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Material Culture and the Other: European Encounters with Chinese Porcelain, ca. 1650–1800

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IN HIS LENGTHY REPORT for Louis IX (r. 1226–1270), composed in the months following his return from the court of the Khan Möngke (Ch. Xianzong; r. 1251–1259) in 1255, William of Rubruck pauses to offer a few observations on the Chinese—or “Cataians”—to the south-east. He notes the use of paper currency and that the people of Cataia write with brushes, “in a single character mak[ing] several letters that comprise one word.”¹ He marvels at the quantities of silver daily yielded to the Mongols, and recounts the tale of “a city which has walls of silver and battlements of gold.” These people, Rubruck tells his king, are the “Seres” or “silk people” of antiquity, being “excellent craftsmen in whatever skill” and “the source of the finest silk cloth.”²

Chinese gold, silver, and silk were not the only things that caught Rubruck’s attention in his two-year mission. A Franciscan friar, he had been dispatched to Karakorum with the explicit aim of soliciting support for Christianity’s struggle against Islam, and his observations on religious views and practice in the expanding Mongol empire predictably form the majority of his report. But it is highly significant that material culture is at the heart of this earliest extant European

¹ *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Mongke, 1253–1255*, trans. Peter Jackson (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), p. 203.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 161–162.

traveler's account of China and its people, and that the very identity of these people is here inextricably linked to a trade relationship and a manufactured product. The Chinese "silk people" are, for Rubruck, quite literally defined by their ability to produce luxury goods.

The specific luxury export with which this paper is concerned is porcelain, not the only manufactured product to emanate from southern China during the early modern period, but certainly one important enough for the name China to become in English closely associated and eventually literally synonymous with the product.³ Archaeological evidence suggests that Chinese porcelain was being exported in systematic, commercial shipments as early as the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1278).⁴ During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was highly prized in European markets, and it was one of the items that regularly filled the carracks of the various competing East India Companies. By the close of the eighteenth century, at least 70 million pieces of porcelain had made their way from China into Europe via these maritime routes.⁵

The movement of Asian luxury goods within the early modern world has over the past few decades generated a large volume of scholarly research across a number of distinct areas. Economic historians have come to see Asian imports, including porcelain, as fundamental to the transformation of British industry in the eighteenth century, eventually laying the critical foundations for what would become known as the Industrial Revolution.⁶ Scholarship in this area has tended to focus on issues such as the development of skills, technol-

³ We use "luxury" in its general sense, to refer to goods that were considered desirable but not necessary or indispensable. On luxury as a key issue in eighteenth-century Britain, see Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). On the question of whether Asian manufactured goods such as porcelain, silks, and cotton textiles should, in fact, be considered "luxuries" in the context of early modern Europe, see Anne E. C. McCants, "Exotic Goods, Popular Consumption, and the Standard of Living: Thinking about Globalization in the Early Modern World," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 4 (2007): 433–462.

⁴ Marie-France Dupoizat, "The Ceramic Cargo of a Song Dynasty Junk Found in the Philippines and Its Significance in the China–South East Asia Trade," in *South East Asia & China: Art, Interaction & Commerce*, Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia 17, ed. Rosemary Scott and John S. Guy (London: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1995), pp. 205–224.

⁵ Peter Wilhelm Meister and Horst Reber, *European Porcelain of the 18th Century*, trans. Ewald Osers (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 18, cited in Robert Finlay, "The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History," *Journal of World History* 9, no. 2 (1998): 142.

⁶ Maxine Berg, "In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present* 182 (February 2004): 85–142.

ogy, and import substitution. Cultural historians of the eighteenth century have focused much attention on the uses and meanings of luxury imports within European societies, highlighting the development of new ideas about collecting, taste, and social status.⁷ And this area of investigation is of course allied to what became known as the cult of chinoiserie: those movements within the decorative arts in Europe that initially drew from and eventually began to redefine, elements of East Asian design.⁸ With the possible exception of the deliberately vague links existing between chinoiserie objects and Asian peoples (broadly defined),⁹ associations between luxury objects and identity have tended to be made exclusively on the basis of their importance to the consumer. This area of scholarship has been led by anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai, who identifies “a high degree of linkage of their consumption to body, person, and personality” as one of the fundamental characteristics of luxury goods.¹⁰ Craig Clunas has similarly argued that for parts of southern China in particular, certain types of activity, such as the collecting and connoisseurship of antiques, had become by the middle of the sixteenth century “an essential form of consumption which was central to the maintenance of elite status.”¹¹

