

Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Imperialism: The Role of Aesthetics and *Chinoiserie* in  
Britain's Objectification and Extortion of Asia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries

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During the eighteenth century, the prominence of the British East India Company (EIC) transformed the way in which Britain interacted with “the East,” namely India and China. As global trade expanded, and the Company brought back more imported items from foreign places, British tastes and aesthetics inevitably changed as Britons encountered Asian styles and sensibilities. Plenty of other scholars, several of whom I will be in conversation with here, have theorized about the effects that these international interactions had on the British psyche—such as ideas of racial superiority, anxieties about sexuality, and fears of the Other as expressed in paintings and literature—but I posit that an underexplored area of inquiry is that of objects, particularly the popularity and production of *chinoiserie* in Britain during the eighteenth, and into the early nineteenth, century.

That is not to say there has not been any research on *chinoiserie*—on the contrary, Oliver Impey and Stacey Sloboda have written extensively on the topic—but I argue certain aesthetic and philosophical motivations that underpin the *chinoiserie* era and, in turn, the consequences of *chinoiserie*, have not been explored to the same extent. This phenomenon cannot be separated from the aesthetic precedents of the time, for conceptions of the beautiful, the picturesque, and, especially, the sublime provide explanations for the British compulsion to imitate and disseminate Asian art so profusely. Such a study reveals that *chinoiserie* was a response to fears rooted in people’s ideas of the sublime, as *chinoiserie* purposefully reasserts the distance between the object and the subject.

Briefly, I want to note the origins of this essay. As I walked through different art museums in Cambridge, London, Bath, and Glasgow, I noticed the obvious Asian influences on the furniture, ceramics, and fashion, often to such an extent that it seemed less like inspiration and more like appropriation. Even as the museum plaques provided me with some context, the

lack of content in regards to Asia's influence on the culture and literature of this period in the Cambridge Program left me feeling like there was a gap in relevant scholarship. Of course, in reality, that is not the case, and I also acknowledge that, as a six week program, Cambridge cannot be comprehensive of an entire century. Still, the glossing over of Oriental themes and allusions in the works of Paine, Wordsworth, and Austen incited in me a desire for investigation.

While in Paine's *The Rights of Man* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* references to "Indians" act as points of departure and contrast against which the writer or narrator can distinguish the oppositional civilized subject, Jane Austen's *Persuasion* offers an example that gets at the heart of this essay.<sup>1</sup> In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot's offhand allusions to Romantic works centering on Oriental themes and to *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment* speak to the ways in which many Eastern cultures were absorbed and sublimated into British society. References to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* and Lord Byron's *The Corsair*, which have been noted by scholars like Kuri Katsuyama and Nigel Leask for their Oriental content and inspiration, are embedded in the narrative, existing mainly in the paratext of the endnotes.<sup>2</sup>

Although these two allusions manifest in the narrative as comments on scenery and as topics of conversation that do not appear Oriental at face value, the fact that one cannot extrapolate the texts' broader themes unless the reader attends to the footnotes and outside texts speaks to how Britain adopted Asian cultural influences as its own. Moreover, while the reference to *Arabian Nights* is more explicit—"like the Sultanness Scheherazade's head"—it is thus even more representative of the constitutive silences surrounding it.<sup>3</sup> If Anne and the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*. (Britain: D. Webster, 1797), 79; William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1850. (Woodstock Books, 1993), 193.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, James Kinsley and Deidre Shauna Lynch, eds., 1998 Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1818), 240, 242.

<sup>3</sup> Austen, 184.

eighteenth-century reader can so easily call up this Eastern text, then it must have been pervasive in the culture, but where can an Asian presence be seen in the rest of the novel? They are virtually nonexistent. Mentions of clothing, furniture, or household items are rare, and if they do appear, often the style of the objects is omitted.

