comedy*, 3rd ed. (London: Printed for G. Strahan, and B. Lintot, 1733), 23. The play was first published in 1701 and a second edition in 1708. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Lov. Alas! the Men have usurp'd all the Pleasures of Life, and made it not so decent for our Sex to Travel; but I manage it as *Mahomet* wou'd ha' done his Mountain, and make as much of 'em come to me as I can. Every Morning the pretty Things of all these Countries are brought me, and I'm in love with every Thing I see. (24)

Lady Lovetoy's justification of women's consumption of "the pretty Things" from foreign lands implies that exotic objects can be liberated from their role as a marker of national identity and instead act as an intermediary that connects women to the wider world beyond their chambers. In doing so, she claims access to global cultures on her own terms, exploiting consumer channels to overcome gendered limitations. In this sense, what critics read as moral excess is also the nascent stirrings of female consumer agency: a woman who orders, compares, and displays exotic goods, in effect, enacts a form of economic and cultural agency. As Stacey Sloboda argues in her discussion of porcelain in the Duchess of Portland's china cabinets, porcelain collecting and display were social acts that produced and signified feminine subjectivity, forging bonds of friendship, patronage, and intellectual exchange. She contends that such objects act as "catalysts for discourse," serving as an additional location for "sociable conversations, knowledge production, and the formation of subjectivities."¹⁷ Her research illuminates the positive resonance of women's engagement with porcelain, showing how porcelain serves as a mediating material that interweaves global trade networks and feminine sociability to shape eighteenth-century taste and knowledge through domestic display, curiosity, and commerce.

Drawing on both the material history of porcelain production and the female practices of porcelain collecting, this chapter re-examines the feminization of Chinese porcelain by moving beyond its typical association with feminine fragility and vanity—a familiar misogynist critique of women's attachment to the ornamental—but rather attending to the plasticity and mutability of porcelain, qualities that were reframed in its literary representations as catalysts of women's creative engagement with taste,

¹⁷ Stacey Sloboda, "Displaying Materials: Porcelain and Natural History in the Duchess of Portland's Museum," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 464.

commerce and knowledge production. As Chinese porcelain moved from mysterious rarity to commonplace commodity, it underwent not only a process of disenchantment but also an ongoing reimagination in the hands of English writers, collectors and craftsmen. They leveraged its mutable, plastic nature, particularly in the practice of mounted porcelain, to recast each piece of Chinese porcelain as a metonymic vessel, a porous repository in which meanings and identities are continually written, erased, and reshaped. In eighteenth-century literary representations, such mutable materiality of Chinese porcelain is framed as an “agreeable confusion”¹⁸ that enables women’s performative form of knowledge and new social possibilities. In Joseph Addison’s *Spectator* 37 (1711) and Sarah Scott’s *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762), the literary juxtaposition of Chinese porcelain and books, transforms the hybrid aesthetics of porcelain from a supposedly disordering taste into a material epistemology and narrative device. Furthermore, the recurring pairing of shells and Chinese porcelain in eighteenth-century women’s collection, exemplified by Mary Delany’s shellwork and her disordered china closet, demonstrates how the unstable, porous semiotics of porcelain could be used to challenge and rewrite aesthetic and epistemic hierarchies, turning exotic objects into active sites of aesthetic experimentation and cultural critique.

Enchantment Unbound: The Mutable Materiality of Chinese Porcelain

As Chinese porcelain became increasingly available in Britain from the mid-seventeenth century, Britons began to demystify its manufacturing, overlaying their own techniques onto what once seemed miraculous. Jane Hwang Degenhardt shows that late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Italian paintings linked Chinese porcelain with “Christian and pagan deities,” a visual association that conferred “exalted virtues” and preserved its aura of wonder.¹⁹ However, porcelain’s gradual commodification and the disenchantment of its magical origins stripped Chinese porcelain of wonder, paving the way for the eighteenth-century English reinterpretation of porcelain as brittle and

¹⁸ Mary Delany, *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mrs. Delany*, ed. Lady Llanover and Sarah Chauncery Woolsey (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1879), 2:153.

¹⁹ Jane Hwang Degenhardt, “Cracking the Mysteries of ‘China’: China(Ware) in the Early Modern Imagination,” *Studies in Philology* 110, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 136.

superficial. According to Henry Hobhouse's research, the quantity of imported chinaware surged dramatically between the 1660s and the 1750s.²⁰ The rapid expansion of the porcelain trade marked a turning point when the British began to import customized porcelain that was tailored to their tastes and needs. From 1729 onwards, Chinese porcelain exports entered the era of exporting in response to foreign orders.²¹ Porcelain goods in China were manufactured and designed exclusively for the European market. Decorated with European designs, chinaware was turned into a blank canvas that was covered with English culture. When kaolin (a special clay vital to porcelain manufacture) was discovered in Cornwall in 1754,²² British manufacturers were finally able to produce porcelain that could rival Chinese porcelain in translucence, whiteness, and tenacity. As Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall have shown, once Europeans had learned to reproduce Chinese porcelain for themselves, and especially after the establishment of Meissen (1710) and other European manufactories, porcelain ceased to inspire awestruck admiration and instead became a vehicle for criticizing both the products and their makers. Where earlier travelers had linked Chinese technical mastery to a superior civilization, eighteenth-century observers increasingly portrayed Chinese artisans as unoriginal, their goods as slipshod, and their society as corrupt or backward.²³ Gerritsen and McDowall observe that across the century, whether in *Robinson Crusoe*, official reports of naval voyages, or accounts of the Macartney

²⁰ It is estimated that the value of chinaware imported to England was only £10 in 1669, while the figure had grown to £2,675 by 1693. Only twenty years later, the total value of all imported chinaware had increased nearly tenfold to £20,815, reaching its peak in the first half of the eighteenth century.²⁰ Henry Hobhouse's estimation of the volume of imported chinaware, which is backed by records from specific East India Company ships, is another argument in favor of the popularity of ceramics. He reckons that approximately five million pieces of Chinese porcelain were imported from China to Europe on an annual basis during the first half of the eighteenth century. See Henry Hobhouse, *Seeds of Change: Six Plants That Transformed Mankind* (New York: Harper & Row, 2005), 136.

²¹ 万钧, “东印度公司与明清瓷器外销,” *故宫博物院院刊*, no.04, (2009): 119. [Wan Jun, “The East India Company and the Export of Ming and Qing Porcelain,” *The Palace Museum Journal*, no. 04 (2009): 119.]

²² Geoffrey A. Godden, *The Concise Guide to British Pottery and Porcelain* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1990), 16.

²³ They examine eighteenth-century travel narratives such as John Bell's *Journeys from St Petersburg to Peking*, Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins's *A Voyage Round the World*, and Lord Macartney's *An Embassy to China*. See Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall, “Material Culture and the Other: European Encounters with Chinese Porcelain, ca. 1650-1800,” *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (March 2012): 105-112.

Embassy, British writers repeatedly dismiss Chinese ceramic achievements as derivative, imitative, or easily surpassed by European science.²⁴ Eighteenth-century travel accounts trace a clear trajectory: once porcelain was no longer a miraculous Chinese secret, Britons recast it as proof of Chinese stagnation, transforming admiration into irritation and distrust.

This material disenchantment was deeply entwined with cultural anxieties about authority, taste, and gender. In visual and literary representations of the period, the passion women displayed for china, whether as collectors, decorators, or consumers, was frequently coded as emasculating, a sign of male impotence before the delicate allure of porcelain. Yet these familiar misogynist critiques overlooked the very qualities that made porcelain so compelling: its plasticity and mutability. Far from signifying fragility or ephemerality, these qualities enabled porcelain objects to serve as metonymic vessels, porous and pliable repositories in which cultural meanings, personal identities, and aesthetic values could be inscribed, erased, and rewritten. As Chinese porcelain evolved from a rare marvel to a commonplace commodity in Britain, it was both disenchanted—losing its exotic mystique—and continually reinvented through the interventions of English writers, collectors, artisans, and consumers. Revisiting those earliest encounters when Chinese porcelain entered Britain as something miraculously uncrackable, materially malleable, and conceptually mutable foregrounds its plasticity—the very capacity to be reshaped both physically and symbolically, and in doing so to transcend reductive tropes of feminine fragility and vanity.

William Wycherley's 1675 comedy *The Country Wife* offers one of the earliest sexualized representations of china in English literature. By casting Mr. Horner, a notorious rake, as a faux-eunuch whose impotence is the key to his adulterous intrigues, Wycherley unsettles any fixed associations between china, gender, and power. The husband, Sir Jasper, is convinced that his wife needs Mr. Horner's help to select porcelain pieces. Even after he actually caught his wife at Horner's house, not at the

²⁴ Gerritsen and McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other," 106-111.

china shop as he had previously assumed, he remains utterly confident in her fidelity.²⁵ His unshaken trust, despite clear evidence to the contrary, underscores the play's satiric dismantling of conventional masculine authority. The china scene stages a triple barter of porcelain, phallus, and marriage:

(Enter LADY FIDGET with a piece of china in her hand, and HORNER following)

LADY FIDGET. And I have been toiling and moiling for the prettiest piece of china, my dear.

HORNER. Nay, she has been too hard for me, do what I could.

MRS. SQUEAMISH. O Lord, I'll have some china too. Good Master Horner, don't think to give other people china, and me none. Come in with me too.

HORNER. Upon my honour, I have none left now.

MRS. SQUEAMISH. Nay, nay, I have known you deny your china before now, but you shan't put me off so. Come.

HORNER. This lady had the last there.

LADY FIDGET. Yes, indeed, madam, to my certain knowledge, he has no more left.

MRS. SQUEAMISH. Oh, but it may be he may have some you could not find.

LADY FIDGET. What, d'ye think if he had had any left, I would not have had it too? For we women of quality never think we have china enough.

HORNER. DO not take it ill, I cannot make china for you all, but I will have a roll-wagon for you too, another time.

MRS. SQUEAMISH. Thank you, dear toad. (4.3.169-187)

In this scene, although Horner is the one who initiates the seduction, it is Lady Fidget's frantic, almost physical exertion—her “toiling and moiling,” that is, her laborious, restless fussing and wrangling over choosing “the prettiest piece of china” (4.3.169-

²⁵ William Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, ed. James R. Ogden (New York: Norton, 1991), 4.3.77-103. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene and line number.

170)—that turns the tables. Horner’s response that “she has been too hard for me” brings his own supposed eunuchism crashing into question (4.3.171). When Mrs. Squeamish, innocent of the jest, asks for more of his “china,” Horner’s lament, “I cannot make china for you all” (4.3.185), exposes his symbolic impotence in the face of ravenous female desire. Scholars have shown how the china exchange between Lady Fidget, Horner, and Mrs. Squeamish stages a sexually charged commentary on desire, gender roles, and the moral economies of Restoration England. Kowaleski-Wallace argues that Wycherley establishes a connection between china as a commodity and “Horner’s irrepressible phallicism.” Lady Fidget’s indiscriminate pursuit of both “expensive china” and “Horner’s body” contributes to shaping her position as “a desiring subject.”²⁶ In this sense, the china closet becomes a miniature marketplace, where Lady Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish trade innuendo as they compete for Horner, much as they would for a piece of porcelain, thereby satirizing both consumer culture and marital property relations. Building on the same scene, Porter sees china as a talismanic emblem of extravagant, illegitimate sexuality, “a porcelain priapus” that stages rampant cuckoldry.²⁷ For Porter, this moment prefigures later eighteenth-century attacks on chinoiserie, expressing a fear that Chinese sensuality would corrupt classical aesthetics and moral codes, privileging immediate pleasure over disciplined taste.²⁸ Both Kowaleski-Wallace and Porter read this exchange as a satirical marketplace of desire: fine, “hard” china becomes a stand-in for the male body, and women’s scramble to possess it mocks both their moral decay and luxury consumerism. Zuroski, on the other hand, argues that the scene’s true power lies in its theatrical “double entendre”: only one piece of china ever appears, leaving the rest to the imagination. As Zuroski interprets, the play makes the audience into collaborators in a private fantasy in which Sir Jasper remains innocently fixated on literal china, while readers, like Lady Fidget, are invited to conjure Horner’s sexual performance behind closed doors.²⁹ Zuroski highlights how Wycherley dramatizes the workings of the

²⁶ Kowaleski-Wallace, “Women, China, and Consumer Culture,” 156.

²⁷ Porter, *Ideographia*, 182.

²⁸ Porter, *Ideographia*, 184.

²⁹ Zuroski, *A Taste for China*, 83.

“double entendre” to expose the power and peril of the imagination. Where Kowaleski-Wallace and Porter identify a singular, fixed association of sexuality, Zuroski argues that Chinese porcelain’s very multiplicity and conceptual elasticity made it an ideal figure for negotiating the boundary between reason and imagination. This mutability allows porcelain to slip between images of masculine potency and feminine fragility, and even non-reproductive or artificial sexuality. In Wycherley’s writing, then, china is far more than a luxury good or a static symbol of feminine virtue or vice. Its very mutability mirrors the fluidity of sexual and social identities: Horner’s feigned impotence, Lady Fidget’s sexual voracity, and Mrs. Squeamish’s naivete all play out on the small stage of the china closet, transforming the domestic sphere into a battleground where male authority, female desire, and the boundaries of gender are perpetually negotiated and re-fashioned.

This very mutability of china as a trope for shifting sexual and social identities dovetailed with the European understanding of porcelain’s mysterious transformations. As Robert Finlay observes, in the Chinese lore about pottery, the kiln is an enchanted crucible in which simple clay, an earthly substance fused with water and fire, undergoes almost magical “furnace transformations” in ways too subtle or spectacular to foresee. Song-era connoisseurs distinguished between two kinds of “kiln transmutations.” The rarest occurred when the fire altered “the shape of the molded clay or produced an object with supernatural properties,” while the more common instances, though still astonishing, involved dramatic color shifts or the spontaneous emergence of imagery in the glaze.³⁰ This mutable materiality—porcelain’s blend of exquisite delicacy and uncanny resilience—struck European missionaries as nothing short of miraculous. By the time Matteo Ricci (1552-1610)—the Italian Jesuit who helped open sustained cultural exchanges between China and Europe—was active in China, Europeans already prized Chinese porcelain for its wafer-thin elegance, even though its secrets of production remained unknown. Ricci himself was astonished by its ability to carry piping-hot food: “This porcelain, too, will bear the heat of hot foods without cracking

³⁰ Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 37.

and, what is more to be wondered at, if it is broken and sewed with a brass wire it will hold liquids without any leakage.”³¹ Porcelain’s paradoxical fragility and mysterious properties became a powerful trope of the mutable processes by which gender, taste, and commodity culture were constructed. It reminds us that, like the clay in the kiln, female subjectivities framed through the metaphor of porcelain, acquired their significance through shaping, interpretation, and transformative agency.

Early modern Europeans also understood porcelain as both natural and artificial, a mediating material that could bring together disparate specimens into a unified display of worldly curiosities. For a very long time, Europeans struggled to uncover the secrets of porcelain manufacturing. A widely believed fallacy was that the ingredients used to produce porcelain had to be buried underground for a hundred years. The fallacious explanation of porcelain production dates back to the 1550s when the two prominent Italian scholars, Gerolamo Cardano and Julius Caesar Scaliger engaged in a heated discussion about the nature, origin, and manufacturing technique of porcelain. Cardano asserts that “it is certain that porcelain is likewise made of a certain juice which coalesces underground, and is brought from the East.”³² While Scaliger and Cardano dispute the source material of porcelain—eggshells, and shellfish, according to Scaliger—they concur that, whatever their source, its resilience could not be attributed to the high-temperature firing of clay in a kiln alone. They believe it must have included other natural substances, such as shells or some kind of liquid component. As Scaliger explains:

Eggshells and the shell of umbilical shellfish (named porcelains, whence the name) are pounded into dust, which is then mingled with water and shaped into vases. These are then hidden underground. A hundred years later they are dug up, being considered finished, and are put up for sale [...] They are buried every year and the dates are marked in calendars, from which they know when

³¹ Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583-1610*, trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), 15. The discussion of Ricci’s recounting of Chinese porcelain in his journal also see Gerritsen and McDowall, “Material Culture and the Other,” 93-94; Degenhardt, “Cracking the Mysteries of ‘China’,” 151-152.

³² R. W. Lightbown, “Oriental Art and the Orient in Late Renaissance and Baroque Italy,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32, no. 1 (1969): 230.

to dig up those which are mature. The best are bought from the region of China.³³

These wild theories that porcelain was made from cowrie shells, and matured underground for generations, cast porcelain as a hybrid substance: part clay and shell, part kiln-fired vessel. These mysterious fallacies granted porcelain a liminal status within sixteenth-century collections of curiosities (*Kunstammer*). The *Kunstammer* collection becomes the cultural space that made porcelain's paradoxical hybridity visible and meaningful. According to Matthew Martin, Samuel Quiccheberg's 1565 *Inscriptiones vel tituli theatri amplissimi* presents a framework for the ideal cabinet of curiosities, organizing its contents into distinct categories—*naturalia*, *artificialia*, and *exotica*—that mirror the intellectual order of the time.³⁴ Porcelain, in this context, defies easy classification by straddling all three realms: its manufacture is human artifice, yet its materiality parallels natural clays and minerals, and its foreign origin renders it exotic.

Later female collectors played up this ambiguity and hybridity. In the frontispiece to the auction catalog of the Duchess of Portland's museum, Sloboda notes that porcelain vessels were often arranged alongside shells and other natural curiosities. These juxtapositions, as Sloboda argues, emphasize porcelain's dual nature: its forms both imitating and indexing the natural world even as they remained crafted artifacts. By occupying both *naturalia* and *artificialia*, porcelain served as a conceptual bridge within cabinets of curiosities, and later, Enlightenment museums, linking nature and art.³⁵ In doing so, porcelain embodied a broader discourse of sociable femininity and material cosmopolitanism: glossy vessels that could circulate in elite drawing rooms as tokens of worldly taste and scientific wonder. Porcelain's mysterious production and its hybrid, mutable materiality, in this sense, made it far more than a decorative luxury. It bridged the natural and the artificial, the exotic East and the cultured West, science and

³³ Lightbown, "Oriental Art," 231.

³⁴ Matthew Martin, "'A Stone Called *Pourcellaine*': Chinese Porcelain and Early Modern Natural History," in *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean*, ed. Beatrice Faluccci, Emanuele Giusti, and Davide Trentacoste (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2024): 215-216.

³⁵ Sloboda, "Displaying Materials," 458, 467-468.

art, emerging as the perfect emblem of an era fascinated by a cosmopolitan engagement with global trade.

Moreover, when chinaware first arrived in Britain in the early sixteenth century, it began to undergo a physical alteration that provides insight into the early modern conceptions of porcelain as a malleable substance. British silversmiths and collectors encased fragile Chinese porcelain in silver-gilt mounts, adapting them into forms more familiar to European tastes and routines.³⁶ This pragmatic intervention not only protected brittle rims and added functional elements such as handles, lids, and feet, but also asserted a new narrative: porcelain was neither wholly natural nor purely artificial, but an interplay of both. As Martin observes, mounting Chinese porcelain in silver-gilt placed these vessels squarely at the crossroads of *naturalia*, *artificialia*, and *exotica* within the early modern *Kunstkammer*. Gilded mounts rendered the ceramic a “*naturalia*” specimen by likening it to hardstone, while their craftsmanship underscored human ingenuity; and by overlaying Chinese shapes with European metals, they elevated these imports into coveted “*exotica*,” expressions of princely taste and global reach.³⁷ In this sense, this mounting practice reveals how early modern Europe actively reshaped and redefined Chinese porcelain to articulate emerging philosophies of nature, artifice, and power.

Although mounting porcelain had a brief, utilitarian surge in its native China—driven not by aesthetic preferences, but by the need to conceal imperfections from novel production techniques³⁸—it flourished in Britain as a mark of refinement. The earliest

³⁶ In a study to examine mounted oriental porcelain in France, Francis J. B. Watson and Gillian Wilson draw a similar conclusion that “in the eighteenth century the main reason for setting these oriental objects in mounts of European design was to naturalize them to the decoration of French interiors of the period, i.e. to modify their exotic character by giving them a quasi-French appearance.” See Watson and Wilson, *Mounted Oriental Porcelain in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (California: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1982), 1.

³⁷ Martin, “‘A Stone Called *Pourcellaine*’,” 213-215.

³⁸ This innovative technique, known as “inverted firing” (*Fushao* in pinyin), increased the output and even overcame the issue of porcelains’ propensity for deformation, but it caused a defect in porcelain, leaving the mouth edge of porcelain unglazed. In order to make up for this flaw, the mouth edge is then mounted with a gold, silver or copper rim. It emerged during the Tang Dynasty, flourished in the Northern Song Dynasty, fell out of favor in the Southern Song Dynasty, and almost disappeared after the Yuan Dynasty. See 陈南, “理想中的‘China’——欧洲后镶金的中国瓷器发展源流概述,” *中国艺术*, no 02, (2022): 4. [Chen Nan, “Imaginary ‘China’: The Development History of Redecoration of the Mounted Chinese Porcelains in Europe,” *Chinese*

piece of mounted porcelain in England can be dated back to 1570, when an English merchant, Samuel Lennard, mounted “a porcelain cup with a greyish blue glaze” with silver-gilt.³⁹ In her pioneering research on mounted Chinese porcelain in England, Louise Avery examines “five pieces of Chinese porcelain of the Wan Li period (1573-1619) with contemporary English silver-gilt mounts.”⁴⁰ Dated to the late sixteenth century, these porcelain pieces rank among the earliest documented examples of English silver mounts on Chinese porcelain. They offered valuable insights into the initial decades when English craftsmen first encountered and actively reworked imported porcelain wares. Moreover, Avery emphasizes that the mounts are “ambitious in point of design” and “unusually fine in workmanship,” and that the provenance inscribed by those mounts links four of the five pieces to William Cecil, a significant figure during Queen Elizabeth’s reign.⁴¹ That high-status ownership shows how elite English collectors quickly adapted exotic Chinese objects to English conventions. Avery’s study illuminates that, from the earliest phases of importation, English mounting practices reframed porcelain’s exotic traits and projected a distinctly English taste. Stacey Pierson similarly highlights that mounting was not an act of passive admiration; rather, it actively redefined the imported vessel into an entirely new work of luxury. As Pierson observes, the earliest mounted porcelain in England, the “Lennard Cup,” was originally a plain china bowl, but was reworked into a *tazza*—a shallow, wide dish or bowl set on a tall stem or pedestal—served as a display piece rather than for daily use. This transformation exemplifies how imported Chinese porcelain was elevated in both its function and social status. Moreover, the addition of metal fittings asserted European mastery and ownership, converting porcelain into a hybrid emblem of wealth, taste, and cosmopolitan reach.⁴²

By tracing the trajectory from delicate imports to silver-gilt hybrids, we see that

Art, no.2 (2022): 4.]

³⁹ Watson and Wilson, *Mounted Oriental Porcelain*, 4.

⁴⁰ Louise Avery, “Chinese Porcelain in English Mounts,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 2, no. 9 (May 1944): 266.

⁴¹ Avery, “Chinese Porcelain in English Mounts,” 266.

⁴² Stacey Pierson, “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History,” *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (March 2012): 16-17.

mounting was more than a decorative flourish but was also a celebration of the mutable materiality of Chinese porcelain. Mounting reshaped porcelain's form and purpose while asserting English ownership and taste. Circulated in elite collections, these mounted pieces, inscribed and curated, integrated imported Chinese porcelain into English connoisseurship. This practice thus served as the mechanism through which porcelain entered European consciousness as both a marvel of nature and a testament to human artifice. In reshaping Chinese porcelain, British connoisseurs and artisans did not simply adopt an exotic import but redefined it, cementing porcelain's place in British art and society through deliberate acts of adaptation, appropriation, and display. This mutable materiality of porcelain, far from reinforcing stereotypes of decorative frivolity, actively destabilizes the negative resonances drawn between women and Chinese porcelain. As I will explore in the following discussion, it sheds light on how female collectors and connoisseurs, often dismissed as passive consumers of luxury goods, engaged in complex acts of curation, interpretation, and reinvention. The practice of collecting, particularly when centered on objects like Chinese porcelain, thus emerges as a form of intellectual and creative labor, a site of experimentation in which women could negotiate questions of knowledge production and cultural exchange.

Mixt Furniture, Mutable Minds: Hybridity, Display, and Women's Libraries

In Joseph Addison's *Spectator* 37 (April 12, 1711), the fictional persona Mr. Spectator recounts his visit to the library of a wealthy widow named Leonora. The narrator catalogs the library's curious furnishing, where piles of China jars and tea-dishes are arranged among folios and wooden "Counterfeit Books":

At the End of the *Folio's* (which were finely bound and gilt) were great Jars of *China* placed one above another in a very noble piece of Architecture. The *Quarto's* were separated from the *Octavo's* by a pile of smaller Vessels, which rose in a very delightful Pyramid. The *Octavo's* were bounded by Tea Dishes of all Shapes Colours and Sizes, which were so disposed on a wooden Frame, that they looked like one continued Pillar indented with the finest Strokes of

Sculpture, and stained with the greatest Variety of Dyes.⁴³

Leonora's library represents a deliberate collapse of categorical boundaries. Bibliographic order merges with decorative arrangement, as imported Chinese porcelain becomes columns, pyramids, and pillars that both replicate and subvert the library's hierarchies. The inventory—Chinese porcelain, carved counterfeit books, grotesque ornaments of “Lions, Monkies, Mandarines, Trees, Shells”—refuses the neat oppositions of art and utility, nature and artifice. This is a hybrid interior, neither wholly grotto nor wholly library, a threshold the narrator concedes when confessing, “I was wonderfully pleased with such a mixt kind of Furniture [...] and did not know at first whether I should fancy myself in a Grotto, or in a Library” (73). Ros Ballaster interprets Addison's catalogue as transforming the library into a staged fiction—less a workshop of learning than a spectacle of taste. The counterfeit books and arrangement-by-size underscore the privileging of visible form over intellectual matter, rendering the female collection a scene of “conspicuous consumption, form without matter.”⁴⁴ Porter, while acknowledging, as Ballaster does, Addison's misogynistic satirical framing of feminine taste, reads that satire as an index of a real cultural arrangement: books and Chinese porcelain co-existed in elite women's rooms, and their juxtaposition helped produce feminized imaginative spaces Porter terms “gendered utopias.”⁴⁵ For Porter, Leonora's library illustrates a reciprocal resonance between books and porcelain in which they amplify each other's imaginative effects, together generating the resonant, gendered imaginings that shaped elite women's cultural life.

What Ballaster sees as a conspicuous collection in fact models an alternative epistemology, one that is rooted in hybridity, mutability, sensibility and performative display. The heterogeneous juxtaposition of books that the narrator observes—from translations of the classics (Dryden, Seneca) to sprawling French heroic and pastoral

⁴³ Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 37, April 12, 1711, 73, [Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online II](#). All apostrophes in the quotations are retained from the original text. Further references of *Spectator* are to this issue and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁴ Ros Ballaster, *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49.

⁴⁵ David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 57-59.

romances and courtly fiction (*Cassandra, Cleopatra, Astræa*), weighty philosophical and scientific treatises by Issac Newton and John Locke, and a clutch of more domestic or fashionable manuals such as spelling books, midwifery guides and conduct tracts (73-74)—enacts a promiscuous mingling of genres that resists neat classification. Addison’s amused, mildly didactic voice frames this hybridity both as an object of aesthetic marvel and a symptom of feminine frivolity: comic details of the bookshelf (a pin in *The Grand Cyrus*, a bottle of Hungary water beside a Prayer Book) invite both admiration and ridicule. Mr. Spectator admires the room’s novelty, calling it “very suitable both to the Lady and the Scholar” (73), but tempers that praise with a gentle rebuke: the books are “of little more use than to divert the Imagination” (74). The library thus risks becoming a grotto or cabinet of curiosities rather than a place of serious learning, revealing an aesthetic unease about the mingling of ornament and learning.

Yet Addison writes with a light, nuanced touch rather than blunt dismissal. The narrator observes that possessing Chinese objects provides the lady with a specific type of intellectual enjoyment comparable to that experienced when reading romances: “As her Reading has lain very much among Romances, it has given her a very particular Turn of Thinking, and discovers it self even in her House, her Gardens and her Furnisher” (74). Despite the narrator’s skepticism toward women’s reading preferences and the hybridity of the library, he acknowledges a symbiotic connection between material and intellectual pleasure, facilitated by the presence of Chinese imports. Ultimately he suggests that a wiser selection of books might nurture her judgment and temper her passions, voiced with a gentle corrective impulse: “the manner of a Lady’s Employing her self usefully in Reading shall be the Subject of another Paper, in which I design to recommend such particular Books as may be proper for the Improvement of the Sex” (74). This ambivalence between mockery of display and recognition of intellectual potential opens interpretive space where the “mixt” library can be read as a site of both constrained agency and inventive intellectual experiment. In Kathleen Lubey’s discussion of Addison’s aesthetics of imagination, she argues that Addison’s model of polite imaginative pleasure is inseparable from, and made intelligible by, eroticized metaphors and embodied responses. Erotic imagery and the language of bodily arousal,

she argues, are not marginal to Addisonian aesthetics, but serve as the conceptual tools through which early eighteenth-century writers articulated the workings of the imagination. Addison and later writers seek to discipline and redirect the imagination's bodily force, training readers to become self-aware, self-regulating spectators whose cultivated taste remains inseparable from the bodily impulses that animate it.⁴⁶ Instead of treating Addison as drawing a sharp line between moral-intellectual taste and sensuality, Lubey shows that intellectual pleasures in his work remain entangled with material pleasures, continuous in origin and sensation, and are differentiated more by management than by an ontological divide. From this light, the very hybridity that Mr. Spectator seeks to discipline embodies a counter-model of knowledge production—one that is sensory, relational, and materially staged—whose instability and mutability are precisely what make it generative for women's intellectual and social practices. In this sense, the lady's library becomes a performative space where knowledge is articulated not solely through reading, but also through the sensory, spatial, and global arrangement of objects.

Leonora's hybrid library is reimagined in the *Lady's Magazine* late in the century. A letter ostensibly penned by a female reader, given the fictional name of Prtilia, transforms the "mixt kind of Furniture" from a mildly patronizing male satire into a consciously assembled, curated female archive. Prtilia aligns herself firmly with Leonora: after musing about converting her dressing-room into a library that intermixes "china and ornaments" with books, an idea sparked by Addison's ladies' library, she falls asleep and dreams of visiting Leonora.⁴⁷ Fancy whisks her in a chariot to Leonora's house, where Leonora, who is graceful, slightly older, and romantically dressed, shows off a richly decorated room in which books are juxtaposed with china, busts, pictures, and plants: "her books were intermixed with china vases, &c. as the Spectator describes [...] the mantle-piece was adorned with pieces of shell work,

⁴⁶ Kathleen Lubey, "Erotic Interiors in Joseph Addison's Imagination," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 20, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 415-444.

⁴⁷ John Huddleston Wynne, ed., *The Lady's Magazine or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to Their Use and Amusement* (London: Printed for G. Robinson, 1778), 9:20-21. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

intermixed with tender young orange and myrtle plants, and hyacinth roots in glasses” (9:21). Unlike Addison’s Leonora, who is presented as an object of observation that the male narrator both admires and gently satirizes, in Prätalia’s dream, Leonora explains, curates, and defends her library by offering an alternative canon of female collection. Leonora explains that most of her books are by women: “You fancy my library must be reduced into a small compass; but look round and tell me, for the honour of our sex, whether there are not female publications sufficient for a female’s perusal” (9:21-22). Prätalia then proceeds to catalogue and praise female writers across history and genres (9:22). Where Addison’s Mr. Spectator suggests that women need guidance toward “useful” books, Prätalia redirects the judgment: her catalogue foregrounds women writers, both classical and contemporary, and the print infrastructures that sustain them, such as magazines, pocket-books, and other ephemera. The same assemblages of intermixing china and books that Mr. Spectator describes are reframed as evidence of an active print culture: shelves hold periodicals, pocket-books as journals, and collections as historical memory. In Prätalia’s dream of Leonora’s library, hybridity is not accidental clutter but a method of curation, record-keeping and intentional display.

That endorsement, however, is strategically calibrated. Prätalia uses familiar modesty tropes and nods to male authority— “notwithstanding my partiality to my own sex, as I have received no particular disgust from yours [...] Milton, Shakespeare, Young, Thomson [...] I too much revere” (9:23)—a concession that shields her claim from dismissal and makes it persuasive rather than polemical. Even the scene’s collapse into waking—the comic mishap that Prätalia’s head-dress “fell down, and with the fright, lest it should destroy some of the fine china jars and vases, broke the shadowy fabric of my vision” (9:23)—signals fragility: the celebration takes place inside a dream and within a social context that may not fully accept it. Taken together, the ambivalent admiration allows Prätalia to present Leonora’s library as a deliberate act of cultural self-fashioning. Hybridity becomes a performative proof of cultivated taste and cosmopolitan identity even as those same practices remain vulnerable to parody. Zuroski interprets this feminized, ornamented library as evidence of a broader epistemological shift in early eighteenth-century England. Chinese things are not

merely decorative but function as semiotic tools that participate in a Lockean epistemology whereby external objects are taken into the mind's ordering processes. This domestic ordering of foreign objects models the new way England imagines itself: a nation that knows and orders the world through taste and display, not royal and aristocratic descent.⁴⁸ In this sense, the lady's library, a domestic microcosm where imported Chinese porcelain and books are arranged into an intelligible aesthetic whole, functions as a representational device that signals a shift in the production of cultural authority. What at first appears as conspicuous female consumption reveals itself as a novel mode of seeing and ordering, one that uses imported Chinese porcelain and visual display to cultivate feeling, memory, and social identity. The ambivalent voice of both Mr. Spectator and Pratilia, far from simply condemning feminine taste, exposes the instability through which taste, sensibility and authority are negotiated through things Chinese. Recovering Addison's lady's library through its reimagination in the *Lady's Magazine* as epistemological practices sheds light on how women employ the multiplicity, hybridity and mutability of exotic objects to know the world and to articulate their intellectual and aesthetic innovations.

While Addison's narrator responds ambivalently to the hybridity of Chinese porcelain, seeing its mutability as a challenge to stable taxonomies of morality and aesthetics, Sarah Scott, in *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762),⁴⁹ seizes the very instability and variety that troubles Addison and reconceives it as productive in creating a female utopian community. Moving from the literal collection of Chinese porcelain in eighteenth-century cabinets, Scott transforms its mobility and hybridity into a governing metaphor and epistemological practice in *Millenium Hall*. The same aesthetics that makes porcelain circulate, classify, and confer taste are refigured as a narrative device through women who collect and display lives and thereby claim their agency. The Hall's landscape and the novel's inset biographies operate as collectible specimens whose labeling, juxtaposition and preservation perform intellectual work.

⁴⁸ Zuroski, *A Taste for China*, 54-56.

⁴⁹ Sarah Scott, *A Description of Millenium Hall*, ed. Gary Kelly (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995). Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

By making collecting a narrative and cognitive practice rather than a mere material activity, Scott makes variety and hybridity the novel's central principle, and the novel's inset stories function like a composite, mutable object whose assembled parts produce moral meaning, communal identity, and female authority.

In *Millenium Hall*, Scott presents a utopian vision of a secluded, all-female community that combines charitable work, education, and industrious domestic labor as an alternative to conventional marriage and genteel dependency. Critics agree that this female-centric utopia is constructed not only through dialogue and plot, but also through its material and spatial design, where landscape and objects function rhetorically in making the novel's utopia legible and persuasive. Crystal B. Lake notes that Scott's use of antiquarian discourse, including narrative framework, architectural monuments, preservation debates, and genealogies, repositions women within the "collection, investigation, and narration of Britain's material history."⁵⁰ Objects and monuments thus serve as evidence of female competence and continuity: stewardship of things becomes a claim to authority and historical belonging. Porter reads *Millenium Hall*'s spatial form alongside decorative material culture, notably exported Chinese porcelain, and finds a rhetorical and spatial homology. The figural scenes on Chinese porcelain, often featuring no male figures and confined within decorative borders, echo Scott's idyllic description of "protective walls of the cloistered community" where floral barriers, garden pavilions, and cultivated retreats mark withdrawal from public, male domains into a feminine sanctuary.⁵¹ Porcelain's miniature, idealized scenes, in this sense, mirror the Hall's enclosure and so reinforce Scott's representation of a female community that is complete, self-sufficient, and morally refined. With a similar focus on how Scott makes landscape and objects an active organizer of meaning, Nicolle Jordan argues that *Millenium Hall* ties women's agency to landownership and the landscape arts, though it does so in a way that mystifies and helps reproduce emergent capitalist relations.⁵² Jordan reads the landscape garden as Scott's device to

⁵⁰ Crystal B. Lake, "Redecorating the Ruin: Women and Antiquarianism in Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall*," *ELH* 76, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 662.

⁵¹ Porter, *The Chinese Taste*, 66-71.

⁵² Nicolle Jordan, *Prolific Ground: Landscape and British Women's Writing, 1690-1790*

demonstrate “the ladies’ qualification to oversee the entire operation of their community.” Gardening thus is a “synecdoche for wise governance.”⁵³ In this light, social relations and property are transmuted into an aesthetic product, a landscape that naturalizes landowner authority. Scott thus makes the landscape arts the central arena for female authority, where landscaping skills not only showcase women’s competence but also veil the Hall’s capitalist-inflected relations of property.⁵⁴ Taken together, Lake, Porter and Jordan, all show that collection and display are not mere aesthetics but pedagogical and political practices that naturalize female autonomy.

Building on their insights, I argue that where Addison parodies women for delighting in curious mixtures, Scott redeploys the eighteenth-century curatorial rhetoric of cabinets, collections, and display as a malleable discourse through which hybrid objects do not merely ornament female spaces but animate them. The landscape surrounding Millennium Hall and the architectural follies displayed inside the Hall practice the aesthetics of variety and mutability—an iconography that echoes Chinese porcelain and which Scott narratively reattributes to women rather than men. And crucially, the novel’s inset life-histories function as a textual “cabinet of curiosities” through which women’s diverse, fragmentary biographies become collectible, preservable, and instructive objects that enable readers’ moral reflection. The miscellaneous, non-chronological arrangement becomes a feminist mode of narration, one that reframes variety and hybridity as the foundations of a feminine utopia and asserts women’s agency in curating their own pasts.

Millennium Hall opens with a letter from the male narrator, Sir George Ellison,⁵⁵ and it is his landscape rhetoric that first situates the eponymous hall for the reader. Traveling through Cornwall with his companion Mr. Lamont, Ellison’s chaise breaks down miles from town; after sending for a smith, they leave the chaise and walk toward “an avenue of oaks” (56). Lured by shade, scent, and the beauty of the grounds, they

(Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2025), 81-113.

⁵³ Jordan, *Prolific Ground*, 103.

⁵⁴ Jordan, *Prolific Ground*, 103-113.

⁵⁵ The narrator’s name does not appear in *Millennium Hall*; he is identified as Sir George Ellison in Scott’s sequel *The History of Sir George Ellison* (1766).

stroll on and pass a pastoral sequence: a shepherd playing a flute and tending a flock, richly planted fields and hedgerows, well-kept pastures with fine cattle, neat hay-makers at work, and children helping in the fields with “an air of delighted emulation” (56-57). Ellison invokes classical pastoral—“we began to think ourselves in the days of Theocritus”—yet his pastoral is reworked by binding lyric scenery to cultivation, labor, and social order rather than to Arcadian idleness: “Their eyes sparkled with that spirit which health and activity can only give, and their rosy cheeks shewed the benefits of youthful labour” (57-58). More significantly, Ellison’s way of seeing is shaped as much by curatorial collection as by pastoral imagination. He repeatedly adopts the rhetoric of curatorial curiosity to frame his walk as an act of discovery: “Curiosity now prompted us to walk on” (56), and later, “Curiosity is one of those insatiable passions that grow by gratification; it still prompted us to proceed, not unsatisfied with what we had seen, but desirous to see still more of this earthly paradise” (58). This idea of curatorial curiosity, as Krzysztof Pomian argues in his discussion of early modern collections, is an impulse to make the world visible and knowable by compressing its diversity into a single, inspectable microcosm. As Pomian defines, curiosity is “a desire to see, learn or possess rare, singular, new things” that have “a special relationship with totality,”⁵⁶ and thus function as a means of attaining a comprehensible whole. Collectors and painters, he notes, attempt to “miniaturize the constituent parts of the world so the eye may take them all in at once.”⁵⁷ This reframes collecting from a random amassing of rarities into a purposeful practice aimed at achieving, or at least simulating, total apprehension.

Ellison’s stroll reads less like idle sightseeing than an act of curatorial collection. His detailed enumeration of flowers and the protection of ornamental plants by hedges and sweetbriar reads like cataloguing: “pinks, jonquils, hyacinths, and various other flowers, seemed to grow under their protection. Primroses, violets, lilies of the valley, and polyanthuses enriched such shady spots, as, for want of sun, were not well

⁵⁶ Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice 1500-1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991): 58-59.

⁵⁷ Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities*, 49.

calculated for the production of other flowers” (56-57). The hedges and sweetbriar that “protect” lower beds function like labeled drawers of a cabinet: they delimit and preserve; they mark items as worthy of inspection rather than mere wild growth. The grounds around the Hall, in this sense, are represented as a miniature world whose parts have been selected, arranged, and bounded so the beholder’s eye can apprehend their relations at a glance. That sense of curated totality, furthermore, is achieved through juxtaposition and hybridity: “The mixture of perfumes which exhaled from this profusion composed the highest fragrance, and sometimes the different scents regaled the senses alternately, and filled us with reflections on the infinite variety of nature” (57). In other words, the grounds’ unity is a constructed one, an intelligible whole produced by the display of singular, heterogeneous elements. The narrator’s tour of the landscape surrounding the Hall thus functions as a curatorial collection where beds, hedges and flowers are selected, framed, and juxtaposed to create a hybrid, varied, and coherent female-centered utopia.

Early morning in the day following his unexpected arrival, the narrator continues his stroll through Millenium Hall’s landscape garden, where Scott’s hybrid aesthetic becomes plain: interior cultivation and exterior design operate as intertwined forms of female instruction and care. Inside the Hall, a large saloon—lined with bookcases, an orrery and globes—hosts women and girls industriously occupied in translation, painting, carving, embroidery, and music (59); outside the Hall, flower-beds, shrubberies, and architectural prospects are “artfully mingled” and “ranged” with the same intent:

I first went into the gayest flower garden I ever beheld. The rainbow exhibits not half the variety of tints, and they are so artfully mingled, and ranged to make such a harmony of colours, as taught me how much the most beautiful objects may be improved by a judicious disposition of them. Beyond these beds of flowers rises a shrubbery, where every thing sweet and pleasing is collected. [...] Behind the shrubbery is a little wood, which affords a gloom, rendered more agreeable by its contrast with the dazzling beauty of that part of the garden that leads to it. In the high pale which encloses this wood I

observed a little door, curiosity induced me to pass through it. (64-65)

The garden is explicitly hybrid—part spontaneous profusion, part careful composition—and that doubleness mirrors the Hall itself: a place where cultivated taste and learned curiosity (the orrery, globes, books) coexist with productive, reforming labor. As Suzanne Stewart notes, Scott invites the reader to see those distinctions as “permeable”: interior cultivation and exterior arrangement are two facets of a feminine utopian community.⁵⁸ Stewart argues that Scott creates a tension between an open, detached, male gaze that characterizes the eighteenth-century picturesque and a network of enclosed, circular spaces that structure Millenium Hall’s social life. Those enclosures are designed to produce social cohesion, moral reform, and a distinctively feminized political economy.⁵⁹ In the description of the garden, the progression from beds to shrubbery to wood and pale turns the landscape into a series of protective, circular architectures, places that hide, shelter, and enable intimate social labor. In this sense, Scott represents the Hall and its garden as complementary sites of workmanship and learning: the salon’s enclosed, collective labor has its analogue in a landscape that is composed for instruction as much as for pleasure.