Thus, scholarly attention has focused on the ways in which objects have been used by consumers to define the self, while less attention has been paid to the ways in which those same objects could define the other. The link between luxury goods and perceptions of producers in the early modern world remains relatively unexplored. In one impor-

⁷ The secondary literature here is extensive. For an excellent recent treatment, see McCants, “Exotic Goods.” Other relevant works include John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); and Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁸ The classic studies here are Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: John Murray, 1961), and Oliver Impey, *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁹ Of the “flimsy fantasy of doll-like lovers, children, monkeys, and fishermen lolling about in pleasure gardens graced by eternal spring” of eighteenth-century chinoiserie, David Porter argues convincingly that “there was no substance to such a vision and indeed no desire for substance.” See *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 135.

¹⁰ 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), p. 38.

¹¹ Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 108.

tant study, Michael Adas shows that “by the mid-eighteenth century, scientific and technological gauges were playing a major and sometimes dominant role in European thinking about . . . India and China.”¹² Drawing mostly on nineteenth-century evidence, Adas argues that early modern European perceptions of their own superiority of scientific and technological knowledge, rather than ideas about biology and race, were the principal components of what he terms “ideologies of Western dominance.”¹³ The argument is important, but it reveals more about the ways in which Europeans sought to define themselves as modern, in relation to what they perceived to be a backward, static Asia.¹⁴ Moreover, as useful as such an approach may be for the study of nineteenth-century encounters, there is a very real danger here of reading “the presuppositions of nineteenth-century colonialism back into the 1600s,” as Robert Markley reminds us.¹⁵ Whether we accept Andre Gunder Frank’s provocative recasting of the world-system prior to 1800 as essentially “Sinocentric” or not,¹⁶ there is no doubt that Chinese porcelain producers held an unchallenged supremacy over their European counterparts until well into the eighteenth century, and hence the example of porcelain and its technology offers a fascinating counterposition from which to view changing European perceptions of Chinese civilization. To what extent did European travelers link Chinese identity or “Chineseness” to their own comprehension of Chinese material culture?

The evidence used here to address this question primarily comes from accounts written by European travelers from around the middle of the seventeenth century until the end of the eighteenth. From Marco Polo until the development of mass tourism in the nineteenth century, the letters, journals, reports, and accounts by travelers, missionaries, and merchants provided the vast majority of the information about non-Western peoples to which Europeans were exposed. Accounts of China were immensely popular and often circulated in multiple edi-

¹² Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴ On the legitimacy of this position with regard to science and technology, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 7, part 2, ed. K. G. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1–23.

¹⁵ Robert Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1–2, 8–9. David Porter makes a similar point in the introduction to *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 5–6.

¹⁶ Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

tions and in various European languages, as well as being incorporated into the vast compendia that were especially common around the turn of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ The popularity and ongoing commercial success of these accounts make them a key source for the study of global encounters in the early modern world, offering an insight not only into the ways in which representations of “the other” circulated throughout Europe, but also into the ways in which these representations developed over time.

A close analysis of the language of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel accounts allows us to trace changing perceptions of material culture and the other, that is, perceived links between luxury objects and their producers. These accounts were written by men with different motivations and were intended for different readers, but they all contributed to the construction of “Chineseness” in the European imagination. Early travelers, impressed and sometimes awestruck at China and all it had to offer, had imagined the Chinese to be extraordinary, in both their craftsmanship and their civilization.¹⁸ Around the middle of the seventeenth century, travelers such as the Portuguese Jesuit Semedo and the Dutch adventurer Nieuhof begin to investigate the material culture of this strange country more closely, noting its potential as merchandise, but paying little attention to its modes of manufacture. Only a few years later, the Dutch armchair traveler Olfert Dapper and the French Jesuit Louis-Daniel le Comte contribute significantly to European knowledge by enriching their travel accounts with details about ingredients, tools, and processes. This knowledge about what was required to produce such goods in Europe gradually transforms the awe, admiration, and sense of mystery that had surrounded the luxury goods and their producers. European observers begin to see the Chinese as “small of invention,” in Le Comte’s words, and as servile laborers working under degrading conditions, in d’Entrecolles’s