While other scholars have been interested in the effects British anxieties had on art, I am also interested in how the production of art led to material effects on Asian people. We must first, however, survey how others have written on this same or similar topics. Literary academics like Katsuyama, Leask, and Kathryn S. Freeman have analyzed the ways in which Romantic and eighteenth-century writers engaged with the ever-looming Eastern world in their works; however, they have mostly studied it from the perspective of literature as a tool of empire, a stage for hidden anxieties, and a warning against foreign contagion.<sup>4</sup> Scholars of art—such as Stacey Sloboda, Linda Nochlin, and Oliver Impey—have also noticed such motivations as driving painters and artists of the period.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, my findings align somewhat with these themes, but I want to shift to an examination of the rhetoric of aesthetics, how they manifest through *chinoiserie*, and the subsequent consequences.

*Chinoiserie* and the “Chinese style” fit relatively well into to the bounds of the beautiful and the picturesque. Furniture and porcelain flatware in this style were symmetrical, colorful,

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<sup>4</sup> Katsuyama’s chapter, “‘Kubla Khan’ and British Chinoiserie: The Geopolitics of the Chinese Garden,” aims to understand Coleridge’s paradoxical relationship with the East as a source of inspiration and as a place that Coleridge viewed through the European cultural perspective, and I am most interested in the Chinese landscape garden as a microcosmic simulation of Britain’s power over the Eastern landscape. In his book *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*, Leask analyses the work of Romantic writers like Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Thomas De Quincey as writing motivated by sublimated anxieties, notably the fear of foreign contamination through contact with the Orient. Freeman asserts in *British Women Writers and the Asiatic Society of Bengal: Re-Orienting Anglo-India* that women writers and members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal were different from male Orientalists because they embraced the non-dualism that Europeans encountered in the East, thus including female Romantics in the conversation.

<sup>5</sup> Each of these scholars has variously analyzed and critiqued the modes of production and motivation behind the creation of Orientalist and Asian-inspired art, ceramics, and other goods—namely the racism, xenophobia, and sexism that undergird the depictions of Asians and Asia in Western art forms. Sloboda’s book *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-century Britain* is a cornerstone in this field of study.

and smooth to the touch—some of the qualities which Uvedale Price characterizes as beautiful.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Orientalist paintings depicting Asian life often exemplified picturesque ideals by showing antiquated ways of life “on the brink of destruction” and “backwards, oppressed peoples sticking to traditional practices,” much like picturesque representations of European pastoral life.<sup>7</sup> In this way, *chinoiserie* conformed to many of the aesthetics that Britons appreciated, making it acceptable.

It is in regards to the category of the sublime, however, where Asia represented the greatest danger. According to Edmund Burke, the sublime is anything which “excites the ideas of pain” and “operates in a manner analogous to terror,” but he then qualifies this definition by saying “when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, that which poses to close of a threat to one’s person and selfhood cannot provide any visual or emotional pleasure, cannot be sublime.

Freeman, in her critique of male Orientalist writers, notes that Indian texts, for example, threatened “the heart of Enlightenment philosophy: the twin principles of the primacy of the individual’s separate and autonomous ego...and the separation of a single God from the phenomenal world.”<sup>9</sup> In general, the non-dualism—or lack of distinction between the self and the other, the subject and the object—of Eastern cultures put pressure on the European category of “sublime.” The lands of Asia were all at once fascinating, prime examples of the sublime and *too* sublime. They were dangerous and exotic, but they were more than a physical or ideological risk

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<sup>6</sup> Uvedale Price, “Chapter 4,” in *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful*, (London: Printed for J. Robson, 1794), 76-79.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” in *Art in America* 91, no. 5 (1983): 127.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (London: Printed for J. Dodsley, 1767), 58, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Kathryn S. Freeman, “British Women Writers and Late Enlightenment Anglo-India: The Paradoxical Binary of Vedic Nondualism and the Western Sublime,” in *British Women Writers and the Asiatic Society of Bengal: Re-Orienting Anglo-India, 1785-1835*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 8.

to the British; they also jeopardized Western people's very philosophy of selfhood. This fear is perhaps best exemplified in the literature of the time. According to Leask, for writers like Thomas De Quincey, Percy Shelley, and Byron, the Other "threatens the familiar with an uncanny *absorption* and *loss of identity*."<sup>10</sup> In other words, such writers feared a blurring between the self and the other.