Importantly, the iconography at Millenium Hall traffics in variety and mutability—an aesthetics familiarly associated with chinoiserie and the malleable surfaces of Chinese porcelain—yet Scott reattributes this protean aesthetics as the work of women’s hands. After seeing the garden, Ellison and Mr. Lamont are led by the ladies to “an exquisite piece of architecture,” an elegant “temple dedicated to solitude,” whose interior contains pictures of the allegorical figures Contemplation and Silence, birds and animals, moonlight scenes, all executed by the ladies themselves (69). Scott recasts classical and exotic motifs as outputs of female craftsmanship and interpretation: objects and images that would elsewhere mark masculine connoisseurship are here produced, curated, and displayed by women inside a domestic female community. Lake notes that the hybrid design fuses “classical aesthetics” with “British landscape,”

⁵⁸ Suzanne Stewart, “[B]eyond That Small Circle All is Foreign to Us’: Spatial and Social Cohesion in Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall*,” *Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22 (2003): 8.

⁵⁹ Stewart, “[B]eyond That Small Circle,” 1-14.

producing a setting that invites both “an academic and an emotional response, one suited especially to the learned women who were its architects.” This fusion makes women both interpreters of tradition and active makers of a domestic, national cultural landscape.⁶⁰ In this sense, Scott makes hybridity itself an instrument of female agency: hybrid objects—from the interior tableaux of bookcases, an orrery and a globe, diverse female labors like translating, painting or embroidery, to the deliberate pairing of classical reference and local topography—together animate the Hall. These things perform social work: they teach, assert historical and curatorial authority, and legitimate women as cultural mediators. Scott’s landscapes and architectural follies are thus not mere picturesque backdrops but extensions of a domestic cabinet: objects and arrangements enact a feminized curatorial practice that teaches, shelters, and reforms. The display at Millenium Hall is therefore double-edged, both aesthetic and administrative, and through it Scott transforms the rhetoric of collection and variety into an instrument of communal virtue and female cultural labor.

Moving from the Hall’s external and internal displays, the remainder of *Millenium Hall* unfolds as five linked vignettes where inset biographies operate as a textual cabinet of curiosities, a curatorial collection that is both mirrored in and framed by Scott’s descriptions of hybrid and feminine landscaped spaces. Landscape and narrative in the novel together create a spectacle of preservation, display, and ethical spectatorship. Scholars have shown that the spatial design of *Millenium Hall* aligns closely with the structure of its inset biographies. For example, Stewart traces the novel’s recurring enclosed natural settings—the avenue of oaks, banks under elms, gardens visible through bow windows—and argues these spatial configurations create intimate, privileged access that parallels the intimacy of the inset stories.⁶¹ Lake reads the shift from the “setting descriptions” to “inset individual histories” as a feminist antiquarian practice in which the inset stories transform women into collectible, preserved objects whose biographies testify both to national virtues and to men’s failures, with

⁶⁰ Lake, “Redecorating the Ruin,” 668-669.

⁶¹ Stewart, “[B]eyond That Small Circle,” 8-9.

architectural imagery linking textual preservation to spatial form.⁶² Katherine Nolan emphasizes the novel's curatorial dynamics, arguing that Scott tempts the reader's voyeuristic impulse—so that reading the vignettes can feel like “wandering through the halls of a museum, or viewing a curiosity cabinet full of women”—but then redirects that impulse away from sensational spectacle toward moral instruction.⁶³ In this sense, reading the inset female stories as a narrative cabinet of curiosities enacts a curatorial practice that not only preserves and showcases women's lives but also establishes them as the agents of cultural stewardship.

Scott assembles inset narratives of women's lives into a domestic cabinet of curiosities by curating a heterogeneous assemblage of female biographies, each fragment valuable on its own, and together forming a purposeful collection meant to be inspected, compared, and read for moral instruction. Rather than presenting one continuous, chronological history, Scott arranges framed vignettes as specimens: discrete lives depicted side by side so visitors and readers can draw lessons from contrast and resemblance. She converts private suffering into pedagogical exhibits that both empower women as knowers and conservators and reveal how identity is constructed through collectible, property-like traces. In doing so, the novel's miscellaneous, non-linear arrangement becomes a feminist mode of narration that forges a moral community out of variety, resilience, and female friendship. The sequence of founder narratives exemplifies this curatorial logic. The first long account follows Ellison's letter is Miss Mancel and Mrs. Morgan (formerly Miss Melvyn), whose misfortunes highlight virtue under trial, the emotional and legal hazards of dependence on marriage, and the consolations found in female friendship. Lady Mary Jones's history follows: a genteel upbringing undermined by recurring ill health, a thwarted betrothal, and family reversals that expose the precarity of genteel womanhood. Miss Selvyn emerges next as the Hall's steady domestic and pedagogical center; her backstory—family reversals, early responsibilities, mastery of household

⁶² Lake, “Redecorating the Ruin,” 672-673.

⁶³ Katherine Nolan, “Sarah Scott's Narrative ‘No Place’: Gazing and Utopia in *Millenium Hall*,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2021): 524.

management and needlework, and a gift for teaching—models the everyday labors that sustain the community. The sequence closes with Miss Trentham, orphaned and circulated among relatives until she inherits property and is shaped by the Hall’s elder women. Each tale concentrates on dependence, loss, skill, and mutual care, and each is presented as an exhibit that illuminates different facets of feminine experience.

Scott’s structural choice echoes an eighteenth-century intellectual habit that Sean Silver captures with the phrase “the mind is a collection.” Silver notes that eighteenth-century thought habitually mapped cognition into curated spaces such as libraries, cabinets, and galleries so that arrangement became a way of thinking and thinking itself took the form of arranging. According to Silver, collecting was not a merely material practice but “a performance of the root workings of intellection,” a means by which the mind could literally “find itself in place.”⁶⁴ Read this way, the inset lives are not mere storytelling devices but cognitive acts: each life is preserved, labeled, and displayed so that moral signification can be extracted. The Hall thus operates as a moral museum where private suffering and domestic virtue are externalized into objects that a female community can curate, teach from, and pass along. That curatorial turn performs double work. On one hand, it grants women epistemic agency: they collect, conserve, interpret, and use lives as instruments of communal knowledge and moral education. On the other hand, it represents hybridity and variety as productive. Cabinets of curiosities are valued for their miscellany, their resistance to one coherent, continuous history. Scott embraces that variety—paralleling the mutability of Chinese porcelain—and redeploys it as a feminist mode of narrative. Women’s diverse stories, far from ornamental miscellany, are the foundation of a female-centered utopian community.

Remaking the Surface: Shells, Porcelain, and Women’s Disordered China Closets

Addison’s uneasy narrator and Scott’s utopian curator both make the same perceptual move: what unsettles classical taste opens a space for a performative, object-centered mode of knowledge. The mutability of objects becomes a method in which meanings

⁶⁴ Sean Silver, *The Mind Is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 14.

are performed and reconfigured. Chinese porcelain, in its juxtaposition with shells, extends and intensifies this material epistemology. From the early modern period, shells and Chinese porcelain circulated together as paired objects whose shared material qualities and overlapping histories of movement and display made them mutually intelligible to European collectors. Anna Grasskamp traces how that intelligibility was produced: through linguistic conflation (for example, Marco Polo's initial use of the word *porcellane* to denote both shells and porcelain); perceived material likenesses, such as whiteness, translucence, and smoothness; shared routes of circulation and co-appearance in inventories like those of the Dresden *Kunstammer*; analogous decorative and mounting practices in which Asian shells were carved with birds and flowers, porcelains painted with similar motifs, and both frequently set in European metal mounts.⁶⁵ Martin extends this material connection by showing that the porcelain-shell relationship functioned as an interpretive system, not merely a linguistic curiosity: shells operated as conceptual models in natural history and alchemy, a way of reasoning about unfamiliar materials. Martin argues that invoking shells allowed European thinkers to place porcelain within preexisting frameworks of mineral generation and alchemical transformation. Neither simply pottery nor merely stone, porcelain was understood as occupying an intermediate zone between organic and mineral processes.⁶⁶ Martin's research shows how the shell-metaphor helped Europeans fold an unfamiliar Chinese material into their own categories of nature, craft and wonder. Emphasis on volatility and interchangeability thus transformed shells and porcelains into resonant objects: their tactile and aesthetic appeal not only invited sensual engagement but also helped explain their frequent juxtaposition in women's china closets. Susan Scott Parrish brings a complementary, gendered dimension to this material juxtaposition. Focusing on the practice of eighteenth-century Anglo-American female collectors, Parrish begins with Griffith Hughes's *Natural History of Barbados* (1750) to show that contemporaries explicitly recommended shellwork as a suitable

⁶⁵ Anna Grasskamp, "Shells, Bodies and the Collector's Cabinet," in *Conchophilia: Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Marisa Anne Bass, Anne Goldgar, Hanneke Grootenboer and Claudia Swan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 58-64.

⁶⁶ Martin, "Chinese Porcelain and Early Modern Natural History," 216-226.

scientific and artistic activity for women. Parrish argues that shellwork offered women a sanctioned medium for collecting, displaying, and transmitting New World materials, thereby contributing to the creation of new aesthetic forms.⁶⁷ Taken together, the porcelain-shell pairing did more than decorate cabinets of curiosity; instead, it unsettled tidy binaries between natural and artificial, local and exotic, scientific and aesthetic, while enabling women to incorporate the unfamiliar Chinese material of porcelain into new intellectual and cultural orders.

In the *World* 20 (September 20, 1753), a letter ostensibly written by a male reader, given the fictitious name Samuel Simple, and addressed to the paper's imagined editor, Adam Fitz-Adam, records a husband's complaint about his wife's compulsive spending on fashionable furnishings.⁶⁸ The narrator, a city gentleman who has inherited a country house and a fortune, describes how his wife refashions their home in the latest foreign modes—Chinese paper, shell-work, pyramids of china—turning it into a showhouse for visitors while driving him into mounting debt. The narrator meticulously describes a cabinet of curiosities as an assemblage of heterogeneous, exotic objects, creating a scene of an overload of ornament and artifice:

This is divided from the room by two twisted pillars, adorned with wreaths of flowers, and inter-mixed with shell-work. In this apartment there is a cabinet of most curious workmanship, highly finished with stones, gems and shells, disposed in such a manner as to represent several sorts of flowers. The top of this cabinet is adorned with a prodigious pyramid of china of all colours, shapes, and sizes.⁶⁹

The narrator converts a redecorated domestic interior into a theatrical cabinet of spectacles. The china pyramid and the floral shell veneers create a visual glut that privileges surface over narrative. Chinese porcelain is reduced to signs whose sole

⁶⁷ Susan Scott Parrish, "Women's Nature: Curiosity, Pastoral, and the New Science in British America," *Early American Literature* 37, no. 2 (2002): 195-245.

⁶⁸ *World* 20, September 20, 1753, 230-231. [British Periodicals Collection I](#). The contributors of the *World*, a weekly newspaper, include Edward Moore, Horace Walpole, E. S. Dallas, and Charles Hanbury Williams. The authorship of this number is unknown, but it is consistently written in character of Samuel Simple.

⁶⁹ *World* 20, 227-232.

function is to be looked at, indicating a mode of consumption that the essay seemingly treats as both aesthetic folly and social danger. Porter thus reads this juxtaposition of “meaningless abundance of hollow images” as evidence that chinoiserie reduces objects into empty signifiers, thereby subverting the “implicit ideal of legitimacy” of what it claims to represent.⁷⁰ Yet the material pairing of real shellwork with Chinese porcelain complicates and sometimes contradicts the charge that chinoiserie flattens meaning into spectacle.

Shells, by virtue of their tactile traces and grotesque affinities, resist simple assimilation into a decorative surface. In Zuroski’s reading of the representation of the nautilus cup across the long eighteenth century, a shell appears as a “restless” object that “refuses to settle into firm historical narratives or singular iconic significance.” Zuroski observes that once emptied of its living animal, the shell became a site for cultural projection, absorbing meanings from natural history and myth, undergoing technical reworking by Asian carvers and European mountmakers, and transforming into grotesque hybrids that resemble sea monsters. The material “restlessness” of shells, as Zuroski argues, exposes the limits of human narratives.⁷¹ Being materially exotic, formally hybrid, and semantically unstable, the shell unsettles the symbolic authority ordinarily claimed by collections and paintings. Read this way, the shell’s material vitality converts the china closet from a reliquary of taste into an experimental field in which objects perform rather than merely signify. The frequent juxtaposition of shells and Chinese porcelain in eighteenth-century women’s china closets therefore produces an unstable, porous semiotics that women collectors could and did exploit to rewrite aesthetic and epistemic hierarchies.

Significantly, the remaking of shell grottos becomes evidence of women’s visual regimes: the iterative practices of arranging, patching, assembling, and cultivating shells are a form of knowledge production—a way of reinterpreting objects and producing alternative epistemologies that a single act of making would obscure. As James Howley argues, creating a shell grotto functions as an epistemic practice of

⁷⁰ Porter, *Ideographia*, 192.

⁷¹ Eugenia Zuroski, “Nautilus Cups and Unstill Life,” *Journal* 18, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 1-25.

classification, transforming disordered matter into a coherent, culturally intelligible order.⁷² The interior imitation of nature performs a double motion: it makes the artificial seem alive and the natural seem staged, thereby unsettling straightforward aesthetic or scientific readings. Freya Gowrley similarly argues that eighteenth-century fragmentary culture—shells, glass shards, plant cuttings, and scraps of fabric—gains significance but through the act of “compiling, collecting, and reconstituting them into assemblages, potent with personal meaning, history, and emotional significance.”⁷³ Gowrley reads shellwork as occupying a middle ground between souvenir, craft, and domestic display, neither pure natural history specimen nor high art, but an intimate collage that tells a story about travel, memory, social ties, and “female-centric” labor.⁷⁴ Hannah Robertson’s *Young Lady’s School of the Arts* (first published in 1766) provides a clear example of domestic instruction that treats shellwork as a form of making knowledge. As a manual teaching women practical decorative skills and tastes for domestic ornament and cabinet curiosities, it includes a section on gathering and classifying shells. Robertson suggests that the beauty of a shell grotto depends on intelligent arrangement and craftsmanship, which reveal the shells’ hidden charms. She instructs that “Shell-flowers, when properly made, make very beautiful festoons, brackets, picture frames,”⁷⁵ and emphasizes that “the design is to show the hidden beauties under the crust, and not to destroy the natural beauty and polish of the inside of the shell” (11). She even encourages personal invention: “you may make a grotto to your taste of these things, with a variety of shells, pebbles, petrifications, moss, ore, and glass” (6). In this way, Robertson reveals how female collection, arrangement, and remaking of shells constitutes a mode of knowledge production that classifies, reveals, and reorders nature.

While shellwork clearly functions as an epistemic practice, teaching women to

⁷² James Howley, *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 26.

⁷³ Freya Gowrley, “Joineriana: The Small Fragments and Parts of Eighteenth-Century Assemblages,” in *Small Things in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Beth Fowkes Tobin, and Chloe Wigston Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 112.

⁷⁴ Gowrley, “Joineriana,” 117-120.

⁷⁵ Hannah Robertson, *The Young Ladies School of Arts*, 4th ed. (Coppergate: the New Printing-Office, 1777), 14. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

gather, sort, and display natural specimens, eighteenth-century writers also highlighted its ethical significance. In “Inscription on a Grotto of Shells at Crux-Easton,” Alexander Pope elevates rural, collective female shellwork above courtly artifice, portraying its “natural polish” as a moral and aesthetic virtue:

HERE shunning idleness at once and praise,
 This radiant pile nine rural sisters raise;
 The glitt’ring emblem of each spotless dame,
 Clear as her soul, and shining as her frame;
 Beauty which Nature only can impart,
 And such a polish as disgraces Art;
 But Fate dispos’d them in this humble sort,
 And hid in desarts what wou’d charm a court.⁷⁶

The opening line both announces the grotto and asserts a moral claim: the grotto functions as an emblem of the makers’ purity. The poem links visual spectacle to moral clarity rather than to vanity; to be “glittering” is to signal ethical rather than superficial worth. The paradox is that natural polish shames human workmanship and elevates the material authenticity of shells above manufactured ornament. The final line makes the social irony explicit: what might enchant a courtly audience is hidden in a rural retreat. By locating value in a rural grotto rather than in courtly display, the inscription critiques social hierarchies that occlude talent and virtue and frames the grotto as a site of displaced but true aesthetic and moral value. Far from endorsing shellwork as empty chinoiserie or mere exotic consumption, Pope reframes shell ornament as testimony to modest female creativity and authenticity. In doing so, the poem represents an alternative politics of display in which ornament becomes meaningful rather than hollow, and the shell grotto is claimed as a morally and epistemically productive space.

Pope’s celebration of the grotto’s moral virtue and Robertson’s training of the eye to classify push the logic of female making in a more radical direction. Rather than

⁷⁶ Alexander Pope, “Inscription on a Grotto of Shells at Crux-Easton, the Work of Nine Young Ladies,” in *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes* (London: J. Hughs for R. and J. Dodsley, 1758), 6:161-162.

simply preserving or revealing the “hidden beauties” beneath a shell’s crust, Delany’s china closet and her shellwork relish surfaces, juxtapositions, and the uncanny effects that come from recombining heterogeneous pieces. A recurring feature of her rooms and closets is a striking material pairing: Chinese porcelain set alongside arranged shells. In a 1745-1746 letter to Mrs. Dewes, she describes a small household project that makes her practice explicit: “I am making some little brackets such as Mr. Bateman's, but instead of gilding them I cover them with shells; I design to have eight of them for my closet, to hold little pieces of China.”⁷⁷ That detail announces a persistent logic in her collecting where porcelain, shells, and other exotic curios are not treated as stable tokens to be slotted into a moral taxonomy, but as materials whose patterned surfaces, accidental fits, and repeated permutations produce aesthetic effects in their own right—fantastic combinations, grotesque metamorphoses, and playful distortions that resist tidy narrative or teleological reading.

For Delany, her closet is not simply storage but a workplace where objects are reworked, arranged, and staged. In a subsequent 1750 letter to Mrs. Dewes, Delany updates her on current decorating and collecting efforts and sketches a design for her closet:

I am going to make a very comfortable closet; — to have a dresser, and all manner of working tools, to keep all my stores for painting, carving, gilding, &c.; for my own room is now so clean and pretty that I cannot suffer it to be littered with litter, only books and work, and the closet belonging to it to be given up to prints, drawings, and my collection of fossils, petrifications, and minerals. [...] In the middle of the closet a deep pitch with shelves, where I shall put whatever china I think too good for common use, but trifling and insignificant is my store-room to what yours is! Mine fits only an idle mind that wants amusement, yours serves either to supply your hospitable table, or gives cordial and healing médicines to the poor and the sick.⁷⁸

Delany’s assemblages foreground the manual processes of “painting, carving, and

⁷⁷ Delany, *The Autobiography and Correspondence*, 1:329.

⁷⁸ Delany, *The Autobiography and Correspondence*, 1:381.

gilding” that alter surfaces and produce new visual effects, while their juxtaposition and reordering render the objects themselves active agents. Prints and drawings sit alongside “fossils, petrifications, and minerals,” while a central “deep pitch” will hold a variety of china collections. Delany’s description of china as “too good for common use” also revalues the exotic object by removing it from everyday function and placing it in a speculative economy of display and experiment. In this way, her seemingly disordered closet reveals a surface logic that prioritizes transformation and diversity over ethical exemplarity. Moreover, her brief apology for seeming “idle” performs a tactical modesty. Set against her catalogue of tools and activities, what she calls “amusement” is in fact skilled, iterative labor that transforms objects into new aesthetic configurations. Where Mrs. Dewes’s closet operates as a pragmatic storeroom for hospitality and care, Delany reimagines the closet as a site of aesthetic invention and material experimentation rather than social provision or domestic utility. In this sense, Delany’s domestic labor becomes a mode of cultural critique, showing how material form, repetition, and surface play can unsettle hierarchical taste, destabilize provenance, and redefine value. Jo Dahn, for example, describes Delany’s domestic display as an “objectscape” that structures everyday behavior, indexes social relations of class and gender, and helps produce subjectivity. Using Delany’s letters as a case study, Dahn argues that Delany actively assembled ceramics, often paired with shells, into a kind of self-portrait and a practice of feminine community, not simply as a passive consumption of fashion. As Dahn observes, in Delany’s china closet, “the china took its place amongst a series of arrangements of many different sorts of objects, but was most closely associated with shells.”⁷⁹ Through this pairing, Delany curates a feminine self, a network of female relations, and a private objectscape in which shells and china together perform display, pedagogy and inheritance.

At the same time, the heterogeneity and shifting valuations of shells also produced the cultural and intellectual resonances of her collection. In Kristina Decker’s analysis of Delany’s shellwork from the 1740s to 1760s, she finds that shellwork and collecting

⁷⁹ Jo Dahn, “Mrs. Delany and Ceramics in Objectscape,” *Interpreting Ceramics* 1 (2000), <http://interpretingceramics.com/issue001/delany/delany.htm>.

were central to how Delany practiced Enlightenment values, combining aesthetic pleasure, scientific classification, sociability, and memory. Significantly, Decker finds that the “unfixed nature of shells” in Delany’s cabinet allowed continual “arrangement and rearrangement,” turning display into an ongoing experiment that staged nature at the intersection of art and science.⁸⁰ Rather than a fixed archive, Delany’s cabinet became a space where old and new objects could be compared, aesthetic judgments refined and both practical and classificatory knowledge cultivated. In this sense, by placing her shellwork alongside Chinese porcelain in her cabinet, Delany does more than collect curiosities. She builds a dialogue between two porous, malleable objects that contest aesthetic and epistemic hierarchies. The heterogeneity and instability of shells resonate with the hybrid, mutable semiotics of porcelain; together they produce a visual rhetoric that values surface variation, multiplicity, and uncanny juxtaposition. Delany’s disordered china closet and her shellwork thus enact a shared surface logic that privileges reworking, rearrangement and visual play over narrative coherence or moral depth, turning collection into an ongoing experiment in taste, classification, and knowledge production.

This refusal of stable meaning shaped not only Delany’s own collections but also her fascination with material abundance and disorder. In a later 1769 letter to Miss Dewes, she delights in the “agreeable confusion” of the Duchess of Portland’s breakfast-room, a space where collecting, reading, and domestic life converge in productive disorder:

[H]er Grace’s breakfast-room, which is now the repository of sieves, pans, platters, and filled with all the productions of *that nature*, are spread on tables, windows, chairs, which with books of all kinds (opened in their useful places), make an agreeable confusion; sometimes, notwithstanding twelve chairs and a couch, *it is* indeed a little *difficult* to find a *seat!* but your inquiries are indefatigable, and I don’t know whether they sit or stand!⁸¹

⁸⁰ Kristina Decker, “‘She Has an Activity of Mind That *Never Lets Her Be Idle*’: Mary Delany, the Enlightenment, and the Creative Arts,” *Women’s Writing* 30, no. 3 (2023): 302.

⁸¹ Delany, *The Autobiography and Correspondence*, 2:153.

Delany's description of the Duchess of Portland's breakfast-room represents the space as a hybrid environment—part domestic interior, part cabinet of curiosities, part working archive. Once intended for dining, the room now overflows with “sieves, pans, platters,” alongside “books of all kinds,” a scene she explicitly names an “agreeable confusion.” Rejecting singular, framed displays or hierarchical order, the space instead embraces simultaneity, multiplicity, and disorder. Like Delany's own closet, the Duchess's room transforms private space into a site of aesthetic and epistemic activity, marked by abundance, surface interaction, and the suspension of tidy order in favor of “agreeable” confusion.

When porcelain is read not as an emblem of female weakness but as a porous, plastic, and reworkable medium, the interventions of eighteenth-century British writers, craftsmen, and female collectors can be reconsidered as attempts to transform decorative practice into a performance of knowledge and identity. Mounted porcelain, the literary juxtapositions of porcelain and books, disordered china closets and shell pairings are not mere ornaments but epistemic practices through which women experiment with how meaning is produced, erased, and rewritten. Addison's lady's library and Scott's fictional cabinet of curiosities demonstrate how hybridity becomes a narrative tactic where porcelain's disordering potential is deployed to produce alternative knowledge and social imaginaries. Delany's shellwork and disordered china closet make this especially visible, as the surface interventions she favored articulate a politics of display that celebrates diversity and instability. By assembling porcelain with books, personal life-histories, and shells, British writers and collectors contested linear narratives of knowledge and taste and forged hybrid epistemologies legible in both material culture and literary representations.

The material qualities of Chinese porcelain, its plasticity, porosity, and capacity for reinvention, demonstrate that the meanings attached to it are not unilateral British projections onto Chinese things but reciprocal processes in which objects mediate exchange. The result was a cultural reciprocity in which Chinese porcelain carried with it its material, aesthetic, and symbolic potentials that were reactivated, adapted, and sometimes resisted in English contexts. Porcelain's ability to be mounted, paired, and

narrated makes it an ideal lens to see how objects carry, transform, and transmit cultural meanings. Ultimately, the story of Chinese porcelain in eighteenth-century Britain was less about feminine fragility or Oriental otherness but about cultural exchange, about things that traveled, people who remade them, and inventive practices of collecting through which cultural meanings were continually composed and revised.

Chapter 2

Gift, Civility and Confrontation: The Travels to China

In *A New Voyage Round the World* (1697), William Dampier recounts how, after a violent storm in 1687, his ship stopped for repairs at a harbor of the Pescadores (the Penghu Islands), an archipelago in the Taiwan Strait.¹ Dampier overwhelmingly presents his short stay in the Pescadores as a narrative of civility and kindness, emphasizing the friendly exchanges of gifts between English visitors and Chinese officials. However, this representation of a courteous encounter masks the reality that Dampier's 1687 voyage to the Pescadores, occurring during the latter stages of his Pacific expedition, was part of the *Cygnets*' piracy and privateering mission across the East Indies, a venture originally commanded by Captain Charles Swan. By the time the ship reached the Pescadores, Swan had been deposed and command passed to Captain John Read.² Dampier sailed with the expedition as a crewman and later used his eyewitness notes to compose *A New Voyage*. Dampier's early account of gift exchange deploys a language of civility that later British writers either adopt to obscure power asymmetries and imagine a utopian cross-cultural encounter, as John Bell does in *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Diverse Parts of Asia* (1763),³ or to invert the rhetoric depicting gift rituals as obstacles to free trade, thereby illegitimizing the exotic culture that sustains them, as evidenced in Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins's representation of the China episodes in *A Voyage Round the World* (1748).⁴

Scholars have read Dampier's revision of his manuscript into a printed *A New Voyage* as an effort to erase buccaneering violence and convert illicit experience into

¹ William Dampier, *A New Voyage Round the World* (London: Print for James Knapton, 1697), 416. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² Diana Preston and Michael Preston, *A Pirate of Exquisite Mind: The Life of William Dampier* (London: Doubleday, 2004), 160-170.

³ John Bell, *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Diverse Parts of Asia*. 2 vols. (Glasgow: n.p., 1763). Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

⁴ Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins, *A Voyage Round the World in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV by George Anson*, ed. William Glyndwr (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

respectable knowledge. As Philip Edwards notes, Dampier began as an observant “Baconian scientist” whose original manuscript was mainly a plain narrative of events and places. However, Dampier repeatedly revised and expanded it, eventually producing a much longer printed text, *A New Voyage*, that weaves in large amounts of natural history, geographic details, and ethnographic descriptions.⁵ Edwards shows how Dampier’s revisions mute his criticism of fellow sailors, downplay English failures, and carefully obscure the “crudities of buccaneering life,” thereby establishing what he calls a “moral chasm” between Dampier and buccaneering.⁶ Anna Neill situates Dampier’s revisionary strategy within a broader transformation of buccaneer narratives, arguing that late-seventeenth-century travelogues, especially Dampier’s, were instrumental in converting lawless seafarers into “men of science” and thereby reintegrating them into an emergent imperial order.⁷ As Neill observes, Dampier’s primary motive for reframing his pirate adventures as ethnographic observations stems directly from the “connection between imperial administration and modern conceptions of political sovereignty.”⁸ Neill argues that through the rhetoric and practices of natural-law anthropology and the patronage of institutions such as the Royal Society, Dampier turns violent, transnational contact into ethnographic detachment and commercial knowledge useful to the empire.⁹ The rhetorical smoothing that Edwards describes functions, in Neill’s terms, as a device to “reincorporate” maritime outlaws into the national body: it transforms illicit experience into ethnographic details, reframes violent encounters as objective observation, and thus generates knowledge that could be harnessed for imperial expansion.

Dampier’s account of the Pescadores stay enacts the rhetorical strategy that Edwards and Neil describe, recasting what was essentially a privateering venture as a scene of civilized, reciprocal encounter. He does not disclose Captain Read’s true role

⁵ Philip Edwards, *The Story of the Voyage: Sea-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 20.

⁶ Edwards, *The Story of the Voyage*, 29-31.

⁷ Anna Neill, “Buccaneer Ethnography: Nature, Culture, and Nation in the Journals of William Dampier,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no. 2 (December 2000): 165-180.

⁸ Neill, “Buccaneer Ethnography,” 165.

⁹ Neill, “Buccaneer Ethnography,” 166-169.

as the leader of a privateering expedition, nor does he reveal the nature of his own involvement. Instead, in the Pescadores episode, Dampier shows how gift exchange becomes the central mechanism that manufactures legitimacy for the English presence and dramatizes English superiority. He retrospectively reframes Captain Read's contact with the Chinese Governor as a ritual of mutual civility in which gift exchange performs politeness. The Chinese prohibition on trading ashore is constructed as reasonable administration, while the English return of gifts is described as polite reciprocation that signifies technological prowess and social rank. The effect is to transform an asymmetrical, politically fraught encounter into an orderly, reciprocal exchange so as to legitimate English presence rather than interrogate its origins in violence.

After anchoring off a harbor at the Pescadores for repairs following a heavy storm, Dampier depicts the negotiations between the two parties as friendly, civil, and hospitable. The Chinese Governor's restriction—"we must not expect to Trade [...] we must not come ashore on that Island"—appears in Dampier's narrative alongside immediate offers of assistance—"he should be very ready to assist us in any thing"—and practical alternatives such as sending men aboard or going to other islands for refreshments (417-418). Through juxtaposing prohibition with benevolence, Dampier recasts the Chinese restriction as an instance of considerate administration rather than arbitrary rejection. In doing so, Dampier redirects attention from the denial of English commercial agency to the civility of the Chinese official. The governor becomes a prudent guardian of national order who remains attentive to the English crew's needs, thereby creating a scene of civility rather than conflict.

The framing of civility becomes most evident in Dampier's account of the gift exchange. He catalogs the governor's gifts, including hogs, goats, flowers, bread, and liquor, with material precision, even noting jar shapes, clay seals, and prices, recording that "A quart Jar there is worth Six-pence" (419). By attending to such commercial details, Dampier converts ceremonial gifts into commodities with both use- and exchange-value, collapsing the boundary between hospitable generosity and marketable goods. The Chinese hospitality that serves to enforce limits on trade is represented as continuous with the free trade the English seek to access. Captain Read's

reciprocation, “a curious Spanish Silver-hilted Rapier, an English Carbine, and a Gold Chain” (420), differs markedly from the gifts of the Chinese Governor. These gifts are not local goods but industrial products that signal European craftsmanship, martial capability, and social rank. Where the Chinese gifts are rendered as consumable and tradeable, the English presents display power, skill and prestige. This asymmetric coding of gifts reinforces the façade of an equivalent exchange while subtly claiming a technological and social edge.

Even on the remote Pescadores Islands, far from the Qianlong court, the Chinese Governor’s expectations would still have been shaped by the norms of Qing guest ritual, in which gifts from subordinate lands were meant to signify and confirm social and territorial order. The nature of the gift in the Qing guest ritual, as James Hevia argues in his discussion of the Macartney mission, serves to form a distinct hierarchy. The gifts presented by lesser lords are meant to “be local products or products of the land.” He clarifies that “to be gifts made in offering,” they must “be linked explicitly to the lesser lord’s domain.”¹⁰ Offering local products to the court is regarded as “the concrete manifestation of correct temporal practices of organizing and managing a domain.”¹¹ Similarly, when discussing the gifts presented by Lord Macartney to the Qianlong Emperor, Cynthia Klekar underscores that “European efforts to dazzle the Chinese with examples of their technological and scientific innovations seemed, at best, bad form and, at worst, a serious violation of protocol.”¹² By offering items such as the Spanish rapier and English carbine—neither of which were local or natural products of Britain, but rather goods that could have been the spoils of the Pacific plunder or purchased along Asian trade routes—Captain Read implicitly disregarded the imbalanced power dynamics that accompany asymmetrical gift exchanges. In this sense, the very ritual of gift exchange that Dampier presents as hospitable simultaneously serves to constrain and regulate English commerce. By converting gifts into commodities and framing

¹⁰ James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 128-129.

¹¹ Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 129.

¹² Cynthia Klekar, “‘Prisoners in Silken Bonds’: Obligation, Trade, and Diplomacy in English Voyages to Japan and China,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2006): 98.

reciprocity as a performance of technological prowess, Dampier obscures how the gift exchange creates obligations and dependencies that Chinese officials can exploit to manage the English presence. Dampier's account of the gift exchange thus smooths over the political inequality embedded in the encounter even as it reproduces it.

Dampier's Pescadores episode exemplifies how gift exchange was central to the distribution and maintenance of power in eighteenth-century Britain and its imperial networks. The language and practice of the gift in eighteenth-century England, as Klekar argues, functioned less as a genuine alternative to market exchange than as an "ideological" mechanism. It emerged as a means to mitigate conflicts that arose with the decline of patronage and the rise of capitalism and individualism, which appeared to threaten established social structures.¹³ By positioning the "fiction of the disinterested gift" as central to how authors negotiated social change in gender, property, diplomacy, and charity, Klekar shows that benevolent rhetoric actually reinforces a politics of obligation in which the gift masks instability by pretending to preserve stable, selfless, reciprocal exchange.¹⁴ Such a demystification of the moral power of gifts echoes Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of gift exchange as a socially regulated practice in which generosity functions as a form of symbolic domination sustained through "collective misrecognition." As Bourdieu proposes, gift exchange is a social game that "cannot be played unless the players refuse to acknowledge the objective truth of the game [...] and unless they are predisposed to contribute [...] to the production of collective misrecognition."¹⁵ This collective misrecognition "does not facilitate a violation of the social rules; instead, it is itself part of the social rules, part of the *habitus*."¹⁶ In this respect, gift exchange is constrained by rigid social norms and behavioral customs, and it can only be sustained through shared misrecognition. He further introduces the concept of "symbolic violence," described as "the emotional attachments created and maintained by the generous gift," which enacts "a lasting hold"

¹³ Cynthia Klekar, "Fictions of The Gift: Generosity, Obligation, and Economy in Eighteenth-Century England" (PhD diss., West Virginia University, 2005), 5.

¹⁴ Klekar, "Fictions of The Gift," 1-31.

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "Selections from *The Logic of Practice*," in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), 198.

¹⁶ Alan D. Schrift, "Introduction: Why Gift?" in Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift*, 14.

over the recipient. Symbolic violence is often “censored, euphemized,” and misrecognized, yet remains a recognized form of coercion.¹⁷ By defining gift exchange as the production of collective misrecognition, Bourdieu frames gift exchange as a form of symbolic violence to establish a relationship of dominance. Bourdieu’s approach to gift exchange emphasizes how gifts as symbolic capital are embedded in social relationships and power dynamics, which can be used to reinforce or challenge existing social order.

Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic domination, where generosity conceals relations of power, illuminates Maija Jansson’s observation that English ambassadorial gift exchange in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a highly regulated instrument of diplomacy in which gifts expressed sovereign dignity and hospitality while also creating calculable obligations that required carefully measured reciprocity. As Jansson finds, English diplomatic practice developed administrative routines, overseen by officials such as Masters of Ceremonies and the Master of the Jewel House, to ensure gifts matched rank, were reciprocated, and were of equal value, thereby preventing indebtedness or accusations of bribery.¹⁸ The English practice of turning ambassadorial gifts into measurable, reciprocated tokens of rank thus disguises hierarchy as polite obligation. European nations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries trying to establish trade relations with China adhered to, with some variations, customary patterns of gift exchange, which involve the reciprocal obligations to give, to receive, and to return. However, the intricate networks of obligation and reciprocity, assumed by the European embassy as customary practices in gift exchange, were repeatedly misunderstood and reconstructed by Chinese government. As Hevia points out, the Qing court governed foreign relations with the tribute system, operating on the principle that foreign rulers would acknowledge the superiority of the Chinese emperor.¹⁹ That divergence in understandings of gift exchange created both a political impasse—an unmistakable imperial inequality European powers could not easily acknowledge—and

¹⁷ Bourdieu, “Selections,” 217.

¹⁸ Maija Jansson, “Measured Reciprocity: English Ambassadorial Gift Exchange in the 17th and 18th Centuries,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 9, no. 3 (2005): 348-370.

¹⁹ Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 9.

an epistemic dilemma, as it generated competing interpretations of gift exchange through incompatible cultural frames.

Robert Markley shows how seventeenth-century travel writers responded to that impasse by transforming the unequal ritual into a discourse of civility. Markley's study of European attempts to secure free commerce with China in the late seventeenth century—read through Jan Nieuhof's account of the Dutch embassy to the Shun-chih court (1655-1656) and Evert Ysbrants Ides's record of the Russian embassy to the Kangxi court (1692)—reveals a persistent cross-cultural misreading of gift exchange.²⁰ As Markley observes, while “the Dutch expect their gifts to mediate a diplomatic and commercial relationship among equals,”²¹ the Chinese emperor reinterprets “the theocentric rhetoric of mutual exchange into the hierarchical language of tribute.”²² Rather than representing this divergence as a source of diplomatic rupture, Markley contends that Nieuhof and Ides soften and conceal it by reframing the encounter in terms of civility. In their travel narratives, China appears as a wealthy and ordered country that both legitimizes European commercial ambitions and projects European values of civility and urban taste onto Chinese society. For Markley, the discourse of civility functions as a strategic device to “mediate and mystify” the linguistic, cultural, and racial differences.²³ Read this way, by aestheticizing the ritual of gift exchange at the Qing court, early modern European travelers transformed gifts into proof of congenial, civilized practices rather than evidence of an asymmetrical hierarchy. What might have been read as a diplomatic failure, a profound misreading of obligation, is domesticated into a reassuring tale of transnational civility. The discourse of civility served to manage commercial frustrations, project European norms, and legitimize commercial engagement and unequal power relations, rendering Sino-British encounters contested sites where cultural anxieties and imperial ambitions were negotiated.

²⁰ Robert Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 104-136.

²¹ Markley, *The Far East*, 111.

²² Markley, *The Far East*, 124.

²³ Markley, *The Far East*, 105-106.

Drawing on insights into the role of gift exchange in shaping cross-cultural encounters, this chapter examines how eighteenth-century British travel narratives represent Chinese rituals of gift exchange to negotiate English identity. These narratives position Englishness between the ideals of transcultural civility, which mediates suspicions, misunderstandings and confrontations, and the anxieties over power asymmetries, which are expressed through ritualized reciprocity and obligation that contest authority and national identity. When John Bell, a Scottish physician, recounts his trip accompanying the Russian embassy trekking to Peking from 1719 to 1721, he navigates the language of gift in the forms of hospitality, gift exchange and ceremonial rituals to illustrate how these customs help transcend sociocultural differences between the two countries to foster a sense of cross-cultural civility. Bell constructs China as a prosperous, orderly utopia in which gift exchange and banquet hospitality operate as reciprocal performances of civility. Even when the embassy and the Chinese court clashed over the kowtow ceremony, Bell effaces the political implications of tribute and recasts Sino-European power asymmetries as cultural difference rather than submission, thereby legitimizing continued commercial and diplomatic engagement with China. By contrast, in the China episodes of *A Voyage Round the World* (1748), Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins frame the ritual of gift exchange in Canton as a backward, corrupt impediment to free trade in order to justify Commodore George Anson's refusal to participate. China is represented as an unassimilable Other, resistant to the emerging global economy and obstructive to British imperial ambitions and consolidation of national identity. Walter and Robins's restoration of English identity in the crisis of Pacific voyages, however, remains unstable. Edward Page's unpublished *A Little Secret History* (1765) offers an alternative account of the Canton confrontation, embracing a transcultural sympathy that downplays power rivalries between English and Chinese officials and reframes gift exchange as a vehicle for intercultural exchange within expanding commercial networks.

The Power of Gift in Mediating Confrontation: John Bell's Travel to China

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European nations sent embassies to China in an effort to access the country's lucrative markets. Russia's geographical proximity to China and its ambitions to expand eastward into Asia prompted a series of diplomatic missions aimed at securing overland trade routes and establishing a stable diplomatic relationship with the Qing Empire.²⁴ The embassy led by Leoff Vasilovich Ismaylov in 1719, with John Bell as part of the mission, was a continuation of these efforts.²⁵ As Markley notes, China's prosperity was well accepted in seventeenth-century Europe, with numerous firsthand and fictional accounts by missionaries, traders, and armchair geographers emphasizing its immense wealth, fertility, and socioeconomic stability.²⁶ The "economic idealization" of China, as Markley argues, was for English intellectuals like Peter Heylyn, a seventeenth-century English ecclesiastic and geographer, and John Webb, a contemporary English Orientalist known for his treatise on the Chinese language, both a lucrative trade opportunity and a sign of sociopolitical stability, underwriting China's "cultural and moral authority." This perception elevated China as a model civilization, especially during a period of unrest in Europe, particularly in England.²⁷ China, in this sense, became a European fantasy of an inexhaustible reservoir of wealth that could be exploited to absorb European exports and restore Europe's sociopolitical stability.

Bell's travelogue, titled *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Diverse Parts of Asia*, is to a large extent reminiscent of the writings of Jesuit missionaries and European embassies who predominantly represented China as a land of unparalleled cultural sophistication, political stability, and promising commercial potential. Bell's travel account is composed of five travelogues, with the third being an English translation of the journal of Lorents Lange, Ismaylov's secretary, who remained in Peking as a

²⁴ Michael Keevak, *Embassies to China: Diplomacy and Cultural Encounters Before the Opium Wars* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017), 1-2.

²⁵ The Ismaylov mission was under orders to "increase trade volume" with China, build an Orthodox church in Peking, station a "permanent consular representative" in Peking to support Russian commercial operations, and if possible, secure "full freedom of trade" throughout China "on a reciprocal basis." See Oliver Edmund Clubb, *China & Russia: The "Great Game"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 41.

²⁶ Robert Markley, "China and the English Enlightenment: Literature, Aesthetics, and Commerce," *Literature Compass* 11, no. 8 (August 2014): 517-518.