¹⁷ The rich accounts produced by European travelers and the transformations in the European imagination of China they reveal have long formed the subject of academic scholarship referred to as “sinography” by Eric Hayot and Haun Saussy, editors of a recent volume titled *Sinographies: Writing China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). For another recent example, see Ulrike Hilleman, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁸ While the travel accounts used in this article were without exception written by nonspecialists in ceramic technology, it is worth recalling that the majority of these men had received a scientific education unimagined today. The great Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, who is said to have regarded himself as poorly educated in the sciences, had studied arithmetic, geography, astronomy, and perspective and “confessed that he knew little of astronomy beyond the techniques of charting the paths of the planets, predicting eclipses and correcting calendars.” Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, pp. 57–58.

descriptions. Eighteenth-century travelers compare Chinese products and skills to those of their own developing porcelain industries, and when the British embassy under Macartney proudly presents its hosts with a collection of British-made porcelain at the end of the century, the European fascination with both china and China has given way to impatience, irritation, and disdain.

EARLY ACCOUNTS

Rubruck's report of the "silk people" he encountered in Karakorum received little attention beyond the court of Louis IX, and in this respect, the contrast with the next tale of China to reach Europe could not be greater. Marco Polo's narrated account, describing his travels and life in Yuan China between 1271 and 1295, amazed Europeans for centuries following its publication around the turn of the fourteenth century. Writing in 1859, Saxe Bannister could claim, somewhat hyperbolically perhaps, that the accounts of Polo and Sir John Mandeville "were more eagerly read than any other books of the time except the Holy Scriptures."¹⁹ Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) sent to England for a copy of Polo in 1496, and later marked in the margins the references to spices, gems, silks, ginger, pearls, and other merchandise, his imagination clearly more captured by tales of exotic goods than by topographical discovery or political diplomacy.²⁰ Polo's account of Chinese material culture suggests an opportunity for trade and profit, but the products he describes, including porcelain, remain mysterious and unknown. He notes the global trajectory of porcelain emanating from Jingdezhen, and expresses amazement that in the city itself "for a Venetian groat you might buy three [porcelain] bowls of such beauty that nothing lovelier could be imagined."²¹ And his account suggests extraordinary modes of manufacture, with clay for these porcelain vessels being "stacked in huge mounds and then left for thirty or forty years exposed to wind, rain, and sun," such that "when a man makes a mound of this earth he does so for his children."²²

¹⁹ Saxe Bannister, trans., *A Journal of the First French Embassy to China, 1698–1700* (London: Thomas Cautley Newby, 1859), p. xcix.

²⁰ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 25, 38–39.

²¹ *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Ronald Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 238.

²² *Ibid.*

The image of potters burying clay for the benefits of the next generation again links China's material culture to the qualities of its inhabitants, implying a patient, unhurried, and forethoughtful people that would become a common European image of Chinese civilization until the late seventeenth century. Indeed, in the years following the publication of Polo's account, the number of years reputedly required to produce porcelain steadily increased, from thirty to forty to eighty and even to one hundred. Despite evidence to the contrary,²³ the image proved persistent, and as late as 1720, John Bell (1691–1780) was still investigating “the truth of the opinion which the Europeans entertain, ‘that the clay must ly a century, to digest, before it is fit for use.’”²⁴ The substance itself also remained an unknown for some. Gaspar da Cruz (ca. 1520–1570), a Portuguese Dominican whose remarkable account was published in 1569, wrote: “There are many opinions among the Portugals who have not been in China, about where this porcelain is made, and touching the substance of which it is made, some saying of oyster-shells, others of dung rotten for a long time.”²⁵ Thomas Browne (1605–1682), trying to find the true origins of porcelain in 1646, remained thoroughly confused, as “the relations thereof are not onely divers, but contrary, and Authors agree not herein.”²⁶

By the time the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) observed that “there is nothing like it in European pottery either from the standpoint of the material itself or its thin and fragile construction,” he was addressing an audience that had become quite familiar with the material of porcelain, even if its production methods remained obscure. Porcelains were being shipped throughout China and Europe, where they were, according to Ricci, “highly prized by those who appreci-

²³ Juan González de Mendoza (ca. 1540–1617), a Spanish Augustinian, explicitly dismissed this idea in 1586: “If that were true, they would not make so great a number of them as is made in that kingdome, and is brought into Portugall, and carried into Peru, and Nova Espania, and into other parts of the world.” See *The Historie of the Great and Mightie Kingdome of China, and the situation thereof: Together with the great riches, huge Citties, politike gouernement, and rare inuentions of the same*, trans. R. Parke (London: Edward White, 1588), pp. 22–23.