Therefore, in order to cope with the increased presence of Asian goods—in the form of imported textiles from India and porcelain from China by the EIC—in British society and the accompanying (if vague) awareness of Asian philosophies, one could argue Britain subconsciously used *chinoiserie* as a mechanism for keeping non-dualism at bay. In doing so, it asserted that the subject could be separated from the object both by drawing a line between Asian people and Asian goods, and by distinguishing Britain from Asia, namely by asserting British superiority. Even the term itself would have performed a distancing function for Britons; as a French word, *chinoiserie* added a layer of removal from the form's Eastern origins and influences. Meanwhile, in practice, British production of goods—clothing, furniture, housewares, decorative goods—in the "Chinese taste" established the fungibility of Asian peoples, asserted the status of Asia as a commodity, and reinforced British exceptionalism.

Here, I want to note that I am taking the imitation of Chinese porcelain as my departure point and extrapolating this study to make observations on British-Asian relations more broadly. I do this not because I believe the relationships of East Asia and South Asia with Britain to be wholly the same, but for three other reasons. Firstly, it is outside the scope of this essay to comprehensively discuss more than one art form. Secondly, the pattern of trade and production in Indian textiles and Chinese porcelain followed trajectories similar enough that conclusions

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<sup>10</sup> Nigel Leask, "Introduction" in *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 9. Emphasis mine.

drawn from the study of one would have resonances with the other, and my questions arise from observations about both. Finally, to the extent that British people themselves used the adjectives “Indian” and “Chinese” interchangeably to describe goods, one can infer that their attitudes towards different Asian peoples would be the same.

To that point, Sloboda explains how British people used adjectives indiscriminately to describe goods from the East. She writes:

In the eighteenth century, objects from Asia were sometimes described by the adjective “India,” when referring to Chinese or other Oriental objects supplied by the East India Company...or the broadest term, “China,” to indicate not only objects from China, but also ceramics generally...<sup>11</sup>

The disregard the British had for using proper terminology speaks to how the nuances and differences between the Asian societies from which these products came or took inspiration did not matter in the market. To be fungible means something is easily exchanged for or replaced by an item of the “same type and value,” especially in reference to commodities.<sup>12</sup> Thus, to lump together the products from distinct cultures is to transform said cultures and its peoples into interchangeable objects.

Similarly, British artists and manufacturers then assumed that the Asian subjects in the *chinoiserie* could be transposed into British ones. As the curator and Orientalist Impey notes, much of the style of *chinoiserie* comes from European objects and subject matter.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the subjects featured in these pieces were often “very Europeanized figures in oriental garb, and, at least the male figures, of oriental physiognomy.”<sup>14</sup> In *Figure 1*, for example, an Asian-looking

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<sup>11</sup> Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>12</sup> “Fungible: Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” Cambridge Dictionary, [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fungible](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fungible).

<sup>13</sup> Oliver Impey, “Chapter 7: Ceramics-Inspiration,” in *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1977), 89, 98.

<sup>14</sup> Oliver Impey, “Chapter 6: Painting, Drawing, and Engraving,” in *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1977), 80.

man in oriental clothes stands with one hand tucked into the breast of his shirt, a pose recognizable as one commonly found in European portraiture during the eighteenth century. This is an example of how Britons not only tried to Anglicize Chinese figures, but also thought Chinese culture could be seamlessly replaced by British culture.

*Figures 2 and 3* take this reasoning a step further by placing European—or indeterminate—figures into vaguely oriental settings. Although the clothes they wear are European, their environments are coded as Eastern by the winding trees, exotic flowers, and wispy brushstrokes. As Impey explains, “As long as the ‘copies’ stuck to certain rules, lightness of touch, absurdity of stance, costume and physiognomy and so on, then they were recognizably ‘Chinese.’<sup>15</sup> Thus, British people presumptively placed themselves, through figures in their likeness, into the “oriental” landscape without any qualms for those whom they were displacing.

