

David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. x + 230. £60. ISBN 9780521192996.

In *The Chinese Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, David Porter has synthesized and focused commentary in a productive area of research, while at the same time extending it in intriguing and often insightful ways. The two questions – or ‘sets of questions’ – Porter poses are, firstly, ‘how a foreign aesthetic that was so often depicted in negative terms – strange, monstrous, grotesque, repugnant, trifling – came to be so thoroughly and successfully assimilated’, and, secondly, what was ‘the significance of this appeal for the art, literature, and collective imagination of eighteenth-century England’ (4). The first thing Porter remarks about the function of Chinese goods and Chinoiserie is its complexity and contradictions: if domestic porcelain enabled the British imagination to contain the vast and politically overwhelming power of the Chinese empire, re-imagining it as ‘fragile, superficial, and faintly absurd’, it also functioned to remind British consumers of their ‘cultural backwardness, national dependency, and late arrival on the world stage’ (6). ‘Only an awareness of this ambivalence, of the potential status of Chinese objects as a site of both imperial envy and imperial pride, can enable us to recognize the semiotic fluidity and transformative potency of these seemingly ephemeral objects in the European imagination’ (6).

Porter’s first chapter offers a general examination of ‘eighteenth-century fashion and the aesthetics of Chinese taste’, which is seen to have troubled the boundary ‘between cultivated and vulgar taste, fine art and the fripperies of fashion’ (23). The British version of the Chinese taste, ‘by virtue of its *unheimlich* contortions of familiar experience’ (28), tended to conflate (confuse?) it with the Gothic, but the focus here is less on the exotic than on the sensual, frequently identified with the feminine. Chinoiserie, argues Porter, ‘marks the consolidation of an oppositional aesthetic widely embraced by contemporary women and coded along specifically gendered lines in its resistance to cultural assumptions embedded within the classicist norm’ (32-3).

Chapter 2 discovers the ambiguity and ambivalence that characterize the British reception of the Chinese style in the work (and heart) of one of its best known early mediators. William Chambers’s uneasy alternations between Rome and Canton (Chambers was one of the few who had actually visited China) initiate a theme so recurrent as to suggest a question less of taste than of psychopathology. ‘He deeply admired the Chinese model’, writes Porter, ‘but simultaneously despised it – or perhaps more accurately despised his own admiration for it’ (44). The contrast, variety, and unpredictability of the Chinese garden comes across as both seductively liberating and shamefully pornographic. It all turns on a proto-Romantic faculty of ‘wonder’ engaged in this ‘earnest’ eighteenth-century European’s ‘contemplation of a largely unintelligible East’ (54).

In Chapter 3, Porter insists, paradoxically, that the sensuality of Chinaware inhered in its *asexual* figuration, hinting at utopian ideals of homoerotic female friendship that ‘negated male-dominated economies of sexuality and power’ (73). In retreat from the violence and scopophilia of patriarchal art forms, did women, asks Porter, discover in the serene Chinese style, if only subliminally, ‘a protected utopian space of female dignity, autonomy, intimate community, and pleasure’ (62)? With their ‘vivid spectacles of autoeroticism’ (88), William Hogarth’s more explicit identification of Chinaware with the feminine (Chapter 4), specifically as ‘emblems of female vanity and extravagance (*luxé*)’ (86), is read as reflecting a masculine anxiety about precisely this ‘autonomy and self determination’.

Chapter 5 looks at the challenging ‘socio-aesthetics of the Chinese scholar’s stone’, ‘a recognizable hallmark of the so-called Chinese style’ (100). For Porter, the scholar’s stone raises doubts about the very idea of the aesthetic as a characteristically Western ‘privileged space for a distinct and privileged kind of experience’ (102). On looking more closely at Walpole’s mid-century preference for what he called ‘Sharawaggi, or the Chinese want of symmetry, in buildings, as in grounds and gardens’ (121) in chapter 6, Porter discovers in ‘Walpole’s Gothic’ the return of a repressed ‘spirit of chinoiserie’ (129). Chapter 7 returns us to porcelain or Chinaware and ‘its relational position as the locus of deeply fraught ideas of sensuality, novelty, desire, femininity, temptation, and exchange’ (139), arguing for its significant role in the evolution of a late eighteenth-century sensibility (153).

Then, in a final chapter, on the antiquarian and would-be sinologist Thomas Percy, most of the themes and all of the tensions and contradictions of Britain’s reception of (and attitude towards) China come together: ‘Percy is at once thoroughly captivated and deeply disturbed by his sinological discoveries. His ambivalence is dizzying’ (154). ‘Like Hogarth, Chambers, and Walpole, Percy finds in Chinese productions a model that is at once inspiring and unsettling, leading him simultaneously to repudiate Chinese claims to cultural greatness and to appropriate them to his own purposes’ (155). In the footnotes to his edition of an English translation of the seventeenth-century Chinese novel, *Hau Kiou Choaan; or, The Pleasing History*, Percy struggles with his irreconcilable sources. The closest Percy manages to come to a balanced assessment is by itemizing ‘the dark side’ and ‘the bright side’ of the Chinese character respectively, in an ingenious (‘Manichean’) display of moral bookkeeping in his index (161).

Thomas Percy offers a veritable encyclopedia of Western (mis)representations of China, the Chinese, and the Chinese style. On the other hand, David Porter’s responsive and variously intelligent reading of Britain’s negotiations with the Chinese style at every level becomes itself a veritable encyclopedia of contemporary scholarship in a burgeoning area of enquiry.

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