²⁴ John Bell, *A Journey from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Peking in China, with an Embassy from His Imperial Majesty, Peter the First, to Kamhi Emperor of China, in the Year MDCCXIX*, published as part of *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia, to Diverse Parts of Asia* (1763), and republished as *A Journey from St Petersburg to Peking, 1719–1722*, ed. J. L. Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), p. 160.

²⁵ C. R. Boxer, ed., *South China in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), pp. 126–127.

²⁶ *Sir Thomas Browne's Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, ed. Robin Robbins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 1:135–136.

ate elegance at their banquets rather than pompous display.” Amazingly, he found that porcelain could “bear the heat of hot foods without cracking 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.”²⁷ The Spanish Dominican Friar Domingo Navarrete (1618–1686), who also loved China and thought its people to be intelligent, civilized, and courteous, echoed Ricci’s amazement half a century later when he described those “whose trade is to mend broken earthen Ware, which they do by nailing together the pieces with pins of Brass; the Dish is strong, and the Crack scarce perceivable.”²⁸

The wonder and amazement recorded by these early European observers at the qualities of Chinese porcelain is matched by comments about the skills of its producers. The Spanish Augustinian Martin de Rada (b. 1533), who led a mission to China from the Philippines in 1575, found the Chinese “great workers, and very active in their trades, so that it is astounding to see how diligently they furnish their works, and in this they are most ingenious.”²⁹ Da Cruz likewise notes that the Chinese “are commonly very ingenious and cunning with their hands,” and “they have many inventions in every kind of work.”³⁰ In these early accounts, words like “astounding” and “ingenious” conjure up images of both creators and their creations; people who make this extraordinary material culture can be nothing but extraordinary themselves.

MERCHANDISE AND MATERIAL CULTURE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ACCOUNTS

From the middle of the seventeenth century, when missionaries and merchants traveling to China begin to grow in number, we begin to see a shift in focus, as the account by the Portuguese Jesuit Alvaro Semedo (1585–1658) reveals. Semedo must have been a man of great determination. On his first visit to Ming China, spending time in Nanjing to gain competence in the Chinese language, Semedo and his fellow Jesuits came under attack from the vice minister of ritual, and Semedo was

²⁷ *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583–1610*, trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), pp. 14–15.

²⁸ *The Travels and Controversies of Friar Domingo Navarrete, 1618–1686*, ed. J. S. Cummins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 1:155.

²⁹ Boxer, *South China*, pp. 284–285.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

thrown in jail and deported, “in a cage” as the account has it, to Canton. Undeterred by what must have been a harrowing experience, he left Canton in 1620 and spent the next years in Hangzhou and Jiangxi. He did not return to Europe until 1637 but then embarked on a second trip in 1644 to what had by now become the Qing Empire. Because of the change of regime and Semedo’s association with the rulers of the Ming dynasty, he was incarcerated a second time. This time, his fellow Jesuit, the famous astronomer Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1591–1666), rescued him from jail. After his release, he returned to Canton, where he died in 1658.³¹

It was during his interlude in Europe, between his two jail experiences, that Semedo wrote *The History of that Great and Renowned Monarchy of China*.³² It covered the “Politicks, Oeconomicks, Sciences, Mechanicks, Riches, Merchandise Etc.” of China, including the “Traffic and Commodities of that Country.”³³ These commodities were paramount in Semedo’s impressions of “that great and renowned monarchy,” in which it is “almost incredible, how great a concourse of people there is, and what a multitude of commodities, what goe and come without intermission.”³⁴ In Macau, he notes that the “natives as well as strangers” bring “all sorts of merchandise” here, and that the Portuguese take thousands of chests of “silke stufes” as well as “musk, sugar, porcellane dishes . . . and many things of less importance” from here to India, Japan, and Manila.³⁵ Fujian, he notes as part of his description of the provinces, is famous for its gold, sugar, canvas, linen, and paper, “which for plenty, goodness, and cheapnesse is very remarkable.”³⁶ He finds Nankim (Nanjing) to be one of “the best Provinces of the kingdom,” its products of such quality that no other part of the realm is deemed worthy “to participate of its perfection,” while everyone else is