²⁷ Markley, *The Far East*, 108-109.

resident diplomat after the Ismaylov embassy departed. Bell's narrative of his journey accompanying the Ismaylov embassy to Peking forms the second travelogue, comprising about one-third of the book. In the travel account, Bell praises Emperor Kangxi as a monarch of "good nature and affability" with "a sound judgment, and sense intire [*sic*]" (2:46), an image that aligns with the Jesuit's ideal of the philosopher-king, an idealized vision of governance. Bell acknowledges that under Kangxi's reign, China has enjoyed "perfect peace and happiness" (2:97). Moreover, Bell finds the Chinese people "civilized and hospitable" (2:103), notes that their trade with foreign nations is flourishing (2:101), and observes that their manufacturing, particularly in silk and paper-making, surpasses that of Europe (2:102-103). Bell's admiring narrative revives a Jesuit-derived discourse of the philosopher-king and of China as culturally sophisticated and governable, exemplifying what Markley terms "accommodationist principles of Jesuit cultural anthropology." These principles, he argues, were later "informally extended" by ambassadors Jan Nieuhoff and Evret Ides in their missions to China in the seventeenth century, where they aimed to "find common ground with Manchu and Chinese elites to promote their efforts to regularize trade."²⁸ Like his predecessors, Bell revives this utopian vision of China's infinite wealth and sociopolitical stability to resurrect the desire to translate Jesuits' accommodationist strategies into trade opportunities. Different from William Dampier and George Anson, whom I will discuss later and who traveled by sea to China's southeastern coast, Bell took an overland route through Moscow, Siberia, and Mongolia to reach Peking. It enables Bell to situate his narrative of the embassy and his experience in China as a geographic and cultural closeness to order, culture and wealth, traversing through nomadic, undeveloped Asiatic cultures to reach Chinese civilization—a journey toward the civilized, idealized vision of China.

The other Asiatic regions Bell encountered fell far short of the socioeconomic prosperity that China represented. It was only upon reaching the Great Wall, which marks the divide between the barren wilderness of Siberia and Mongolia and China,

²⁸ Markley, *The Far East*, 107.

that Bell claims their triumphant arrival in a utopian land of infinite plenty: “we comforted ourselves with the hopes of soon seeing an end of our toils, and arriving in a rich and inhabited country [...] Everything now appeared to us as if we had arrived in another world” (1:331-333). Significantly, this sense of otherworldly abundance is not an unmediated discovery but resembles the images of China found on imported Chinese porcelain, which had shaped the European imagination for centuries:

In the cliffs of the rocks you see little scattered cottages, with spots of cultivated ground, much resembling those romantick figures of landscapes which are painted on the CHINA-ware and other manufactures of this country. These are accounted fanciful by most EUROPEANS, but are really natural. (1:334)

By treating the porcelain motif as the model for what he sees, Bell converts a mediated image into an epistemic standard in which the visual representation of China on the porcelain becomes the measure of reality. As Eric Hayot argues, porcelain was a widely used “representational medium” in the eighteenth century that, while only loosely connected to real China, provided “armchair travelers with a set of powerfully mediatized and mercantiled images of China.” Hayot explains that Bell’s assertion that the landscapes he sees are “really natural” implies a preconceived idea shaped by these representations.²⁹ Bell’s narrative is therefore not purely empirical but guided by previously circulating images produced within mercantile networks. Calling those painted, “romantick” landscapes “really natural” collapses art into nature, and aesthetic admiration into documentary truth. That collapse renders China’s abundance self-evident rather than constructed, which prepares the ground for Bell’s political and commercial praise of China. If China appears, at first sight, to embody the luxury goods and images Europeans coveted and purchased, its prosperity invites not only admiration but, for Bell and the Ismaylov embassy, efforts to exploit that prosperity through trade and diplomacy. The Great Wall thus becomes not simply a geographical boundary separating the wilderness of other Asiatic regions from the prosperity of China, but a

²⁹ Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 80.

rhetoical threshold where porcelain-mediated images of China produce a utopian vision of abundance and order, one that enables Bell to depict China as a stable, affluent country, and to justify and encourage commercial and diplomatic missions to the country.

It is worth noting that Bell did not publish his travelogue until 1763, more than forty years after he visited China. Raymond Dawson describes this period as the decline of the China craze, noting that “both the sinophilism of the Enlightenment and the chinoiserie vogue had run their natural course and completely lost their impetus.”³⁰ Similarly, Laurence Williams observes that after the late 1750s, the English enthusiasm for Chinese culture and governance gave away to rising tensions in trade negotiations between China and Britain, with British merchants in Canton being embroiled in protracted and frictional trade disputes with the Chinese.³¹ Bell, however, as a Scottish writer, refrains from addressing European conflicts with the Qing court, instead adopting a plain and unembellished style to depict the embassy’s interactions with Chinese officials as relatively smooth. As Bell claims in the preface, his travelogue records what is “worth remarking, without attempting to embellish them, by taking any of the liberties of exaggeration, or invention” (1:xv). The plainness of his style and the structured, dated entries of his travel account serve to affirm his claimed sincerity—to edify readers with “strong desires of seeing foreign parts” (1:xiii). Yet by leaning on such a restrained, plain style, Bell carefully curates his account, selectively recording the interaction between the Russian embassy and the Chinese court as friendly, civil and polite. This aesthetic of moderation advances an idealized vision of transcultural sympathy that is later recognized as a key feature of Scottish Orientalism.

In tracing the rise of a Scottish school of Orientalists from the eighteenth century, John MacKenzie argues that nearly all the Scottish administrators, missionary scholars, translators, educators and Orientalists seek to “comprehend Asian cultures and ideas”

³⁰ Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 132.

³¹ The Sino-British trade relations worsened from the late 1750s, as “a series of Chinese edicts restricted Europeans to an ‘isolation zone’ around the warehouses at Canton.” See Laurence Williams, “Anglo-Chinese Caresses: Civility, Friendship and Trade in English Representations of China, 1760-1800,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 2 (June 2015): 277.

while navigating British rule.³² Michael Fry also observes that Scottish Orientalism is characterized by “mutual sympathy and comprehension.” Influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment, Scottish Orientalists sought to understand oriental cultures through language and anthropological studies, extending their inquiries into religion and science to test theories of universalism.³³ The unique features of Scottish Orientalism were closely connected to the prominence of Scots in securing influential positions and establishing major trade ventures in the East since the eighteenth century. Both MacKenzie and Fry note that after the Union of 1707, Scots took advantage of their new British citizenship to join the English East India Company, and by the late eighteenth century, they comprised half of its members. They were disproportionately represented, particularly in the officer class, becoming key participants in commerce with China.³⁴ Being one of the many Scots venturing in the East, Bell did not view China primarily as a rival obstructing British imperial commercial expansion but as a land of immense wealth, profit, and commercial opportunities. He recounts the conflicts between the Russian embassy and the Qing court with a sense of comprehension and sympathy toward Chinese culture, an approach reminiscent of both earlier Jesuit missionaries and later Scottish Orientalists. In this context, examining how Bell navigates the discourse of gift exchange and ceremonial rituals to override implicit power negotiations offers an alternative account of European trade negotiations with China during a period of rising tensions. It allows for a re-evaluation of the asymmetries of gift exchange in cross-cultural encounters when a utopian, cosmopolitan vision of the other is constructed.

After over a year’s journey across Siberia and Mongolia, Bell and the embassy were received by the Mandarin commandant upon entering the Great Wall of China. He treats the commandant’s banquet as the ceremonial hinge of the journey, a moment that

³² John M. MacKenzie, “Scottish Orientalists, Administrators and Missions: A Distinctive Scots Approach to Asia?” in *The Scottish Experience in Asia, c.1700 to the Present*, ed. T. M. Devine and Angela McCarthy (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 66.

³³ Michael Fry, “‘The Key to Their Hearts’: Scottish Orientalism,” in *Scotland and the 19th-Century World*, ed. Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2012), 137.

³⁴ MacKenzie, “Scottish Orientalist,” 138; Fry, “Scottish Orientalism,” 67.

announces the embassy's arrival in an ordered and prosperous polity. Bell lingers over the banquet rituals—the table service, the sequence of toasts, the presentation of food—translating unfamiliar Chinese ceremony into the language of politeness and taste that resonates with his English readers. By emphasizing the politeness and courtesy of the Chinese, Bell demonstrates a sympathetic understanding of an alternative civilization, where cultural differences are transcended:

We alighted in the outer-court, where the commandant in person waited for us [...] We were first entertained with tea, and a dram of hot arrack, after which supper was brought [...] The dishes were small, and placed upon the table in the most regular manner; [...] The carver sits upon the floor, and executes his office with great dexterity [...] The whole is served in CHINA-ware; and neither gold or silver is to be seen. All servants perform their unity with the utmost regularity, and without the least noise. I must confess, I was never better pleased with any entertainment. (1:338-339)

Bell records a structured hierarchy where each figure, from the commandant to the carver and the servants, embodies a distinct role within an orderly, ritualized banquet. The commandant, as the host, represents the highest authority in the scene, yet his power is expressed not through overt authoritarianism but through the orchestration of a disciplined and refined banquet. Bell subsumes the commandant's hierarchical superiority under his polite and courteous manner, presenting it as a gesture of hospitality toward the embassy. Seated on the floor, the carver appears to occupy a humble, inferior position; however, Bell redirects focus to his “great dexterity,” highlighting his role in maintaining the precise order of the ritual banquet, where each person expertly fulfills their duty. Similarly, the servants' silence exemplifies the values of control, discipline, and deference that define an orderly, hierarchical social decorum. Nevertheless, the hierarchy in the banquet is not depicted as a rigid imposition, but as an aesthetic of order, a cultural expression of governance that Bell finds pleasing rather than oppressive. He subtly redirects the reader's focus from power and submission to an admiration of order and discipline, emphasizing those details that are characteristic of banquet hospitality, such as etiquette, cuisine, service, music, and dance, which

significantly downplays the semiotics of hierarchy.

However, as Hevia argues, unlike the English concept of a “guest,” which assumes “equality” between guest and host, the principles guiding guest ritual in the Chinese imperium are designed to establish hierarchical relations of superiority and inferiority.³⁵ In the Qing court’s practice of “guest ritual” (*binli*), “the emperor was accorded the position of supreme lord (*hunagdi*) in relation to lesser lords (*fanwang*) as guests.”³⁶ For the Qing court, guest ritual serves as a mechanism for engaging in “complex dialogues” through which the hierarchy between superior and inferior is delineated, and other entities are integrated into the emperor’s authority.³⁷ Bell’s overwhelming desire to present the encounters between the Russian embassy and the Qing court as friendly and smooth, so as to picture a promising trade future with China for his contemporaries, makes him selectively neglect the symbolic submissions in the ceremonial performance of guest ritual. Bell’s characterization of the Mandarin commandant’s reception as hospitality rather than hierarchy is reinforced by his account of the Emperor’s gift presented to the ambassador Ismaylov upon his arrival in Peking:

The Emperor sent an officer to enquire after the ambassador’s health; who brought along with him a table, carried by four men, and covered with yellow silk, on which was placed variety of fruits and confections [...] The officer acquainted the ambassador that these provisions were brought from the Emperor’s own table; and therefore hoped he would eat of them. This circumstance was accounted a singular mark of the Emperor’s favour. (2:2)

Bell is drawn to the ceremonial splendor and the officer’s respectful presentation: the table’s ornate covering, the officer’s solicitous address, and the Emperor’s supposed generosity. The “yellow silk,” which Bell explains elsewhere as being “chosen by the Emperor, because, among the CHINESE, it [the yellow color] is the emblem of the sun, to which he [the Emperor] is compared” (1:348), serves as a synecdoche for imperial authority in Qing China. By focusing on the manner of gift-giving, Bell transforms a

³⁵ Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 117.

³⁶ Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 116.

³⁷ Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 212.

scene that formally encodes imperial hierarchy into a token of honor and mutual regard. He emphasizes the presentation of gifts and the sentiment of favor rather than the political code the ceremony enacts, narrating imperial largesse as the emperor's personal generosity. In so doing, Bell elides the submissive implications embedded in the Qing court's guest ritual—the gift's origin “from the Emperor's own table,” its mediated delivery through an officer, and the obligations of deference entailed in accepting the offering—all of which point to a tributary submission. Bell downplays and reframes these signals as expressions of hospitality and reciprocal respect. The result is an illusion of shared civility that obscures cultural incompatibility and recasts what is fundamentally a performance of sovereignty as a matter of manners.

Notably, there is no description of Ismaylov's responses to the Emperor's gifts. In Bell's account, the ambassador seems to resign himself to the hierarchical guest ritual. However, the same event is cast differently in the memoirs of Matteo Ripa, an Italian Jesuit missionary in China. Father Ripa, appointed by the Qing court as an interpreter for the Ismaylov mission, records in his memoir how the ambassador refused to perform the customary prostrations in gratitude for the Emperor's gift:

Whilst we were engaged in conversation with the ambassador, the dinner sent him by his Majesty arrived; and when he was requested to return thanks, by making the accustomed prostrations, he refused, alleging that he represented his sovereign, who was on equal terms with the Emperor; but that he would make an obeisance according to the custom of his country. The commissioners could not obtain any further concessions, and were obliged to be satisfied.³⁸

While Ripa's account draws attention to the power dynamics in play between the two courts, Bell's narrative shifts the focus entirely onto the ritual and ceremonial significance of the gift. His narrative positions the ambassador as secondary or irrelevant within the context of the Qing court's guest ritual, where the Emperor's gestures and the formalities of the ritual take precedence.

³⁸ Matteo Ripa, *Memoirs of Father Ripa During Thirteen Years' Residence at the Court of Peking* (London: J. Murray, 1844), 103. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

Moreover, the expectation of symbolic submission from the ambassador in return for banquet hospitality and imperial gifts, which Bell's narrative overlooks, is addressed in Ripa's memoir. Ripa records an imperial decree that demands Count Ismaylov to show submission and deference in response to the court's hospitality. The translation of the imperial edict from the Emperor says:

The Emperor had hitherto received, and treated with great honour, all envoys of foreign powers; [...] as soon as he was informed of the approach of his ambassador [Ismaylov] to Peking, he had sent some mandarins to meet him, furnishing him with horses, and whatever else was necessary in the journey. On the ambassador's arrival in Peking, one of his Majesty's eunuchs was sent to him with dishes from the imperial table [...] His Majesty thought that all these favours might have induced him to give up his unreasonable pretensions of delivering the letter with his own hands. (105)

The imperial edict shows clearly that the court's gestures of hospitality, such as sending mandarins to receive the ambassador, providing horses, and delivering dishes, are intertwined with the expectation that the ambassador would submit to the court's established protocols. The expected placement of the Czar's letter on a table before the throne, rather than its direct presentation, literalizes the asymmetry between European and Chinese diplomatic conventions—an asymmetry Bell resolves by translating coercive protocol into courteous ritual. The indirect mode of delivery symbolically confirms that the foreign ruler addresses the Emperor not as an equal but as a vassal paying tribute. The Emperor's expectation that his gift of hospitality be met with the embassy's symbolic submission clashes with the European notion of genteel hospitality, with its rhetoric of reciprocity and civility in diplomatic interactions. Jansson's study emphasizes the significant role that the "combination of gift and hospitality" plays in the "dictates of ambassadorial ritual."³⁹ In particular, hospitality was strategically employed by the English crown to foster ongoing diplomatic relationship and create "the expectation of return."⁴⁰ In European diplomatic encounters, the crown's gift of

³⁹ Jansson, "Measured Reciprocity," 354.

⁴⁰ Jansson, "Measured Reciprocity," 359.

hospitality was a structured and meaningful part of gift exchange, underscoring the symbolic and reciprocal nature of diplomatic interactions. By contrast, the tributary system that governed China's foreign relations until the nineteenth century folded hospitality into a protocol in which hospitality presupposed and sought symbolic submission rather than reciprocation.⁴¹ Reflecting on the tribute system and its critics, Hevia sees it as “a unique method of dealing with foreign powers” that China created early in its history because of its isolation from other major civilizations and confidence in its cultural superiority. It requires “the acknowledgment of the supremacy of China's ‘Son of Heaven’ (*Tianzi*) as superior to all other rulers in the world.”⁴² In other words, true diplomacy, which relies on the natural equality between sovereign states, was impossible within the Chinese culture.⁴³ Instead, there was an entrenched idea of sinocentrism that demanded the submission of foreign rulers.

As Hevia notices, this implication of submission to Chinese civilization was deeply ingrained in Qing China's interaction with foreign nations under the tribute system, in which “presenting ritual tribute (*gong*) to the emperor and performing the ‘full’ *koutou*” emerged as two key “symbolic” rituals.⁴⁴ Fairbank points out that as for the foreign rulers, their willingness to perform symbolic submission was driven by their desire for trading opportunities. Over time the tribute system became an effective mechanism for regulated diplomacy and trade, sustaining itself because it served both Chinese prestige-building and foreign economic interests. Fairbank thus argues that the tribute system became an “ingenious vehicle” for trade.⁴⁵ The Ismaylov mission was aware of the importance of the kowtow ceremony in securing Russia's trade privileges with China. According to Clubb's research, while establishing reciprocal trade relations was designated as Ismaylov's urgent and primary mission, he also received instructions

⁴¹ The Opium War of 1840 is seen as a pivotal event marking the transition from the tribute system, where China was dominant, to the treaty system, where Western powers held dominance. See John K. Fairbank, “The Early Treaty System in the Chinese World Order,” in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John King Fairbank (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1968), 257-258.

⁴² Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 9.

⁴³ Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 11.

⁴⁴ Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 9.

⁴⁵ Qtd. in Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 10.

from Peter the Great who asked him to “fulfill the Chinese ceremonies if requisite.”⁴⁶ The instruction reveals that symbolic submission was often a pragmatic calculation rather than sheer humiliation or surrender. Performing the ritual prostration could be a strategic concession to gain access to the material benefits of regulated trade. Being a member of the official embassy, Bell is fully aware that the controversy between the ambassador and the Qing officials centered around “the ceremony of the ambassador’s introduction to the Emperor,” particularly the ambassador’s demand to “be excused from bowing thrice three times on entering his Majesty’s presence” (2:3). However, Bell carefully downplays the ritual prostration’s implications of subservience in his narrative. He simplifies the ritual by merely referring to it as “bowing,” without informing the reader of the full kowtow ceremony, which involves three kneelings and nine prostrations, with the forehead touching the ground each time. Father Ripa’s memoir records that Ismaylov refused to perform the prostrations, a stance the Qing court firmly rejected in an imperial decree issued before his audience: “Count Ismailof again declared in the same manner, that he would not make the prostrations” (106). Ripa notices that both sides reached a compromise ultimately: the ambassador “performed the prostrations according to Chinese custom,” contingent on the Emperor’s promise that “whenever he should send an ambassador to the Czar [...] his representative [...] should perform all the other ceremonies customary at Moscow” (107). According to the Chinese records in the *I-yü-lu*, the ambassador, during his audience with the Kangxi Emperor, “performed the ceremonials of three genuflections and nine kowtows.”⁴⁷ Both texts either explicitly confirm or imply that the ambassador’s conflict with Chinese officials was over the performance of prostrations, rather than mere “bowing,” as recorded by Bell who frames this conflict in a less confrontational light.

Bell refrains from commenting on how the kowtow ceremony is designed to demonstrate the embassy’s symbolic submission to the Qing court as a tributary power, nor does he detail the prolonged standoff between the two sides over the kowtow issue.

⁴⁶ Clubb, *China & Russia*, 41.

⁴⁷ Lo-shu Fu, *A Documentary Chronicle of Sino-Western Relations, 1644-1820* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1966), 1:131.

By leaving out the suspicion, discontent, and anxiety in the ongoing tug-of-war, Bell presents the resolution of their dispute over the ritual of kowtow in a concise manner. He identifies the *aleggada*, the Qing court's prime minister and master of ceremonies, as the official mediating the negotiation, and then records the episode tersely:

From this day little material happened, except daily messages from court relating to the ceremonial, till 27th; when this affair was at last, adjusted on the following terms. "That the ambassador should comply with the established customs of the court of CHINA; and when the Emperor sent a minister to Russia, he should have instructions to conform himself, in every respect, to the ceremonies in use at that court." (2:4)

Bell presents the ritual as a procedural accommodation adopted by both courts, a reframing that downplays its implication of unequal power relations. The Chinese willingness to follow Russian protocol, in Bell's telling, becomes evidence of the tribute system's adaptive strength. The Qing ritual is shown to absorb potential challenges and convert them into negotiated reciprocity, thereby sustaining imperial authority through ceremonial flexibility. Father Ripa's memoir offers a sharper, more conflictual picture of the two empires' dispute over the kowtow ceremony. Ripa highlights Count Ismaylov's cultural sensitivity, political acumen, and strong sense of duty in serving his sovereign, which led him to refuse to perform prostrations, despite the pressures from the Emperor and the court (103-106). The kowtow controversy is thus depicted as an unyielding standoff between the two sides. Ripa remarks that the Qing court maintained, "according to the immutable ceremonial of China, it was incumbent upon ambassadors to make the prostrations" (104). Count Ismaylov, equally resolute as Chinese officials, remained steadfast in his refusal to conform to the court's ritual (106). Where Ripa presents Ismaylov as a self-determining agent whose refusal to perform the kowtow is a struggle over symbolic domination and political authority, Bell reduces him to a ceremonial participant who simply enacts a prearranged diplomatic script. In doing so, Bell recasts conflict over the kowtow as a narrative of negotiated protocol and mutual accommodation, transforming what might have been a scene of humiliation into a measured exercise of reciprocal ceremonial practice.

The kowtow controversy, which in nineteenth-century discourse epitomized the larger clash between two civilizations and marked the beginning of a contentious Sino-British relationship, is cast differently in Bell's narrative: a reinterpretation that transforms the ritual of kowtow into a space for more harmonious and nuanced interaction through reciprocal encounters and dialogue. Research has shown that the predominant representation of kowtow as a symbol of humiliating subjugation in oriental literature, travel narratives, diplomatic reports, and critical essays is largely a construct of nineteenth-century discourses. Peter Kitson's discussion on the treatment of the kowtow in Romantic-period writings reveals that ambassadorial reception during the 1793 Macartney mission and the 1816 Amherst embassy, where prostration rituals were central, became a "primal scene of trauma in the collective national unconscious" for the British. Kitson shows how Romantic writing—from James Gillray's satire of the Macartney embassy which fixes the image of the oriental despot and the submissive embassy, to Shelley's and Byron's uses of prostration as symbolic of tyranny and resistance—rearticulated this trauma over the kowtow ceremony as a discourse of "manliness and humiliation": an enduring allegory in which refusing to kowtow preserved the integrity of the masculine and imperial self against foreign domination.⁴⁸ As Kitson argues, the kowtow becomes metonymic for Britain's sense of humiliation, a test of British manliness and sovereign dignity, and later a political justification in British discourse for aggressive policies.⁴⁹ As a result, over the early nineteenth century, the ritual of kowtow was abstracted from its diplomatic nuance and turned into a fetishized object around which Britain imagined a civilizational divide. While Kitson traces the kowtow's migration into British literary imagination, Hevia returns the kowtow to its original context to reframe it from an emblem of unilateral humiliation into a flexible, political ritual: a bodily practice that produced social space, measured loyalty, and participated in larger cosmological orders of authority.⁵⁰ As Hevia argues,

⁴⁸ Peter J. Kitson, *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange, 1760-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 157.

⁴⁹ Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*, 153-181.

⁵⁰ James L. Hevia, "'The Ultimate Gesture of Deference and Debasement': Kowtowing in China," *Past & Present* 203, no. Supplement 4 (2009): 222.

although Euro-American observers repeatedly reduced the ritual to a sign of “abject servitude”⁵¹ and proof of Chinese despotism,⁵² close readings of Qing ritual manuals, court records, and accounts of non-European encounters reveal a far more complex reality. The kowtow functioned within a choreography of time and space, which aimed to regulate inclusion, link human actors to heaven and earth, and serve political ends. Hevia demonstrates that the overwhelming rhetoric for justifying the war against China by invoking the ritual of kowtow as humiliation signals Europe’s early attempt to systematically destroy “the structures of ‘Asian’ power.”⁵³ Both Kitson and Hevia reveal that the negative implications of the kowtow were never inherent in the act itself but were shaped through cultural and historical reconfigurations, transforming the gesture of kneeling into a site for constructing ideological difference, legitimizing imperial aggression, and redefining the boundaries of civility and sovereignty.

Bell’s recounting of Count Ismaylov’s audience with the Kangxi Emperor offers a corrective to the nineteenth-century discourse that later cast the kowtow solely as a humiliating practice undermining the masculine, enlightened European self. Bell reframes the Chinese kowtow ritual within a context of universal civility and reciprocal exchange in which universal courtesy is invoked to gloss over the potential power competition in performing prostration rituals:

Having ascended the steps, the letter was laid on a table placed for that purpose, as had been previously agreed; but the Emperor beckoned to the ambassador and directed him to approach; [...] he took up the credentials, and, attended by ALOY, walked up to the throne, and, kneeling, laid them before the Emperor; who touched them with his hand, and inquired after his Czarish Majesty’s health. He then told the ambassador, that the love and friendship he entertained for his majesty were such, that he had even dispensed with an established custom of the empire in receiving his letter. (2:6-7)

The ambassador’s careful adherence to the protocols by placing the letter on the table,

⁵¹ Hevia, “The Ultimate Gesture,” 225.

⁵² Hevia, “The Ultimate Gesture,” 234.

⁵³ Hevia, “The Ultimate Gesture,” 223.

and kneeling before the Emperor, along with the Emperor's gracious response that includes touching the letter and inquiring about the Czar's health, together highlight the mutual politeness and respect between the two sides. The Kangxi Emperor, in particular, is portrayed as generous and flexible, willing to adjust Chinese imperial customs out of "love and friendship." This characterization of the Emperor makes him emblematic of the idealized hospitality, civility and politeness that the Qing court represents. It helps to soften any conflict or tension presumably arising from the kowtow ceremony and emphasizes instead the reception as a friendly and reciprocal encounter. The ambassador's adherence to the kowtow ritual becomes an indication of his willingness to participate in the lengthy process of gift-giving, which is interpreted by the court as loyalty and submission in a tributary relation. The Emperor's gentility to waive an established custom is thus a return for this symbolic submission. In this sense, the kowtow ceremony is carefully crafted as a crucial prerequisite for reciprocal exchange to occur.

Moreover, instead of representing the kowtow controversy as a civilizational conflict, Bell shapes it into a matter of cultural difference. This is vividly exemplified by his personal experience with the kowtow ceremony. During the ambassador's audience with the Emperor, Bell, as part of the retinue, was also required to perform kowtow:

Great pains were taken to avoid this piece of homage, but without success. The master of the ceremonies stood by, and delivered his orders in the TARTAR language, by pronouncing the words *morgu* and *boss*; the first meaning to bow, and other to stand; two words which I cannot soon forget." (2:7)

Initially, Bell views the kowtow ceremony as a humiliating submission which he and his companions took "great pains" to circumvent. The intimidating words "*morgue*" and "*boss*" that Bell heard when performing kowtow become incarnations of imperial domination that linger in his mind. In this context, bodily prostration evolves into a space for symbolic exchanges where the appeals to political authority and cultural civility intersect. Later, when Bell observes the Chinese kowtowing to their Emperor, he comes to understand it as a necessary gesture from the lens of diplomatic civility,

commenting that it seems “somewhat strange to a Briton, to see some thousands of people upon their knees, and bowing their heads to the ground, in most humble posture, to a mortal like themselves” (2:60). As Hevia argues, “the act of kneeling and bowing was only one among an ensemble of bodily practices involved in imperial audiences,” which was “part of the everyday business of state.”⁵⁴ In this sense, kowtow does not inherently signify humiliating subjugation; instead, it functions as a performance that creates and shapes social relationships. Hevia’s revisionist understanding of kowtow is manifested in Bell’s account. By characterizing kowtow as a “strange” way to show homage and loyalty and establish imperial hierarchy, Bell refrains from condemning the ritual as a symbol of despotism or barbarity, and instead fosters a narrative of mutual respect and reciprocal cultural encounters. In doing so, Bell frames the kowtow as a culturally intelligible ritual of reciprocal civility. By positioning himself as someone capable of learning, accommodating, and understanding the ritual, Bell departs from the dominant narrative of humiliation that nineteenth-century nationalist polemics later weaponized to justify imperial intervention. He creates an alternative interpretive precedent in which the kowtow can be read as a neutral, even instructive, site of cultural encounter, though such reading is complicated by the power asymmetries that the ceremony could also embody.

If Count Ismaylov’s audience with the Kangxi Emperor is the climax of Bell’s narrative of the embassy’s experience in Peking, it also marks a moment where Bell frames the court’s hospitality in a manner that could minimize the implication of submission in performing kowtow. Toward the end of the ambassador’s audience with the Emperor, following the full kowtow ceremony, Father Ripa notes the Emperor’s courteous but evasive response to the ambassador’s inquiries about free trade, stating: “To these inquiries the Emperor replied in a very courteous manner; and then added, that it being a feast day, it would not be proper to discuss business” (109). This response exemplifies the guest rituals of the Qing court as a deceptive form of hospitality, designed to thwart progress toward trade negotiations. Different from Father Ripa’s

⁵⁴ Hevia, “The Ultimate Gesture,” 215.

account, Bell concludes the ambassador's conversation with the Emperor by highlighting the "friendly and wholesome advice" given to the Czar (2:8). Following this, he provides a detailed account of the banquet and entertainment that ensued (2:9-13), ending with an expression of gratitude for the overall experience of courtly reception: "[we were] so well satisfied with the gracious and friendly reception of the Emperor, that all our former hardships were almost forgot" (2:13). By not acknowledging the Emperor's strategic evasion over the trade issue, Bell downplays a key moment where imperial hospitality was employed to defer the very negotiations that the ambassador was sent to initiate. Significantly, it softens the potential conflict or criticism surrounding the kowtow ritual, allowing for a more culturally sensitive narrative where an official facade of friendship and beneficence was carefully sustained.

Bell's writing of China is filled with depictions of civil, courteous, and hospitable Chinese officials, providing a narrative that minimizes the existing tensions between China and European countries. In his account, ritualized displays of authority are recast as gestures of mutual regard, and diplomatic contact becomes less a contest over sovereignty than an occasion for polite exchange. Jonathan Spence's remark that Bell's judgments on China seem to "promise good prospect for the future of trade and diplomacy" captures how this rhetoric works.⁵⁵ By invoking the ideal of civility through discourses of gift exchanges and ceremonial rituals, Bell seeks to override the implicit power competitions and forge the reciprocal cross-cultural understanding that the European missions wished to establish. When the Qing court's guest ritual is presented as a practice of shared civility, any ritual concessions the envoy makes appear less as acts of submission than gestures of courteous protocol. In this way, Bell's utopian construction of transcultural civility and courtesy holds the potential to materialize into tangible trade opportunities, which Spence suggests Bell's travelogue anticipates.

Yet that very rhetoric also elides the tributary logic that underpinned the Qing court's hospitality. When the Chinese ceremonial expectations collided with British

⁵⁵ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 51.

norms of diplomatic equality, misunderstandings or stalemates could follow. Bell's carefully crafted rhetoric of gift exchange may have fostered commercial optimism, but it also risks naturalizing an unequal tribute economy whose political consequences his account largely effaces. Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins's China episodes in *A Voyage Round the World* (1748), which describe Commodore George Anson's 1740-1744 expedition, provide a different narrative. Their representation of Anson's refusal to participate in the complex network of gift exchange crucial to sustain trade relations in Canton becomes a prelude to overwhelming rhetoric that redefines civility through the lens of British imperial expansion and emerging national identity.

The Crisis of Gift Exchange: George Anson's Travel to China

By the early eighteenth century, British ventures into the South Seas were overshadowed by the dominance of the Dutch and Spanish, leaving Britain without a significant share of trade in the Far East.⁵⁶ From the mid-seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the British did not achieve any successful commercial ventures in the Pacific (aside from some covert trading by the East India Company merchants). This lack of success was in stark contrast to the overly optimistic British expectations of profit in the Pacific, which were more influenced by Sir Francis Drake's privateering triumphs in the sixteenth century than by a realistic assessment of the risks and challenges of Pacific voyages.⁵⁷ Drake's voyages, celebrated for their profitable raids on Spanish ships and settlements, reflected Britain's reliance on privateers to tap into the lucrative trade in the South Seas, given their limited success in expanding British interests in the Pacific. The voyage round the world led by Commodore George Anson from 1740 to 1744, however, was an Admiralty venture in Pacific expedition, aiming to go beyond the plundering raids of earlier times. At the outbreak of the War of Jenkins' Ear when Britain and Spain fought over colonial dominance, particularly in the Americas, Anson's formidable squadron—led by his flagship, *Centurion*, alongside five other

⁵⁶ Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600-1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976).

⁵⁷ Markley, *The Far East*, 213-218.

warships—was dispatched with a grand imperial mission: to undermine Spanish control in the South America and establish British influence in newly acquired territory of Callao, the port of Lima. According to Glyndwr Williams’s research, the initial instructions, crafted by Charles Wager and reviewed by Robert Walpole, included aggressive objectives such as capturing key ports, encouraging rebellion among Spanish subjects in Peru, seizing the Acapulco galleon, and potentially completing a global circumnavigation by way of China.⁵⁸ However, for two years, Anson’s expedition was a catastrophic ordeal, suffering from severe storms, shipwrecks, mutiny, and high fatalities from scurvy.⁵⁹ By the time Anson returned to England, his only notable achievement was the capture of the Spanish Acapulco treasure galleon, a feat that Williams describes as reminiscent of “the routine buccaneering and privateering objectives of an earlier era.”⁶⁰ Significantly, Anson’s official voyage did not enable Britain to access the rich resources of the South Seas nor did it establish a significant British presence in the region. As Williams finds, the sailing instructions of Anson’s expedition reveal “a fallacy which was never overcome in the various South Seas projects.”⁶¹ Later, the official account of the expedition transformed this unrealized fallacy into an instructive promise that sustained public and commercial interest in the South Seas.

This rhetorical repair—turning empirical disappointment into a narrative of future possibility—aligns with Markley’s observation that the British national imagination of the South Seas as a vast region that promised untapped resources, new trade routes, and potential colonies clashed with the reality that many voyages ended in failure or limited success. This tension, as Markley argues, situates eighteenth-century voyage literature

⁵⁸ Glyndwr Williams, *The Prize of All the Oceans: Commodore Anson’s Daring Voyage and Triumphant Capture of the Spanish Treasure Galleon* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 10-15.

⁵⁹ During the two-year voyage, two ships turned back at Cape Horn due to severe storms. The *Wager* was shipwrecked off the coast of Chile, leading to a harrowing tale of mutiny and death. Two other ships foundered in the Pacific due to hull deterioration and the illness of their crew members. Of the over nineteen hundred men who departed from England, nearly two-thirds of them died from scurvy. See Williams, *The Prize*, 29-65.

⁶⁰ Williams, *The Prize*, 11.

⁶¹ Glyndwr Williams, “‘The Inexhaustible Fountain of Gold’: English Projects and Ventures in the South Seas, 1670-1750,” in *Perspectives of Empire: Essays Presented to Gerald S. Graham*, ed. John E. Flint and Glyndwr Williams (London: Longman, 1973), 51.

as a form of cultural rhetoric, which sought to reinterpret the frustrations and setbacks of Pacific exploration by reimagining them as opportunities to reshape national identity and reaffirm Britain's imperial ambitions.⁶² As one of the most popular works of voyage literature of its time, the official account of Anson's circumnavigation of the globe was published in 1748 with the title *A Voyage Round the World, in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV*. It proved a commercial success, with over 1,800 subscribers for its first edition, fifteen editions by 1776, and translations into German, French, Dutch, and Russian.⁶³ The title of the book echoes earlier works, such as William Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World* (1697) and Daniel Defoe's *A New Voyage Round the World by a Course Never Sailed Before* (1725). This popular title, promising readers a new adventure around the world, reflects the commercial motivations of writers, ghostwriters, and publishers looking to capitalize on the popularity of voyage narratives.⁶⁴ This commercial framing did more than attract readers; it also helped normalize and promote the expedition's material aims in the South Seas. As Markley notes, *A Voyage* also implies a familiar pattern in British voyages to the South Seas, where journeys around the Pacific were viewed as opportunities to raid Spanish ships and trade for valuable goods such as tea, silks, spices, and porcelain in the Far East.⁶⁵ In this sense, to a significant extent, *A Voyage* needs to be read as a compensatory effort to redefine the South Seas as a stage for reviving hopes of trade and plunder in the region, while also reimagining British national identity amid the frustrations of Pacific exploration.

A Voyage diverges from the familiar colonial narrative of British triumph over Spain. Although it includes the capture of a Spanish treasure galleon, an episode that shows the vulnerability of Spanish control over South Seas wealth, the narrative is rooted in Britain's cultural obsession with South Seas trade as a route to global

⁶² Robert Markley, "The Southern Unknown Countries': Imagining the Pacific in the Eighteenth-Century Novel," in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, ed. Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 197.

⁶³ Glyndwr Williams, *Buccaneers, Explorers and Settlers: British Enterprise and Encounters in the Pacific, 1670-1800* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 299-302.

⁶⁴ Markley, *The Far East*, 216-217.

⁶⁵ Markley, *The Far East*, 217.

economic dominance and ultimately recounts an unfulfilling expedition whose repeated setbacks transformed imperial ambition into a national identity crisis. Authored by Richard Walter the chaplain of Anson's flagship *Centurion*, and Benjamin Robins the mathematician under Anson's close supervision, *A Voyage* seeks to describe how Anson's confrontation with a backward and corrupt China restores an embattled English identity. The authorship of *A Voyage* is complex. Walter began the manuscript and supplied shipboard log details such as wind, weather, and navigation data. Later, at Anson's request, Robins, who had not been part of the voyage, was tasked with adding extensive commentary. By the time two key events occurred in 1743, the capture of the Spanish treasure galleon and Anson's visit to Canton, neither Walter nor Robins was part of the voyage.⁶⁶ The resulting *A Voyage* is at once a compilation of shipboard records and a retrospective construction by authors who were not eyewitnesses to those key moments. The China episodes in *A Voyage* recount George Anson's two significant stays in China, both characterized by intense standoffs between Anson, East India Company officers, Chinese officials, and Chinese Hong merchants. In 1742, after a grueling circumnavigation marked by shipwrecks, mutiny, and severe fatalities from scurvy, Anson landed in Macao seeking essential supplies and maintenance for his severely damaged ship, the *Centurion*. His arrival, however, was met with cautious reception from the Portuguese authorities and indirect negotiations with Chinese officials. Through the Hong merchants, Anson interceded with Chinese authorities after protracted, difficult negotiations. Although the *Centurion* was eventually repaired and reprovisioned, relations with Chinese officials remained tense because of Anson's blunt, demanding approach and his decision to overstay his welcome. In 1743, following his capture of the Spanish treasure galleon, Anson returned to Canton with the dual purpose of securing further supplies and negotiating the disposal of the captured galleon and its prisoners. This second visit gave rise to intensified tensions, as Anson's demands clashed with the rigid Canton trade system enforced by Qing authorities. The China episodes conclude with Walter and Robins offering highly critical remarks on Chinese

⁶⁶ Williams, "The Making of a Best-Seller," 304-307.

culture and government by depicting its bureaucracy as corrupt and inefficient and characterizing its customs and traditions as inferior and backward. This chapter argues that Walter and Robins represent China as an unassimilable Other through their justification of Anson's refusal to acknowledge the practice and values of gift exchange in Canton. Their restoration of English identity amid the frustration of Pacific exploration, however, is unstable, as it paradoxically reflects a fluid representation of the other. It reflects the global movement of commodities and people in trans-Pacific trade ventures, where the dynamic oscillates between national protectionism and free trade, between resistance and acculturation to foreign cultures.

Unlike Bell, who portrays China as a utopian land of economic prosperity, cultural richness, and political stability—framing the revival of the Jesuit strategy of cultural accommodation as a means to unlock trade opportunities—Walter and Robins take a markedly different approach. Displaying minimal interest in British trade with China, Walter and Robins focus primarily on depicting China as an unassimilable Other, a civilization inherently resistant to cultural integration. Their narrative underscores China's impenetrability, suggesting that any attempts at accommodation or exchange were ultimately futile in the face of its exclusionary structures. In the opening scenes of the China episodes, Walter and Robins characterize Anson's voyage to Macao as a navigation of uncertainty, danger and mystery. The authors highlight the crew's deep anxiety about navigating the unfamiliar Chinese coast, conveying their uncertainty with the admission that they were "all entire strangers" (310). The voyage toward Macao is framed as an encounter with an impenetrable, unpredictable, and perilous land. Walter and Robins repeatedly stress that no charts or journals could prevent misidentification or guard against the dangers of navigating Chinese waters. They foreground the geographical impenetrability of Chinese waters, a metaphorical representation of China's resistance to foreign forces: "there is a shoal stretching from them at least a mile and an half to the southward, whence they may be truly called dangerous" (311). As the crew neared Macao, this sense of impenetrability intensified, particularly as they struggled with unexpected and erratic depth variations, which Walter and Robins describe as "an alteration we could not very well account for" (312). This representation

of the impenetrable East, as Edward Said observes, is repeatedly represented in the Oriental discourse where the “cultural, temporal, and geographical distance was expressed in metaphors of depth, secrecy.”⁶⁷ He argues that the Orientalist approach reinforces the notion of the Orient as an exotic, impenetrable, and fundamentally foreign entity. The relationship between the Orientalist and the Orient was primarily “hermeneutical,” where scholars, positioned as distant observers, sought to make an unfamiliar civilization more comprehensible by translating and sympathetically depicting it. However, Said insists that this process did not eliminate the perceived cultural divide; instead, it reinforced the idea of the Orient as an enigmatic and unknowable realm. As Said puts it, “the Orientalist remained outside the Orient, which, however much it was made to appear intelligible, remained beyond the Occident.”⁶⁸ Ultimately, Orientalists maintained a power dynamic that privileged the West, controlling how the East was represented rather than allowing it to speak for itself. In *A Voyage*, Walter and Robins describe the journey through Chinese waters as navigating a labyrinth, where “no chart,” “no journal,” and “no observation” could fully safeguard the ship (310), deploying metaphors that make China appear mysterious, hazardous, and ultimately unassimilable. In doing so, they set the stage for marginalizing Chinese voices and practices, such as systems of gift exchange or trade protocol, presenting them as obstacles rather than legitimate cultural alternatives. Read this way, although the squad ultimately managed to break through the treacherous waterways and reach Macao, that arrival is less evidence of overcoming the uncharted and enigmatic nature of China than a rhetorical maneuver that represents China as a fixed text, awaiting British interpretation to be codified, subdued, and brought under authority. More significantly, China remains an unassimilated Other throughout this process of deciphering.

The notion of China being impracticable for strangers is conveyed through the image of indifferent fishermen, a symbol Walter and Robins use to illustrate China’s disregard for European manufacturing and technology. Rather than portraying Chinese

⁶⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 222.

⁶⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 222.

indifference as a mere threat to English identity, one that is made irrelevant and insignificant in a Sinocentric world, the authors reframe it as China's resistance to assimilation into a global economy. After detailing Anson's arduous journey, culminating in his arrival in Macao in 1742, the authors turn to describe the first local Chinese the crew encountered: "we were surprised to find ourselves in the midst of an incredible number of fishing boats" (312). Initially, the fishermen were assumed to be easily tempted "by showing them a number of dollars, a most alluring bait for *Chinese* of all ranks and professions" (312). Although that mercantile assumption performs an unabashed assertion of English cultural and economic superiority over China, it also implies the limitation of the supposedly universal language of mutually beneficial transactions, hinting at China's resistance to the global network of free trade. Without any self-scrutiny regarding the *Centurion's* vulnerable position—being in desperate need of repairs and provisions after two years of ordeals when it anchored off Macao—Walter and Robins hastily leap to a near-hysterical assertion that the Chinese lack of interest and curiosity in the outside world reflects "a mean and contemptible disposition" inherent to Chinese interiority:

But what surprised us most was the inattention and want of curiosity [...] A ship like ours had doubtless never been in those seas before; [...] yet they did not appear to be at all interested about us [...] It may perhaps be doubted, whether this cast of temper be the effect of nature or education; but, in either case, it is an incontestable symptom of a mean and contemptible disposition, and is alone a sufficient confutation of the extravagant praises, which many prejudiced writers have bestowed on the ingenuity and capacity of this Nation.
(313)

By funneling the fishermen's indifference into a charge of Chinese cultural insularity, Walter and Robins recast an encounter, one shaped as much by the *Centurion's* vulnerable condition and unfamiliar circumstances, as evidence of national deficiency. This reframing was typical in the late eighteenth-century antagonism toward China, which was fueled by its cultural insularity and stemmed from frustration over China's reluctance to engage in a global trade network that valued commerce and intercourse.