For eighteenth-century Britons, a British figure in an Asian setting is the same as, if not better than, an Asian figure of uncertain nationality in the same setting. It did not matter if they were Indian, Chinese, or Japanese; it did not even matter if they were realistically Asian at all. In fact, most portrayals in *chinoiserie* came from “the imaginary China known as Cathay which as so well known from depictions on imported Chinese goods.”<sup>16</sup> British people considered China, and Asia more generally, to be so immaterial that the replacement of a real place and culture for an abstract fantasy was seen as inconsequential.

While the British considered Chinese people to be interchangeable for Europeans or other Asians, they also thought that Britain was inherently superior and Chinese porcelain could be improved upon by Britain. *Chinoiseries* are a different manifestation of the idea of British excellence than is usually discussed, however. Scholars have studied how artistic reactions to the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

increasing influences of the East portrayed scenes of white, Western domination over Oriental figures or, in literature, of “detoxification” from contamination.<sup>17</sup> *Chinoiserie*, though, does not perform the same kind of imposition: Oriental figures are not seen prostrating before British ones, and, although the figures are Anglicized, the essence of the art form is not changed. That is, the “Chinese” features of the porcelain are not eradicated, and there is still a guise that *chinoiserie* is representative of Chinese culture, not British.

This idea goes back to the mentality of fungibility; Britain focused on *imitation*, even as it thought it could accomplish the Chinese art form better than its originators. According to Sloboda, “In Britain, artists and industrialists imitated and attempted to improve upon those Asian models with their own wares.”<sup>18</sup> By the late eighteenth century, the importation of Indian textiles and Chinese porcelain had decreased due to Britain’s ability to mass-produce similar copies for cheaper prices.<sup>19</sup> The irony, of course, is that British attempts did not in any way come close to the Chinese originals and could be easily distinguished.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, “East India Company imports did not cause the subsequent rage for *chinoiserie*. Rather, their presence contributed to an existing interest in imitative practices,” indicating, I argue, that the fascination was not with the Foreign itself, but with tactics for managing the threat.<sup>21</sup>

In this case, although Britain supposed itself to be innovating porcelain, the products reveal that the goal was likely not to dominate or surpass China, but to refashion it into an object

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<sup>17</sup> Valerie Kennedy, “Orientalism in the Victorian Era,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature. 22 August 2017. Oxford University Press, <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-226>; Leask, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Sloboda, 3.

<sup>19</sup> David Clingingsmith and Jeffrey G. Williamson, “Deindustrialization in 18th and 19th Century India: Mughal Decline, Climate Shocks and British Industrial Ascent,” in *Explorations in Economic History* 45, no. 3 (2008): 217; *Traders: the East India Company & Asia*. Permanent exhibit at the National Maritime Museum, London, England. Seen in July 2019.

<sup>20</sup> See *Figures 4 & 5* and compare *Figure 6* with *Figure 7*.

<sup>21</sup> Sloboda, 19.

that the British could have control over. No longer was China a vast, strange land, but a delicate image on a cup. The fact of whether that cup had been imported or made domestically was irrelevant because they represented the same thing: Asia.

To put this back in conversation with the sublime, I turn to Sloboda's observation that "the height of *chinoiserie*'s popularity in Britain in the 1790s coincided with the development of public aesthetic debates that attempted to regulate the relationship between art and commerce through codified principles of taste [and aesthetic judgement]." <sup>22</sup> By associating China primarily with objects (porcelain) and by asserting that even the symbolism, cultural context, and craftsmanship that made these items Chinese were still fungible—still easily exchanged for British ones—Britain was able to reinstate its philosophy of dualism. As Impey puts it, *chinoiserie* was the process of "an oriental style, be it Chinese, Japanese, Indian, or anything else, being adapted to European needs and skills, and *getting further and further away from its original style*."<sup>23</sup> As *chinoiserie* moved further into the British household, then, it grew more estranged from its homeland.