³¹ Semedo arrived in Goa in 1608, and moved to Macau in 1613, from where he was sent to Nanjing. See Luther Carrington Goodrich, ed., *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368–1644* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 1157–1159, and George H. Dunne, *Generations of Giants: The Story of the Jesuits in China in the last Decades of the Ming Dynasty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press: 1962), pp. 128–146.

³² Semedo’s work was originally published in Portuguese as *Relação da propagação da fé no reyno da China e outros adjacentes* (Madrid, 1641). The text was revised in 1642, and subsequently rendered into English as *The History of that Great and Renowned Monarchy of China: Wherein All the Particular Provinces Are Accurately Described, as also the Dispositions, Manners, Learning, Lawes, Militia, Government, and Religion of the People, Together with the Traffick and Commodities of that Countrey* (London: John Crook, 1655).

³³ Semedo, “Epistle to the Reader,” in *Great and Renowned Monarchy*.

³⁴ Semedo, *Great and Renowned Monarchy*, p. 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

keen to pass off their merchandise as “of Nankim” so as to command better prices for them.³⁷ In the northern provinces, drier and poorer than their southern counterparts, Semedo is struck by the felt made of fine goat’s hair, the musk used in perfumes, and the ubiquity of “stone-coale” of which the mines are most “fruitfull.”³⁸

As part of this overview of the provinces and their commodities, Semedo notes Jiangxi’s fame for “*Porcellane* dishes.” Jingdezhen in Jiangxi is the only place in the world to manufacture this material, he tells us, “so that all that is used in the Kingdom, and dispersed through the whole world, are brought from this place.”³⁹ Few other local commodities were traded “through the whole world,” and none commanded such impressive profits. “They which transport *Porsellane* within their own Kingdom, although they sell it but from one Province to another, gaine thirty *per Cent.* twice a year.”⁴⁰ Significantly, Semedo’s account begins to lift the veil of magic to reveal some similarities between Chinese porcelain and European earthenwares: “In this worke there are not those mysteries that are reported of it here, neither in the matter, the form, nor the manner of working; they are made in the same time, and the same manner, as our earthen vessels, only they make them with more diligence and accureatenesse.”⁴¹

The rich variety of material goods he saw being manufactured, traded, and used all around him is what Semedo uses to evaluate China and its people. “Their inventions in many things” make them appear “in no way below us, but in many superior.”⁴² They were, in Semedo’s view, “able mechanicks” with a “natural inclination” to be merchants, and “the fame and manufactures of *China* are sufficient to attest to its civilisation, beeing now many years that we have heard the one; and seen the other.”⁴³ The material culture, the fame of the manufactures, and the admiration for China’s civilization together generate an image of the people, who emerge not only as inventive manufacturers but as people with whom one could do business. “The rich Merchants are of good credit,” he notes, “and very punctuall, (as the *Portughesses* have had experience for many yeares together).”⁴⁴ While he expresses frustration that trade could be conducted only from Canton and hence

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴² Semedo, “Epistle to the Reader,” in *Great and Renowned Monarchy*.

⁴³ Semedo, *Great and Renowned Monarchy*, pp. 27–28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

required the use of intermediaries, he felt the system worked, observing that “this manner of merchandising was practised for many yeares without any fraud.”⁴⁵ Overall, Semedo considered the Chinese to be “a people of an admirable Acutenesse” and concluded that “Asia exceeded Europe in ingenuity” even if Asia was “exceeded by Europe in valour.”⁴⁶