David Porter notes that the “restriction and constraint” of everyday interactions in China “offended the sensibilities of English visitors and contributed to a widespread view of the empire’s moral and political culture as backward, corrupt, and tyrannical.”⁶⁹ As Porter argues, because China resisted assimilation into a model that privileged “free circulation of cultural commodities,” English writers extended that verdict beyond commerce to pronounce the Chinese illegitimate in religious, aesthetic, economic, social, and political realms.⁷⁰ Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, in a similar vein, notices that the recurring criticism of Chinese cultural insularity in eighteenth-century European writings serves to “reflexively emphasize their own cosmopolitan orientation” by framing China’s indifference to the outside world as “willful short-sightedness.”⁷¹ As Zuroski argues, John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) reconceives personal identity and national character by making the mind a blank “cabinet” or “white paper” that accrues ideas through sensation and reflection. Zuroski contends that where John Webb locates identity in blood, tongue, and embodied lineage, Locke relocates identity to the process of acquisition: the self is what it learns and accumulates. Locke deploys the trope of China—a supposedly insular, atheistic, and static polity—as a negative exemplar to foreground the virtues of English curiosity, improvement, and cosmopolitan knowledge acquisition.⁷² As a result, Zuroski proposes that the Lockean self that “allowed for progressive accumulation and privileged dynamic improvement” provides an ideological basis for reframing the English pursuit for “intercourse and commerce with foreigners” as an advantage.⁷³ Locke’s epistemological model naturalizes commerce, travel, and cultural import as mechanisms of improvement and national strength. In this sense, the cultural insularity of the Chinese estranges them from the English, whose prestige lies in their eagerness to constantly accumulate new knowledge from the outside world. A monolithic China

⁶⁹ David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 198.

⁷⁰ Porter, *Ideographia*, 207.

⁷¹ Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 43.

⁷² Zuroski, *A Taste for China*, 42-50.

⁷³ Zuroski, *A Taste for China*, 47-49.

was no longer viewed as the ideal nation but was instead reframed by writers like Walter and Robins as an unassimilable Other, resistant to evolving into a global economy.

By framing China as an outdated model of insulated nationhood, opposite to the Lockean ideal of a dynamic and self-transforming self, Walter and Robins dismiss the threats of China incorporating Britain into its civic order. This is especially evident in their glorification of Anson's resistance to participating in the Chinese ritual of gift exchange in Canton. In Markley's discussion of Anson's second stay in *A Voyage*, he highlights how gift exchange played a crucial role in maintaining the delicate trade relations in Canton—a practice carefully managed by both English and Chinese merchants but jeopardized by Anson's refusal to pay customs duties upon entering Canton harbor. Markley argues that this refusal reflects an attempt to “construct an Anglocentric history that ignores or misrepresents the practices, assumptions and values” governing the international trade order in China.⁷⁴ Markley's study sheds light on how, through the lens of the ritual politics of gift, *A Voyage* reconstructs the contingent and compromised realities of Sino-British trade into a coherent story of British moral, military, and commercial superiority. Walter and Robins reframe the gift exchange ritual in Canton as an illegitimate impediment to free trade to reinforce the representation of China as an unassimilable Other in an Anglocentric international order. This compensatory rhetoric masks Britain's actual weakness in the South Seas trade by transforming economic disadvantages into moral superiority, thereby forging the myth of Britain as the defender of civilization against Chinese despotism.

In *A Voyage*, the authors' recounting of Anson's rejection of the gift ritual in Canton follows their narration of the capture of the Spanish galleon *Covadonga* near Manila—a significant achievement that resulted in the capture of Spanish prisoners and a substantial amount of treasure (338-341).⁷⁵ While Walter and Robins acknowledge that Anson was forced to return to the Chinese port due to severe damage to the

⁷⁴ Robert Markley, “Anson at Canton, 1743: Obligation, Exchange, and Ritual in Edward Page's ‘Secret History,’” in *The Culture of the Gift in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Linda Zionkowski and Cynthia Klekar (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 217.

⁷⁵ The final counts revealed Anson and his crew had seized 1,313,843 pieces of eight and 35,682 pieces of silver—the last and richest prize of Anson's entire voyage. See Walter and Robins, *A Voyage*, 344.

Centurion and worsening resource shortages exacerbated by newly captured prisoners (341-343), they reframe his visit as a willful confrontation with Chinese officials. Anson was portrayed as resolute in determining to “make the best of his way with his prize for the river of *Canton*” instead of docking in Macao (341)—a decision that marked his intent to directly confront Chinese officials. Anson’s stay in Canton is presented as a confrontation with the unreasonable and authoritarian Canton trade system operating through ceremonies of gift exchange and measurement. When the *Centurion* entered the Canton River and Chinese officials boarded to inspect the ship, Walter and Robins emphasize that Anson immediately declined to pay the customs duties because “as a man of war he was prohibited from trading, and had nothing to do with customs or duties of any kind” (346). Notably, Anson’s refusal to participate in the ritual of gift exchange in Canton is recounted before his negotiation with Chinese officials to secure daily provisions or arrange a visit to the Viceroy (349). Walter and Robins carefully reframe and reverse the power dynamics dictated by the gift ritual of the Qing court, in which Anson’s refusal to pay customs duties was essentially a rejection of the Qing Empire’s status as the giver of gifts. Marcel Mauss’s gift theory suggests that giving creates an obligation to reciprocate. In his groundbreaking study *The Gift*, Mauss invokes the Māori concept of the *hau*, which he describes as the spirit of a thing that “wishes to return to its birthplace [...] and to the owner,” to explain why gifts demand return.⁷⁶ As Mauss contends, it is this innate quality of the gift that forces the recipient to reciprocate, as “to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul. To retain that thing would be dangerous and mortal.”⁷⁷ When this reciprocal gesture is not made, the social bond that regulates interactions and maintains order is disrupted, creating a sense of indebtedness. Refusing to acknowledge the Qing’s authority as the benefactor in the ritual of gift exchange reverses the power relation, positioning the Qing court as the indebted party. In this reconfiguration, China’s imposition of duties is depicted not as a legitimate assertion of

⁷⁶ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 2002), 15.

⁷⁷ Mauss, *The Gift*, 16.

sovereignty but as an unreasonable and inferior practice that obstructed the civilized international order governing Britain's global interactions.

Walter and Robins emphasize that the procedure that Chinese officials followed was, at best, unreasonable. The punishment of the Mandarin commanding the forts for allowing foreign ships to pass is dismissed as a procedural "unreasonableness," given that the forts were too vulnerable to stop the superior British warships (348). To further highlight the absurdity, the authors note how the Chinese insisted that the Mandarin would still be punished, despite the impossibility of the forts preventing the ships. They characterize this unreasonable punishment imposed by Chinese authority as "indefensible absurdities," which are forced upon those "obliged to submit, who think themselves concerned to support their authority, when the necessary force is wanting" (348). In this context, the insistence on enforcing Chinese customs on a foreign warship only underscores the backwardness of Chinese practice in the face of British military superiority. Walter and Robins repeatedly justify Anson's refusal to pay customs duties, asserting that "he [the Commodore] would never submit to any demand of that kind; that as he neither brought any merchandize thither, nor intended to carry any away, he could not be reasonably deemed to be within the meaning of the Emperor's orders" (350). This stance rejects the notion of China as an equal participant in international relations, viewing its disincorporation with European values, customs, and civil orders as unreasonable and inferior. Moreover, it reframes the ritual of gift exchange in Canton as an unjust imposition rather than legitimate taxation, misinterpreting customs duties as a mere tribute to the Emperor's authority. In doing so, Walter and Robins invert Britain's role in this exchange, rejecting the idea that it was an indebted party in the ritual of gift exchange governing the Canton trade.

Walter and Robins, however, encounter an impasse. While they reject the accommodation of Chinese practices into British standards of civilization—elevating Englishness as resistant to acculturation by an unassimilable Other—they need to reconcile Anson's unavoidable dependence on Chinese merchants and officials. These intermediaries were crucial in navigating the complexities of the Canton trade, securing essential supplies for ship repairs, and facilitating his meeting with the Viceroy. This

reliance exposes a contradiction: despite their efforts to construct an English national identity that dismisses Chinese custom as illegitimate, Britain's practical dependence on Chinese intermediaries for trade and supplies makes China an inevitable participant in the global exchanges of goods, thereby undermining their claimed distinction between a progressive Britain and an insular China. Walter and Robins, therefore, at this point, choose to tell a notorious story of the "artifices, extortions and frauds" of the Chinese in their transactions with the Commodore and his crew (355). They claim that Chinese merchants manipulated the weight-based trading system by stuffing fowls and ducks with stones and gravel, injecting water into hog carcasses to increase their weight, and orchestrating the premature death of live sea stock to reclaim discarded carcasses for resale (355-356). Sarcastically, they remark that these instances "serve as a specimen of the manners of this celebrated Nation" (356). However, they downplay the crucial role these same Chinese merchants played in supplementing the *Centurion's* daily provisions, which became essential after Anson's refusal to pay customs duties cut off access to official supplies. They rush to dismiss Chinese cultural and moral authority so as to obscure the unstable status of Englishness. Reading their recounting of Anson's performance of resistance to the ritual of gift exchange in Canton alongside his reliance on the informal networks sustained by Chinese merchants maps the symbiosis between resistance and acculturation to foreign cultures within the global movement of trade.

Ironically, while Walter and Robins seek to reframe Anson's unfulfilling expedition as evidence of Britain's fascination with South Seas trade as a path to global economic dominance, their narrative largely overlooks the trade that British merchants of the East India Company maintained in Canton. In *A Voyage*, the role of the East India Company supercargoes—senior officials responsible for overseeing the cargo and commercial transactions abroad ships in foreign ports—in mediating Anson's disputes with Chinese officials over the duty issue, securing an audience with the Viceroy and other matters is "muted" or even rendered as "unpatriotic," as Williams observes.⁷⁸ In

⁷⁸ Williams, *The Prize*, 186.

their dismissive and passing description of the supercargoes, Walter and Robins retroactively shape Anson's interactions with the supercargoes as if he were dealing with doppelgangers of Chinese merchants, given the supercargoes' acculturation to Chinese ceremonies. They reveal that when Anson sought an audience with the Viceroy without adhering to the ceremonial customs of Canton trade, the supercargoes collectively expressed their "fears" about the potential repercussions of Anson's violation of the established protocols set by the Chinese authorities:

the Commodore received a letter signed by all the supercargoes of the *English* ship then at that place, expressing their great uneasiness at what had happened, and intimating their fears that some insult would be offered to his boat, if he came thither before the Viceroy was fully satisfied about the mistake. (358)

Instead of recognizing the supercargoes' efforts to navigate and respect the intricate social and economic systems of Canton, Walter and Robins regard their uniform compliance with the customs of gift exchange in hopes of securing trade privileges in Canton as cowardly, materialistic, submissive and unpatriotic. They dismiss the East India Company officers' wishful accommodation of Qing protocols as necessary for trade, representing such conformity as submission to a backward, alien civilization. They assert that: "they [the Chinese] had no other method of succeeding than by violence, and that even against this the Commodore was prepared; they were at last disposed, I conceive, to let the affair drop, rather than entangle themselves in an hostile measure" (357). It reveals a rejection of the Jesuits' accommodationist strategies, previously embraced by John Bell and now by the East India officers, who sought to translate acculturation to Chinese customs into concrete trade opportunities. In contrast, Walter and Robins insist on portraying China as an unassimilable Other, one that must be dominated, not negotiated with. By muting and denigrating the supercargoes, Walter and Robins downplay the commercial networks that sustained British global trade. Where merchants translated, bargained, and brokered access, Walter and Robins replace reciprocal negotiation with martial force and moral superiority, recasting imperial expansion as the result of national valor rather than of sustained commercial negotiation and mutual accommodation.

At this stage, *A Voyage* adopts a predictably sinophobic stance, framing assimilation to Chinese culture as a threat to a dynamic, self-transforming English identity. *A Voyage* concludes with a harsh critique of Chinese culture and government. Walter and Robins mock Chinese manufacturing, asserting that its “principal excellency seems to be imitation” (367). They criticize Chinese paintings for lacking the “ease and grace in the drawing which are to be met with in the works of European artists” (367). The Chinese language, they claim, is “perplexed,” “unintelligible,” and “extremely problematical” (368). While missionaries had praised Chinese morality as “exemplary” (368), they characterize the Chinese as embodying “timidity, dissimulation, and dishonesty” (369). Meanwhile, they condemn Chinese government as “corrupt,” the people as “thievish,” and the tribunals as “venal, and abounding with artifice” (368). Through the sinophobic rewriting of Jesuit idealization of China—an image that had shaped the English imagination since the seventeenth century and was still upheld by English merchants in Canton—Walter and Robins reinforce their portrayal of China as an unassimilable Other. In doing so, they dismantle earlier Jesuit accommodationist strategies, which had allowed British travelers like John Bell to view China as an idealized reflection of cultural, social, economic, and political excellence. However, this newly asserted English identity, defined by its resistance to acculturation, proves unstable within the global networks of trade. This instability becomes evident in a rival account of Anson’s second stay in Canton, written by Edward Page, an East India Company supercargo.

The unpublished manuscript *A Little Secret History* (1765) written by Edward Page provides an alternative account of Anson’s confrontation with Chinese authorities in Canton that inverts the official narrative.⁷⁹ Page’s manuscript refutes the official account that depicts Anson as a heroic defender of English honor against a corrupt and tyrannical Chinese empire. Instead, it presents a highly critical view of Anson’s conduct in Canton, describing it as chauvinistic and misunderstanding the ritualized gift

⁷⁹ Edward Page, *A Little Secret History of Affairs at Canton in the Year 1743 When the Centurion, Commodore Anson was Lying in the River*. November 18, 1765. MS 2894 Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon. Further references to Page’s manuscript will be cited parenthetically in the text.

exchange necessary to maintain delicate trade relations.⁸⁰ David Simpson's discussion of the figure of the stranger in and beyond the Romantic period has provided a paradigm for a broader consideration of gift exchange in cross-cultural encounters. Simpson evokes the trope of Derrida's *pharmakon*, "the healing power that may poison, the poison that is the cure," to clarify stranger syndrome as a continuous dialectic in which a spectrum of possibilities exists between the extremes of "unconditional hospitality" and "absolute aversion."⁸¹ Simpson argues that the stranger is a generative, unstable figure that organizes both political and rhetorical thought across a very long Romantic horizon: it is at once a source of welcome and of fear, lawgiving and scapegoating, poetic invention and political paranoia.⁸² The reflection on the stranger, therefore, is itself "a moving event, a process of adjustment or dialogue, and not a preservation of boundaries and given definitions."⁸³ In this sense, the gifts from the stranger are attributed with the paradoxical, *pharmakon* qualities. "Tea and sugar," for example, that are frequently mentioned in the works of De Quincey and Austen, operate "as both poison and cure on both the constitution of the body and that of the nation-state."⁸⁴ The unstable representation of the stranger, as Simpson argues, both reflects and reenacts the literal ambivalence of the late-eighteenth-century "global movement of goods and people," where the pattern persistently oscillates "between impediment and permissiveness, protectionism and free circulation."⁸⁵ The divergence between Anson's and Page's attitudes toward the Chinese merchants and the ritual of gift exchange can be understood through the lens of this unstable, antagonistic repulsion-acculturation dynamic. In this framework, the ambivalent *pharmakon* is embodied by the customs duty that Anson is required to pay: a poison, to Anson, threatening the cultural integrity of Englishness, yet a cure, to Page, essential for sustaining the delicate but profitable trade in Canton.

⁸⁰ See Williams, *The Prize*, 176-200; Williams, *Buccaneers*, 271-287; Markley, "Anson at Canton, 1743," 215-232.

⁸¹ David Simpson, *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9.

⁸² Simpson, *Romanticism*, 16-53.

⁸³ Simpson, *Romanticism*, 9.

⁸⁴ Simpson, *Romanticism*, 12-13.

⁸⁵ Simpson, *Romanticism*, 37.

In *A Little Secret*, Page situates the Company's willingness to engage in ritualized gift exchanges as a pragmatic and adaptive approach necessary for successful international trade. As Markley argues, different from Walter and Robins's insistence on demystifying idealized China, Page offers an account of "reciprocal anthropology," in which China "embodies the ideals of international commerce as a civilising, transcultural system that can be mutually beneficial."⁸⁶ Markley's account of Page's "reciprocal anthropology" illuminates how Page's defense of ritualized gift exchange is best understood not as cultural naivete but as an ideological response grounded in the vision of cross-cultural commerce. If Chinese civilization is constructed as governed by reciprocal obligations whose customs reliably generate mutual advantage, its ritual of gift exchange ceases to be merely ornamental or corrupting. Instead, it functions as a regulatory protocol, a set of conventional practices through which trust is produced, expectations are clarified, and commercial relations are rendered predictable. As the senior officer of the East India Company, Page reminds his readers how Anson's refusal to pay customs duty is a performative display of English national pride, disregarding the real lucrative business opportunities in Canton. Interestingly, Page's cynical perception of Anson's intemperate conduct is articulated through the Chinese merchant, Seuqua. As "the Oldest & the Richest of our merchants" conducting trade with the East India Company (3), Seuqua was introduced to Anson in hopes of mediating the standoff with the Chinese government. Page frames the conversation between Seuqua and Anson as an encounter between a seasoned Chinese trader, well-versed in the complexities of international trade and diplomacy in Canton, and an arrogant yet uninformed British officer—an outsider to this intricate economic network, preoccupied only with hollow displays of national pride:

Truly (says he) I think it is a very Foolish Business to set your Heart so much upon. You want to see a little of the China Customs. To You it is all one as to see a play, But to others it gives much Trouble and Vexation [...]; and then

⁸⁶ Robert Markley, "'That full complement of riches': China and the Problems of Political Economy in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*," in *Tribute and Trade: China and Global Modernity, 1784-1935*, ed. William Christie, Angela Dunstan and Q. S. Tong (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020), 51-52.

much Trouble will be brought upon the Factory, and the Merchants must have their Share. (4-5)

Seuqua sharply pointed out that the Commodore's dismissive and playful attitude toward the Chinese ceremonial gift exchange—viewing these customs as mere amusement that he could opt out of without facing any serious consequences or responsibilities—would wreck the East India Company's trade with China and negatively affect the English merchants involved. Anson's stance, however, did not waver after his conversation with Seuqua. Page continues to highlight Anson's blindness to the lucrative China trade that he would ultimately destroy, the opposite of the stance he himself shared with Seuqua. When Anson threatened to blockade the entrance to the Canton River, Page hoped he would consider “what the present & future Consequences might be to the East India Company; and how the Crown would be affected by the Loss of the China Trade which brought in a very great Revenue” (13). Anson nonetheless responded with indifference to Page's plea, stating that “he did not mind That; the Nation might make that up some other way” (13). The irony is so far established, as Page makes it clear to the reader that it is Seuqua, a Chinese merchant, who shows a cross-cultural sympathy toward his circumstances, not the Commodore who claims to defend English national interest. While the mutual trust and understanding between Seuqua and Page primarily stems from their shared priority of securing lucrative trade rather than engaging in performative displays of sovereign superiority, it reflects a form of transcultural sympathy that surpasses competing power relations to encourage intercultural interaction in global commerce networks.

The capacity of sympathy to bridge differences between individuals with varying dispositions carries significant implications for cross-cultural identification. April Alliston argues that the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary representations of sympathy enable novelists to imagine transnational, utopian communities that transgress the boundaries of nation, language, class, kinship and even race. Alliston contends that these “imaginary communities of sympathy,” rather than reinforcing

national unity, serve as sites of resistance to such alignments.⁸⁷ These “imaginary communities” function as alternatives to the bourgeois nation and its domestic core, the family, and are spatially mapped onto borderlands and colonies. In this sense, Alliston reframes sympathy not as an interpersonal moral capacity but as a collective, political imaginary that contests nationhood, showing how sympathy forges communities deliberately marginal to the nation. Page’s account of Anson’s unpleasant experiences with the Chinese in Canton reveals how sympathy extends beyond national identity, fostering a collective imaginative space in which English and Chinese actors are recast as participants in a broader, interdependent commercial community. In particular, where Walter and Robins adopt a sinophobic perspective, attributing Anson’s poor treatment in Canton not to his disregard for Chinese rituals of gift exchange but to the supposed Chinese inferiority, Page adopts a sympathetic stance to bridge cultural differences and national conflicts, promoting mutual understanding between English and Chinese merchants and officials. Walter and Robins shatter the Jesuit celebration of China as “a pattern of all kinds of laudable qualities” (356), by severely criticizing Chinese merchants for the notorious frauds Anson encountered while procuring supplies and repairing the *Centurion*. Page, however, counters the ethnocentric biases in the criticisms of Chinese merchants by promoting a more empathetic understanding of the challenges faced by the merchants, regardless of cultural differences:

And the case is the same in Turkey, in Persia and in India; [...] the Custom has travelled westward have nothing to do with the morals of the Chinese. [...] That the people of China will play Tricks, I won’t deny; and I believe They could tell you of some played by the more enlightened Europeans. (52-53)

Page universalizes the problem by presenting deception and vigilance as features of global trade, not symptoms of racial inferiority. Page thus undercuts the easy transfer from commercial friction to moral indictment and reframes Chinese commercial misconduct as a practice that deserves situational understanding. More importantly, Page invokes a sympathetic identification with Chinese officials by inviting the readers

⁸⁷ April Alliston, “Transnational Sympathies, Imaginary Communities,” in *The Literary Channel*, ed. Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 133.

to imagine how the British Crown would respond to foreign violations of its laws:

whether the Officers of Our Customhouse would not watch the Boats of a Foreign Ship (although she might be a Man of war) or, if they would not examine their Baggage if they were ordered so to do? And whether our government would not protect their officers in their Duty; & punish the Foreigners, if their Resistance to our Laws & Regulations should bring on any mischiefs. (19-20)

Page encourages readers to understand the actions of Chinese merchants and authorities not in terms of moral judgment or national pride, but rather as components of a broader global context where trade is operated through mutual obligation and deference. In doing so, Page situates sympathetic identification in the liminal trade space of Canton, treating that borderland as a place where national identity can be suspended or reshaped into cross-cultural solidarities rooted in commercial practice rather than patriotic assertion. Page thus produces an imaginary community of merchants and officials bound by affective and procedural ties like gift exchange rather than by strict national affiliation.

From Bell's travelogue to Walter and Robins' *A Voyage* and to Page's *A Little Secret*, one can trace a winding movement from a more cosmopolitan and utopian discourse of the other to the anxieties of confronting the unassimilable other. While Bell seeks to override cultural and political disagreements to forge reciprocal relations with the Chinese by invoking transcultural civility in the rituals of gift exchange, Walter and Robins, in their representation of Anson's dispute with Chinese officials over the custom duty, not only dismiss the custom and symbolic significance of gift exchange but also depict the efforts of English and Chinese merchants to mediate the crisis as wicked and hypocritical. However, by no means does this transition happen in chronological order. The transcultural sympathy that Walter and Robins regard as detrimental to the integrity of English identity is reimagined by Page as a means of understanding and engaging with the Chinese in an era of growing mercantile expansion. The English identity that emerges is inherently unstable, neither wholly cosmopolitan nor fully nationalist, and is continually negotiated through

representations of gift exchange. Gift exchange can both create reciprocal, cosmopolitan subjectivities and be repurposed to mark boundaries and enforce exclusion, thereby being recast as proof of alterity to be resisted or domesticated. The opposing responses to the Chinese ritual of gift exchange do not constitute a linear progression from utopian imagination to xenophobia; instead, they reflect how cosmopolitanism and nationalism operate through the same cultural and political practice. Across the three travel accounts, the ostensible alternation between nationalism and cosmopolitanism is thus better understood as a symbiotic relationship that mutually forged an unstable Englishness.

Chapter 3

From Confucius to the Fashion Fair: Oliver Goldsmith's Cosmopolitan Experiment in *The Citizen of the World*

In his 1760 essay “Reflexions on National Prejudices,” first published in the *British Magazine*, Oliver Goldsmith criticizes national bias and advocates for cross-cultural mutual understanding:

We are now become so much Englishmen, Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Spaniards, or Germans, that we are no longer *citizens of the world*; so much the natives of one particular spot, or members of one petty society, that we no longer consider ourselves as the general inhabitants of the globe or members of that grand society which comprehends the whole humankind.¹

Goldsmith sees intense national identification as a kind of moral myopia, where devotion to a single locality obscures our shared humanity. He suggests that national prejudice narrows sympathies and justifies partial judgments, serving as an implicit rebuke to xenophobia, factionalism, and imperial arrogance. His remedy is explicitly cosmopolitan: by celebrating a “grand society” that embraces all humankind, he seeks to correct parochial pride by prompting readers to think beyond narrow national loyalties.

Goldsmith puts this proposal into practice in a sustained series of pseudo-Chinese letters. Beginning in January 1760, Goldsmith contributed 119 of these letters to the newly-established daily newspaper, the *Public Ledger*, over the next eighteen months. Goldsmith subsequently revised the letters and incorporated a preface and four additional pieces before releasing the compilation under the name *The Citizen of the World* in 1762.² The correspondence is ostensibly authored by Lien Chi Altangi, a

¹ Oliver Goldsmith, “Reflexions on National Prejudices,” in *The British Magazine: or, Monthly Repository for Gentlemen and Ladies*, August, 1760, 461, [Eighteenth Century Journals - Adam Matthew Digital](#).

² Arthur Friedman, “Introduction,” in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, vol. 2, *The Citizen of the World* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966), ix-xii.

Chinese philosopher residing in London, who shares his experiences of London life with his addressees, his son Hingpo, a slave in Persia, and his friend Fum Hoam, the First President of the Ceremonial Academy of Peking. Within his letters, Lien Chi engages in a thoughtful evaluation of various facets of British society, drawing from a Confucian moral perspective to offer insightful reflections on its social, political, and cultural customs.

This use of pseudo-ethnographic letters, where foreign observers are deployed to defamiliarize European institutions and to enable social and political satire, was not an isolated experiment but a recurring literary mode across the long eighteenth century, from Montesquieu and Horace Walpole to Goldsmith and beyond. Srinivas Aravamudan captures what makes the genre distinctive by showing how pseudo-ethnographic epistolary fiction privileges “epistemological alterity”—the “singular,” “odd,” or “unfamiliar” perspective of a foreign observer—over “the cumulative outcome of a multiplicity of exotic attributes.”³ A single striking observation, as Aravamudan demonstrates in his reading of Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (1721), whether about a court ritual, household practice, or legal custom, can function like a philosophical experiment, as it destabilizes claims to universality and opens space for ethical or political arguments without requiring a full systematic treatise.⁴ In other words, pseudo-ethnographic or epistolary oriental narrators convert cultural difference into an epistemic resource: their seemingly exotic vantage point produces defamiliarization and stages comparative thought-experiments that open possibilities for ethical and political reform. This genre is thus regarded as a generous literary experiment in cross-cultural imagination, exemplifying what Aravamudan calls “a transcultural, cosmopolitan, and Enlightenment-inflected Orientalism.”⁵ By adopting foreign perspectives to prompt reciprocal reflection rather than mere exotic display, pseudo-ethnographic letters thus enable a nascent cross-cultural mutual understanding, one that is based on comparative imagination and self-critique rather than unilateral

³ Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 77.

⁴ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 81-94.

⁵ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 3.

imperial dominance.

Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, which satirizes the myriad social, religious, political, and literary absurdities of France through the eyes of two Persian visitors, Usbek and Rica, is a profound source of inspiration for Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*.⁶ Goldsmith's insights on Montesquieu's work are brought to light in his introduction on Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, which appeared in the *Monthly Review* in August 1757. In this essay, Goldsmith cites Voltaire's remarks regarding *Lettres Persanes*, which he groups alongside the *Siamese Letters* and the *Turkish Spy*:

The success their works met with was, for the most part, owing to the foreign air of their performance; the success of the *Persian Letters* arose from the delicacy of their satire. That satire which in the mouth of an Asiatic is poignant, would lose all its force when coming from an European. The genius which appeared in this performance, opened to Mr. Montesquieu, the gates of the French academy, even though it had been reflected upon by him. Yet at the same time, the liberty which he took in speaking of government, and the abuses of religion, induced Cardinal de Fleury to exclude him from the intended honour. However, the Author took very politic measures for reconciling this Minister to his interests. He published a new edition of this work; in which he retrenched, or softened, all that could be censured by that great man, either as Cardinal or Minister.⁷

Voltaire views Montesquieu's work as an imitation that draws on and refines earlier pseudo-ethnographic letters. He singles out the rhetorical advantage of an oriental narrator, noting how the "Asiatic mouth" lends satire a sharper, more effective edge.

⁶ See Levette Jay Davidson, "Forerunners of Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*," *Modern Language Notes* 36, no. 4 (April 1921): 216-218; William Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay: The Chinese Vogue in England during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 123; 范存忠, *中国文化在启蒙时期的英国* (上海: 上海外语教育出版社, 1991), 162. [Fan Cunzong, *Chinese Culture in Enlightenment Britain* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1991), 162.]

⁷ Goldsmith, *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 1:104-105. Further references to Goldsmith's critical essays are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

This insight anticipates the interpretive move Goldsmith makes with his Chinese narrator, Lien Chi, who like Montesquieu's Persian informant, is an epistemic device designed to defamiliarize familiar English institutions and enable critique. Yet Voltaire's account of Montesquieu revising the text to placate Cardinal de Fleury also reveals the political pragmatism underlying such strategies. The same device that opens space for cosmopolitan reflection must at times be tempered to secure acceptance, exposing both the possibilities and the constraints of using a foreign voice for social criticism.

However, unlike Montesquieu, who uses his foreign correspondent for sharp satire, Goldsmith recasts his oriental narrator as a sympathetic moral observer. As Levette Davidson notes, whereas Montesquieu positions his Persian narrators as "a protection in casting forth witty and bitter satire against the people, the government, and the Church," Goldsmith deploys his Chinese narrator primarily as "an attractive vehicle for a sympathetic criticism of customs and manners."⁸ By foregrounding a Confucian voice embodied in Lien Chi, a traveler who presents himself as guided by Confucian philosophy, Goldsmith invites a sympathetic imagination in which readers are encouraged not merely to be corrected or criticized, but to entertain empathy and to reflect. Ros Ballaster explains why eighteenth-century writers favored the Chinese persona: the fictional Confucian informants were "more amenable than the Turkish or Persian," because they could be presented as educated, linguistically capable, and predisposed to civic ethics.⁹ As Ballaster suggests, enabled by Jesuit and Enlightenment accounts of Confucius as a secular moral authority, the Chinese narrator carries epistemic weight without the theological baggage that often made other oriental voices sites of sectarian polemic.¹⁰ In this way, the Confucian narrator can build a sympathetic imagination by inviting empathy and modeling self-critique. As Goldsmith's biographer James Prior notes, Goldsmith chose a Chinese philosopher rather than "a native of Morocco or Fez," "a Turk or Persian," because he thought the

⁸ Davidson, "Forerunners," 217-218.

⁹ Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England, 1662-1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 243.

¹⁰ Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient*, 243-247.

Chinese, “being equally advanced in the scale of civilization, could pass an opinion on all he saw better than the native of a more barbarous country.”¹¹ Presenting the letters as written back to England on the pretext of mutual courtesy, Goldsmith thereby creates a reciprocal critical space where English customs are estranged for scrutiny and Chinese moral ideals are offered as potential correctives. These circumstances of fictional Chinese informants, as Ballaster argues, “provide an opportunity for genuine mutual ‘enlightenment.’”¹² In this sense, by making Lien Chi a Confucian philosopher, Goldsmith converts cross-cultural satire into a pedagogy of sympathy—a dialogic, reciprocal practice that highlights empathy, self-critique, and mutual understanding.

Goldsmith’s satire on British society through a Confucian philosopher is not original. According to Davidson and Shouyi Chen, Goldsmith draws inspiration for the name of his own Chinese philosopher, Lien Chi Altangi, from Horace Walpole’s 1757 five-folio pamphlet *A Letter from Xo Ho, a Chinese Philosopher at London, To his friend Lien Chi, at Peking*.¹³ In this work, Walpole satirizes the factionalism prevalent in the political landscape of eighteenth-century England, which resulted in the controversial execution of Admiral Byng for losing Minorca during the Seven Years’ War, and the ensuing political upheaval over the election of the Minister.¹⁴ In response to the chaotic British political administration, Xo Ho labels the British as “incomprehensible”:¹⁵

Formerly they had two Parties, now they have three Factions [...] In my last I told thee, that the second Faction in Magnitude had displaced the least Faction, and that a new Ministry would immediately be appointed. I deceived thee, I

¹¹ Qtd. in Friedman, “Introduction,” in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 2:ix-x.

¹² Ballaster, *Fabulous Orientals*, 247.

¹³ Davidson, “Forerunners,” 215; Shouyi Chen, “Goldsmith and His Chinese Letters,” in *The Vision of China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Adrian Hsia (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998), 287.

¹⁴ Chinese fables were widely employed as “an idealized commonwealth from overseas” to denounce the corruption of the Whig administration during Robert Walpole’s tenure from 1721 to 1742. Through these fables, the writers of the Opposition attacked “their political opponents as utterly inhuman, as utterly careless of their country, as utterly cynical” (151). See Cunzhong Fan, “Chinese Fables and Anti-Walpole Journalism,” *Review of English Studies* 25, no. 98 (April 1949): 141-151.

¹⁵ Horace Walpole, *A Letter from Xo Ho, a Chinese Philosopher at London to his Friend Lien Chi at Peking* (London: Printed for J. Graham, 1757), 1.

was deceived [...] I thought that when a Nation was engaged in a great War with a superior Power, that they must have Council; I was deceived: Reason in *China* is not Reason in *England*.¹⁶

Xo Ho speaks in the voice of a rational Confucian sage who reveals the instability and opportunism of English politics. His judgment—“Reason in China is not Reason in England”—ridicules England for failing to meet even the most common ideal of governance while also unsettling the universality of reason itself, suggesting that what counts as reasonable depends on cultural and political contexts. This satirical approach, as Peter Kitson argues, serves to elevate “the morality of the eastern Confucian sage over British mendacity and corruption.”¹⁷ By subjecting English institutions to the tribunal of Confucian rationality, Walpole exposes English political failure, revealing to English readers how their own practices appear contradictory and absurd when judged against Confucian rationality. The satire ultimately rests on the unsettling premise that English and Chinese reason are mutually unintelligible, a gap that both sharpens the critique and ironizes Enlightenment claims to universal rationality.

Goldsmith, however, departs from Walpole by using a Chinese traveler in England to delve into the potential for intimacy, civility, and friendship—a relationship that mutually defines the identities of both the British and the Chinese. Whereas Walpole adopts the Confucian informant as an estranging device for political satire, Goldsmith configures his protagonist Lien Chi Altangi to cultivate a cosmopolitan ideal that nurtures sympathetic imagination and invites a dialogic, reciprocal form of moral instruction. Unlike Xo Ho, who highlights the incomprehensibility of the English people, Lien Chi sets a lofty goal for his role as a philosopher. In Letter VII, Lien Chi differentiates between the missions of a traveler and a philosopher, criticizing European travelers for their focus on measuring geographical features and describing commodities, rather than “understanding the human heart” and uncovering cultural

¹⁶ Walpole, *A Letter from Xo Ho*, 2.

¹⁷ Peter J. Kitson, “‘Reason in China is not Reason in England’: Eighteenth-Century Adaptations of China by Horace Walpole and Arthur Murphy,” in *Romantic Adaptations: Essays in Mediation and Remediation*, ed. Cian Duffy, Peter Howell and Caroline Ruddell (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 14.

differences that arise from “climate, religion, education, prejudice, and partiality,” which is what a philosopher does.¹⁸ Lien Chi suggests that “a man who leaves home to mend himself and others is a philosopher; but he who goes from country to country, guided by the blind impulse of curiosity, is only a vagabond” (2:41). The philosopher’s endeavors in this sense are driven by humanitarian and cosmopolitan considerations, which make them akin to “the citizen of the world,” as the title of the work suggests. Although Goldsmith’s utopian vision of a worldwide community in *The Citizen of the World* has been subject to scrutiny,¹⁹ scholars also reveal that the cosmopolitan persona of Lien Chi illuminates the reciprocity of cultural interactions and the fluidity of cultural diversity. Roman Alexander Barton argues that Goldsmith frames Lien Chi as the embodiment of Adam Smith’s “impartial spectator,” a cosmopolitan figure whose authority derives from his detachment from local interests and his capacity for universal judgment.²⁰ Through Lien Chi, moral judgment is exercised by the disciplined use of sympathetic imagination, placing oneself in another’s situation to assess whether their feelings are proportionate and proper. In Barton’s reading, Goldsmith transforms cosmopolitanism from a lofty sentiment into a practical ethic. Lien Chi’s selective sympathies toward the British he encounters dramatize Goldsmith’s conviction that sympathetic imagination determines “the propriety of affections” and forms “the hinge and bottom of an intersubjective ethics.”²¹ Furthermore, Barton notes that by pairing Mencius with Seneca—the two philosophers whom Goldsmith has Altangi quote, both

¹⁸ Goldsmith, *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 2:40. All subsequent references to *The Citizen of the World* are to edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

¹⁹ Zhijian Tao argues that Goldsmith’s ideas of cosmopolitanism, as seen through Lien Chi’s perspective on Britain’s involvement in colonial wars, are shaped by “the empire’s broadening geopolitical experiences,” albeit this imperialistic political position is veiled behind “the rhetoric of humanistic cosmopolitanism.” See Tao, “Citizen of Whose World? Goldsmith’s Orientalism,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 33, no. 1 (1996): 20. James Watt also notices that Goldsmith’s cosmopolitan ideal is untenable, as evidence by the ambiguous and unstable nature of Lien Chi’s Chinese identity, coupled with the contradictions between Lien Chi’s lofty aspirations and actual experiences. These ambivalences, Watt maintains, exemplify the difficulties Goldsmith encounters in seeking alternative expressions of understanding cultural diversity, which ultimately obscures the potential benefits of cosmopolitan thought. See Watt, “Goldsmith’s Cosmopolitanism,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 56-75.

²⁰ Roman Alexander Barton, *The Making of the Sympathetic Imagination: Transformations of Sympathy in British Eighteenth-Century Philosophy and Fiction* (Germany: De Gruyter, 2020), 119.

²¹ Barton, *Sympathetic Imagination*, 129.

regarded as citizens of the world who traveled to distant lands to advance moral improvement for humanity—Goldsmith grounds his cosmopolitan ideal in a cross-cultural tradition.²² This gesture not only broadens the lineage of cosmopolitan thought but also invites readers to engage in a dialogic exercise of comparison and judgment. Therefore, by positioning Lien Chi as a cosmopolitan philosopher whose sympathetic imagination models ethics of mutual recognition and cross-cultural moral instruction, Goldsmith reimagines a reciprocal encounter in which a Chinese traveler and his British readers inhabit the same moral and cultural framework, narrowing the distance between them and transforming difference into dialogue.

By using a Confucian, cosmopolitan narrator to represent a reciprocal encounter that both estranges and reconstitutes Englishness, Goldsmith shows that national identity emerges in the comparative space of cross-cultural exchange, where mutual recognition and corrective sympathy reshape it. This reciprocity gains additional complexity from Goldsmith's decision to publish the Chinese letters serially in the *Public Ledger*. Stuart Sherman's discussion of the diurnal rhythm of newspapers in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's *Spectator* demonstrates how newspaper publication synchronizes a dispersed audience into a single, habitual moment.²³ As readers encounter the same essay at the same time each day, reading becomes a temporal practice, a shared, recurrent present in which author and readers are co-located. Sherman argues that the *Spectator* does not operate as a linear lecture from author to reader but as an instant, reflexive transmission of ideas: "Mr. Spectator 'speaks' and readers attend as an osmotic transfer of material from his mind to that of his reader, a correspondence enacted in an instant (like the reflection in a mirror) rather than one transacted over time (like that of speech or writing)."²⁴ By making reading a daily, reflective exchange, the quotidian cycle of newspaper creates a reciprocal relationship in which author and audience mutually shape and inhabit the printed self. Woven into that diurnal rhythm of newspaper, Lien Chi's observations become part of an ongoing,

²² Barton, *Sympathetic Imagination*, 120.

²³ Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal form, 1660-1785* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 109-158.

²⁴ Sherman, *Telling Time*, 138.

performative exchange that situates England and China within a shared temporal frame. As James Watt notes, the speed of composition imposed by the *Public Ledger*'s "serialization agreement" left the letters "uneven in tone as well as content," resisting efforts to locate a "coherent authorial agenda."²⁵ This unevenness reflects not a flaw but the improvisational, hybrid character of a text shaped by market demands, literary conventions, and the serial form itself. Like Watt, Aravamudan argues that *The Citizen of the World* is inseparable from such periodical pressures of topicality, brevity, and audience appeal. For Aravamudan, Lien Chi is less an autonomous philosophical persona than "a mouthpiece according to the topical necessities of the moment."²⁶ The figure of the Confucian philosopher thus becomes not a stable emblem of wisdom but a flexible rhetorical instrument, responsive to the shifting tides of eighteenth-century print culture and its appetite for novelty. Eun Kyung Min's account of newspaper seriality in *The Citizen of the World* sheds light on my argument of a temporal synchronization between China and Britain. Min describes Lien Chi as "a foreign correspondent reengineered as an eidolon, treading a thin line between reportage and the periodical essay, and exploiting the ambiguous eighteenth-century divide between the exotic and the new, the openly fictive and the curiously newsworthy."²⁷ Min's observations suggest that Lien Chi's comments operate in a liminal space between journalistic reporting and the more reflective, literary style of the periodical essay. For Min, by transplanting the pseudo-letter into the *Public Ledger*, a commercial, daily newspaper, Goldsmith "introduces a Chinese man into the quotidian, diurnal space of modern England." As a result, rather than functioning as the distant, ahistorical "despotic gaze" of traditional oriental tales, the Chinese perspective now appears "contemporary and proximate," the view of what Min calls a "neighboring stranger."²⁸ As Min clarifies, publishing the Chinese letters in serial form thus carries significant formal and ideological implications, by turning Lien Chi into a "serial subject,"

²⁵ Watt, "Goldsmith's Cosmopolitanism," 57.

²⁶ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 98.

²⁷ Eun Kyung Min, *China and the Writing of English Literary Modernity, 1690-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 137.

²⁸ Min, *China and the Writing of English Literary Modernity*, 144.

Goldsmith synchronizes England and China within the same calendrical time, encouraging readers to view both nations as “correlative, comparable” series within a shared modernity. Lien Chi’s seriality, in this sense, as Min notes, acquires a “universalizing” force, opening a “comparative perspective” on Englishness itself and unsettling the notion of national identity as fixed, singular, or insulated from global contexts.²⁹ Ultimately, the serial form positions Goldsmith’s Chinese narrator as a dynamic site where engagement with China continually renegotiates the meaning of Englishness in a modern, interconnected world.