In a time where there was a growing belief that "[t]hings had characteristics that were metaphysically transferred back and forth between objects and their users," the need to keep oneself distant from the foreign, exotic objects in one's home would have proved paramount.<sup>24</sup> Thus, even though Chinese porcelain represented the non-dualistic beliefs of its homeland, and even though its importation mirrored the encroaching Asian presence in Europe, *chinoiserie* provided a way for Britons to both distance itself from Asia and to distance Asian people from the products Britain consumed by turning the Chinese themselves into fungible objects. In this

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<sup>22</sup> Sloboda, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver Impey, "Chapter 8: Ceramics—Imitation," in *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1977), 101. Emphasis mine.

<sup>24</sup> Sloboda, 62.

way, *chinoiserie* could still be sublime in the Burkean sense because, by reestablishing the subject-object divide, it no longer posed a threat to Enlightenment philosophy or to Britain's sense of selfhood.

The consequences of this separation from and objectification of Asian peoples are evident in historical facts. Repeatedly, Britain demonstrated how it perceived China and India as mere commodities. By the end of the Industrial Revolution (1750-1850), Britain was shipping millions of pounds of opium to China and using the taxes on these sales to fund the East India Company's tea exports to Britain. Additionally, this opium came from India, and the EIC gradually became "more involved in Indian politics...[fighting] wars to protect and expand its business interests."<sup>25</sup> There was a complete disregard for the ramifications on either people: not the suppression and enslavement of Indians nor the opium addiction of the Chinese. Despite Britain's banning of the slave trade (1807) and of slavery (1833), both continued in India legally until 1843.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, Britain fought entire wars with China to continue the flow of opium into the country (Opium Wars 1839-42, 1856-60).<sup>27</sup> Again and again, Britain treated Indian and Chinese people like objects to be bought, traded, sold, and discarded when they had passed their usefulness.

*Chinoiserie*, then, was a mechanism through which Britain could reconcile its rabid consumption of Asian goods with its simultaneous extortion and mistreatment of actual Asian individuals, by insisting said goods were distanced from Asians themselves, that the subject and object had no relation. It accomplished this process through *chinoiserie* portrayals that asserted

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<sup>25</sup> *Traders: the East India Company & Asia*. Permanent exhibit at the National Maritime Museum, London, England. Seen in July 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Andrea Major, "Introduction: Slavery and Colonial Expansion in India," in *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772-1843*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 43.

<sup>27</sup> The Opium Wars were two wars between China and Britain wherein the British fought to continue their practice of smuggling and selling opium to the Chinese people. The Second Opium War resulted in the Treaty of Tientsin (requiring China to pay war reparations), the opening of more Chinese ports for European trade, legalization of the opium trade, and the rights of foreign traders and missionaries to travel in China. In short, the drugging and domination of China.

Asians' fungibility and added to the degrees of removal from the products' material and cultural source. As Asian people became more like objects themselves, it became increasingly easy for Britain to justify its economic imperialism. Moreover, in addition to being sourced in fears about sexuality and the Other, these anxieties actually had important roots in aestheticism and dualistic philosophies as well.

Certainly, the many complexities and qualifications of these relations cannot be held within this single paper—for example, I was unable to address Orientalist paintings or Indian textiles.<sup>28</sup> This fact simply shows that the relationship between aesthetics, art objects, and British-Asian interactions should be considered more comprehensively when approaching the attitudes that supported Britain's history of colonialism, manipulation, and abuse of China and other Asian countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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<sup>28</sup> These works are only a cursory list, but for more on paintings, see *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography* by Jill Beaulieu, Mary Roberts, and Nicholas Thomas, and for more on Indian textiles, see *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress* by Richardson Harrison Martin and Harold Koda, and "The South Kensington Museum and the colonial project" by Tim Barringer.

Figures 29



Figure 1. Cup, Worcester, c.1760-65



Figure 2. Cup and saucer, Worcester, c.1755-60



Figure 3. Plate, Lowestoft, c.1765-70



Figure 4. Bowl, Chinese, Qing Dynasty, 1723-1735

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29 All photographs are mine, and all items were found at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, England.



Figure 5. Double gourd Vase, Chinese, Qing Dynasty



Figure 6. Jar, Chinese, Qing Dynasty, Early 18th century



Figure 7. Bowl, Chinese, Qing Dynasty, Kangxi Period (1662-1722)

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