This chapter argues that by giving voice to a Confucian narrator who claims a cosmopolitan ideal and by serializing *The Citizen of the World* so that Chinese and English perspectives unfold within a shared temporal and spatial framework, Goldsmith turns *The Citizen of the World* into a performative forum for reciprocal, dialogic Sino-British exchange that instructs and satirizes English society. I will show how Goldsmith adapts numerous Confucian proverbs—whether drawn from Jesuit accounts or entirely fabricated—to address the contemporary challenges faced by English society. In doing so, Goldsmith invokes a supposed convergence of English and Chinese values that echoes the Jesuit advocacy of Confucian-Christian synthesis. At the same time, this reciprocal, cosmopolitan encounter is precarious. The Confucian voice is dependent on selective missionary writings and constrained by editorial framing. Yet by situating Confucian ideals within the immediacy of the periodical press and juxtaposing them with contemporary events, Goldsmith transforms mediated interpretations into a dialogic cosmopolitanism that invites English readers to test and respond rather than simply accept Confucian wisdom as antique authority. Furthermore, by simultaneously casting Lien Chi as a London-roaming modern metropolitan, Goldsmith produces a figure who facilitates reciprocal mockery: a satire that both commodifies and flattens Chinese culture and, at the same time, exposes British imperial-commercial hypocrisies and material follies. Goldsmith, therefore, not only imagines the promise of a reciprocal cross-cultural encounter but also demonstrates its fragility and ambivalence, showing

²⁹ Min, *China and the Writing of English Literary Modernity*, 146-147.

how curiosity can easily slip into caricature and how readers become complicit consumers of oriental allure.

“The Chinese and we are pretty much alike”: A Reconsideration of the Cosmopolitan Ideal in Goldsmith’s Confucian Adaptations

When Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit pioneer, arrived in Macao in 1582, he fashioned himself in the manner of a Chinese literatus, donning official robes, mastering *guanhua* (the native Chinese language), and undertaking an annotated Latin translation of the Four Books, the Confucian classics *Lunyu*, *Zhongyong*, *Daxue* and *Mengzi*.³⁰ As J. J. Clarke explains, early missionaries like Ricci recognized that China was a refined civilization with its own language, literature, and traditions, and they soon realized that the outright replacement of Confucian practices was futile. They therefore embraced a strategy of “accommodation”—interpreting rather than suppressing native rites—by adopting the manners and learning of Chinese scholar-officials and by “adapting Catholic rituals to Confucian customs and practices.”³¹ This strategy of accommodation produced a carefully constructed convergence between Confucian morality and Christian doctrine. By presenting themselves as Chinese literati and interpreting the Confucian canon through Christian doctrine, the Jesuits fostered dialogue with Chinese elites, even as they sparked enduring disputes over representation and orthodoxy. As Clarke notes, these compromises provoked alarm in Rome, where custodians of orthodoxy viewed the accommodationist strategy as a dangerous dilution of Catholic purity.³²

Moving the focus from Rome’s orthodoxy-driven reprimands to the ways those disputes reconfigured intellectual authority in Europe, David Porter demonstrates that Jesuits built authority by translating Confucian morality into Christian terms, which rendered Chinese culture intelligible to Europeans but flattened its cultural diversity into a teleological narrative toward Christian truth. As Porter puts it, “By positing an

³⁰ Lionel M. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions & Universal Civilization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 35-61.

³¹ J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: the Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), 41.

³² Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 41.

essential compatibility between Catholic doctrine and the religious ideas of the ancient Chinese, these Jesuits constructed an interpretation of Chinese culture that was premised on a conceptual foundation closely related to that employed by their more philologically minded contemporaries back in Europe.”³³ Rather than neutrally identifying equivalences, the Jesuits produced them, rendering Chinese texts in a discourse governed by European philological norms. Porter shows the ideological consequence of this process, that is, “the persistent association of Chinese culture with a privileged form of representation, a utopian anticipation of absolute legibility in the face of inscrutable otherness.”³⁴ He reveals a seventeenth-century European hope that China could be completely read, assimilated, and folded into a universal narrative. Porter’s account implies that a Confucian-Jesuit synthesis could generate cross-cultural contact, but the synthesis did so by imposing a representational model that legitimates Christian readings of Chinese texts while flattening cultural heterogeneity and erasing the productive strangeness that might resist such assimilation. In a similar vein, Lionel Jensen argues that “Confucius” is not a fixed, pre-existing figure but a cultural product forged by the early Jesuit missionaries in late-Ming China and by their European interpreters. The Jesuits’ strategy of accommodation produced a hybrid, Christianized image of Kongzi, the revered ancient Chinese philosopher later known in the West as Confucius. This new image of Kongzi made the missionaries comprehensible to Chinese patrons and exported an influential, often distorted, image of “Confucius” back to Europe.³⁵ Jensen further clarifies that the assumption of Confucianism as “largely a Western invention” does not aim to “establish a Western provenance for Confucius,”³⁶ but rather emphasizes Confucianism as “the consequence of centuries of relationship between China and West.”³⁷ The transformation of Kongzi into the Western figure of Confucius, a process shaped by the accommodationist policy since the sixteenth century, indicates that Confucianism, from its earliest representations to Europe, reflects the

³³ David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 80.

³⁴ Porter, *Ideographia*, 80.

³⁵ Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, 33-74.

³⁶ Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, 5.

³⁷ Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, 4.

cultural interconnectedness between China and the West. In short, the premise of intellectual parallels and shared civility, which made Chinese/Confucian culture appear compatible with Christianity, set the stage for the European understanding of Confucianism. The Confucian-Christian synthesis, in turn, prepared the ground for Chinese philosophy to enter and influence the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁸ Meanwhile, this intellectual convergence was a Jesuit and European construction intended to legitimize Christianity and, in the process, flattened the complexity of Chinese culture. The enduring legacy, then, is a partial and forged interconnectedness: a compelling, legible image of Confucian China that enabled cross-cultural dialogue but also reshaped, and sometimes distorted, how Europeans and their Chinese interlocutors understood the exchange.

The pioneering English intellectual Sir William Temple played a key role in promoting the cult of Confucian philosophy. In his 1690 tract *Of Heroic Virtue*, Temple contends that the exemplars of heroic virtue can be found in geographically distant regions, that is China in the far east, Peru in the far West, Scythia or Tartary in the far north, and Arabia in the far south.³⁹ These four remote regions are brought together despite their differences to illustrate the universality of exemplarity, and to form a collective representation of heroic virtue. As Chi-ming Yang notes, Temple connects these distant places by drawing “structural similarities” between them and their “combined opposition” in late seventeenth-century England. This approach allows Temple to bridge “distances with effortless intellectual leaps while at the same time using distance as productive of universality, or identity.”⁴⁰ Temple’s praise of Confucius—“a very extraordinary genius, of mighty learning, admirable virtue,

³⁸ For the general impact of Confucian thoughts on France, Germany and England, see Arnold H. Rowbotham, “The Impact of Confucianism on Seventeenth Century Europe,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (May 1945): 224-242; for the relationship between Confucianism and English Enlightenment, see 范, *中国文化在启蒙时期的英国*, 22-41. [Fan, *Chinese Culture in Enlightenment Britain*, 22-41.]; for the leading French, German, and English philosophers’ integration of China into the European Enlightenment, including Voltaire, Diderot, Leibniz, Quesnay, William Temple, and Matthew Tindal, see Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 43-52.

³⁹ William Temple, “Of Heroic Virtue,” in *The Works of Sir William Temple* (London: Printed for F. C. and J. Rivington, 1814), 3:324.

⁴⁰ Chi-ming Yang, “Virtue’s Vogues: Eastern Authenticity and the Commodification of Chineseness on the 18th-century Stage,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 39, no. 4 (2002): 343.

excellent nature, a true patriot of his country, and lover of mankind”⁴¹— serves as the keystone of this universal moral canon. Temple’s cosmopolitan ideal that “human nature is the same in these remote, as well as the other more known and celebrated parts of the world”⁴² rests on the interpretive groundwork laid by the Jesuit accommodationist strategy. By the time Temple penned his tract, Jesuit translations had already rendered Confucian texts intelligible within a Christian framework, culminating in the 1687 Paris publication of the first comprehensive translation of the Confucian canon, titled *Confucius sinarum philosophus, sive, Scientia sinensis latine exposita*.⁴³ Temple’s cosmopolitan admiration of Confucian philosophy both draws upon and reproduces this Jesuit construction of Chinese culture. He borrows the Jesuit-framed Confucius as proof that ancient, non-European civilizations participate in the same moral order celebrated by Europeans. At the same time, as Min and Yang have noted, Temple’s admiration of China’s achievement is closely tied to his defense of ancient superiority in the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.⁴⁴ In this sense, while Temple claims a cosmopolitan, universal moral order, his purpose is less to celebrate China than to appropriate selectively mediated images of Confucius to reinforce his stance in English political and literary debates.

The Confucian-Christian synthesis is also echoed by the British deists, who draw on the parallels between Confucian philosophy and Christian teachings to support their

⁴¹ Temple, “Of Heroic Virtue,” 334.

⁴² Temple, “Of Heroic Virtue,” 357.

⁴³ The appearance of this work was quickly followed by a wave of Jesuit writings on Confucius and Chinese moral philosophy, including *La Morale de Confucius, philosophe de la Chine* (1687), and Simon Fourcher’s *Lettre sur la morale de Confucius* (1688). See William Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay: The Chinese Vogue in England during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 40-41.

⁴⁴ Min investigates China’s significant presence in an intellectual controversy, known as the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, in which William Temple and William Wotton debated the relative advantages of ancient and modern achievements. She contends that for eighteenth-century English writers, China was more of a “thinking tool” for critical self-reflection, used to “arrive at a self-conscious appraisal of their modern cultural moment.” See Min, *China and the Writing of English Literary Modernity*, 12. Yang also views Temple’s celebration of China’s historical accomplishment as part of an earnest endeavor to restore the lost grandeur of antiquity and a warning of the impending crisis of Western modernity. She argues that Temple’s Sinophilia serves to elevate “China’s primordial civilization to deliver a scathing critique of European modernity.” See Chi-ming Yang, *Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century England, 1660-1760* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 68.

idea that the principles of natural religion are applicable to all human beings regardless of their cultural or religious backgrounds. In his work on deism *Christianity as Old as Creation* (1730), Matthew Tindal, the primary advocate of natural religion, sees Confucius's teachings as providing a practical and accessible pathway to delve into the more intricate and metaphorical aspects of Christ's teachings:

I am so far from thinking the Maxims of *Confucius*, and Jesus Christ to differ; that I think the plain and simple Maxims of the former, will help to illustrate the more obscure Ones of the latter, accommodated to the then way of speaking.⁴⁵

This famous quote has been extensively examined to demonstrate how Tindal substantiates his perspective on a universal moral order by leveraging the compatibility of ethical teachings between Confucianism and Christianity.⁴⁶ Appleton suggests that the interchangeability of “the sayings of Confucius and Christ,” which Tindal identifies while exploring “the universal code of practical morality,” demonstrates the “likeness among men of reason.”⁴⁷ This notion of universal reason becomes the foundation for deism, which can be comprehended through human reason alone rather than through revealed dogmas, and is accessible to all people. The Jesuit interpretations of Chinese texts, which initially aimed to reveal the Christian elements within Chinese culture, were now being used by British deists to address the contradictions emerging from attempts to align scientific knowledge with religious beliefs. Jensen argues this transition shows the “mechanisms of meaningful invention, canon construction, and authority generation” that had been instrumental in forming and maintaining a distinct Chinese identity were repurposed in Europe to address crises related to the representation of various fields, such as science and theology.⁴⁸ Thus, when Tindal claims that the “plain and simple Maxims” of Confucius illuminate the “obscure Ones”

⁴⁵ Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation: Or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London: n.p., 1730), 352.

⁴⁶ See Rowbotham, “The Impact of Confucianism,” 238; Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, 50; Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 51; 范, *中国文化在启蒙时期的英国*, 28. [Fan, *Chinese Culture in Enlightenment Britain*, 28.]

⁴⁷ Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, 50.

⁴⁸ Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, 118-119.

of Christ, he is doing more than proposing a moral parallel. He inherits a Jesuit-shaped, quasi-canonical Confucianism that had been refashioned in Britain into evidence for a universal natural religion, one that could stabilize representation across both science and theology. The result reflects a twofold dynamic in which Jesuit missionaries endowed Confucian maxims with European legibility and authority, while English intellectuals subsequently transformed them into a secular, transcultural resource for addressing questions of religious and cultural authority in Britain.

Throughout the sixteenth century and onwards, the reception and understanding of Chinese culture in Europe largely revolved around this Confucian-Christian synthesis, building a cross-cultural form of civility and moral universality. This synthesis not only legitimized European cultural authority but also constructed a pliable, selectively mediated Confucianism that could be deployed to address domestic theological, scientific, and political debates. Qingbo Meng's bibliographical survey of eighteenth-century English writings on Confucius shows that, between 1706 and 1795, a total of nineteen translations, treatises, and pamphlets concerning Confucius were published.⁴⁹ As Kitson argues, "The standard eighteenth-century European interpretation of Chinese culture which [Thomas] Percy and [William] Jones inherited was that it was Confucian, or at least that its most legitimate, worthy, and essential attributes were [...] constructed by its 'scholar-literati' (*shidafu*) class." This stance "was an artful and sophisticated 'manufacture' [...] of Jesuit missionaries."⁵⁰ Goldsmith, like many of his predecessors in Europe, was attracted to this dominant construal of Chinese culture, primarily drawing upon the works of Jesuit missionaries

⁴⁹ These publications ranged from English translations of Confucian works or Chinese history published in other European languages—such as *The Morals of Confucius* and *The General History of China*—to articles, biographies, or pamphlet excerpts that appeared in periodicals, like the biography of Confucius published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1742. They also included chapters dedicated to Confucius within broader English works introducing Chinese culture, such as *The Works of Sir William Temple* and *Hau Kiou Chooan; or The Pleasing History*. These works played a pivotal role in introducing both Confucius and Chinese philosophical ideas to the English learned community, fostering a merging of Confucian thought and English intellectual discourse. See 孟庆波, "18 世纪记述孔子的英文文献及其特征与影响," *中国比较文学* 4, no. 113 (2018): 180-199. [Meng Qingbo, "Eighteenth-Century English Literature on Confucius and Its Characteristics and Influence," *Chinese Comparative Literature* 4, no. 113 (2018): 180-199.]

⁵⁰ Peter J. Kitson, *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange, 1760-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 28.

to develop his understanding of Confucian philosophy, with a notable reliance on Louis Le Comte's *Nouveaux memoires sur l'etat present de la Chine* (1697) and Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's *A Description of the Empire of China* (1738 and 1741).⁵¹ Throughout *The Citizen of the World*, Goldsmith's protagonist Lien Chi mentions "Confucius" twenty-three times and quotes his words on six occasions. Most of these references do not directly mirror passages from *The Analects* but instead represent Goldsmith's reworking of Confucian proverbs. Goldsmith builds on this Confucian-Christian synthesis by enabling Confucian philosophy to assess English thought and society while also exposing how the selective transmission of Jesuit texts and editorial intervention manufacture a simplified, often parodic image of Lien Chi, the Confucian narrator. However, by placing Lien Chi's advocacy of Confucian exemplarity in conversation with topical events, most notably the reported death of Voltaire and debates over the factional republic of letters, Goldsmith transforms mediated representations of Confucian philosophy into a dialogic practice that compels English readers to test and respond to Confucian norms. The result is a reciprocal, dialogic cosmopolitanism that advances Chinese ethical norms to judge European thought even as that very mediation complicates questions of authenticity and authority.

In the Editor's Preface that Goldsmith appends to the collected letters, Goldsmith, through the voice of an editor-narrator, both authorizes Lien Chi as a moral interlocutor and domesticates him for an English reading public. The preface advances an explicit cosmopolitan claim: "The truth is, the Chinese and we are pretty much alike" (2:13-14). By insisting that "Different degrees of refinement, and not of distance, mark the distinctions among mankind" (2:14), the editor collapses the barrier between English and Chinese cultures and invites readers to take Lien Chi's judgments seriously instead of dismissing them as exotic spectacle. That invitation is reinforced by the editor's promise to preserve Lien Chi's distinctive manner: "The metaphors and allusions are all drawn from the East [...] The Chinese are always concise, so is he. Simple, so is he. The Chinese are grave and sententious, so is he" (2:14). Although the editor doesn't

⁵¹ Friedman, "Introduction," in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 2:x.

explicitly state that these figurative expressions from Eastern civilization refer to Confucian philosophy, the teachings of Confucius are frequently referenced by Lien Chi, acting as a continual testament to his commitment to pursuing transcultural cosmopolitan intimacy.

Yet the preface also models the limits of that cosmopolitan ideal by allowing stereotype and mockery to coexist with praise. After listing formal affinities, the editor concedes that “the Chinese are often dull; and so is he” (2:14), a qualification that tempers the cosmopolitan claim and reminds readers of the comic tone in which many of Lien Chi’s comments will appear. The editor, furthermore, adapts the romance tale of “a certain knight errant and his horse who contracted an intimate friendship” to characterize his collaboration with Lien Chi (2:14). This playful reference to the famously absurd and romanticized bond between Don Quixote and his horse, Rocinante—noble in intention but ultimately comic and futile—adds a layer of irony to the preface. Don Quixote’s intimacy with his horse turns heroic grandeur into a playful humor, reshaping the expected chivalric nobility. By comparing their collaboration to the closeness of knight and horse, the editor introduces a satirical sense of intimacy to his partnership with Lien Chi. The editor turns what might be seen as a solemn cross-cultural exchange between a wise Chinese philosopher and an English editor into an informal, friendly, and lightly absurd interaction. The didactic tone of Lien Chi’s weighty Confucian morality is thus softened, making it open to comic scrutiny. As the editor claims, Lien Chi “has usually given me a lift of his Eastern sublimity, and I have sometimes given him a return of my colloquial ease” (2:14), casting the letters as a negotiated performance in which both voices mutually shape meaning. By alternating praise with mild mockery, the editor positions Lien Chi as wise and comic: his letter carries the trappings of dignity, expressed through elevated aphoristic pronouncements, while also being recast in editorial put-downs that make him the object of gentle ridicule. That ambivalence prepares readers to accept Confucian moral lessons that are occasionally undercut by comic episodes. Through the editor’s preface, Goldsmith sets the stage for a cosmopolitan ideal while also revealing the mediated and satirical conditions that will complicate that ideal throughout *The Citizen of the World*.

In Letter VII, Lien Chi articulates a defense of the “philosophical traveler,” presenting traveling as a form of moral training underpinned by Confucian morality and aimed at understanding the human heart. As Charles Knight notices, Lien Chi tends to refrain from irony when discussing “moral and philosophical” topics.⁵² He explains that this is because the reader’s expectation that Lien Chi’s values will exhibit a degree of stability is crucial for “the reader’s willingness to appreciate him as a perceptive ironist.”⁵³ Knight’s remark suggests the consistency of Lien Chi’s moral judgments makes it possible for an English audience to accept him as a serious moral interlocutor, not just a comic device. In Letter VII, Goldsmith depicts Lien Chi transforming personal calamity, the loss of his family who were “carried into captivity” as punishment for his exile, into an opportunity for moral growth (2:39). Lien Chi’s declaration that “I hold the volume of Confucius in my hand, and as I read grow humble and patient, and wise” turns the act of reading Confucian texts into an ethical practice (2:39). The Confucian classics are instruments of inward reform, rather than exotic doctrine, which prepares the narrator to translate private training into public admonition. Lien Chi then invokes the Confucian ideal of the “immutable mean”:

We should hold the immutable mean that lies between insensibility and anguish; our attempts should be not to extinguish nature, but to repress it; not to stand unmoved at distress, but endeavour to turn every disaster to our own advantage. Our greatest glory is, not in never falling, but in rising everytime we fall. (2:39)

Sourced from “the twelfth maxim of Confucius given by Le Comte” (2:39n), as Arthur Friedman points out, Goldsmith shows how embracing the Confucian virtue turns misfortune into moral development. From this Confucian maxim, Lien Chi, for the first time, elaborates his motivation for traveling abroad:

Let European travellers cross seas and deserts merely to measure the height of a mountain, to describe the cataract of a river, or tell the commodities which

⁵² Charles A. Knight, “Ironic Loneliness: The Case of Goldsmith’s Chinaman,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 82, no. 3 (July 1983): 357-358.

⁵³ Knight, “Ironic Loneliness,” 358.

every country may produce; [...], but what advantage can accrue to a philosopher from such accounts, who is desirous of understanding the human heart, who seeks to know the men of every country, who desires to discover those differences which result from climate, religion, education, prejudice, and partiality. (2:40)

By contrasting mere collectors of facts with those who travel to “understand the human heart,” Lien Chi reframes travel as facilitating moral formation rather than empirical inventory, implicitly criticizing the objectifying approach to foreign peoples. Goldsmith returns to this ideal of philosophical travel in Letter CVIII, where Lien Chi condemns “almost all the European travellers” as “men of very narrow or very prejudiced education” (2:418), and sketches the model traveler as:

a man of a philosophical turn, one apt to deduce consequences of general utility from particular occurrences, neither swollen with pride, nor hardened by prejudice, neither wedded to one particular system, nor instructed only in one particular science; [...] his mind should be tinctured with miscellaneous knowledge, and his manners humanized by an intercourse with men. (2:421)

This description translates the Confucian doctrine into concrete virtues like openness to experience, intellectual eclecticism, and humanity forged through interaction. The fact that Goldsmith revisits the concept of the philosophical traveler in multiple letters indicates that, despite the layers of irony present in *The Citizen of the World*, his exploration of the cosmopolitan potential embodied by a philosophical traveler engaged in cross-cultural exchanges remains consistent and serious.

Although Lien Chi’s grand aspiration to travel as a philosopher is based on Confucian doctrines, Goldsmith exhibits a certain reservation in his admiration for Confucius. That ambivalence shapes the way Confucian wisdom is presented: not as an unmediated doctrine, but through editorial interruption. The editor cautions that he:

thinks proper to acquaint the reader, that the greatest part of the following letter, seems to him to be little more than a rhapsody of sentences borrowed from Confucius, the Chinese philosopher. (2:39)

This intervention both legitimates Lien Chi by invoking Confucius and undermines him

by casting his materials as unauthentic, derivative or formulaic. Paul Nash draws a parallel between Goldsmith's playful treatment of Chinese maxims and William Wotton's "criticism of Sir William Temple's laudatory remarks on China."⁵⁴ Wotton raises doubts about relying solely on the authority of Jesuit missionaries to understand Chinese cultures. He implies the Jesuits' presentation of Confucian teachings might be vulnerable to being dismissed as "an incoherent Rhapsody of Moral Sayings, with which good Sense and tolerable Experience might have furnished any Man as well as Confucius."⁵⁵ For Nash, Goldsmith's editorial gloss both validates and satirizes the use of Chinese wisdom by mocking English enthusiasm for easy maxims, lampooning the heavy-handed editorial apparatus that claims authority over oriental texts, and exposing the limits of a Chinese narrator's voice as a vehicle for moral instruction.⁵⁶ Watt likewise interprets this editorial intervention as Goldsmith's "wariness" in "offering any claim that might appear definitive" due to the disparity between idealized visions and actual historical events.⁵⁷ Taken together, Lien Chi's Confucian wisdom functions as both a genuine moral aspiration and a mediated performance that cannot escape parody. Goldsmith needs Lien Chi to personify cosmopolitan virtues, but he also mocks the very claims to authenticity that his readers might fetishize. Through editorial irony and the narrator's advocacy, Confucian wisdom becomes a mediated moral performance. The core of Goldsmith's cosmopolitan vision thus rests on both Confucian morality and self-conscious parody that exposes the performative nature of such virtue.

This mediated and unstable voice of Confucius, constrained by the editorial intervention and selective rewriting or invention of Jesuit works on Confucianism, nevertheless acquires new resonance for English readers when Goldsmith has Lien Chi invoke Confucius in response to contemporary events. In Letter XLIII, Goldsmith uses Lien Chi's Confucian persona and the immediacy of the newspaper to convert the

⁵⁴ Paul Nash, "The Idea of China in British Literature, 1757-1785" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2013), 167-168.

⁵⁵ William Wotton, *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning*, 3rd ed. (London: Printed by F. Leake for Peter Buck 1705), 145-146.

⁵⁶ Nash, "The Idea of China in British Literature," 168.

⁵⁷ James Watt, *British Orientalisms, 1759-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 36.

(mis)reported death of Voltaire into a public occasion for ethical judgment and cosmopolitan solidarity. In doing so, he juxtaposes Confucian exemplarity with European philosophers, making Chinese standards operative in contemporary debates about how society values thinkers and sustains a transnational republic of letters. This letter was first published in the *Public Ledger* on 3 June 1760 against the backdrop of contradictory reports: a Swiss notice of Voltaire's death on May 10 and a same-day denial in the *London Chronicle* (2:181n). Goldsmith seizes the fake news of Voltaire's death and makes it a prompt for Lien Chi's ethical reflection.

Lien Chi opens with an empathetic attachment to the loss of philosophers—"When a philosopher dies, I consider myself as losing a patron, an instructor, and a friend" (2:181)—and proceeds to catalogue the persecutions endured by great minds, such as Socrates, Galileo, Bacon, Locke, etc. (2:182). Lien Chi embeds Voltaire in a transnational republic of letters—"The royal Prussian, D'argens, Diderot, D'alambert, and Fontenelle conspire in drawing the picture, in describing the friend of man and the patron of every rising genius" (2:183)—thus modeling an intellectual community that transcends courts and national rivalries and privileging wisdom and liberty over rank. Crucially, Lien Chi places Voltaire and other European philosophers beside Confucius:

Nature every day produces in abundance men capable of filling all the requisite duties of authority; but she is niggard in the birth of an exalted mind, scarcely producing in a century a single genius to bless and enlighten a degenerate age. [...] she seems to have forgotten for more than three thousand years, the manner in which she once formed the brain of a Confucius; and well it is she has forgotten, when a bad world gave him so very bad a reception. (2:182)

Confucius is the paradigmatic "exalted mind," both the embodiment of philosophical virtue to be admired and emulated, and the metric by which European intellectual life can be judged. The scarcity of "an exalted mind" in the contemporary world is a critique of Europe's failure to produce, or to honor, such minds. Thus, when Lien Chi praises a European thinker, he does so by reference to Confucius's standard, enhancing that thinker's moral standing while making Confucianism a contemporary, applicable yardstick for European debates.

Furthermore, as this elegiac letter was first published in the *Public Ledger*, it reads less like a detached moral tract than a public performance unfolding with readers' daily lives. As Min observes, by placing Lien Chi "squarely in the midst of contemporary events," Goldsmith establishes "China's contemporaneity with the 'now' time of the newspaper." Min explains that by pretending to be up-to-date foreign correspondence, Goldsmith's Chinese letters encourage a more intimate, temporally immediate relation between the reader and reported events.⁵⁸ In this way, English readers encounter Lien Chi as a contemporary voice, directly relevant to their own moment, rather than as an exotic diversion. That contemporaneity gives Lien Chi's Confucian claims immediate resonance, because they intervene in ongoing debates and events rather than being presented as timeless maxims detached from lived experience—maxims that the editorial framing could easily dismiss as lacking credibility. As a result, instead of treating Confucius as a static repository of antique wisdom or Europe as the sole source of modernity, the juxtaposition of Voltaire and Confucius in the same spatial and temporal framework transforms Lien Chi's cosmopolitanism into a reciprocal, dialogic practice, one that empowers Chinese ethical norms to assess contemporary European thinkers.

This resonance between Confucian ideal and English intellectual life becomes especially clear in Letter XX, where Goldsmith recasts the Confucian ideal of "great unity" (*datong*) from a distant moral aspiration into a practical code for intellectual conduct that exposes the factional, commodified "republic of letters." In this letter, Lien Chi launches a cynical attack on the vaunted "republic of letters," which he describes as "an anarchy of literature" where the learned are splintered "into almost as many factions as there are men" (2:85). He counters that fragmentation by invoking the Confucian maxim that "it is the duty of the learned to unite society more closely, and to persuade men to become citizens of the world" (2:86). This ideal of "great unity" that lies at the core of Confucianism underscores the importance of balance, harmony, and interconnectedness of social, moral, and cosmic orders. The Confucian community,

⁵⁸ Min, *China and the Writing of English Literary Modernity*, 146-147.

also known as the *ru* community, is not a monolithic entity. In fact, interpretations of Confucianism have varied over time and among different scholars and adherents.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, amidst the alterations and evolutions within Confucianism, the *ru* community renewed itself through teaching, ritual, institutions, and reinterpretation, preserving a collective identity even as specific beliefs and practices evolve. The Confucian principle of “great unity,” aiming to construct a harmonious and cohesive world, holds a pivotal function in nurturing a shared sense of identity within the *ru* community. When the Jesuit fathers converted to *ru* identity during their assimilation into the Chinese culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this concept of “great unity” became the foundation for their successful implementation of the accommodating strategy of Confucian-Christian synthesis.⁶⁰

Goldsmith, however, complicates any straightforward application of the Confucian ideal of “great unity” to the factional English republic of letters by publishing Lien Chi’s critique inside the daily, commodified periodical that produces and sells the very factionalism Lien Chi denounces. Megan Kitching argues that Goldsmith consistently experiments with ways “literature can substitute for local or global community,” and one of his strategies is to promote “cosmopolitan wisdom” in

⁵⁹ From the time Confucianism became established as the orthodox belief during the Western Han dynasty (202 BC-8), the reconstruction, reinterpretation, and reinvention of Confucian doctrines have traversed diverse phases. These range from the metaphysical interpretation of Confucian thought in the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties (220-589), to the revival of Confucianism as a response to the prevalence of Daoism and Buddhism in the Sui and Tang Dynasties (589-907). The Song Dynasty (960-1279) stand as the pinnacle of Confucian development, marked by the emergence of Neo-Confucianism that integrates Confucianism with Buddhist and Daoist creeds. See 尚斌, 李明珠. *中国儒学发展史* (兰州: 兰州大学出版社, 2008). [Shang Bin, and Li Mingzhu. *History of Confucianism in China* (Lanzhou: Lanzhou University Press, 2008).]

⁶⁰ The idea of unity is celebrated by many scholars as the legacy of Enlightenment ideals. Anthony Pagden argues that the core of the Enlightenment is to “describe and define humankind in all its immensely varied aspects,” revealing the existence of “a universal human nature” and “a common disposition for a shared, and universal, social and political life” known as “the ‘city of the world,’ the ‘cosmopolis’.” See Pagden, *The Enlightenment and Why it Still Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 38. Similarly, Vincenzo Ferrone observes that in later decades of the Enlightenment there was “a conscious and passionate creative effort aimed at bringing about a fairer and more equitable society,” driven by the belief in “individual rights” and the pursuit of “happiness as the ethical foundation for a new universal morality.” See Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, trans. Elisabetta Tarantino (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), xi.

the marketplace of print.⁶¹ Read this way, *The Citizen of the World* becomes Goldsmith's meditation on the shrinking authority of authors and critics in an eighteenth-century print economy. The figure of Lien Chi, as Kitching notes, both embodies the ideal of a republican learned class and demonstrates that ideal's impotence in a commodified, factional print market. Lien Chi's attack on the English republic of letters, therefore, on the one hand, reveals imposture and moral failure in the English literary community in which "critics eat up critics, and compilers rob from compilation" (2:86). On the other hand, Lien Chi's detection is serialized in the same marketplace whose incentives produce the very anarchy he deplors. When Lien Chi's Confucian ideal of great unity enters the periodical marketplace, it speaks in a double register, condemning factionalism and commodification while simultaneously circulating within the very print economy that enables it. The result is a productive paradox: by introducing Confucian maxims into the periodical present, Goldsmith does not simply offer British readers a set of Confucian doctrines to adopt. Rather, by staging Lien Chi's Confucian voice in a serialized press performance, he presents the Confucian philosophy not as disembodied moral instruction but as a recurring, public test—one that prompts readers to respond, to test the maxims against English customs, and to participate in the shared work of evaluating taste and authority. This paradox makes Goldsmith's cosmopolitanism function as a dialogue between cultures rather than cultural appropriation, as Chinese culture is engaged as part of a reciprocal exchange in which it is tested, parodied, and tentatively incorporated through the medium of the ongoing English public debates.

From Confucian Philosopher to Metropolitan Traveler: Reciprocal Mockery and the Marketable Other

What renders Goldsmith's cosmopolitan experiment unstable is that it plays out in a market-driven print culture. Goldsmith literalizes this precariousness in the preface of *The Citizen of the World*, where the editor-narrator recounts a dream about attending a

⁶¹ Megan Kitching, "The Solitary Animal: Professional Authorship and Persona in Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 25, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 179.

Fashion Fair on the frozen Thames. Standing by the river, he observes the safe return of all the authors who bring their works to the fair. The editor thus decides to go on the same adventure, but instead of bringing the “furniture, frippery and fireworks of China [that] have long been fashionably bought up,” he determines to “try the fair with a small cargoe of Chinese morality” (2:15). The fashionable Chinese commodities that corrupt one’s taste, in this context, are juxtaposed with the neglected Chinese morality that could potentially “improve our understanding” (2:15). However, the ice on the Thames, which previously supported the weight of numerous English books, cracks when the editor enters with only a few Chinese moral books, causing all the Chinese books to fall to the bottom of the river. Watt, Kitching, and Aravamudan all recognize the Thames-dream as emblematic of the tension between commodity culture and moral instruction. Watt interprets the dream about the sunken Chinese books as “an ironic recognition of the limits of the work’s moral authority” that further elucidates “the compromise inherent in using an imaginary Chinese philosopher” to criticize the enthusiasm for chinoiserie.⁶² For Watt, Goldsmith adopts a sober, rational Confucian voice against the frivolous, marketable trinkets of chinoiserie to show how even corrective moral discourse becomes framed and consumed as a commodity; the cracked ice therefore signals both the precariousness of moral authority and the irony of deploying commodified Chinese morality to satirize consumerism. Kitching picks up this commodity/morality contrast but shifts the emphasis from representational ethics to the broader cultural role Lien Chi plays: as both an “objectified exotic figure” and a “moralist” articulating timeless truths associated with China’s lingering reputation. Kitching argues that the Chinese philosopher is a narrative device through which Goldsmith engages with the social and intellectual challenges of modern, commercial London.⁶³ Where Watt emphasizes the ethical complications involved in the commodification of moral authority, Kitching underscores Lien Chi’s doubleness as both an object for consumption and a medium for satire and instruction, a combination that renders him an effective, though compromised, interlocutor for debates about

⁶² Watt, “Cosmopolitanism,” 62.

⁶³ Kitching, “The Solitary Animal,” 187.

English society. Aravamudan brings an authorial dimension into focus. He suggests that Goldsmith contrasts the English appetite for Chinese luxury goods with his offering of Chinese morality, presenting philosophy as a marginal addition to commodity culture and a pointed challenge to the “grandiose ambitions of Enlightenment Orientalism.”⁶⁴ The sinking cargo is more than cultural rejection, but also a reflection of the writer’s own professional vulnerability, dramatizing how market forces reduce moral critique to spectacle. As Aravamudan puts it, Goldsmith adopts the stance of a “cultural agent provocateur” to expose the pressures faced by the Grub Street writer “who performed Enlightenment Orientalism as critical cosmopolitanism.”⁶⁵ Goldsmith’s Chinese narrator thus embodies a double persona, both satirizing English taste in chinoiserie and performing an authorial critique of the commercial marketplace that sustains it. Lien Chi’s complex and ambivalent persona positions him as both a mediator of moral instruction and an exoticized spectacle for public consumption. In the following section, I will show that by making Lien Chi Altangi not only an ancient Confucian philosopher but also a London-roaming modern metropolitan, Goldsmith constructs a shifting, self-reflexive satire that targets not only English Orientalist fantasies, where the Chinese narrator is repeatedly commodified into a flattened stereotype, but also the hypocrisies and material follies of British imperial and commercial modernity. That reciprocity—mutual, often gleeful mockery of both Chinese and British pretension—allows Goldsmith to explore whether a dialogic cosmopolitanism can survive when performances of the other are absorbed and sold as marketable stereotypes.

By the time Goldsmith published his Chinese Letter in the *Public Ledger* (1760), the image of China as a rational Confucian kingdom was already under challenge. This shift was growing out of decades of practical commercial contact and irritation between British merchants and Qing authorities. Direct Sino-British trade at Canton had begun around 1700 with the arrival of the East India Company’s ship *Macclesfield* and the establishment of the first permanent English factory there.⁶⁶ Despite the Company’s

⁶⁴ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 99.

⁶⁵ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 99.

⁶⁶ E. H. Pritchard, “The Struggle for Control of the China Trade during the Eighteenth Century,” *Pacific Historical Review* 3, no. 3 (Sep. 1934): 280. The English factory functioned as the

substantial profits from its trade with China, commercial and diplomatic frictions between Britain and China escalated sharply upon the institution of the Canton system, a protectionist policy enacted by Qing China to regulate and restrict Sino-Western trade.⁶⁷ The Canton system is regarded as “hierarchic subordination,” wherein “foreigner traders” were placed under the authority of the “licensed Chinese monopolist.”⁶⁸ That “hierarchic subordination” intensified a persistent trade imbalance dating back to the late seventeenth century and generated repeated commercial grievances among British merchants. Porter argues that eighteenth-century British thinkers interpreted China through a commercialist lens that valorized free circulation of goods, capital, ideas and people. As Porter puts it, “The limitation of the British trade to Canton, its control by the local merchant monopoly, and restricted access to legal redress constituted formidable obstacles to the free circulation that alone would provide a legitimate basis, in the British view, for a ‘civilized’ commercial relationship.”⁶⁹ Because Qing China repeatedly refused or constrained that model of free circulation, British intellectuals transformed practical trade frustrations into sweeping cultural judgments. As Porter notes, writers and commentators such as Daniel Defoe (in *Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*), Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins (in *A Voyage Round the World*), and later diplomats and embassy authors like Lord Macartney and George Staunton took these commercial irritations and amplified them into a general cultural narrative in which China was imagined as an inherently blocked, stagnant, and

Company’s residential and commercial outpost to warehouse goods, negotiate the Hong merchants in Canton, and organize the shipment of Chinese commodities like tea, silk, and porcelain back to Britain.

⁶⁷ Initiated by Emperor Kangxi in 1685, the Canton system was inaugurated through the establishment of maritime customs stations along the empire’s coast, with Canton (Guangzhou) emerging as a major hub. The system underwent further development during the Qianlong reign. In 1757, the Qing court designated Canton as “the sole port open for Western trade with the Qing empire” (142). This decision solidified the Canton system, marking a culmination of restrictions on Western access and trade in Qing China. See William T. Rowe, *China’s Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 141-142.

⁶⁸ Frederic Wakeman Jr. suggests that the ascent of free trade in opium ultimately disrupted the balance of the Canton system, and this tension culminated in the outbreak of the First Opium War. See Wakeman Jr., “The Canton trade and the Opium War,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 10:163.

⁶⁹ David Porter, “A Peculiar but Uninteresting Nation: China and the Discourse of Commerce in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no. 2 (2000): 187.

“uninteresting” society.⁷⁰ Porter shows how the discourse of commerce not only shaped Britain’s view of China but also reinforced Britain’s emerging identity as a modern, progressive nation defined by the very principle of free circulation that China was seen to deny.

Goldsmith seems to align with the contemporary advocates of free trade when the cultural legitimacy of commerce, as suggested by Porter, had become a “literary commonplace in well-known writing” of the eighteenth century.⁷¹ Goldsmith’s support for Britain’s commercial and colonial expansion, as it emerged as a rising imperial power tapping into the burgeoning overseas market, appears to be evident in his moral and economic condemnation of the unprecedented influx of Chinese objects into Britain. In his critique of Arthur Murphy’s *Orphan of China* in the *Critical Review* (May 1759), Goldsmith laments the “perversion of taste” brought on by chinoiserie (1:170). He regards the presence of “gardens laid out in the Eastern manner; houses ornamented in front by zig-zag lines, and rooms stuck round with Chinese vases, and Indian pagods” as indicators of indulgence in extravagance and novelty, capable of corrupting the traditional manner of artistic expression (1:170). He wonders how “the refined European has, of late, had recourse even to China, in order to diversify the amusement of the day” (1:170). Goldsmith thus commends Murphy’s play for its poetic achievements, acknowledging that by leaving out certain parts of the original Chinese story and adding new elements, it becomes a work that prioritizes artistry over Chinese authenticity (1:172). Goldsmith’s concern regarding the corrupting influence of Chinese exoticism on refined aesthetics places him in alignment with the satirists of his time who perceive chinoiserie as a threat to classical morality, virtue, and national pride.⁷²

⁷⁰ Porter, “A Peculiar but Uninteresting Nation,” 181-196.

⁷¹ Porter argues that the concept of free trade and the importance of commerce as a measure of a nation’s greatness in “British accounts of the China trade” can be traced back to a long-standing tradition originating in the late sixteenth century. This idea gained widespread “cultural acceptance” by the eighteenth century and was promoted by various writers such as Joseph Addison, Daniel Defoe, and George Lillo, who affirmed the inherent “legitimacy for trade,” and finally established the value of trade as a “guarantor of social order and stability” even before the more sophisticated economic theories of Adam Smith. See Porter, “A Peculiar but Uninteresting Nation,” 184-185.

⁷² Watt points out that the “use of a term like ‘perversion’ seems to position Goldsmith among

However, unlike the writers Porter examines, who cast Britain as progressive in contrast to a stagnant China, Goldsmith makes his Chinese narrator Lien Chi not only a Confucian philosopher, echoing the Jesuit idealization of China from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also a modern metropolitan immersed in London life. Far from being frozen in a stagnant China, he roams the city like any urban resident, enjoying its spectacles and amusements: attending the play-house (Letter XXI), shopping at mercers' stalls (Letter LXXVII) and visiting grand monuments (Letter XIII). Through such scenes, Goldsmith sheds light on a vision of China as contemporary with modern Britain rather than irredeemably blocked from it. At the play-house in Letter XXI, Lien Chi joins his English companion, the Man in Black (whom he first meets at Westminster Abbey in Letter XIII and thereafter his guide to London's public life). Seated "conveniently at the foot of the stage" (2:89), Lien Chi surveys the performance: "the lights, the music, the ladies in their gayest dresses, the men with cheerfulness and expectation in their looks," and the animated crowd (2:90). He delights in the play, describing it as a sympathetic observer rather than a bewildered outsider. A different urban encounter unfolds in Letter LXXVII, when he enters a London mercer's shop to buy "silk for a night cap" (2:318). The shopkeeper showers him with the "civillest" attentions, piling on flattery, name-dropping noble customers, and pressing him to purchase (2:318-319). Goldsmith renders this sales performance as a satire of commercial excess. Yet Lien Chi sees through the tricks, and his sharp retort—"you must not pretend to instruct me in silks, I know these in particular to be no better than your mere flimsy Bungees" (2:318)—marks his insider's knowledge of trade. Lien Chi moves through London marketplaces as readily as a native. Across the letters, Lien Chi appears to be living the life of an educated London gentleman. The city's spectacles may be exotic to him, but he greets them with curiosity, discernment, and self-assurance rather than disorientation. Comparing Giovanni Paolo Marana's oriental narrator Mahmut in the *Turkish Spy* who is secretive, "solitary," and "buried alive" in the Parisian crowd, a figure for whom "the east and west cohabitately and

those critics who saw the Chinese taste as a vulgar affront both to the integrity of the nation and to the dignity and truth of neoclassical aesthetics." See Watt, "Cosmopolitanism," 61.

suspiciously, trapped in a relationship of observer and observed without achieving much in the way of reciprocity,” Min points out that Goldsmith’s Lien Chi manifests an almost opposing sensibility: “the openness and relish” with which he “enters into and enjoys modern English cultural life” reflect eighteenth-century views of the Chinese as a potentially “coeval rival.”⁷³ In this light, by casting Lien Chi as a Chinese observer who not only witnesses but takes pleasure in London’s urban life, Goldsmith creates a vantage point that problematizes metropolitan modernity. Lien Chi’s mobility and playful, probing curiosity about the modern city—his ease in slipping into urban life—make him an ideal vehicle to reveal scenes Londoners prefer to gloss over, exposing the gulf between the metropolis’s polished image of progress, and the poverty, hypocrisy, injustice and social disorder that lurks beneath the façade of flourishing trade and commerce.

Goldsmith represents that dissonance through Lien Chi’s encounter with a disabled English soldier in Letter CXIX. Listening to the soldier’s account—being press-ganged, losing four fingers and a leg in battle, enlisting with the East India Company, and ultimately reduced to begging—Lien Chi witnesses a narrative that exposes how state and market repeatedly extract his labor and body for imperial ends while offering no durable recompense:

O liberty, liberty, liberty! that is the property of every Englishman, and I will die in its defence. [...] When the peace came on, I was discharged: and as I could not work, because my wound was sometimes painful, I listed for a landman in the East India company’s service. [...] I lost four fingers of the left hand, and my leg was shot off. [...] However, blessed be God, I enjoy good health, and have no enemy in this world that I know of, but the French, and the Justice of Peace. (2:462-465)

The soldier’s uncomplaining patriotism, an almost instinctive, even irrational loyalty, functions as a metonym for a polity that celebrates martial heroism while commodifying human bodies: the same institutions that demand sacrifice fail to

⁷³ Min, *China and the Writing of English Literary Modernity*, 152-154.

translate that sacrifice into meaningful social protection. Goldsmith uses Lien Chi's pleasurable immersion in city life to sharpen a moral and political indictment. The letter closes, "he limped off, leaving my friend and me in admiration of his intrepidity and content; nor could we avoid acknowledging, that an habitual acquaintance with misery, is the truest school of fortitude and philosophy" (2:465). Lien Chi's leisurely attention exposes how metropolitan spectacle naturalizes and aestheticizes suffering, transforming the soldier's misfortune into an object of sentimental admiration while leaving the violence of imperial and colonial expansions untouched. By embedding Lien Chi in metropolitan life, Goldsmith converts individual suffering into a broader critique of consumer-driven imperialism and national hypocrisy: the city's appetite for spectacle and commodities both relies on and helps to conceal the extraction, dispossession, and violence of empire.

Through Lien Chi's eyes, London appears as a city animated by trade and spectacle where Goldsmith reveals a paradox: metropolitan prosperity promises freedom and cosmopolitan openness, yet it simultaneously conceals social injuries. By rendering the Chinese narrator a modern metropolitan figure rather than a stagnant other, Goldsmith complicates Orientalist binaries and redirects scrutiny onto Britain's commercial practices and colonial policies. This metropolitan indictment also grows out of Goldsmith's Irish identity and Tory sympathies, which make him wary of Britain's emerging role as a colonialist, imperialist, and commercialist power. Michael Griffin argues that Goldsmith's writings during the Seven Years' War represent a consistent, sophisticated ambivalence toward British triumphalism in which he critiques imperial overreach and commercial motives, defends ordinary soldiers and the poor, and marks his stance as rooted in a Tory/Jacobite conservatism rather than simple Whig patriotism.⁷⁴ That double posture—grounded in Goldsmith's own impoverished Irish background and his self-identification as "half a patriot"—reveals, Griffin argues, that he "was as suspicious of Britain's aims in war as he was of the duplicity of her French

⁷⁴ Michael Griffin, "'What d'ye Call Him, Tierconneldrago...': Oliver Goldsmith and the Seven Years' War," in *The Culture of the Seven Years' War: Empire, Identity, and the Arts in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World*, ed. Frans De Bruyn and Shaun Regan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 169-183.

opponent.”⁷⁵ Griffin thus describes Goldsmith as both a “cosmopolitan and traditionalist,” representing the “enlightenment’s cautious tenor” amid widespread celebration of commercial expansion and the rhetoric of “liberty of all.”⁷⁶ Throughout Goldsmith’s lifetime, the “painful and bloody” history between England and Ireland, marked by political and religious tensions (where Ireland, despite its Catholic majority, was ruled by Protestant England as a colony), was mostly set aside; instead, discussions were primarily centered on “economic issues.”⁷⁷ England’s imposition of trade limitations and regulations significantly restricted Ireland’s participation in global trade, ultimately ensuring England’s commercial dominance. For example, legislation such as the Navigation Acts and the Cattle Acts were passed in the later seventeenth century to limit Ireland’s economic autonomy.⁷⁸ According to Thomas Barlett’s research, from 1696 to 1731, Ireland was barred from receiving goods from the American colonies. In Asian trade, Irish merchants faced significant restrictions because the East India Company held an exclusive monopoly. Only in the 1790s did Ireland begin to break into this monopoly.⁷⁹ While there is no precise count of how many Chinese imports shipped to Ireland were carried on English vessels, research reveals that the majority of Irish international trade, both in exports and imports, became increasingly dependent on England throughout the eighteenth century.⁸⁰

Goldsmith implicitly links Britain’s oppressive treatment of smaller economies such as Ireland with its aggressions overseas, suggesting that the same commercial logic that enriches metropolitan Britain also inflicts moral and political injury. Speaking

⁷⁵ Griffin, “Oliver Goldsmith and the Seven Years’ War,” 172.

⁷⁶ Michael Griffin, *Enlightenment in Ruins: The Geographies of Oliver Goldsmith* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2013), 2.

⁷⁷ Norma Clarke, *Brothers of the Quill: Oliver Goldsmith in Grub Street* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 32.

⁷⁸ Jane H. Ohlmeyer, “A Laboratory for Empire?: Early Modern Ireland and English Imperialism,” in *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51.

⁷⁹ Thomas Barlett, “Ireland, Empire, and Union, 1690-1801,” in Kenny, *Ireland and the British Empire*, 63.

⁸⁰ In 1700, around forty-five percent of the value of Irish exports went to England. However, by 1800, this reliance had dramatically increased to eighty-five percent. Similarly, in terms of imports, approximately fifty-four percent of goods imported by Ireland came from England in 1700. By 1800, this percentage had surged to nearly seventy-nine percent. See Barlett, “Ireland, Empire, and Union,” 64. Qtd. in L. M. Cullen, *Anglo-Irish Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), 44.

through Lien Chi, Goldsmith questions the legitimacy of imperial wars waged for colonial expansion. In Letter XVII, Lien Chi attributes the motive of the war between Britain and France over the colonies to a frivolous desire for Canadian fur. Lien Chi, who is immersed in metropolitan life, roaming shops, crowds, assemblies, notes how “the ladies edged some of their cloaths with furs, and muffs were worn both by gentlemen and ladies” at the first hand (2:73). That proximity allows Lien Chi to articulate amazement that fur becomes “indispensable for the happiness of the state” (2:73), and then interrogates the wisdom of sending the “best and bravest subjects” away from home in exchange for “raw silk, hemp, and tobacco” (2:75). Lien Chi’s narration turns military sacrifice into a grotesque barter in which men were traded for luxury goods. As a cosmopolitan traveler who both delights in and understands metropolitan life, Lien Chi is uniquely placed to see this exchange for what it is, and his astonished, sardonic tone forces English readers to recognize their own policies as absurd. Moreover, by having Lien Chi observe that the indigenous Canadians who “claim a property in the country in dispute” and “might have continued to live to eternity, had not the English been informed that those countries produced furs in great abundance” (2:73), Goldsmith foregrounds indigenous humanity as a direct casualty of the imperial commodity impulse. As Watt suggests, this description of Canadian aborigines as innocent victims of imperial expansion transcends a focus on “the domestic ramifications of empire, and instead broaches a principled opposition to the very idea of colonial authority.”⁸¹ Ultimately, Lien Chi’s mobility as a metropolitan traveler allows Goldsmith to criticize the mechanics and morals of metropolitan modernity, exposing how consumer taste and colonial extraction conceal the ethical costs of empire.

However, Goldsmith withholds any simple moral verdict: he refuses to allow England an unchallenged claim to progress and modernity and, by the same token, he refuses to vest absolute moral authority in his Chinese narrator. Aravamudan captures this ambivalence when he describes “Goldsmith’s satirical logic” as “a kind of equal-opportunity bigotry that levels many forms of ethnocentrism: whenever Altangi waxes

⁸¹ Watt, *British Orientalisms*, 38.

eloquent about China, he is undermined as pompous and unpersuasive; however, whenever his English interlocutors attempt to castigate China, they are revealed to be parochial and flawed.”⁸² This double exposure produces a rhetorical mirror-game in which the two nations reflect and refract each other’s pretensions, so that cultural superiority is negotiated within particular conversations rather than founded on any immutable cultural essence. Furthermore, Porter situates *The Citizen of the World* within the cosmopolitan mode of chinoiserie, noting that Goldsmith’s Chinese narrator does not construct an essential cultural otherness but instead works through light, incidental contrasts that dissolve into commensurability. As Porter argues, “Goldsmith’s philosopher is constantly at pains to remind us of the triviality of such distinctions, dwarfed as they are by the shared humanity of all nations.”⁸³ For Porter, Goldsmith’s narrator is a satirical device to expose English foibles while ultimately affirming shared humanity, rather than asserting an irreducible Chinese essence. Read together, Aravamudan and Porter show that Goldsmith’s satire neither elevates China above England nor endorses a pure cosmopolitanism. Instead, through mutual mockery and commensuration, Goldsmith represents both the possibilities and limits of a dialogic, reciprocal cross-cultural encounter, affirming shared humanity while also warning how easily cultural differences can be exploited to produce flattening stereotypes or be reduced to empty caricature.

In Letter XIV, Goldsmith describes a comic encounter in which reciprocal mockery yields a fragile, performative cosmopolitanism that turns cultural difference into marketable stereotypes. Lien Chi receives a message from “a lady of distinction,” declaring her desire for his acquaintance and requesting a visit. Flattered and assuming she has seen him in public and been captivated by his appearance, Lien Chi expects to meet a young admirer (2:63). Instead, he finds an older, “shrivelled” woman; her response to him changes the instant she learns his origin:

As I was dressed after the fashion of Europe, she had taken me for an

⁸² Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 97-98.

⁸³ David Porter, “China and the Formation of the Modernist Aesthetic Ideal,” in *British Modernism and Chinoiserie*, ed. Anne Witchard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 27.

Englishman, and consequently saluted me in her ordinary manner; but when the footman informed her grace that I was the gentleman from China, she instantly lifted herself from the couch, while her eyes sparkled with unusual vivacity. (2:63)

What excites the lady is not Lien Chi himself, but the cultural label suddenly attached to him. Goldsmith dramatizes how fragile and superficial these stereotypes are: a European outfit renders the narrator “ordinary,” while the mere announcement of his origin transforms him into an exotic spectacle. As Griffin notes, “The metropolitan notion of a fixed or essential cultural otherness is here parodied to the extent that any such quality is revealed ultimately to be as fungible as clothing.”⁸⁴ In other words, “Chineseness” operates here not as a stable identity but as a performance, one that can be donned or stripped away depending on appearance and context. The lady further exoticizes and objectifies Lien Chi, ordering him to “turn about” so she can inspect his figure from behind, insisting on watching him eat with “chop sticks,” and urging him to utter a few words in Chinese (2:64). Her requests reduce Lien Chi to a consumable spectacle, an object to be displayed and devoured at a glance.

Lien Chi, at the same time, returns the ridicule onto the lady, mocking her taste and pretensions. When she proudly displays her Chinese curios, he dismisses them as trivial trinkets: “though they may appear fine in your eyes, are but paltry to a Chinese” (2:64). His mockery becomes sharper when she points to a so-called “Chinese temple” in her garden, which he undercuts by insisting that “Where I stand I see nothing, madam, at the end of the garden that may not as well be called an Egyptian pyramid as a Chinese temple” (2:64). Lien Chi’s correction, however, ironically makes him a figure of fun to the lady who labels him as “an actual barbarian,” and accuses him of “want [of] taste” (2:64). In this way, Lien Chi’s claim to speak for an authentic Chinese perspective is undermined. Goldsmith employs reciprocal mockery to satirize both participants: the lady’s fascination with China and chinoiserie proves derivative and shallow, while Lien Chi’s asserted authority is rendered inauthentic and flattened to consumable spectacles.

⁸⁴ Griffin, *Enlightenment in Ruins*, 121.

Goldsmith thus reveals the fragility of a cosmopolitan encounter in which curiosity easily slides into caricature and genuine mutual understanding remains fleeting and unstable.

Goldsmith further enacts this reciprocal mockery in Letter XXXII in which the English author's performed authority over China and Lien Chi's corrective intervention do not stand in opposition but instead mutually produce the very allure attributed to Chinese culture. By depicting both the bogus oriental display and its ostensible refutation, Goldsmith exposes the artifice of Orientalism while simultaneously engaging with and preserving the oriental allures that make that artifice entertaining and marketable. In this letter, Lien Chi describes visiting a second "lady of distinction," where he is expected to make stereotypical displays of Chinese customs, "bringing opium and a tobacco-box," sitting on cushions instead of chairs, and wearing a napkin pinned under his chin (2:142-143). Once seated, he is subjected to the company's curiosity: they are astonished that he does not use chopsticks and are eager to hear an English "author" lecture at length about Chinese customs. A gentleman in the company, whom Lien Chi assumes is an author and who has neither traveled to the east nor mastered its languages, performs a pompous, self-satisfied expertise about China:

he talked of our cities, mountains, and animals, as familiarly as if he had been born in Quamsi, but as erroneously as if a native of the moon; he attempted to prove that I had nothing of the true Chinese cut in my visage; shewed that my cheek bones should have been higher, and my forehead broader; in short, he almost reasoned me out of my country, and effectually persuaded the rest of the company to be of his opinion. (2:144)

By describing an Englishman who lectures about China without consulting an actual Chinese voice, Goldsmith exposes how Orientalist authority rests on repeated tropes and performances rather than genuine knowledge. Goldsmith also shows how such performances inflict symbolic dispossession by reshaping the exotic to fit metropolitan fantasies, leaving Lien Chi feeling that he "reasoned me out of my country." As Aravamudan argues, Goldsmith demonstrates that "Enlightenment Orientalism has become a literary and stylistic exercise that acquires legitimacy by similarity with other

narratives rather than with its presumed real-world referents.”⁸⁵ Aravamudan draws attention to a paradox at the heart of *The Citizen of the World*. Orientalism here is not about transmitting accurate knowledge of China but about sustaining a self-referential literary system. Its authority comes from repetition and recognizability: the more a narrative echoes familiar oriental tropes like lofty diction, exotic landscapes, mysterious customs, the more authentic it appears, regardless of truth.

Goldsmith, however, both ridicules and reproduces this mechanism of bogus orientalism. Lien Chi’s rejoinder—“I could not avoid smiling to hear a native of England attempt to instruct me in the true eastern idiom”—functions as a rebuke (2:145). He counters the English author’s claimed authority, insisting that Chinese writing follows a distinct rhetorical mode:

In the east, similes are seldom used, and metaphors almost wholly unknown; but in China particularly, the very reverse of what you allude to, takes place; a cool phlegmatic method of writing prevails there. The writers of that country, ever more assiduous to instruct than to please, address rather the judgment than the fancy. (2:145-146)

Lien Chi’s corrective, however, does not present an authoritative alternative; it is incorporated into the same theatrical performance that frames the English author’s pompous display of Chinese knowledge. As Kitching notes, when Lien Chi claims that “true Chinese literature seldom employs similes and metaphors, he contradicts both Du Halde’s and Le Comte’s accounts and Goldsmith’s preface.”⁸⁶ In this sense, Lien Chi’s corrective not only discredits amateur Orientalists but also, by preserving oddities and contradictions, implicates itself in the trade of spurious oriental impressions. Aravamudan sharpens this point by observing that “In his notes, Goldsmith deliberately confuses the issue, dismissing some genuinely reported Chinese customs as false and passing off unheard-of customs as real,” an approach he terms “cultivated irresponsibility” toward “the cultural referent.” As Aravamudan argues, this strategy allows Goldsmith both to exploit and to satirize Enlightenment Orientalism, turning the

⁸⁵ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 99-100.

⁸⁶ Kitching, “The Solitary Animal,” 183.

oriental tale into a “detective game for insiders” that performs confidence while simultaneously exposing the genre’s entrapment and exhaustion.⁸⁷ Readers are encouraged to distinguish hoax from report, to congratulate themselves on detecting error, yet also to enjoy the spectacle of the hoax. Goldsmith’s “cultivated irresponsibility” is therefore not mere negligence but a strategic ambiguity that positions readers as both complicit consumers and skeptical critics of Orientalist representation.

In *The Citizen of the World*, Goldsmith treats cosmopolitanism not as a settled doctrine but as a performed, repeatedly renewed stance. By giving voice to a Confucian narrator and embedding that voice in the episodic rhythms of the periodical press, he constructs a public forum where Chinese and English perspectives circulate, collide, and instruct one another. For Goldsmith, cosmopolitanism functions as a rhetorical strategy that is repeatedly shaped by immediate events, reader expectations, and the commercial logic of the marketplace. Crucially, Goldsmith does not spare Lien Chi from ridicule. He deploys Lien Chi as both cultural interlocutor and comic figure: the persona critiques English provincialism and consumerist vanity and tempers excessive patriotism, yet is frequently exposed to ridicule. This inward turn of satire, where the narrator acts as both critical observer and a figure of fun, produces a reflexive mode of critique that resists any simple moral or cultural authority. Neither the exoticized Chinese informant, the authorial voice, nor the cosmopolitan ideal is allowed to stand unchallenged; instead, readers are compelled to confront the partiality and mediations through which knowledge of the other is produced. The satire of Lien Chi sometimes deliberately exposes its own artifice, encouraging readers to scrutinize Chinese wisdom rather than accept it as unmediated truth.

As a result, Goldsmith’s cosmopolitan experiment in *The Citizen of the World* is fundamentally ambivalent. Through the voice of Lien Chi, he repeatedly asserts a common humanity while also revealing how fragile such commensuration can be. The Confucian voice that provokes self-scrutiny in English society depends on selective

⁸⁷ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 100.

missionary sources and editorial framing; its appeal to readers rests as much on novelty and consumption as on moral persuasion. Goldsmith thus models a reciprocal, dialogic Sino-British exchange while also revealing the limits of eighteenth-century cosmopolitan practice in which curiosity and critique operate alongside caricature and complicity, exposing the Orientalist stereotypes that make such an exchange legible. Seen in this light, Goldsmith's Chinese letters complicate facile narratives of enlightened cosmopolitanism. They model a dialogic encounter with Chinese thought that opens space for mutual reflection, yet they also reveal the representational and commercial constraints of eighteenth-century oriental narratives. Attending to this ambivalence—between instruction and commodification, sympathy and stereotype—sheds light on the practices of eighteenth-century Orientalism and the complex dynamics of Sino-British encounters in the period.

Chapter 4

“An empire transformed into a splendid Garden”: Integrating Chinese Plants into a Native English Garden

In a 1763 letter to Richard Owen Cambridge, Thomas Gray wrote that, having read the works of Count Francesco Algarotti, the Italian art historian, he found Algarotti’s critique of the English garden to be unfair:

I am the more solicitous about it, because it relates to the only taste we can call our own, the only proof of our original talent in matter of pleasure; I mean, our skill in gardening, and laying out grounds. That the Chinese have this beautiful art in high perfection, seems very probable from the Jesuits' Letters, and more from Chambers’s little discourse published some few years ago. But it is very certain, we copied nothing from them, nor had anything but nature for our model. It is not forty years, since the art was born among us; and it is sure, that there was nothing in Europe like it, and as sure, we then had no information on this head from China at all.¹

Algarotti’s works, as Yu Liu clarifies, “traced the iconoclastic change of the English pleasure ground to China.”² Gray, however, seeks to establish a nationalistic lineage for the English garden. For Gray, “Chambers’s little discourse”—Sir William Chambers’s 1757 work *Designs for Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dress, Machines and Utensils*—though it documents Chinese mastery in gardening, does nothing to diminish England’s original achievement in landscape gardening. Because as “the only taste” that was truly English, English gardening was distinctly linked to the imitation of “nature” rather than to any foreign ideas, particularly Chinese. Native nature stood as inseparable from the nativist origins of English identity, a bond Gray was intent on

¹ Thomas Gray, *The Letters of Thomas Gray, Including the Correspondence of Gray and Mason*, ed. Duncan Crookes Tovey (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1900), 3:26-27.

² Yu Liu, “Changing Chinese Ideas into a Native English Tradition: The Complex Consequences of Horace Walpole’s Horticultural Nationalism,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 52, no. 3 (September 2019): 39.

preserving.

However, the native nature Gray so cherished as distinctively English was soon under challenge by William Chambers—the Scottish architect who served as architectural advisor to King George III and later designed Somerset House and the Great Pagoda at Kew—when he enlarged his earlier work of Chinese architecture into the 1772 publication *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening*. In this work, Chambers mounted a polemic against his contemporary Lancelot “Capability” Brown, dismissing the naturalistic landscape gardens Brown promoted as bland and uninspired. As David Porter argues, the core of Chambers’s critique lay in Brown’s “literalist naturalism” whose “predictably undulating walks and hills, had fallen into dullness and insipidity.”³ Elizabeth Chang similarly notes that, even though Chambers never explicitly names Brown, his emphasis on evoking “emotional responses” to convey ideas represents a clear challenge to Brown’s “more systematic style of design.”⁴ In the *Dissertation*, Chambers laments that the art of gardening has been “abandoned to kitchen gardeners, well skilled in the culture of sallads [*sic*], but little acquainted with the principles of Ornamental Gardening.”⁵ As a consequence, “our gardens differ very little from common fields, so closely is vulgar nature copied in most of them; there is generally so little variety, and so much want of judgment” (v). Chambers cautions against mimicking uninspired “vulgar nature” and advocates using oriental gardening aesthetics to transform landscapes into art. As Arthur Lovejoy argues in his seminal essay on the Chinese influence on the rise of Romanticism, Chambers’s appreciation of Chinese gardening for its use of imagination and variety, helped popularize the concept of *sharawadgi*, the aesthetics of “beauty without order.”⁶ The ideas of irregularity,

³ David Porter, “From Chinese to Goth: Walpole and the Gothic Repudiation of Chinoiserie,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 23, no. 1 (1999): 52.

⁴ Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain’s Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 29.

⁵ William Chambers, *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (London: Printed by W. Griffin, 1773), iii. There are two editions of *A Dissertation*: the first published in 1772, and this chapter cites the expanded 1773 edition, which includes additions and an annexed “Explanatory Discourse” attributed to “Tan Chet-qua.” Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶ The notion of *sharawadgi* was introduced to the English readership by Sir William Temple in his 1685 essay “Upon the Garden of Epicurus.” For the origin of the term, see Ciaran Murray, *Sharawadgi: The Romantic Return to Nature* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications,

asymmetry, and variety gradually gained prominence as superior aesthetic values to neo-classical aesthetic doctrines that championed regularity, uniformity, and parallelism.⁷ In the *Dissertation*, Chambers pushes the aesthetic ideal of *sharawadgi* to an almost absurd extreme, portraying the Chinese garden as a fanciful and surreal realm filled with “all kinds of sensitive and other extraordinary trees, plants and flowers,” “a surprising variety of birds, reptiles and animals,” and even “monstrous dwarfs, and African giants” (47). As Porter notes, the Chinese art of gardening, “with its emphasis on variety, surprise, and an active engagement of the viewer’s imagination,” provides, in Chambers’s view, “the perfect remedy” to the tame predictability and aesthetic blandness of Brownian landscape gardening.⁸

Chambers’s exaggerated appreciation of Chinese landscaping in the *Dissertation* quickly drew criticism from advocates of Brownian naturalist landscaping, as well as from opponents of George III’s court. Upon reading the *Dissertation* when it was first published in 1772, Horace Walpole sees Chambers’s praise of Chinese gardening as “more extravagant than the worst Chinese paper, and is written in wild revenge against Brown,” as he notes in a letter to William Mason.⁹ He condemns the whimsical taste displayed in the *Dissertation*, targeting Chambers for refusing to acknowledge English originality:

Sr William Chambers, who was far from wanting Taste in Architecture, fell into the mistake of the French [...] and in order to deprive Him [William Kent] and England of the honour of originality, the French call our Style the Anglo-Chinois Garden: whereas the Chinese wander as far from Nature as the French themselves, tho in opposite extremes. Regularity, Uniformity, Formality and Sameness are the characteristics of all French gardens: Irregularity and

1999).

⁷ Arthur O. Lovejoy, “The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 32, no. 1 (1933): 1-20.

⁸ Porter, “From Chinese to Goth,” 52.

⁹ Horace Walpole, *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 28:34.

Extravagance of the Chinese. Nature is artfully & laboriously avoided & destroyed by Both.¹⁰

Walpole transforms a dispute over garden aesthetics into a patriotic defense of ownership. By accusing Chambers of praising Chinese gardening and aligning with French critics who dismissed the originality of English garden designers, particularly William Kent, whom Walpole credits with inventing the English landscape style, he frames the English garden as a uniquely national achievement. Walpole's critique of Chambers reflects a growing preoccupation with how nature was shaped, interpreted, and claimed as a marker of national identity. He frames the French and Chinese approaches as fundamentally opposed to nature, with the former expressed through rigid regularity and formality, the latter through excessive irregularity and extravagance. Walpole implies that the only legitimate form of gardening is one that harmonizes with English nature. Walpole, in his *Essay on Modern Gardening* (1771) and its later expansion, *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening* (1780), promotes horticultural nationalism. As Stephen Bending argues, for Walpole, the English landscape garden serves as "a reflection both of Britain's cultural disposition and of correct-natural-government."¹¹ The native nature preserved in the English landscape garden is a symbol of the moral virtues and political liberties of the nation.

Encouraged by Walpole, William Mason composed a satirical response to Chambers's *Dissertation* in 1773, titled *An Heroic Epistle to Sir William Chambers*. Mason frames the *Dissertation*'s praise of Chinese gardening as aligned with oriental despotism, implying it not only undermines English liberty, but it is also antithetical to English political identity. In his influential discussion of the Mason-Chambers debate

¹⁰ Horace Walpole, "Notes to the Author's Preface," in *Satirical Poems: Published Anonymously by William Mason, With Notes by Horace Walpole, Now First Printed from His Manuscript* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1926), 41. While the origin of the English naturalist garden is difficult to trace definitively, Porter and Liu have redirected focus to demonstrate that Walpole's shift from an early fascination with chinoiserie to a later preference for a nativist Gothic tradition is not a rejection of the influence of Chinese gardening ideas on English landscaping. Instead, it represents a nationalist repudiation of Chinese ideas and patriotic advocacy of English horticultural nationalism, which sheds light on the intricate English reception of imported Chinese culture. See Porter, "From Chinese to Goth," 46-58; Liu, "Changing Chinese Ideas," 37-60.

¹¹ Stephen Bending, "Horace Walpole and Eighteenth-Century Garden History," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 57, no. 1 (1994): 216.

over gardening style, Bending reads both texts as competing bids to appropriate the idea of the “natural” garden in support of opposing factions of England’s constitutional order. Bending argues that Mason and Walpole see the English nationalist landscape garden as an embodiment of Whig ideals of property rights and liberty, whereas Chambers’s Chinese gardening becomes a cipher for “Tory monarchism.”¹² Following Bending’s reading of the Mason-Chambers debate over the garden style as a microcosm of eighteenth-century factionalism, Elizabeth Chang also notes that Chambers follows the Jesuit priest Jean Denis Attiret in attributing the grandeur of the Chinese landscape to “Eastern munificence.” This opulence, reflected in “the arrangement of the Chinese garden around the singular body of the emperor,” serves as a striking representation of “Asian despotism.”¹³ In a similar vein, Peter Kitson views Chambers’s elaborate and fantastical descriptions of the Chinese imperial garden *Yuanming Yuan* as politically charged.¹⁴ The imperial garden is described as a dark, terrifying and supernatural landscape:

in the most dismal recesses of the woods, where the ways are rugged and overgrown with poisonous weeds, and where every object bears the marks of depopulation, are temples dedicated to the king of vengeance [...]; near which are inscribed, on pillars of stone, pathetic descriptions of tragical events, and many horrid acts of cruelty, perpetrated there by outlaws and robbers of former times. (40-41)

Chambers depicts a wildly theatrical “scene of terror” in which nature itself seems turned against the visitor: sunless valleys, shattered trees, roaring waterfalls, and ruined buildings set a tone of desolation. Predators and carrion birds roam amid instruments of torture and ruined temples, while overgrown paths and subterranean caverns speak to human suffering and violence. Kitson shows that the “sublime of the terrible”

¹² Stephen Bending, “A Natural Revolution? Garden Politics in Eighteenth-Century England,” in *Refiguring Revolutions: Aesthetics and Politics from the English Revolution to the Romantic Revolution*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (California: University of California Press, 1998), 250-256.

¹³ Chang, *Britain’s Chinese Eye*, 27.

¹⁴ Peter J. Kitson, *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange, 1760-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 186-187.

imagery Chambers deploys served as a practical blueprint for English garden design. As Kitson argues, Chambers, in his role as architect of George III's Kew Gardens, transformed the disruptive, hybrid features of Chinese landscape aesthetics—elements criticized by neo-classicists—into a tool for Tory authority.¹⁵

These studies centered on the grand garden design, represented by Bending, reveal that the debate between Chambers and Mason shows how the eighteenth-century English landscape garden became a contested vision where competing factions like Whig and Tory sought to claim cultural authority. However, scholars like Elizabeth Hope Chang also note that focusing on grand garden debates can neglect the importance of plants, which is crucial for understanding the transformation of eighteenth-century English nature and aesthetics driven by the influx of exotic species.¹⁶ The eighteenth century saw an emerging vision of nature not as an untouched, wild expanse but as an artfully managed space that blended the natural and the cultivated. By the early eighteenth century, English country estates began diversifying their plantings, incorporating non-European species. According to Mark Laird's research, North American trees and shrubs, once rare curiosities, became widely available by the 1730s, sparking a frenzy similar to the earlier tulip craze.¹⁷ Crucially, this new concept of nature emerged through deliberate transplantation: collectors, nurseries, and gardeners imported seeds and living plants and acclimatized them to re-root and flourish in English soils. For example, Alan Bewell's research shows that Robert James Petre, renowned for his passion for exotic plant species, planted tens of thousands of trees in his estate at Thorndon Hall in the 1740s, creating landscapes that featured exotic species from the Americas, Europe, and Asia.¹⁸ Douglas Chambers finds that from 1701 to

¹⁵ Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*, 186.

¹⁶ See Elizabeth Hope Chang, "The Idea of the Chinese Garden and British Aesthetic Modernism," in *British Modernism and Chinoiserie*, ed. Anne Witchard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 91-107; "Chinese Flowers and the Idea of Cultivation in Early-Nineteenth-Century British Word and Image," *European Romantic Review* 27, no. 1 (2016): 9-24; *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019). I will develop Chang's argument further in the following paragraphs.

¹⁷ Mark Laird, *The Flowering of the Landscape Garden: English Pleasure Grounds, 1720-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 70.

¹⁸ Alan Bewell, *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 57.

1750, England saw the introduction of sixty-one new types of trees and ninety-one types of shrubs, and between 1731 and 1768, the number of plants cultivated in the country doubled.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, as Thomas Lance Bullington notes, given the vogue toward Chinese garden designs, many newly introduced plants in England were of oriental origin, such as the Japanese honeysuckle, Chinese wisteria, and Chinese privet.²⁰ The cultivation of exotic plants resulted in a fundamental transformation in the idea of English nature. As Bewell argues, “An entirely novel nature, composed of plants that had been transported from different geographical regions, was in the process of being brought into existence.”²¹ As a result, nature was increasingly “cosmopolitan or globalized” by the end of the eighteenth century, as Bewell argues.²² Nature was no longer bound to any single place but was endowed with adaptability and mobility to exist beyond its native context.

In response to an increasingly cosmopolitan nature shaped by global plant exchange, A. J. Lustig introduces the concept of “second nature,” suggesting that “gardened and cultivated land” forms “most of the everyday world people see as natural.” The new gardening aesthetics, “once based on the idea of manipulation of landscape,” shifted to emphasize the “manipulation of [botanical] knowledge.”²³ Drawing from Lustig’s idea of “second nature,” Chang argues that modernist accounts have privileged decorative chinoiserie while overlooking the organic cosmopolitanism wrought by actual botanical exchange. These living species, not just images, embodied a transnational exchange that blurred botanical native boundaries. Chang thus calls us to recognize the material agency of plants in shaping British aesthetic modernism and cosmopolitanism.²⁴ Eighteenth-century garden discourse anticipates modernist concerns about material agency, treating plants as active agents by which a

¹⁹ Douglas Chambers, *The Planters of the English Landscape Garden: Botany, Trees, and the Georgics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 81.

²⁰ Thomas Lance Bullington, “Strangers Among Us: Invasive Plants in British Literature, 1669-1800” (PhD diss., University of Mississippi, 2016), 9.

²¹ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 58.

²² Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 56.

²³ A. J. Lustig, “Cultivating Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century English Gardens,” *Science in Context* 13, no. 2 (2000): 155.

²⁴ Chang, “The Idea of the Chinese Garden,” 91-107.

cosmopolitan, transnational aesthetic was materially produced. Chang finds that the late eighteenth century represents “a key stage in the return to the ‘plantfulness’ of gardens.”²⁵ Gardening periodicals emerged to discuss practical information about incorporating new plant species into gardens, rather than focusing on “a grand instantiation of landscape planning” of earlier decades. These publications moved away from “abstract aesthetic claims” and instead emphasized a more detailed, plant-centric approach to garden design.²⁶ In this context, Chang argues that plants were no longer agents of human-cultivated landscapes but instead embodied intersecting possibilities of being both “animate and inanimate, feeling and unfeeling, sentient and instinctual.” They began to serve as symbols of global circulation and the immense interconnectedness of a world where the boundaries between the distant and the familiar were increasingly blurred.²⁷

Re-examining the Mason-Chambers debate in the context of the increasing introduction of exotic plants into English gardens offers insights into a cultural narrative that reflects an evolving idea of nature and nation. Despite the dominant factional debate between Chambers and Mason over grand garden designs, the two share a common concern about the rapid transformation of “native” English nature by the influx of exotic plants. Chambers’s advocacy of Chinese gardens—emphasizing novelty and variety, particularly through his repeated emphasis on the value of “transplanting the peculiarities of one country to another” (7)—shares notable similarities with the ideas Mason promotes in his *The English Garden* (1772-1782), a four-book didactic poem on the “English” gardening style. Mason, who accuses Chambers of producing “a garden that is both unnatural and un-English” and distrusts any garden style that “attacks the Englishness of the English garden or seeks to replace it,” viewing such changes as threats to “English liberty” and the nation’s “constitutional system,”²⁸ nevertheless adopts a similar stance to Chambers in championing the introduction of exotic plants into English gardens—a paradoxical choice that seemingly

²⁵ Chang, “Chinese Flowers and the Idea of Cultivation,” 9.

²⁶ Chang, “Chinese Flowers and the Idea of Cultivation,” 9-15.

²⁷ Chang, *Novel Cultivations*, 16.

²⁸ Bending, “A Natural Revolution,” 254.

undermines the cultural purity he advocates for English gardens.

This chapter argues that Chambers's cultural transfer of Chinese gardening aesthetics, through the lens of his cultural adaption and accommodation of the Chinese practice of transplanting exotic plants, forges a hybrid, cosmopolitan garden discourse. By celebrating Chinese gardening's sensory experiments in variety and surprise triggered through exotic plants and flowers, Chambers creates an imaginative resonance between Chinese horticulture and English gardening amid the rise of a diasporic, globalized nature. In doing so, Chambers accommodates Chinese style into both English picturesque gardens and the Enlightenment's ideals of cosmopolitanism. Mason, on the other hand, in Book I of *The English Garden*, advocates for an English art of gardening that combines a patriotic defense of native nature with an aesthetic of variety—contrasting with the excessive variety and luxury of Chinese gardens championed by Chambers—by embracing a form of variety aligned with constitutional liberty and thus reaffirming English identity. Mason's ideal of variety enables a seemingly paradoxical synthesis: safeguarding native nature even as he embraces the global exchange of plants. In Book IV, Mason tells an imperial fiction instantiated in greenhouses: by celebrating botanical variety, it encloses exotic species as imperial trophies while dissolving the boundaries between native and exotic when planting outdoors. This “happy discord,” as Bewell terms it,²⁹ turns the English garden into a cosmopolitan arboretum. However, the greenhouse itself remains a delicate fantasy: its story of control over nature and exotic lands meets opposition. True variety in the English garden thus must temper imperial ambitions and recognize the autonomy of nature and its inhabitants. The chapter closes with an alternative narrative of Eurocentric botanical conquest by examining Sir Joseph Banks's introduction of the Chinese tree peony to Britain, foregrounding the plant's material agency, Chinese cultivation practices, and the work of Chinese go-betweens that enabled its transplantation and assimilation into English life.

²⁹ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 70.

William Chambers's *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening: Garden as a Cosmopolitan Discourse*

In the mid-eighteenth century, William Chambers stood at the forefront of the debates over Anglo-Chinese gardening designs. Having traveled twice to Canton with the Swedish East India Company in 1743-1744 and again in 1748-1749, Chambers returned to England with more than sketches of pagodas and bamboo pavilions; he brought back a conviction that the very peculiarities of Chinese gardens could find a resonance in their English counterparts. Drawing on his Canton experience, Chambers's early publication, *Designs of Chinese Buildings* (1757), as Kitson notes, offered a corrective to the era's fanciful chinoiserie by presenting measured plans of Chinese designs.³⁰ Such far more authentic representations of Chinese architecture were abandoned in Chambers's later work on Chinese gardening. Over a decade later, Chambers launched his most polemical work *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening*. As Chang observes, in this work, Chambers wove together "an experiential account of aesthetic theory, a fantastical traveler's narrative, and a practical manifesto for a national style of landscape."³¹ Porter argues that Chambers's writing on Chinese gardens shouldn't be read as decorative imitations or ideological projections; instead, it reveals how the "psychological" encounter of Chinese otherness shapes Chambers's garden aesthetics. Rather than merely describing real Chinese gardens, many of his imaginative inventions exceeding any models he had seen in Canton, Chambers transformed the *Dissertation* into what Porter terms "cultural translation."³² Porter points out that the much-criticized extravagance of the *Dissertation* functions as an embodiment of the "residue of translation" that is "beyond the reach of sense" and resists neat interpretation.³³ In other words, Chambers's ambivalent praise and dismissal of Chinese aesthetics, his extravagant descriptions, and his oscillation between fidelity to classical neoclassicism and whimsical exotica all stem from the psychological dislocation of first-hand contact

³⁰ Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*, 185.

³¹ Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye*, 29.

³² David Porter, "Beyond the Bounds of Truth: Cultural Translation and William Chambers's Chinese Garden," *Mosaic* 37, no. 2 (June 2004): 41-58.

³³ Porter, "Beyond the Bounds of Truth," 55.

with China—an encounter that both inspired and unsettled him.³⁴ Attending to these psychological dislocations, ambivalences, and dreamlike fragments in Chambers's cultural translation, as Porter contends, gives a fuller account of how cross-cultural encounters shaped eighteenth-century aesthetics.

In the *Dissertation*, Chambers's psychological and imaginative transformation of Chinese garden aesthetics is particularly evident in his emphasis on the sensualist psychology that the Chinese garden evokes. He calls for an English resonance in the Chinese art of gardening for its embrace of variety, surprise and novelty—aesthetic categories that ignite imagination through a dazzling array of captivating scenes. The Chinese garden is designed to guide viewers through a series of emotional experiences. Chambers categorizes the sceneries of Chinese gardens into three types, each linked to a specific emotion: the pleasing, the terrible or horrid, and the enchanted or surprising (39-45). As Chambers explains, the pleasing scenes are crafted from the most vibrant and flawless elements of the plant world—luxuriant flower beds, lush groves, and elegant shrubs—interwoven with rivers, lakes, cascading waterfalls, ornamental fountains, and myriad waterworks. All these components are “combined and disposed in all the picturesque forms that art or nature can suggest” (39-40). The scenes of terror consist of “gloomy woods”; deep, sunless valleys that are almost impassable; looming, barren cliffs; and wild, thunderous waterfalls that thunder down the mountainside from every direction (40). The surprising, or supernatural scenes fall into the “romantic” category and are rich in marvels, deliberately designed to “excite in the mind of the spectator, quick successions of opposite and violent sensation” (42). Chambers envisions a garden where horrid scenes are adjacent to strikingly pleasant and serene spaces, designed to captivate and surprise visitors at every turn:

His road then lies through lofty woods, where serpents and lizards of many beautiful sorts crawl upon the ground, and where innumerable apes, cats and parrots, clamber upon the trees, to intimidate him as he passes; or through flowery thickets, where he is delighted with the singing of birds, the harmony

³⁴ Porter, “Beyond the Bounds of Truth,” 41-58.

of flutes, and all kinds of soft instrumental music: sometimes, in this romantic excursion, the passenger finds himself in spacious recesses, surrounded with arbors of jessamine, vine and roses; or in splendid pavilions, richly painted and illumined by the sun. (44)

Chambers describes such a scene of contrast, variety and surprise through the persona of a traveler, transforming garden design into a lived, affective experience rather than a static pictorial arrangement. The traveler's journey through "lofty woods" and "flowery thickets" is carefully presented as a movement between terror and delight, alternating between the experience of the horrid and the serene, the wild and the cultivated. As Porter notes, the *Dissertation* frequently reads like "an allegorical narrative of voyage and discovery with the visitor repeatedly described as a 'traveller' or 'passenger' as they navigate the garden's seemingly endless labyrinth."³⁵ By juxtaposing this allegory with Chambers's 1759 *Treatise on Civil Architecture* where he extols the virtues of travel, Porter argues that the *Dissertation*'s account of wonder and disorientation is a literary reenactment of Chambers's youthful cognitive shock.³⁶ Viewed in this light, Chambers's admiration for the irregular beauty of Chinese garden aesthetics becomes a cultural translation of his psychological engagement with Chinese gardens, mediated by an imaginative resonance with English aesthetics. Scholars have noted that his appreciation of Chinese horticultural art, which emphasizes variety, surprise, and novelty, parallels aesthetic ideas articulated by English thinkers. As Richard Quaintance suggests, Chambers turns the Chinese garden into "exercise circuits for the emotions," connecting garden designs with his psychological insights. In doing so, Chambers aligns his sinophilic gardening aesthetics with earlier English thinkers such as Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke.³⁷ Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding further clarifies that by representing Chinese gardens as relying on theatrical staging—using carefully arranged pleasing, horrid or enchanted scenes—to provoke a range of emotional responses,

³⁵ Porter, "Beyond the Bounds of Truth," 49.

³⁶ Porter, "Beyond the Bounds of Truth," 49.

³⁷ Richard Quaintance, "Toward Distinguishing Between Theme Park Publics: William Chambers's Landscape Theory vs. His Kew Practice," in *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations*, ed. Terence G. Young and Robert B. Riley (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002), 25-47.

Chambers grounds Chinese gardening in a sensualist framework that traces its lineage from John Locke's empiricism, through Addison's theory of Imagination, and to Burke's dichotomy of the Beautiful and the Sublime.³⁸

It is Chambers's psychological transformation of the Chinese aesthetic appeal of novelty and surprise in particular that energized the debate about nature and art in his polemic with Walpole and Mason, resonating with his predecessors. Joseph Addison, in *Spectator* 412 (1712), locates the pleasures of imagination in encounters with the "Great, Uncommon, or Beautiful," arguing that "Every thing that is new or uncommon raises a Pleasure in the Imagination, because it fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, gratifies its Curiosity, and gives it an Idea of which it was not before possessed." Addison advocates for novelty as "a kind of Refreshment" from the "Satiety" of familiar entertainments, suggesting that even objects typically deemed unpleasant can captivate us when they possess elements of novelty.³⁹ He calls for an incorporation of novelty into art, much as Chinese gardeners introduce irregular or surprising scenes into landscape design, to spark the imagination:

They [The Chinese] say, any one may place Trees in equal Rows and uniform Figures. They chuse rather to shew a Genius in Works of this Nature, and therefore always conceal the Art by which they direct themselves. They have a Word [to] express the particular Beauty of a Plantation that thus strikes the Imagination at first Sight. [...] Our British Gardeners, on the contrary, instead of humouring Nature, love to deviate from it as much as possible. [...] I would rather look upon a Tree in all its Luxuriancy and Diffusion of Boughs and Branches, than when it is thus cut and trimmed into a Mathematical Figure.⁴⁰

³⁸ Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding, "From Jehol to Stowe: Ornamental Orientalism and the Aesthetics of the Anglo-Chinese Garden," in *Eastern Resonances in Early Modern England: Receptions and Transformations from the Renaissance to the Romantic Period*, ed. Claire Gallien and Ladan Niayesh (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 157-158. For a detailed discussion of how Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* influenced Chambers's architectural thinking throughout his career, see Eileen Harris, "Burke and Chambers on the Sublime and Beautiful," in *Essays in the History of Architecture Presented to Rudolf Wittkower*, ed. Douglas Fraser et al. (London: Phaidon, 1967), 207-213.

³⁹ Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 412, June 23, 1712, 825-826, [Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online II](#). For more of Addison's discussion on imagination see Joseph Addison, *Essays on Taste, and the Pleasures of the Imagination ... From the Spectator* (London: John Taylor, 1834).

⁴⁰ Addison, *Spectator* 412, 825-826.

Addison's idea of the harmonious interplay between art and nature finds its Chinese horticultural resonances in the *Dissertation*, where Chambers delineates two fundamentally different approaches to alter the natural landscape. The first combines art and nature to ignite the viewer's imagination, and as Porter notes, is defined by Chambers's hallmark focus on evoking novelty and surprise through "the experience of foreignness."⁴¹ In particular, Chambers repeatedly highlights the aesthetic novelty of geographical alterity in Chinese gardens, achieved through the introduction and cultivation of exotic plants:

It is indeed true, that novelty and variety may both be attained, by transplanting the peculiarities of one country to another; by introducing rocks, cataracts, impending woods, and other parts of romantic situations, in flat places; by employing much water where it is rare, and cultivated plains, amidst the rude irregularities of mountains. [...] The Chinese Artists employ in these enchanted scenes, the *vendezhang*, the ever-moving poplar, the *pau-lu*,⁴² with all kinds of sensitive and other extraordinary trees, plants and flowers. (17; 47)

Chambers depicts the Chinese garden as an epitome of a plant empire where plants sourced from around the world consist of an imperial nature. This intention to present the Chinese garden as a foster home for foreign plants became even clearer in the second edition of the *Dissertation*, published only a year after the 1772 version, where Chambers includes plant species that were unlikely to have existed in China at that time. The addition of exotic plants and the related footnotes in the revised edition have sparked debates, casting doubt on the authenticity of Chambers's observations and amplifying his already extravagant depictions of the Chinese garden. R. C. Bald's research reveals that Chambers addressed criticism that he had only featured European flora by appending numerous Chinese plant names—primarily drawn from the French Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Du Halde—and updating his list of Chinese trees. Despite these extensive revisions, Chambers remained unaware that crops like maize, tobacco, and

⁴¹ Porter, "Beyond the Bounds of Truth," 52.

⁴² According to Chambers's notes, the *vendezhang* is a plant "native to Siam; it bears flowers of an agreeable smell." The *pau-lu* is a tree "common in Bengal and some parts of China." See Chambers, *A Dissertation*, 47n.

pineapple had long been cultivated in China, which directly conflicted with the plants' true origins or descriptions. Bald suggests that these excessive, error-ridden additions betray Chambers's limited botanical expertise.⁴³ However, if we view the *Dissertation* as a fantasy of the Chinese garden, rather than an accurate representation, the factual inconsistencies in Chambers's addition of exotic plants reveal Chambers's imperial imaginary. In this imagined empire of plants, a new, diasporic nature was emerging—distinct from the traditional idea of native or local nature—where the Chinese garden becomes a site where native plants from faraway lands are naturalized to new conditions:

They [the Chinese gardens] have besides, scenes for every season of the year: some for winter, generally exposed to the southern sun, and composed of pines, firs, cedars, evergreen oaks, phillyreas, hollies, yews, junipers, and many other evergreens; being enriched with laurels of various sorts, laurestinus, arbutus, and such other plants and vegetables as grow or flourish in cold weather: and to give variety and gaiety to these gloomy productions, they plant amongst them, in regular forms, divided by walks, all the rare shrubs, flowers and trees of the torrid zone; which they cover, during the winter, with frames of glass, disposed in the forms of temples, or other elegant buildings. These they call conservatories: they are warmed by subterraneous fires, and afford a comfortable and agreeable retreat, when the weather is too cold to walk in the open air. (24-25)

The pairing of native evergreens with tropical species reveals a refined manipulation of ecological and geographical boundaries. The cultivation of rare flora from “the torrid zone” within “conservatories”—an early precursor to imperial botanical practices—symbolizes a microcosm of empire, where flora from disparate regions is brought together in harmonious coexistence. These conservatories are designed not merely to shield delicate plants from cold climates, but to accommodate human sensibilities and aesthetic pleasure. Within them, plants are arranged around regular promenades for

⁴³ R. C. Bald, “Sir William Chambers and the Chinese Garden,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 11, no. 3 (June 1950): 313-314.

strolling and viewing, while climates are artificially manufactured to enable leisure and contemplation. In this sense, the conservatory becomes an embodiment of anthropocentrism and imperial superiority, asserting dominion over distant ecologies through cultivated display and climatic control. Chambers's description of Chinese gardening foreshadows a key principle that would later define British horticulture: plants belong not in their native habitats but wherever they fulfill aesthetic and functional roles. This idea is practiced by notable figures like Sir Joseph Banks, whose global plant-hunting expeditions exemplify the relocation of flora to serve aesthetic, scientific, and economic purposes for the British Empire.

In stark contrast, Chambers warns against a second mode of alteration that he sees as nothing more than wanton destruction. He levels this critique most forcefully at the naturalist landscape garden championed by "Capability" Brown. Shortly before Mason's *Epistle* appeared, Chambers issued a public letter responding to critics of his *Dissertation*, in which he defends his whimsical fantasy of garden design. He positions himself not only as a defender of artistic diversity and novelty but also as a patriot committed to preserving English nature:

The justice of Your objections to the enchanted Scenery of the Chinese I will not deny [...] but for one circumstance, which is that whimsical productions make only a small part of my general plan, in which great Nature, in various forms, & under various medications, always appears triumphant [...] These little sportive Episodes are introduced, & are only to be considered as Episodes in a poem or Interludes in a Drama, which serve to relieve the fatigued mind, and prepare it for something of Greater Consequence.⁴⁴

Chambers recontextualizes the fantastical features of his appreciation of the Chinese garden in the *Dissertation*—such as terrifying and enchanted scenes, instruments of torture, and splendid artificial lightning bolts, various eccentric exotic animals (41-42)—as subordinate to the overall harmony of nature. He urges his readers to look past the seeming absurdities of his Chinese garden fantasy and consider the "Greater

⁴⁴ John Harris, *Sir William Chambers, Knight of the Polar Star* (London: A. Zwemmer, 1970), 192.

Consequence,” which, as Chambers argues in the preface to the *Dissertation*, is the destruction inflicted on English nature by Brownian landscape gardening. Brown’s naturalist garden, in Chambers’s view, wreaked “havock” [*sic*] on “our old plantation,” as he laments: “The ax has often, in one day, laid waste the growth of several ages; and thousands of venerable plants, whose woods of them, have been swept way, to make room for a little grass, and a few American weeds” (xi). Chambers criticizes Brown’s naturalist garden aesthetics, whose seemingly organic landscape is achieved through aggressive removal of older plantings, and which, for Chambers, amounts to cultural and ecological vandalism.

Laden with cultural significance, weeds are used by Chambers to articulate the relationship between nature and national identity. The “weed,” as Bending argues, stands as a symbolic instability, a category that “marks out some plants as ‘natural’ but as nevertheless unwelcomed,” “primarily articulating humankind’s relationship with nature and understand[ing] of itself.”⁴⁵ For Renaissance writers, as Amy Tigner contends, weeds are framed as a symbol of “both the real danger of careless husbandry of the land and ethical failure of the individual.” Rooted in biblical narratives as a post-lapsarian phenomenon, weeds represent the fallen world, emerging only after humanity’s expulsion from Eden. Metaphorically and horticulturally, they are tied to sin and the imperfect state of the world.⁴⁶ As Bending establishes, for many eighteenth-century writers, “the weed is as much a metaphor as a physicality, standing in with regularity for moral and spiritual failings which must be plucked out.”⁴⁷ In this sense, Chambers’s lamentation over the destruction of venerable plants in old English plantations to make way for “American weeds” suggests a symbolic displacement of traditional English values. His nostalgia for a return to the purity of the Garden of Eden clashes with the physical realities of an English landscape overtaken by “American weeds” and marred by “errors of a false taste” (xi). By labeling American flora as weeds,

⁴⁵ Stephen Bending, “Plants in Culture,” in *A Cultural History of Plants in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Jennifer Milam (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 130.

⁴⁶ Amy L. Tigner, *Literature and the Renaissance Garden from Elizabeth I to Charles II* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 66.

⁴⁷ Bending, “Plants in Culture,” 130.

Chambers positions them as emblematic of cultural and moral failings—an encroachment on the natural and national order that he seeks to protect.

Chambers condemns the unchecked spread of “American weeds,” arguing that it disrupts the natural beauty of the native English landscape. His concern is evident in his stark warning: “If their humour for devastation continues to rage much longer, there will not be a forest-tree left standing in the whole kingdom” (xi). His admiration for Chinese gardeners highlights their careful preservation of ancient trees:

they take all possible care not to kill many of their old trees [...]; saying, that the loss of a fine old plant is irreparable; that it impairs the beauty of the adjacent plantations; and often likewise destroys the effect of the scenery, from many distant points of view: and in shaping their grounds, they are, for the same reason, equally cautious with regard to the old plantations. (86-87)

Chambers favors a more restrained approach that values preservation of nativist nature over possession of exotic nature. As Bending notices, “if one lays aside the somewhat overstrained attempts at sublimity, Chambers’s designs recommend unexceptionably ‘English’ features and are arguably more liberal in their construction than those of Mason.”⁴⁸ By emphasizing national identity and ecological continuity, particularly through the preservation of “English features” within the “old plantation,” Chambers presents himself as more patriotic than Brown’s supporters, whose methods prioritize immediate aesthetic change over historical and natural sustainability.

Chambers’s criticism of American weeds becomes more complex when moving from the metaphorical to the physical realm. American plants were a pervasive physical presence in the eighteenth-century English garden. It was their tangible arrival in substantial quantities, coupled with their prodigious growth, that became central to shaping the garden’s representation of nature. According to Laird’s research, between the 1730s and 1760s, a fascination with North American trees and shrubs swept through England’s upper classes. This enthusiasm extended to creating plantations on scales rivaling natural American forests. “The trade in exotic American plants, such as the

⁴⁸ Bending, “A Natural Revolution,” 255.

Weymouth pine (*Pinus strobus*), kalmia (*Kalmia latifolia*), and buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*),” flourished.⁴⁹ By 1756, Peter Collinson, who received seeds and roots from John Bartram in Philadelphia, remarked on the “prodigious influx” of American plants, declaring that “England must be turned up side down & America transplanted Heither [*sic*].”⁵⁰ Not simply a figurative claim, the physical removal of American weeds might have been necessary to preserve the old English plantation.

The introduction of American plants to English gardens was made popular by early eighteenth-century horticultural theorists like Stephen Switzer, who advocates for the enrichment of native planting through foreign species. Switzer argues that:

if there is any one that would strive to bring the raising and planting of Forest Trees to their utmost Perfection, he ought not to be content with treating barely on those Plants which grow at Home, but ought by all means to endeavour at such an Introduction of foreign Trees and Plants from Climates of equal Temperature, or (if possible) from Climates which are colder than ours [...] such are those which come from the Mountains of Asia, Syria, &c. and such which grow in the extreme Parts of North America; which may improve Planting.⁵¹

This preference for exotic trees reflects their perceived superiority in utility and aesthetic appeal. Mark Catesby echoes this valuation of American flora, describing them as not merely decorative but superior:

[The continent of America] must afford a plentiful variety of trees and shrubs, that may be usefully employed to enrich and adorn our woods by their valuable timber and delightful shade; or to embellish and perfume our gardens with the elegance of their appearance and the fragrance of their odours; in both which respects they greatly excel our home productions of the like kind.⁵²

⁴⁹ Laird, *The Flowering of the Landscape Garden*, 17.

⁵⁰ Qtd. in Laird, *The Flowering of the Landscape Garden*, 17.

⁵¹ Stephen Switzer, *The Practical Husbandman and Planter: Or, Observations on the Ancient and Modern Husbandry, Planting, Gardening, &c. ...By a Society of Husbandmen and Planters* (London: Print for S. Switzer, 1733), 1:liv.

⁵² Mark Catesby, *Hortus Europ.Americanus: or; A Collection of 85 Curious Trees and Shrubs, the Produce of North America* (London: Printed for J. Millan, 1767), i.

Together, Switzer and Catesby articulate a cultural ideology that prioritizes innovation and improvement through the appropriation of foreign plants. As Therese O'Malley interprets, in Catesby's conception, integrating American plants into English landscapes is "a literal incorporation of the colonies into the mother country." This process was a facet of colonialist endeavors centered on, as O'Malley puts it, "appropriation and possession," designed to serve England's interests exclusively.⁵³

Against this backdrop, Chambers's dismissal of American weeds, what appears as a xenophobic denunciation, actually betrays an anxiety over xenophilia: an increased English appetite for exotic plants. This xenophilia finds resonances in Chambers's appreciation of Chinese gardeners' inclusion of exotic plants into the Chinese garden. Alayrac-Fielding argues that Chambers "sinicizes" English gardeners by pairing the *sharawadgi*-infused ideals of variety and irregularity with exotic architectural ornaments, thereby forging a new vision of nature and beauty. Drawing on Srinivas Aravamudan's idea of "Enlightenment Orientalism,"⁵⁴ Alayrac-Fielding interprets the transposition, adaption, and accommodation of chinoiserie ornaments in the English garden as a tangible expression of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism: a "conversation, or dialogism" among multiple cultures and epochs, visible in exotic ornaments.⁵⁵ Echoing Alayrac-Fielding's claim that these architectural ornaments create a diachronic and transnational dialogue, the integration of exotic flora into the English garden likewise participated in this exchange, playing no lesser role in cultivating a cosmopolitan garden discourse. As Bewell notices, eighteenth-century Britons "increasingly embraced the idea that they were a cosmopolitan people, whose strength lay in their power to move from one place to another, exploring, trading, and collecting information about other places and people." The relocation of exotic plants to meet imperial needs reflects how the British aimed to extend their cosmopolitan identity to nature itself. They envisioned a world where no useful species, regardless of its natural origin, would

⁵³ Therese O'Malley, "Mark Catesby and the Culture of Gardens," in *Empire's Nature: Mark Catesby's New World Vision*, ed. Amy R. W. Meyers and Margaret Beck Pritchard (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 161.

⁵⁴ Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁵⁵ Alayrac-Fielding, "From Jehol to Stowe," 158-160.

be excluded from becoming a true “citizen of the world.”⁵⁶ The garden became a physical manifesto of this cosmopolitan ideal, a space where the flora of diverse climates can coexist and thrive.

In Chambers’s writing, the Chinese practice of transplanting exotic plants is not aligned with the colonial impulse described by Switzer and Catesby, which entails an urge to assimilate, transform, and dominate for imperial gain. Instead, the presence of exotic flora in English gardens, finding its resonances in Chinese horticulture, reflects a lineage of sensualist experimentation with variety and surprise. This approach reveals a dynamic and reciprocal interplay between native and exotic cultures, where the integration of exotic plants becomes emblematic of a reflexive mode of othering—what Aravamudan calls “a transcultural, cosmopolitan” Orientalism⁵⁷—aimed at embracing dialogues rather than enforcing dominance. This idea emerges when Chambers draws attention to Chinese gardeners’ awareness of the limitations and fragility of their conservatories:

“We are sensible,” say they [Chinese gardeners], “that no plant is possessed of all good qualities; but choose such as have the fewest faults; and avoid all the exoticks, that vegetate with difficulty in our climate; for though they may be rare, they cannot be beautiful, being always in a sickly state: have, if you please, hot-houses and cool-houses, for plants of every region, to satisfy the curiosity of botanists; but they are mere infirmaries: the plants which they contain, are valetudinarians, divested of beauty and vigour; which only exist by the power of medicine, and by dint of good nursing.” (89-90)

The conservatories serve as reminders of the boundaries of cultivation. While they are inventive in simulating environments suitable for exotic species, they simultaneously impose clear constraints on how far such plants could adapt beyond their native conditions. Chambers thus reveals a nuanced perspective on the sentience of plants and challenges the idea of dominant human control over the circulation and cultivation of exotic plants. Chinese gardeners’ recognition of a tension between human curiosity and

⁵⁶ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 26.

⁵⁷ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 3.

the limits of ecological adaptability questions the extent to which human control can reshape the natural world. While hot-houses and cool-houses might accommodate plants from diverse regions, they are ultimately characterized as “infirmaries,” spaces where delicate plants, like sentient beings, are deprived of vitality. The idea of plant autonomy did not gain widespread recognition until Charles Darwin’s groundbreaking *On the Origin of Species* (1859), where he highlights how botanical migration is largely governed by natural forces beyond human control, emphasizing plants’ opportunistic strategies for seed dispersal.⁵⁸ However, eighteenth-century writers had begun to develop a preliminary awareness of plant sentience, challenging the stability of an anthropocentric worldview. Exploration of plant behaviors and life in the eighteenth century intertwined early botanical science with philosophical reflections. Carl Linnaeus, the father of modern botany, develops the sexual system of plant classification, based on the reproductive organs of flowers. Drawing on human analogies, he uses wedding imagery and marriage metaphors to describe plant reproduction, as outlined in *Systema Naturae* (1735). Moreover, he acknowledges that plants’ sexual unions are generally uncontrolled and do not conform to human standards of propriety.⁵⁹ Erasmus Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants* (1789) rides the wave of Linnaean ideas about plant life. Written during the 1780s, when Darwin was translating Linnaeus’s *Systema Vegetabilium* (1783) and *Genera Plantarum* (1787), the poem intertwines scientific inquiry with poetic artistry, exploring emerging notions of plant sentience. In the poem, Darwin views plants as rudimentary animals, capable of feeling, thinking, dreaming and desiring. He subverts Ovidian mythology by restoring plants to their animal origins, challenging the traditional view of plants as static and imprisoned by “philosophical, geographical, and technological” constraints. *The Loves of the Plants*, as Bewell argues, emphasizes plants’ free movement and dynamic exchanges.⁶⁰ Similarly, Chambers here is drawing on the idea of plants’ sensibility which is beyond human control. Conservatories may cater to botanical curiosity, yet exotic plants often

⁵⁸ Mary Kuhn, “Dickinson and the Politics of Plant Sensibility,” *ELH* 85, no. 1 (2018): 149-150.

⁵⁹ Sam George, *Botany, Sexuality and Women’s Writing, 1760-1830: From Modest Shoot to Forward Plant* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 1.

⁶⁰ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 64-66.

prove too fragile to survive, or, metaphorically, too resistant to domestication in foreign lands. Moreover, Chinese gardeners, dismissing exotic plants as “valetudinarians” needing constant care, evoke an unease about the paternalistic oversight required to domesticate foreign cultures—a process that risks undermining native identity. The sentience of plants thus becomes a synecdoche for the autonomy of exotic cultures, suggesting a cosmopolitan, dialogic, and transcultural exchange rather than an aggressive, imperialistic stance.

William Mason’s *The English Garden*: Fusing Native Nature with Exotic Plants

In the preface to William Mason’s mock-heroic *An Heroic Epistle to Sir William Chambers* (1773), Horace Walpole elevates Book I of Mason’s *The English Garden* (1772-1782), published the year before as the first of a four-book didactic poem on English landscape gardening,⁶¹ into a literary bulwark against the loss of England’s cherished landscape traditions:

In Mr Mason’s Georgic [*The English Garden*], [...] the living landscapes of Kent, Hamilton & Brown will be preserved, when their groves are felled, & their lawns restored to the ploughshare, or desolated by Tyranny & Tax-gatherers. His Poem will preserve the Science, or restore it, should no specimens remain. At least it will show what a Paradise was England while She retained her Constitution [...] Taste in Gardening [...] was the result of all the happy combinations of an Empire of Freemen, an Empire formed by Trade [...] maintained by the valour of independent Property.⁶²

Walpole’s commentary, as Bending notes, is steeped in the “language of Old Whigs,”⁶³ invoking concepts such as empire, freemen, trade, and independent property. Walpole largely frames the poem as “both a creation and a reflection of England’s-hard-won liberty,” opposing the “false taste” of regular and tyrannical designs that features

⁶¹ William Mason, *The English Garden: A Poem in Four Books* (York: Printed by A. Ward, 1783). All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by book and line number.

⁶² Walpole, “Notes to the Author’s Preface,” 43-44.

⁶³ Bending, “A Natural Revolution,” 251.

foreign gardens.⁶⁴ Shaped by Walpole's perspective, Book I of *The English Garden* is largely situated within such a broader Whiggish narrative of national identity.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the English landscape garden served as an emblem of the state, a site where aesthetics and politics intertwined. As Alayrac-Fielding observes, early in the century England sought a new garden model to counter the baroque French style, its rigid symmetry, topiary, and geometric layouts symbolizing Louis XIV's absolutism and Cartesian order. After the Glorious Revolution and the Bill of Rights, the nation embraced a constitutional monarchy grounded in liberty, balance, and negotiated authority.⁶⁵ John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis note that it was precisely the rejection of French formality that ignited the English landscape movement, framing the garden as "an endorsement of liberty and tolerance against tyranny and oppression, democracy against autocracy."⁶⁶ Garden design became a vehicle for reflecting this political shift: instead of emulating French mastery over nature, designers looked to notions of sinuosity and irregularity to evoke wilderness and signify liberty. The shift to variety and irregularity that William Chambers finds its English resonances in the Chinese garden was, in William Mason's view, an oriental excess that threatened English originality and evoked Tory monarchism. As Bending notes, Whiggish and patriotic writers instead championed a distinctly "English" aesthetic of variety in the garden as a symbol of Britain's constitutional order and inherent liberties.⁶⁷ In Book I of *The English Garden*, William Mason promotes a distinctly English approach to garden design, one that merges patriotic defense of native nature with an aesthetic of variety. In doing so, he sets himself apart from his rival William Chambers, endorsing a form of variety that accommodates the ideals of constitutional liberty and, in turn, reaffirms a sense of English national identity.

In Book I of *The English Garden*, having completed the elegiac invocation—

⁶⁴ Bending, "A Natural Revolution," 252.

⁶⁵ Alayrac-Fielding, "From Jehol to Stowe," 142.

⁶⁶ John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis, "Introduction," in *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden, 1620-1820*, ed. John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 8.

⁶⁷ Bending, "A Natural Revolution," 242-243.

writing not for fame but to soothe the “agony of the heart” caused by the loss of his beloved wife Mary Sherman (“Maria”) in 1767 (I. 18-49)—Mason moves to identify and summon “Albion’s sons” as the intended audience the poem aims to guide. By appealing to “ye of Albion’s sons, / Attend; Ye freeborn, ye ingenuous few, / Who heirs of competence” (I. 51-53), Mason positions them as heirs not merely to property but to a patriotic duty: to transpose the arts of liberty into the landscape as they would in culture. He acknowledges classical learning (the plain, arts transplanted from Greece to Rome) but warns that the art he teaches is not to be found in Rome. He implies that the pure, free taste of England must look elsewhere than slavish imitation of foreign formalism: “Those arts which Greece did, with her Liberty, / Resign to Rome. Yet know, the art I sing / Ev’n there ye shall not learn. Rome knew it not / While Rome was free: Ah! hope not then to find / In slavish superstitions Rome the fair / Remains” (I. 58-63). By invoking “Albion’s sons” in this way, Mason elevates his addressees as guardians of national taste, entrusted with cultivating landscapes as embodiments of national identity and virtue.

Mason’s patriotic articulation of gardening styles becomes even clearer in his denunciation of formal, geometric garden designs. He describes how misguided tastes inflicted lasting harm on both landscape and nation: “O how unlike the scene my fancy forms, / Did Folly, heretofore, with Wealth conspire / To plan that formal, dull, disjointed scene / Which once was call’d a Garden. Britain still / Bears on her breast full many a hideous wound” (I. 386-390). By framing geometric artifice as wounds upon Britain’s breast, Mason shows it to be more than an aesthetic misstep, but rather a symbolic assault on national integrity and vitality. He exposes the cruelty behind tools of precision—“By line, by plummet, and unfeeling sheers”—which force “verdure” into “stone”-like rigidity, reducing native trees yew, holly, and tonsile box into decorative ornament (I. 393-400). Invoking Francis Bacon by his title, Lord Verulam—“sagest Verulam”—Mason presents Bacon as a model of wisdom and an early reformer of garden taste, crediting him with helping usher in a naturalistic turn that restores lawns “With verdure pure, unbroken, unabridged” where “Nature glads our eye / Sporting in all her lovely carelessness” (I. 430-431). By revealing the cruelty and folly behind

geometric gardening, Mason stakes his political stance that values liberty, variety, and sensitivity, and sets a tone that elevates native and wild nature as antidotes to oppression.

Many years before, in the *Tatler* No. 161, 1710, Joseph Addison issued one of the earliest polemics against the French formal garden in favor of celebrating the virtues of natural variety. In this essay, Addison borrows a dream to depict an ideal garden shaped by nature and governed by the “Goddess of Liberty.” He shows how true freedom allows “Arts and Sciences” to flourish, and how “Plenty” and “Commerce” thrive when not constrained by artificial, geometric designs. The unrestrained growth of flowers symbolizes organic diversity that surpasses anything shaped by authoritarian order: “The Place was covered with a wonderful Profusion of Flowers, that, without being disposed into regular Borders and Parterres, grew promiscuously, and had a greater Beauty in their natural Luxuriancy and Disorder, than they could have received from the Checks and Restraints of Art.” The river, winding to nourish every plant, behaves differently when leaving the realm of liberty—stagnating in a lake or rushing through enslaved lands.⁶⁸ Hunt and Willis argue that Addison establishes the “freedom from unnecessary constraints” as fundamental to the ideology of the English garden.⁶⁹ By the 1770s, influenced by predecessors like Addison, Mason’s vision of the English garden embraces liberty and untouched nature, yet he moderates this with a balance between variety and preserving native nature, contrasting with Addison’s more dreamlike vision of a liberty-governed garden.

Opposing rigid, geometric styles that scar the land, Mason insists that art must harmonize with nature’s demands: “Great Nature scorns control: she will not bear / One beauty foreign to the spot or soil. / She gives thee to adorn: 'tis thine alone / To mend, not change her features” (I. 74-77). His tone of caution—“Does her band / Stretch forth a level lawn? Ah, hope not thou / To lift the mountain there” (I. 77-79)—reveals his belief in the sanctity of untouched native nature. By rejecting excessive artifice that alienates the land from its native identity and disrupts its symbolic connection to

⁶⁸ Joseph Addison, “*The Tatler*, No. 161, April 1710,” in Hunt and Willis, *The Genius of the Place*, 139-140.

⁶⁹ Hunt and Willis, “Joseph Addison (1672-1719),” in Hunt and Willis, *The Genius of the Place*, 138.

England's heritage, Mason embraces the idea of a local, native nature as integral to native Englishness. Book I features several references to the idea of untouched nature, where plants are rooted in their native land:

Yes, my lov'd Albion! many a glade is found,
 The haunt of wood-gods only; where if Art
 E'er dar'd to tread, 'twas with unsandal'd foot,
 Printless, as if the place were holy ground,
 And there are scenes, where, tho' she whilom trod,
 Led by the worst of guides, fell Tyranny,
 And ruthless Superstition, we now trace
 Her footsteps with delight; and pleas'd revere
 What once had rous'd our hatred. But to Time,
 Not her, the praise is due; his gradual touch
 Has moulder'd into beauty [...] (I. 356-366)

Mason juxtaposes serene, untouched glades, symbolic of nature's purity, with the remnants of past tyranny and superstition, now rendered harmless and picturesque by the passage of time. Ruins of old structures, once oppressive, have integrated into the natural landscape, creating a sublime beauty that arises not from human control, but from nature's gradual maturation.

Mason's conception of native nature is reinforced through the depiction of native trees, especially the oak. The oak not only serves as a synecdoche for native English identity but also symbolizes Britain's rise to a nation of naval supremacy, imperial ambition, and the maturity of its constitutional monarchy. The oak saplings are envisioned as future ship timbers that serve Britain's naval power, essential to national defense: "There plant thy elm, thy chestnut; nourish there / Those sapling oaks, which, at Britannia's call, / May heave their trunks mature into the main, / And float the bulwarks of her liberty" (I. 249-252). As Bending argues, Mason develops the oak into a symbol of the "Anglo-Saxon liberties" and the values of the English constitution.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Bending, "Plants in Culture," 139.

Later lines liken the young oak's growth to a hero's upbringing: in its early stage, the "cradled hero" draws strength from nurturing "female care," building its latent vigor. Once that strength is felt, it bursts forth: "He springs indignant from his nurse's arms, / He nods the plummy crest, he shakes the spear, / And is that awful thing which heaven ordain'd / The scourge of tyrants, and his country's pride" (I. 258-263). The oaks themselves stand as emblems of Britain's future defenders. Mason here draws on a well-established literary tradition that explores the oak's cultural freight as a symbol of nobility and national pride. In the analysis of Chaucer's list of trees and account of deforestation in Book 4 of the *Knight's Tale*, Brenda Schildgen notes that the trees selected for Arcite's grand funeral pyre are "primarily English," with the oak standing out as a key example. Schildgen argues that this choice highlights Chaucer's intent to evoke an English setting and Anglo-Saxon linguistic heritage, anchoring England's arboreal history both naturally and linguistically.⁷¹ Exploring the evolving cultural, historical, and mythological significance of the oak since the Middle Ages, Della Hooke finds that although the belief in its "sanctity" declined, the oak, long admired for its symbolism of "steadfastness and courage," became increasingly associated with historical figures and events. Its mythological and religious meanings shifted toward secular significance, earning it royal connections and the title of "the most English tree," as well as a revered status as "a national symbol." A well-known example, as Hooke notes, is the Boscobel oak, where Charles II was said to have hidden from Cromwell's troops in the English Civil War.⁷² By the late seventeenth century, the oak, essential for constructing the mighty ships for the Royal Navy, came to represent the vessels that enabled the flow of wealth from distant lands back to England. The planting of trees, as Keith Thomas finds, became increasingly driven by economic motives since the government began focusing on woodlands as a resource for shipbuilding. The agricultural improvers calculated costs, returns, and interest rates to show that planting

⁷¹ Brenda Deen Schildgen, "Reception, Elegy, and Eco-Awareness: Trees in Statius, Boccaccio, and Chaucer," *Comparative Literature* 65, no.1 (March 2013): 96.

⁷² Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 104.

trees for the Navy was both a “profitable” and “patriotic” endeavor.⁷³ Given the context of the growing connection between native oaks and English national power, it is not surprising that Bullington argues that John Evelyn’s *Sylva* (1664) “materializes a fantasy of Britain as an arboreal-naval power,” portraying the nation as a sea ruler whose ships are made from its own trees, particularly the oak. This vision embodies what Bullington terms “sylvan nationalism,” a belief that equates Britain’s strength with the lushness of its forests.⁷⁴ Mason, likewise, employs the afforestation of native trees as symbols of national guardianship and protectors of Britannia’s prosperity.

However, despite embodying untouched native nature, the oak’s linear arrangement undermines its desirability. Mason meditates on the tension between reverence for the oaks and the need to introduce diversity into the garden. Mason presents the ancient, symmetrical oaks as brotherly protectors that have long listened to England’s cultural life, from refined poetic strains to simple country pipes, making the avenue itself a living repository of national memory: “Those spreading oaks that in fraternal files / Have pair’d for centuries, and heard the strains / Of Sydney’s, nay, perchance, of Surry’s reed” (I. 323-325). Mason acknowledges the oaks as symbols of historical continuity and guardians of Albion’s liberty but concedes that the variety of the landscape demand their removal: “Thy axe must do its office. Cruel task, / Yet needful. Trust me, tho’ I bid thee strike, / Reluctantly I bid thee: for my soul” (I. 332-334). For Mason, this transformation from authoritarian avenues to scattered, organic groups of trees represents a shift away from arbitrary monarchy to constitutional monarchy: “That haunt yon antient Vista? Pity, sure, / Will spare the long cathedral isle of shade / In which they sojourn; Taste were sacrilege, / If, lifting there the axe, it dar’d invade” (I. 319-322). Even so, Mason also urges a restrained approach to create variety: to preserve a few by planting the oak saplings “discreetly,” allowing some ancient oaks to remain as dignified patriarchs that anchor the new landscape and continue to lend it grandeur, history, and nostalgic resonance:

⁷³ Keith Vivian Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 199.

⁷⁴ Bullington, “Strangers Among Us,” 40.

And try by saplings tall, discreetly plac'd
 Before, between, behind, in scatter'd groups,
 To break th' obdurate line. So may'st thou save
 A chosen few; and yet, alas, but few
 Of these, the old protectors of the plain.
 Yet shall these few give to thy opening lawn
 That shadowy pomp, which only they can give;
 For parted now, in patriarchal pride,
 Each tree becomes the father of a tribe;
 And, o'er the stripling foliage, rising round,
 Towers with parental dignity supreme. (I. 337-347)

This idea of variety with restrictions recurs in Mason's essay on flower gardening. As Bending summarizes, Mason proposes a method of trinal combinations grounded in what he calls a "natural and picturesque principle." Mason suggests that gardeners should select only the brightest, hardiest native flowers, grouping them by the three primary colors, with yellow at the center flanked by blue and red, and extending this pattern to all derived hues. Each trio is composed of plants of uniform height, flowering simultaneously and for the same duration, and the trios themselves are sequenced so that as one set fades, the next emerges in bloom. The result, in Mason's words, is "a succession of living Bouquets"—a garden of continuous transformation yet governed by a rigorous order.⁷⁵ Bending notes Mason's acknowledgment that "such an arrangement of Flowers will exclude many sorts, and consequently abridge that variety," but stresses that, for Mason, "variety without any restriction from Rule, produces confusion rather than ornament."⁷⁶ Mason's scheme of trinal combinations resonates with his poetic effort to disrupt the oak's strict linearity in *The English Garden*: in both cases, he embraces variety that is carefully bounded by order. In this respect, he sets himself apart from Chambers, whose approach to variety depends on psychological

⁷⁵ Stephen Bending, "William Mason's 'An Essay on the Arrangement of Flowers in Pleasure-Grounds,'" *The Journal of Garden History* 9, no. 4 (1989): 217.

⁷⁶ Bending, "William Mason," 220.

stimulation—a method Mason regards as arbitrary and excessive.

Mason's idea of variety with restrictions enables paradoxical harmony that preserves native nature while embracing exotic plants. In Book IV, Mason casts Alcander's garden as a realm where plants shed their native origins and are transplanted into England as if returning home. This constructs a contradictory aesthetics that appears to challenge the cultural originality championed in Book I, yet simultaneously reflects the geographical compression and cosmopolitanism integral to Britain's emerging imperial identity. Book IV unfolds in the garden of Alcander, who rescues and falls in love with Nerina, a shipwreck survivor. However, Nerina rejects his advances, remaining loyal to a prior commitment to Cleon, a man promised to her by her father. When Cleon unexpectedly arrives at Alcander's estate, Nerina is quickly overwhelmed by the shock of his presence, the terror for her father's safety and the suppressed love for Alcander, and dies. Cleon then discloses that Nerina's father was killed by British troops during the American colonial war. Cleon's revelation converts what looks like a private love triangle into a wound inflicted by political violence. Alcander, heartbroken, mourns Nerina until his own death. The garden of Alcander thus becomes both a personal memorial to his lost love, Nerina, and as Samuel Smith suggests, "a loose allegory of the relationship between Britain and America and the possibility of recreating a working union between the two."⁷⁷ Scholars widely agree that the American War significantly influenced Mason's portrayal of gardening in *The English Garden*, resulting in a striking disparity between Book I and Book IV.⁷⁸ Smith argues that while Book I emphasizes gardening as a national art, in Book IV Mason's focus shifts dramatically. His pro-American politics, which became increasingly oppositional as the war progressed, culminated in a sentimental narrative supporting America.⁷⁹ Gardening takes a backseat to political concerns in Book IV, reflecting Mason's evolving view of the relationship between aesthetics and politics amidst the

⁷⁷ Samuel Peter Smith, "William Mason: Nature and The English Garden, 1750-1785" (PhD diss., University of York, 2014), 142.

⁷⁸ Joan Elizabeth Addison, "William Mason: A Study" (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2011): 129-137; Bending, "Plants in Culture," 139-40; Smith, "William Mason," 23.

⁷⁹ Smith, "William Mason," 23.

shifting political climate of the 1770s, particularly following the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Nevertheless, Bending also emphasizes that the pressing concerns of political discourse in Book IV do not reduce plants to a mere “sensual backdrop.” Instead, the “species and placement” of plants and flowers actively “signal the poem’s political intent.”⁸⁰ Drawing on the conventional reading of Book IV as fundamentally political and on Bending’s assertion that plants are active symbols rather than passive scenery, I argue that Mason employs the greenhouse to craft an imperial tale, juxtaposing native and exotic blooms that thrive together both inside and beyond the conservatory with the entangled dynamics of national identity and ecological imperialism.

Mason frames Alcander’s garden for Nerina as an ode to multi-naturalism, where every flower, whether thriving through “transplanting change” or blooming as “indigenous,” finds a place to flourish (IV. 211-212). He muses on the remarkable heterogeneity of the garden where different flowers share a single stem: “her Lover’s Genius form’d / A glittering Fane, where rare and alien plants / Might safely flourish; where the citron sweet, / And fragrant Orange, rich in fruit and flowers, / Might hang their silver stars, their golden globes, / On the same odorous stem” (IV. 217-220). Here, Mason’s metaphorical naturalization of exotic plants echoes Henry Jones’s *Kew Garden* (1767), in which Jones describes Kew as a place that “Through different climates measures back her way, / Where every stranger finds his native home, / And blooms as if beneath parental skies.”⁸¹ As Bewell observes, Jones’s depiction of Kew frames nature as fundamentally composed of foreign plants brought from across the globe. *Kew Garden*, in this sense, uses these plants to envision a new model of national belonging, presenting nature as naturalized through processes of immigration and acclimatization.⁸² Jill Casid notes that Erasmus Darwin’s poem “Loves of the Plants” uses the Linnaean sexual system and the late-eighteenth-century fascination with plant crossbreeding to eroticize botanical life. Casid argues that by assembling plants from

⁸⁰ Bending, “Plants in Culture,” 140.

⁸¹ Henry Jones, *Kew Garden, a Poem in Two Cantos* (London: Printed by J. Browne for J. Dodsley, 1767), 19.

⁸² Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 74-75.

Britain and its colonies into one poetic landscape, the poem casts the British empire as “a global botanical garden” where crossbreeding experiments and “torrid romances,” particularly “sexual practices disavowed at home,” can be imagined and played out.⁸³ In this sense, Darwin’s poem domesticates global flora into a unified, eroticized imperial landscape that both celebrates botanical curiosity and projects imperial desires onto colonial space. This discourse of “plant hybridization” in the eighteenth century, as Casid argues, framed the alteration of nature as “necessary, natural, and immutable.” It serves as an analogy for controlling the perceived mixing of different human races by shifting the focus from human intermarriage to the hybridization of plants and landscapes. The conception of intermixed nature, in this sense, as Casid puts it, is “a discourse of ‘race’.” The intermingling of plants thus represents a way to manage and reinforce colonial control.⁸⁴

Mason’s conception of this new hybrid nature features a reimagined role for science in the global distribution of natural resources. He muses on the scientific technology that makes this transformation possible, particularly the glasshouse, which enables tropical plants to thrive in England:

Glass rooft the whole, and sidelong to the South,
 ‘Twixt ev’ry fluted column, lightly rear’d
 Its wall pellucid. All within was day,
 Was genial Summer’s day, for secret stoves
 Thro’ all the pile solstitial warmth convey’d. (IV. 227-231)

Mason’s greenhouse, with its transparent walls and “secret stoves” creating an illusion of perpetual summer, metaphorically dissolves the boundary between inside and outside and conceals the labor, technology, and colonial networks that sustain tropical plants in the English garden. By presenting itself as a self-contained natural microcosm, the greenhouse functions as an imperial heterotopia in which exotic flora seems naturally integrated into the English landscape, rather than a product of artifice. According to

⁸³ Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 2.

⁸⁴ Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 15.

Deidre Shauna Lynch, eighteenth-century horticulturalists, influenced by Carl Linnaeus and John Locke, believed that a plant's seasonal behavior could be shaped by its "acquired habits," suggesting that transplants from other climates could adapt to English weather through cultivation practices.⁸⁵ The greenhouse that forces plants into premature bloom or unseasonal flourishing, as a result, creates a hybrid nature where distinctions that define the plants' cultural and geographical origins are erased. Mason, like his contemporaries, adopts an imperial narrative of the greenhouse to present Alcander's garden as a microcosm of the empire that receives botanical treasures from across the world:

[...] That bright space
 Guarded the spicy tribes from Afric's shore,
 Or Ind, or Araby, Sabaeen plants
 Weeping with nard, and balsam. In the midst
 A Statue stood, the work of Attic art;
 Its thin light drapery, cast in fluid folds. (IV. 233-238)

Mason presents an image of ecological imperialism, where rare plants from Africa, India, and the Middle East—along with resinous substances like nard and balsam, valued for their medicinal and ornamental properties—are collected and brought back to England. The hybridity of exotic plants ushers in a novel imperial nature that serves the tastes and interests of the British Empire. As Bullington contends, Mason tells an imperial fiction where "plants 'belong' not where they grow naturally, but where they aesthetically and horticulturally work best."⁸⁶ Significantly, at the heart of Alcander's glasshouse, where the exotic plants are transplanted and naturalized, stands the statue of Nerina, embodying Britannia and symbolizing Britain's central plants in a global community of plants. The greenhouse is depicted as a sacred space, a "Fane," or temple where Nerina is honored through the mingling of floral and aromatic tributes from around the world: "Such was the Fane, and such the Deity / Who seem'd, with smile

⁸⁵ Deidre Shauna Lynch, "'Young Ladies Are Delicate Plants': Jane Austen and Greenhouse Romanticism," *ELH* 77, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 704.

⁸⁶ Bullington, "Strangers Among Us," 141.

auspicious, to inhale / That incense which a tributary world/ From all its regions round her altar breath'd" (IV. 252-255). Through its role as a vessel for floral tributes, the statue of Nerina metaphorically alludes to Britain's Orientalist fantasy of receiving global resources. It becomes emblematic of Britain's power to control and integrate a cosmopolitan nature into its identity.

Moreover, Mason instantiates a cosmopolitan ideal in the greenhouse's design which combines a neoclassical façade with a glasshouse that shelters exotic flora: "High on Ionic shafts he bad it tower / A proud Rotunda; to its sides conjoin'd / Two broad Piazzas in theatric curve, / Ending in equal porticos sublime" (IV. 223-226). Mason's glass house follows a grand neoclassical design, centered on a towering rotunda with a "theatric curve" reminiscent of the circular venues of ancient Greek and Roman amphitheaters. Ekaterina Heath and Jennifer Milam note that exotic plants such as pineapples and palms gained popularity as features in garden architecture in the eighteenth century, a trend shaped by the expansion of European empires and the rise of cosmopolitan ideals.⁸⁷ Structures like the Dunmore pavilion (1761), with its pineapple-shaped dome and integrated hothouses, serve as architectural analogs to Mason's glasshouse. As Heath and Milam observe, the Dunmore pavilion highlights "the centrality of pineapple hothouses" which safeguarded "rare and challenging crops." The neoclassical bottom section and pineapple dome symbolize the effort to "naturalize colonial transplantation" by "merging the colonies and the metropole in the single building."⁸⁸ Just like the pineapple dome of the Dunmore pavilion, which hybridizes neoclassical features, Alcander's garden cultivates exotic flora within a neoclassical architectural structure, creating a cosmopolitan space to naturalize in the English land. This fusion of neoclassical design with the cultivation of exotic plants presents a seemingly harmonious relationship between Britain and its colonies, framing imperial expansion as a civilizing and unifying endeavor. In this way, Mason constructs a cosmopolitan English garden that aligns with the empire's emerging identity as a global

⁸⁷ Ekaterina Heath and Jennifer Milam, "The Representation of Plants," in Milam, *A Cultural History of Plants*, 193.

⁸⁸ Heath and Milam, "The Representation of Plants," 193.

imperial power.

However, Mason further casts doubt on the very greenhouse that seems to make “Hesperian fables true” (IV. 461), as he recounts Nerina’s distressed response to this exotic shrine. When led into the greenhouse filled with native and exotic plants and crowned by her statue, Nerina greets it with a “sigh” and “starting tear” (IV. 257-258), asking why Alcander would erect such an ostentatious monument for “A Wretch’s image whom his Pride should scorn” (IV. 262), given her status as an exiled alien and rebel. Having requested only a humble “woodbine bower,” “Where I might sit and weep” (IV. 280-281), she finds the lavish greenhouse unbearable because it “Too strongly paints the passion which stern Fate / Forbids me to return” (IV. 286-287). Nerina’s reluctance reveals how the greenhouse’s imperial narrative of cosmopolitan nature meets resistance from those who have suffered exile and loss. For Nerina, the greenhouse becomes a reminder of displacement rather than a consolation. By dramatizing the tension between Alcander’s pride in the greenhouse as an embodiment of a cosmopolitan garden and Nerina’s deep sense of displacement, Mason challenges the fantasy of botanical dominion and global display. In this sense, the fragile imperial narrative embodied by the greenhouse reveals that, in Mason’s view, true variety in garden design must be restrained by a recognition of the autonomy of both nature and its inhabitants, tempering the expansive ambitions of empire.

Sir Joseph Banks and the Introduction of *Moutan*, the Tree Peony: Plant Agency and Transnational Networks

The mingling of native and exotic flora in conservatories and glasshouses is imagined by both Chambers and Mason as emblematic of an emerging cosmopolitan nature that privileges variety and the transnational circulation of plant life. For Chambers, the sensory experiments of Chinese gardening—its cultivation of variety through exotic plants—foster a hybrid, cosmopolitan abundance. The conservatory therefore becomes a site of cultural adaptation, where transplanted species enrich English aesthetics and contribute to forming a diasporic, globalized nature. While Mason, by contrast, endorses a tempered, patriotic variety, one that is only celebrated when it affirms native

Englishness and constitutional liberty, he acknowledges that this very variety remains entangled with the imperial networks of plant movement. For both Chambers and Mason, botanical variety is not only an aesthetic preference but also a metaphor for global contact: transplanting and plant exchange make the English garden a testing ground where taste, national identity and imperial authority continually are negotiated and contested. Where Chambers and Mason cast plant diversity as a symbol of transnational circulation and contested national identity, Sir Joseph Banks's collection and cultivation of Chinese plants reveal how those circulations were actually enacted through the agency of the plants themselves, the tradition of Chinese gardening practice, and the involvement of Cantonese commercial intermediaries.

Banks gathered an enormous number of plant specimens from places such as Brazil, Tierra del Fuego, the South Pacific, New Zealand and the east coast of Australia. Most of Banks's exotic plant collection was relocated to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, where, as director, Banks leveraged his connections and networks to transform Kew into a hub of cultivating and experimenting with plants from around the globe. Although botanic gardens were originally established in the early sixteenth century for the study of *materia medica*, by the late eighteenth century, they had expanded worldwide and evolved into key sites of botanical exchange, serving colonial needs by facilitating plant collection, exportation, and naturalization of exotic species. With notable centers in Cape Town, Calcutta, Jamaica, and others, botanic gardens became pivotal in global plant transfer.⁸⁹ Kew Gardens, as John Gascoigne notes, under the directorship of Banks, "became virtually an institute for economic botany and it was there that plants that were considered to be potential sources of additional income for the British Empire could be cultivated and re-distributed."⁹⁰ Gascoigne's observation reveals how Banks reconfigured Kew from a scientific garden into a tool of economic imperialism, turning botanical diversity into commodified resources deployed to expand Britain's wealth, resources and global influence. This chapter, however,

⁸⁹ Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 71.

⁹⁰ John Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the Uses of Science in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 130.

complicates that narrative of Eurocentric botanical conquest by spotlighting the material agency of the Chinese tree peony, *moutan* (牡丹) and the local expertise that enabled its transplantation and naturalization in Britain. In this case study, Banks's successful introduction of *moutan* peonies is rediscovered as inseparable from his engagement with Chinese cultivation practices and his connection with Hong merchants. By centering both the plant's agency and the labor of Chinese go-betweens, Banks's botanical activity emerges as part of a transnational network in which the *moutan* peony was not merely acquired but co-authored. Its introduction to Britain reveals not only an assimilated or domesticated Chinese nature, but also an English one reimagined—a nature shaped by reciprocal engagement and hybridity.

Unlike the cultivation of exotic plants envisioned by Chambers and Mason, which is restricted to enclosed spaces like greenhouses, Banks aspires to cultivate Chinese plants “in the open air.” When Banks sent William Kerr to China as a botanical collector in 1803, he instructed Kerr that:

you will carefully state all such circumstances relative to the Plants you send home as are likely to occur be useful in their future cultivations, the names of the Countries from where they have been bought, the nature as far as you can deem it of the climates in which they naturally [*sic*] Grow, the Soil that best suits them [...] The Northern & even the Midland Countries of China no doubt produce many Plants that may be Cultivated here in the open air, as Tea & the Saphora Japonica & the Ailanthus - now are, Plants of this description are on all accounts of the utmost value & should be preferred to all others.⁹¹

Banks's emphasis on documenting the environmental and cultural contexts of plants renders them mobile repositories of knowledge, whose successful relocation and cultivation in Britain depend on reproducible horticultural expertise. Banks's aim was not simply to acquire greenhouse curiosities for sheltered display or aesthetic

⁹¹ Joseph Banks, *Draft Instructions Received by William Kerr from Banks, 18 April 1803*, SAFE/Banks Papers, Series 20, Item 34, Page 3-4, 6, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/document/draft-instructions-received-william-kerr-banks-18-april-1803-series-2034>.

experiments, but to identify Chinese plants capable of thriving outdoors in Britain—transplanted species that could be permanently integrated into British landscapes and economies. As Chang observes, the “cultivation of exotic plants in open ground,” distinct from cultivation in the “green-house and conservatory” that aims to showcase the personal collections and anticipates later national efforts to assert control over global plant specimens, is “a reciprocal and engaged process only partly explained by such narratives of static preservation and display.”⁹² During this process, the homologies of cultivation practices between English and Chinese gardening are emphasized, presenting China not merely as a geographical origin deprived of its cultural significance but as a model of exemplary practice. Banks’s specific focus on plants from northern and midland China—regions whose climates are similar to that of Britain—signals a commitment to ecological integration that requires plants to adapt to English soils, seasons, and horticultural practice. Such integration demanded sustained, reciprocal labor in which collectors, gardeners, nurserymen, together with the plants themselves, engaged in an iterative process of observation, experiment, and adjustment. The result was not a unilateral act of botanical acquisition, but collective production of practical knowledge and labor that enabled Chinese species to be adapted and naturalized within British nature and culture.

Banks’s instructions for Kerr’s botanical expedition to China extend beyond guidance on plant collection itself, demonstrating a keen interest in Chinese horticultural expertise. He specifically urges Kerr to observe and document Chinese cultivation practices:

You are also to procure as far as you are able from the Chinese a knowledge of the manner in which the plants rendered dwarf by their Gardiners [*sic*] are managed [...] particularly in the case of the Bamboo...you are also carefully to notice the manner in which the Flat Peach the species of Dyerspy called in China Fowls heart, the odoratifinia & the Calycanthus are managed by the Chinese. [...] You are also to make use of every opportunity [...] of observing

⁹² Chang, “Chinese Flowers,” 15.

the manner in which the Chinese Cultivate The usual fruits of the Earth: whether they use the drill, the Broadcast or the Dibling in what manner & in what quantity.⁹³

By asking Kerr to secure Chinese gardeners' skills for dwarfing plants, flat-peach care, and sowing, Banks acknowledges that horticultural success depends on transferred horticultural knowledge as much as on transplanted plants. Although, as Sarah Easterby-Smith suggests, almost all European states highly valued the collection of new plants and sought to transfer botanical knowledge to support travel, trade, and empire expansion during the long eighteenth century,⁹⁴ Chang reminds us that "ethnographic details" were largely absent in "entries of exotics sourced from other geographies."⁹⁵ This absence reflects a prevailing horticultural discourse that emphasized the scientific and utilitarian aspects of plants—focusing on physical characteristics and economic value—while overlooking culturally specific information about their origins, cultivation practices, and the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they were embedded. Chinese exotic flora, however, as Chang observes, particularly in the example of *moutan*, a tree peony, flourished in cultivation while maintaining its distinctive "foreign mark," marking a notable exception.⁹⁶ Chang stresses that *moutan* was prized in China as a product of a "pre-established Chinese discourse of cultivation," and that British horticulturists often encountered it as a cultivated, mediated object rather than a wild species.⁹⁷ As Chang notices, celebrated in Jesuit writings for their symbolic representation of pride and glory in Chinese culture, *moutan* peonies were highly sought after by influential collectors like Banks, who ultimately introduced tree peonies to England around 1790.⁹⁸ In this sense, even Banks's interest in collecting *moutan* peonies was excited by Chinese traditions of cultivation.

Banks's appreciation of Chinese horticultural practices is evident in his interest in Chinese cultivation of "dwarfed" plants, the potted plants typical of Canton merchants'

⁹³ Banks, *Draft Instructions*, 4-5.

⁹⁴ Sarah Easterby-Smith, "Trade and Exploration," in Milam, *A Cultural History of Plants*, 70.

⁹⁵ Chang, "Chinese Flowers," 16.

⁹⁶ Chang, "Chinese Flowers," 12.

⁹⁷ Chang, "Chinese Flowers," 12-13.

⁹⁸ Chang, "Chinese Flowers," 13.

gardens, where plants were grown as what Josepha Richard and Jan Woudstra describe as “disposable items of consumption.” This commercial tradition of plant cultivation, as Richard and Woudstra observe, was absent in most other countries where British naturalists sought new species. The prevalence of potted plants in Canton nurseries significantly facilitated the work of British naturalists, as the plants were pre-conditioned for transport, simplifying their collection and study.⁹⁹ Banks, fully recognizing the convenience of cultivating potted plants in Canton, instructs Kerr to maintain a ready supply for quick dispatch: “you must always have some of Every sort Establishd, either in Boxes of a Proper Size & shape for the Plant Cabbin that will be created or in Large Chinese Pots, ready to be shipd on the shortest notice.”¹⁰⁰ Banks’s attention to Chinese cultural, social, and economic horticultural practice reflects Chinese gardening’s unique influence and connection to British gardening in the broader context of translational cultivation. From the moment *moutan* peonies reached Britain, British gardeners encountered them not as wild transplants but cultivated artifacts shaped by Chinese horticultural traditions. Their pre-existing cultivated status—visible in their expected form as potted plants, prescribed methods of care, and embedded cultural value—entailed that their identity was inseparable from Chinese gardening practice. Consequently, their incorporation into British life was never a straightforward act of botanical transfer, but an ongoing interplay of intercultural horticultural skills, aesthetics and representations that kept the *moutan* peony materially and symbolically tied to its cultivated Chinese origins.

That ongoing horticultural exchange was made possible by the contributions of Chinese “go-betweens,” including an extensive network of Hong merchants, China Trade painters, and nurserymen. Scholars have recognized that it was this intricate web of commercial intermediaries that underpinned Banks’s ambitious project to collect and cultivate Chinese plants like *moutan* peonies.¹⁰¹ The successful introduction of *moutan*

⁹⁹ Josepha Richard and Jan Woudstra, “‘Thoroughly Chinese’: Revealing The Plants of The Hong Merchants’ Gardens Through John Bradby Blake’s Paintings,” *Curtis’s Botanical Magazine* 34, no. 4 (December 2017): 482.

¹⁰⁰ Banks, *Draft Instructions*, 7.

¹⁰¹ Fa-ti Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire, and Cultural Encounter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jordan Goodman and Charles Jarvis, “The John

peonies into Britain, as Fa-ti Fan has shown, demonstrates how this network of Canton trade provided Britons with access to Chinese plants. Western visitors to Canton had the opportunity to explore the Hong merchants' gardens in Honam, which showcased rare plants such as *moutan* peonies. Through the East India Company, the Duncan brothers, James Main and William Kerr accessed these gardens and established relationships with Hong merchants such as Puankequa II. Puankequa II, in turn, engaged in the exchange of rare plants with their correspondents and patrons like Banks, sending, among other specimens, "many pots of the finest moutans."¹⁰² As Fan argues, every element of this plant collection project, including "the men, the ships, the networks," was closely interconnected with the China trade, in which the Chinese actively contributed to the global circulation of plants and flowers.¹⁰³ Josepha Richard, in her research on John Bradby Blake's collection of Chinese plant drawings in the 1770s, highlights the critical role of individual Chinese "go-betweens" in his botanical endeavors. Among them was painter Mak Sau, who depicted Chinese plants with scientific precision, and translator Whang At Tong, who advised Captain Blake on the names and functions of Chinese plants.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Whang At Tong is believed to have brought Blake's botanical paintings to London in 1773,¹⁰⁵ where they were put to practical use by Banks, who later utilized these paintings to guide his collectors in Canton to identify and acquire Chinese plants.¹⁰⁶ As Kitson highlights, Whang, as one of the very few Chinese visitors to England in the 1770s, was received by the elite cultural circles he engaged with "respect, sympathy, and affection."¹⁰⁷ David Clarke's research on eighteenth-century Chinese visitors to Britain reveals that, as rare unofficial

Bradby Blake Drawings in the Natural History Museum, London: Joseph Banks Puts Them to Work," *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* 34, no. 4 (December 2017): 251-275; Josepha Richard, "Collecting Chinese Flora: Eighteenth- to Nineteenth-Century Sino-British Scientific and Cultural Exchanges as Seen through British Collections of China Trade Botanical Paintings," *Ming Qing Yanjiu* 24, no. 2 (2020): 209-244; Richard and Woudstra, "Thoroughly Chinese," 475-497.

¹⁰² Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China*, 34.

¹⁰³ Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China*, 39.

¹⁰⁴ Richard, "Collecting Chinese Flora," 211-218; 224.

¹⁰⁵ Richard, "Collecting Chinese Flora," 226.

¹⁰⁶ Goodman and Jarvis, "The John Bradby Blake Drawings," 251-275.

¹⁰⁷ Peter J. Kitson, "'The Kindness of My Friends in England': Chinese Visitors to Britain in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries and Discourses of Friendship and Estrangement," *European Romantic Review* 27, no. 1 (February 2016): 63.

cultural ambassadors, these individuals like Whang contributed uniquely to the transfer and production of artistic and intellectual knowledge about China, shaping Western understanding of Chinese culture through personal interactions.¹⁰⁸ Kitson shows that Whang provided Josiah Wedgwood with valuable insights into Chinese ceramic manufacturing and was even invited by Sir William Jones, the leading British Orientalist of the era, to collaborate on a research network aimed at exchanging knowledge about Chinese culture between Canton and Calcutta. Jones also sought Whang's assistance in translating the *Shijing (Classic of Poetry)*, though Whang ultimately declined.¹⁰⁹ According to Kitson, Whang's connection with Jones played a significant role in the development of what he terms Romantic Sinology.¹¹⁰ Whang's contribution to British botanical knowledge of China, as Clarke notes, is evident in his inscriptions of Chinese plant names.¹¹¹ Richard also suggests it is highly likely that he was received by Banks during his visit to the Royal Society in 1775.¹¹² Although the specific knowledge Whang shared with Banks remains unclear, it is certain that many leading intellectuals of the time regarded him as a valuable repository of Chinese expertise. His botanical knowledge, in particular, would undoubtedly have been of great interest to Banks. These amicable and polite exchanges, as Kitson contends, reflect a broader "eighteenth-century discourse of civil rationality and "cosmopolitan assimilation"—an approach that is distinct from the Romantic racialism that emerged later in the nineteenth century, driven by British colonial expansion.¹¹³ Situating Banks's ambitious project of collecting Chinese plants alongside his network with local Chinese like Whang is to acknowledge the engaged, reciprocal process of cultural encounters, which complicates a straightforward Orientalist interpretation of the importation of exotic Chinese plants into Britain.

¹⁰⁸ David Clarke, "Chinese Visitors to 18th Century Britain and Their Contribution to its Cultural and Intellectual Life," *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* 34, no. 4 (2017): 498-521.

¹⁰⁹ Kitson, "The Kindness," 61-63; Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*, 48-52.

¹¹⁰ Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*, 45-72.

¹¹¹ Clarke, "Chinese Visitors," 514.

¹¹² Richard, "Collecting Chinese Flora," 226.

¹¹³ Kitson, "The Kindness," 67.

A letter from Whang to Banks in 1796, written after he had returned to China following his visit to England, offers a fascinating glimpse into the continued and cooperative relationship between them:

Since my Return to my native country I was honored with your kind Letter [...] as a Proof of my gratitude I have deliverd to the Care of Mr Browne who returns to England on the Northumberland the following Articles I beg the faver of your Acceptance of

1 Sett of Books of the History of China

1 Box of tea which has 3 Teas

3 Box[es] of Chulan Teas are packd in One Chest directed to your [*sic*] except the Books two Folds of Nankeen Flowers which the Chines[e] Call Moun Tane Far [...]

As I am Sealed at Canton and Living with a hong merchant by Name Chune Qua Nankeen Man and one of the Companys Merchant[s]—Shall be very happy to recieve [*sic*] your Commands [...]¹¹⁴

Although Banks's original letter to Whang is no longer extant, Whang's acknowledgment of his kindness suggests that Banks may have intended to solidify their friendship through a shared project, which was likely centered on the exchange of plants and botanical knowledge. Whang's explicit reference to "Moun Tane Far" (*moutan* peonies) resonates with the botanical and intellectual exchange at the heart of their relationship. Whang's letter, with its carefully crafted rhetoric of politeness, reveals a reciprocal enthusiasm that was essential to the success of transnational scientific networks. It also indicates a subtle negotiation of agency. While Whang adopts the conventions of polite gratitude, his actions—carefully curating the items to be sent, explicitly listing them, and invoking his strategic ties in Canton—indicate his active participation in shaping the exchange. In particular, Whang's mention of his living arrangements in Canton and his association with a prominent Hong merchant, Chune Qua, situates Whang within the broader mercantile networks of the time,

¹¹⁴ Neil Chambers, ed., *The Indian and Pacific Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks, 1768-1820* (London: Routledge, 2021), 4:391.

suggesting his strategic position as a mediator of both material and intellectual exchange. By offering to “recieve your Commands,” Whang opens the door to further collaboration, signaling his willingness to leverage his local connections for the benefit of Banks’s botanical endeavors. According to Goodman and Jarvis’s research, later, when Banks’s plant collector William Kerr arrived in Canton in 1803, Whang, presumably still maintaining his connection with Banks and honoring his commitment to facilitating exchanges, may have assisted Kerr in finding a Chinese artist to create drawings of Chinese plants.¹¹⁵ The interactions between the explorer Joseph Banks, the sinologist and botanist John Blake, and the Chinese merchant and naturalist Whang At Tong exemplify the intricate interplay of scientific inquiry, commerce, and cross-cultural engagement that defined botanical exploration and knowledge circulation of the long eighteenth century.

When *moutan* peonies were finally brought back to Britain from Canton through the efforts of Banks, his botanical collectors, and Chinese intermediaries in the late eighteenth century, their arrival was not a single moment of botanical discovery but the culmination of a long circuit of Chinese cultivation practice, Canton trade and cultural representations. As Chang notices, the acquisition of the tree peony as “a living specimen was long anticipated by its arrival as a representation in text and on decorated trade goods.”¹¹⁶ In other words, the living *moutan* peonies came to Britain already framed by images, commercial networks, and gardening practices that had produced their fame in China. Roslyn L. Hammers traces how *moutan* peonies rose, between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, from a prized botanical curiosity into a dominant cultural symbol in Chinese art and literature. Celebrated across ceramics, textiles, painting, poetry, and prose, the peony’s material cultivation, visual representation, and poetic imagination worked together to endow it with enduring associations of lush bloom, prosperity and nobility.¹¹⁷ Those cultural identities traveled with the plant, so

¹¹⁵ Goodman and Jarvis, “The John Bradby Blake Drawings,” 269-271.

¹¹⁶ Chang, “Chinese Flowers,” 12.

¹¹⁷ Roslyn L. Hammers, “The Peony in Paintings and Verse in China from the Eighth to Thirteenth Centuries,” in *Passion for Peonies: Celebrating the Culture and Conservation of Nichols Arboretum’s Beloved Flower*, ed. David Michener and Robert B. Grese (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 133-142.

British gardeners and consumers encountered a specimen already invested with specific aesthetic and social expectations. Chang demonstrates that British horticultural discourse readily adopted and amplified this halo of rarity and luxury. As Chang notes, in the 1809 issue of William Curtis's *Botanical Magazine*, John Sim, its editor, compares the admiration for *moutan* peonies to the famous European tulip craze, referring to repeated reports that certain *moutan* varieties were "sold in China for a hundred ounces of gold."¹¹⁸ Sim's descriptions foreground the plant's commercial value and reinforce its status as an exotic luxury within familiar European economic imaginaries. Chang further points out that this initial aura of exclusivity did not remain unchanged. As the peony entered British markets, it moved from the domain of elite collectors into broader circulation. According to Chang's research, prices fell in the early nineteenth century, potted exotics became more widely available to the middle class, and the peony's image was reproduced across porcelain, textiles, and botanical plates.¹¹⁹ These reproductions of *moutan* peonies simplified a plant rich in imperial, social and literary meanings to a small set of repeatable, decorative motifs that manufacturers could mass-produce on chinoiserie objects. Robert Finlay's work helps explain this pictorial flattening: symbols like the lotus, peony, and winter-flowering plum—once tied to ideas of spiritual attainment, female sexuality, and dynastic loyalty—were reduced in European culture to quaint embellishments. Chinoiserie designs, particularly those with floral elements, served as "filters that reduced the complexity of Chinese visual culture to stereotyped constituents, thereby rendering it picturesque and accessible rather than potent and enigmatic." Finlay argues that this cultural encounter ultimately resulted in "a creative imagining of China," generating "new decorative patterns with international currency." While shaped by mutual misunderstanding, these exchanges brought cultures closer together.¹²⁰ The introduction of the *moutan* peony into Britain therefore demonstrates a reciprocal process: it arrived materially and symbolically bound to Chinese gardening practice and

¹¹⁸ Chang, "Chinese Flowers," 15-16.

¹¹⁹ Chang, "Chinese Flowers," 17-18.

¹²⁰ Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 301.

cultural prestige, yet its mass reproduction and commercialization in Britain transformed that prestige into an assimilable aesthetic and commodity.

The late-eighteenth-century English garden thus emerged as not a single, stable emblem of national identity but a contested and porous arena where botanical variety tested and remade boundaries of native and exotic. Chambers's celebration of Chinese gardening advances a cultural adaptation in which novelty and transplanted "peculiarities" become ways of rethinking English taste within a cosmopolitan nature. Mason, while worrying that excessive novelty could threaten constitutional liberty, paradoxically deploys the same botanical exchange to produce a tempered variety that affirms national identity. That paradox, a patriotic aesthetic sustained by global movement of plants, exposes how Englishness was co-produced with an emerging cosmopolitan nature. Bank's introduction of the *moutan* peony anchors these literary tensions in material networks. The peony's passage to Britain demonstrates that botanical transfer was not unilateral botanical hunting but a negotiated, co-created process. Chinese traditions of cultivation, Hong merchants' commercial network, and the plants' own agency all reshaped how these exotics were received, cultivated and commodified in Britain. Chambers, Mason and Banks all reframe the English garden as a testing ground where aesthetic theory, national identity and imperial practice intersect and where the definition of nature itself is remade.

Conclusion

Reciprocal Orientalism: Self-Orientalizing Others and the Co-Constitution of Englishness

In his reconsideration of Orientalism in modern European culture, J. J. Clarke challenges the idea that Orientalism would simply “fade into history” as an anachronistic “by-product” of modernity.¹ Rather than vanishing with the decline of European imperial power, Clarke argues, Orientalism has been transformed and in many respects made more vital.² He suggests that the continuing vitality of Orientalism lies in the fact that “orientalism can be seen to have fostered from the start a pluralistic outlook and to have encouraged the recognition of the possibility of alternative ways of thinking, valuing, and acting.” Clarke reads Orientalism as a bridge of encounter, an expression of genuine intellectual curiosity that confronted Western civilization with an alternative rationality. Drawing on sociologists such as Anthony Giddens’s account of cultural globalization, Clarke locates this process within a modernity that gives rise to “multiple overlapping identities” and “new forms of interdependence.”³ The self, therefore, as Clarke contends, is “not given by nature but constructed, not stable and permanent but painfully fractured.”⁴ Mapping Clarke’s account of Orientalism and modernity onto my argument—restoring China as a co-constitutive partner in the making of Englishness through readings of eighteenth-century English literary representations of things Chinese—shows that Orientalism in the eighteenth century functioned as a dynamic site of cultural encounter and self-definition. This reciprocal relationship reveals that Orientalism, even in its early modern manifestations, embodied a pluralistic impulse through which British engagements with Chinese culture exposed the permeability of national and intellectual boundaries, allowing the British to imagine

¹ J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: the Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), 210.

² Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 211.

³ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 210.

⁴ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 213.

and negotiate their own identity in relation to an alternative civilization.

This thesis challenges narratives of unilateral European exceptionalism by tracing how the circulation of things Chinese and Chinese knowledge transformed and shaped Englishness amid tensions between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Beginning with a re-examination of the feminization of Chinese porcelain, it foregrounds porcelain as a porous, plastic, and reworkable repository. Reading Joseph Addison's *Spectator* 37 (1711), Sarah Scott's *A Description of Millennium Hall* (1762), and Mary Delany's china closets and shellwork, Chapter 1 shows how English practices of mounting, juxtaposing porcelain with books, and female collecting turned Chinese porcelain into a site of epistemic and aesthetic negotiation, where taste, knowledge, and female authorship were performed, reimagined, and contested. Revisiting the familiar misogynist trope of Chinese porcelain sets the stage for a model of plastic, iterative interpretations of Chinese knowledge as it circulated into Britain, demonstrating how the social life of porcelain was continually reactivated, adapted, resisted, and hybridized in the making of English identity.

Reading representations of Chinese gift rituals in British travel literature extends the focus from material objects to a semiotic system of cultural exchange—rituals, protocols, and reciprocal obligations—that embodies power, civility, and national identity and thus becomes a testing ground for negotiating Englishness. John Bell, Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins, and Edward Page variously idealize, denounce, or reframe Chinese rituals of gift exchange to advance cosmopolitan visions of transcultural civility, or conversely, to shore up nascent nationalist claims. These diverse accounts reveal that nationalism and cosmopolitanism function not as opposing forces but as mutually dependent strategies to forge an unstable Englishness. Furthermore, Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* (1762) provides a literary experiment in a cosmopolitan ideal that shapes a reciprocal Sino-British exchange. By using a Confucian narrator, one shaped by missionary sources, editorial framing, and the commercial periodical market, Goldsmith reveals how eighteenth-century Orientalism could open ethical and epistemic possibilities that affirmed cross-cultural convergence and enabled reciprocal mockery and critique while simultaneously

commodifying and flattening Chinese culture. Orientalist narrative and market forces together defined both the scope and the constraints of cosmopolitanism in the formation of English identity.

Finally, representations of Chinese garden aesthetic and exotic plants provoke debates over native nature, imperial mastery and the autonomy of the exotic. Close readings of Sir William Chambers's praise for Chinese gardening's aesthetic novelty in *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1773) and William Mason's patriotic insistence on a tempered variety in *The English Garden* (1772-1782) demonstrate how aesthetic theory, horticultural practice, and the plants' own agency together reconfigured ideas of nature and nation. The thesis closes with the story of Sir Joseph Banks's introduction of the *moutan* peony into Britain, foregrounding a negotiated, co-creative process in which Chinese go-betweens, transnational commercial networks and Chinese traditions of cultivation that enabled its transplantation and naturalization were essential to its new English life. Ultimately, the thesis demonstrates that eighteenth-century English identity was not stable or self-assertive but a hybrid, contested and fluid formation, co-constituted through ongoing encounter with things Chinese. Englishness emerged as continually fluctuating between cosmopolitan aspiration and nationalist anxiety by drawing on Chinese objects, rituals, aesthetics, and knowledge to perform taste, authority, and civility.

However, restoring China as a co-constitutive partner in Britain's formation of national identity does not imply an idealization of China or an exaggeration of its influence on English culture. Instead, it is a rejection of a single, monolithic Orientalist ideology by revealing pluralistic, plastic, competing formations of knowledge and representation. Srinivas Aravamudan's idea of Enlightenment Orientalism demonstrates how Orientalism's enduring intellectual vitality was enacted through narrative forms that resist teleological modernity. Aravamudan argues that oriental tales provided eighteenth-century readers with an affiliative, diachronic account of genre that disconnects narrative history from a single, linear story of modernity. For Aravamudan, Enlightenment Orientalism preserves an "oral," "parabolic," and "transcultural" way of narrative that resists the realist novel's "nationalist," "explanatory," and commodity-

driven impulses.⁵ As Aravamudan puts it, “Enlightenment Orientalism brings to life the conjectural, the counterfactual, the transcultural, and the cosmopolitan.”⁶ Where Aravamudan locates Enlightenment Orientalism’s resistance to the teleological narrative of modernity and the Saidian East-West binary in its transcultural narrative forms, James Watt situates that resistance in the agency of Eastern readers who selectively reinterpreted or reframed British culture and knowledge. Watt contends that the representations of British engagements with the East after the Seven Years’ War are best understood not as a unified discourse, but as a “plurality of British Orientalisms” that coexisted and competed.⁷ Watt examines the reception of James Justinian Morier’s *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824) to show that, while the novel can be read as Saidian Orientalist knowledge in service of empire, its Persian afterlife reveals an alternative reading that reclaims the novel to articulate local social realities and political aspirations. Mirza Habi Isfahani’s Persian translation, along with a 1906 Persian edition, allowed Iranian reformers during the constitutional revolution to appropriate the novel. Since the text mapped Iranian social life, activists could repurpose it as a vehicle for critique and for narrating their own material and political struggles.⁸ Watt emphasizes selective adoption and creative reinterpretation over passive assimilation, demonstrating how Eastern readers articulated alternative visions of modernity that disrupted any straightforward alignment of metropolitan instruction with metropolitan domination. Together, Aravamudan and Watt shift attention from a unidirectional model of imperial influence to a reciprocal process in which genre and readership foster distinct modernities through the re-examination of eighteenth-century Orientalism.

Restoring a reciprocal, dialogic, and pluralistic Orientalism opens up new possibilities for understanding cross-cultural exchange and challenges simplistic binaries. At the same time, it also acknowledges the ambivalent dynamics of self-

⁵ Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 246-248.

⁶ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 253.

⁷ James Watt, *British Orientalisms, 1759-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 264.

⁸ Watt, *British Orientalisms*, 263.

orientalization that accompany this cross-cultural process, through which Eastern actors may internalize and reproduce the very stereotypes and aesthetic fantasies that sustain the Orientalist imaginary. Chi-ming Yang sees self-orientalization as a strategic, ambivalent practice in which Chinese subjects who were long cast through Western representations recognize the artifice of those fantasies, and then transform them into a new, marketable form of authenticity—a manufactured “Chineseness” that can be reclaimed, displayed, and consumed. As Yang puts it, “Asia too participates in the self-orientalizing act of translating and reiterating the image of its commodified self.”⁹ Yang makes a case that the Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou’s 1998 production of Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Turandot* in Beijing shows how a European fantasy of China can be refashioned and marketed by Chinese participants.¹⁰ Yang observes that the character of Turandot, depicted as “inscrutable, effeminized, brutal yet fragile,” and the staged display of Chinese imperial power, together become “signs of Chineseness that circulate discursively and materially through performance.”¹¹ As a result, as Yang notices, “what was once an Orientalist fantasy becomes materialized through not only the suspension of history but also a saleable historical revisionism premised on China’s right to own its own representation.”¹² Things Chinese, in this sense, are not merely celebrated or recovered but are actively rewritten into a marketable narrative. Self-orientalization therefore carries a double dynamic: it can reclaim narrative agency and unsettle a simple West-East binary, yet it often does so by reproducing reductive exotic tropes, flattening historical complexity, and converting cultural heritage into a commodity. This process of self-orientalization particularly resonates with eighteenth-century British fascination with things Chinese, a period when China began to emerge as an active agent in claiming its own representation while simultaneously reinforcing the ornamental, feminized, and illegitimate images that already circulated in the English cultural imagination of China.

⁹ Chi-ming Yang, *Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century England, 1660-1760* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 188.

¹⁰ Yang, *Performing China*, 188-192.

¹¹ Yang, *Performing China*, 190.

¹² Yang, *Performing China*, 192.

The cultural imagination of lapdogs, whose biological origins remain uncertain and contested, exemplifies how English literary representations and Chinese acts of self-orientalization together shaped the lapdog and its porcelain figure as a commodified and ornamental emblem of “Chineseness.” Stephanie Howard-Smith demonstrates that eighteenth-century historians and writers offered competing origin stories of pug dogs. While many natural historians traced the breed to Europe, some writers attributed its lineage to China, giving the pug an oriental provenance.¹³ Despite their uncertain Chinese origin, lapdogs emerged as a familiar Orientalist trope of feminine fashion and frivolity through their repeated juxtaposition with Chinese porcelain in eighteenth-century literature and visual culture. In such representations, the two became interchangeable signs of female taste, resonating a common satirical tactic that feminized Chinese porcelain to undermine Chinese cultural authority. In Charles Molloy’s 1718 play *The Coquet; or, the English Chevalier*, two female characters—Mademoiselle Fantast, identified as “the Coquet” for her flirtatious and lively nature, and La Jupe, a servant in Monsieur Caprice’s household—engage in a conversation about love, marriage, and feminine desire. Fantast’s playful blurring of people, pets, and porcelain reveals the complex interplay of desire, consumption, and exoticism in eighteenth-century Britain:

Fan. Oh, *La Jupe*, I think a Husband a strange Creature. — Then to see a Couple fond, is a most odious Sight. For my part, if I were married I would never love my Husband, that’s certain; ’tis so *bourgeois*: And then, on the other side, the Creatures don’t know how to be civil to other Women till they begin to hate their own Wives.

La J. But don’t you think it possible you might fall in Love, Madam?

Fan. Oh, very possible. Nay, I always am in Love with one thing or other: But I can’t love more than one thing at once. There’s not room in a Woman’s Heart for more than one Object at a time. — A little while ago I was passionately

¹³ Stephanie Howard-Smith, “China-Pugs: The Global Circulation of Chinoiseries, Porcelain, and Lapdogs, 1660-1800,” in *Oriental Networks: Culture, Commerce, and Communication in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Bärbel Czennia and Greg Clingham (Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2020), 67.

in Love with my Parrot, now I begin to grow tir'd of that, I'd give any thing in the World for a Monkey; and if that should be so unfortunate as to grow out of Favour, as who can answer for one's Heart, perhaps, the next thing I should take a Fancy to, may be either a Lap-Dog, a Husband, or a piece of *China*.¹⁴

Fantast's flippant catalogue of loves from parrot, monkey, lapdog to a husband and Chinese porcelain turns affection into a mode of consumption, collapsing persons, animals, and objects into a single economy of taste. Yang reads Fantast's juxtaposition of diverse categories not as a comic whimsy, but as emblematic of a broader process of "dehumanizing the person while anthropomorphizing the animal." This representational rhetoric reveals the function of "exoticism within the context of British colonialism," where imperial culture translates racial and gendered others into decorative possessions, blurring distinctions between subjects and commodities.¹⁵ For Yang, the interchangeability of people and things, where persons become collectibles and objects are animated with emotional value, suggests "the intersectional construction of gender, race, class, and cultural identities and relations."¹⁶ While Yang interprets the collapse of human, lapdog and china as symptomatic of colonial commodification and the racialized logic of exoticism, Ingrid Tague foregrounds social satire and gender norms, taking the same juxtaposition as a sign of the "fickleness of female affection."¹⁷ Feminine desire is depicted as capricious and indiscriminate, and the lapdog's juxtaposition with china intensifies the feared slide from proper affection to absurd attachment. Together, Yang and Tague reveal that Molloy's scene turns lapdogs and china into interchangeable objects of female taste, an equivalence that allows the lapdog to function simultaneously as a satirical device that mocks women's caprice and as evidence of imperial, consumerist logics that commodify people, animals, and things.

¹⁴ Charles Molloy, *The Coquet: or, the English Chevalier* (London: Print for E. Curll, 1718), 30-31.

¹⁵ Chi-ming Yang, "Culture in Miniature: Toy Dogs and Object Life," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 25, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 152.

¹⁶ Yang, "Culture in Miniature," 153.

¹⁷ Ingrid H. Tague, *Animal Companions: Pets and Social Change in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2015), 108.

The interchangeability of lapdogs and Chinese porcelain as emblems of feminine taste and social folly, as Howard-Smith notices, represents a recurring trope that runs through eighteenth-century English literature. Across a wide range of texts, writers draw on their shared associations and material qualities to comment on fashion, femininity, and consumer culture.¹⁸ Pairing lapdogs with porcelain not only reiterates the eighteenth-century critiques of Chinese taste as superficial, frivolous and effeminate, but also constructs and naturalizes an Orientalized origin narrative of the lapdog, one that links feminine excess and exotic luxury to a broader discourse of cultural otherness and moral degeneration.

Chinese merchants and craftsmen, nevertheless, through their production of porcelain pug figures, also contributed to making the lapdog an Orientalized motif, folding the pug into the same set of illegitimate, feminine, and excessive semiotics of porcelain. David Howard and John Ayers note that while the living pugs originated in China, Chinese porcelain pugs were created specifically for export and were modeled on European prototypes provided to Chinese artisans.¹⁹ Their research shows that Chinese-produced porcelain pugs borrowed specific design elements from Meissen—the first European manufactory to produce hard-paste porcelain founded near Dresden in 1710—and even replicated Meissen’s crossed-swords mark on the underside.²⁰ By deliberately imitating Meissen models, Chinese-made pugs met English tastes for an established oriental fantasy while complicating the question of cultural authenticity. Once returned to Britain, these Chinese porcelain pugs helped authenticate the perceived oriental origin of lapdogs and further circulated the image of the lapdog already embedded in English cultural imagination. During this process, Chinese cultural authenticity was contested and commercialized. It was no longer a fixed relation to origins, but a strategic discourse and marketable construction that could be performed, claimed, rewritten, and consumed. In this sense, by adopting and adapting

¹⁸ Howard-Smith, “China-Pugs,” 73-76.

¹⁹ David Howard and John Ayers, *China for the West: Chinese Porcelain and Other Decorative Arts for Export Illustrated from the Mottahedeh Collection* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1978), 2:600.

²⁰ Howard and Ayers, *China for the West*, 2:600.

European models to establish a saleable image of porcelain pugs, Chinese craftsmen enacted a kind of self-orientalization that transformed European fantasy into a marketable emblem of “Chineseness.” This practice granted Chinese makers both representational agency and economic benefit, while at the same time reinforcing the very market dynamics that perpetuated reductive associations between lapdogs, porcelain, femininity, and consumer excess.

The self-orientalization of the lapdog reveals how the agency of the Oriental other and the commercial market that shaped eighteenth-century European imagination of China continues to resonate through contemporary Chinese cultural spectacles. A parallel emerges between eighteenth-century Chinese artisans’ self-orientalization, which manifested in their creation of export porcelain pugs tailored to English literary tastes, and Zhang’s 1998 staging of *Turandot*, which reinterpreted and commodified a Western fantasy of China, a practice Yang closely analyzes as self-orientalization. Echoing Clarke’s observation that globalization has not erased Orientalism but rather redistributed and redeployed it, Yang highlights self-orientalization to reveal how formerly represented societies now actively engage in, and profit from, the commodification of their own images.²¹ The process of self-orientalization illuminates the uneasy but pragmatic position of Eastern cultures, caught between collaboration and competition, economic dependence and cultural self-assertion, as they navigate Western cultural dominance. As Yang observes, such dynamics shed light on “the complicity of East and West in producing transnational spectacle” and “the nationalist revival of traditional customs” as intertwined responses to the uneven cultural homogenization brought about by globalization.²² Self-orientalization, in this sense, foregrounds cross-cultural encounters as multi-actor, transnational collaborations in which Chinese producers and Western markets collaborate to manufacture and sell a legible “Chineseness.”

Orientalism thus emerges not as a monolithic ideology but a pluralistic, contested formation in which literary forms, material circulation, cross-cultural agency, and

²¹ Yang, *Performing China*, 188-192.

²² Yang, *Performing China*, 190.

market dynamics co-produce the representation of the East. Repositioning China from the margins to the very center of English literary imagination reveals that the making of Englishness is inseparable from Sino-British cultural exchange. This is not to erase differences or to romanticize cross-cultural encounters but to acknowledge that cultural authority, consumer and aesthetic taste, and the agency of representation are co-constituted in contested contact zones, and that meanings of “Chineseness” and “Englishness” are transformed and shaped by multiple actors for multiple ends. Acknowledging this reciprocity opens up new possibilities for examining how national identity and the exotic are imagined and represented in eighteenth-century literature and for re-evaluating the contributions of non-European partners to intellectual and material knowledge.

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