Johan Nieuhof’s (1618–1672?) illustrated record of 1658, describing the first official Dutch mission to the “Grand Tartar Cham” between 1655 and 1657, is one of the few European eyewitness accounts of China written by someone other than a Jesuit missionary prior to the eighteenth century.⁴⁷ The Dutch eyes through which we see the “towns, villages, government, sciences, handicrafts, mores, religions, buildings, clothing, ships, mountains, crops and animals” found much to marvel at: fishermen using birds or shimmering planks for their catch, peasants waving flags at locusts, “weather makers” demanding silver to change the weather, and much more.⁴⁸ But while there is amazement at the cleverness (“vernunft”⁴⁹) of the Chinese, there is also recognition. Nieuhof’s China was a place where people used boats for travel, transportation, and trade much as they did in Holland, and where men felt the effects of too much alcohol the next day, undoubtedly just as they did in Holland.⁵⁰ Almost every town they passed was full of commercial activity, some because of their location on important rivers, others because of their specialization (in shipbuilding, for example, or in clay).⁵¹ One town was such an active center of trade that each day five or six people were killed in the crowds pushing through the town gates.⁵² Commerce was the reason they had embarked on the

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴⁷ The Dutch title of the volume uses the term *Dagelijckse aanteikening van zommige notable voorvallen*, literally “daily notes of some noteworthy events.” This 1658 text is rather shorter than the more famous 1665 version produced by Johan’s brother Hendrik and printed by the Amsterdam publishing house of Jacob van Meurs, but also less mediated by the artistic license and commercial outlook that shaped the longer version. The title of the account in John Ogilby’s translation (London, 1673) is *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperor of China: Deliver’d by Their Excellencies Peter de Goyer and Jacob de Keyzer at His Imperial City of Peking: Wherein the Cities, Towns, Villages, Ports, Rivers, &c. in Their Passages from Canton to Peking Are Ingeniously Describ’d*.

⁴⁸ Leonard Blussé and Reindert Falkenburg, eds., *Johan Nieuhoofs Beelden van een China-reis 1655–1657* (Middelburg: Stichting VOC Publicaties, 1987), pp. 44, 49.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

⁵⁰ “Tables, chairs, benches, all in chaos, on the basis of which we judged they had celebrated the festival of Bacchus, and most of the men who entertained us were still stuffed and drunk” (our translation). Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhoofs Beelden*, p. 58.

⁵¹ Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhoofs Beelden*, pp. 35–37, 40–42, 47–48, etc.

⁵² Ibid., p. 35.

journey in the first place, and their observations of mercantile activity throughout the empire confirmed their view that the Chinese would form excellent trading partners for the Dutch. The realization that they may not be assured free trade throughout the land (“vrijen handell door all ’t landt”) only dawned slowly on the party.⁵³

The Dutch observers were most impressed by the splendor and abundance of these “heathens.”⁵⁴ Throughout the account, there are references to the materiality of the culture that surrounds them: the silver of the dishes used to serve food and alcohol, the silver coins used in bribes, the porcelain tiles used to decorate the 25-foot walls, the green-glazed tiles that cover temples, and the green, yellow, and red of the “porcelain” used to build the nine-story pagoda in Nanjing, decorated with iron railings and copper bells that chimed in the wind.⁵⁵ They were most intrigued by a 40-foot “rock” at the entrance of a village in Jiangxi. Despite its natural appearance, it turned out to have been made from baked clay, with two stories connected by a winding staircase inside it. “One wonders about the art and invention of this work, because nature has been imitated in such a natural manner.”⁵⁶

As in Semedo’s text, objects and people are conflated; the “invention” of the material goods is ascribed to the people. Nieuhof’s account, however, adds the perspective of a trader to the descriptions. The Dutch were on a business trip, in search of commercial opportunities. Where Nieuhof describes porcelain, he focuses on the best place for its trade: Wuchengzhen, on the edge of Lake Poyang, at the mouth of the Gan, within easy reach of the site of porcelain manufacture and the main transportation routes south to Canton and north to Nanjing and Beijing.⁵⁷ Only later does he touch on the quality of the porcelain (exceptional and without match), and the manufacturing process. Nieuhof did not visit Jingdezhen himself, and in the end, how this porcelain was made remained a mystery to him: a “peculiar science, one that these folks only pass on to their kin.”⁵⁸ But that porcelain provided an excellent business opportunity was crystal clear to the Dutch visitors.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁵⁴ “Wij waren altegaar verwondert over de pracht en praal van deze heydens.” Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhoofs Beelden*, p. 33.

⁵⁵ Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhoofs Beelden*, pp. 33–43.

⁵⁶ “. . . dat men zich verwonderdt over de kunst en vindinge van dat werk daar de natuur zoo natuurlik is naageaapt.” Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhoofs Beelden*, p. 39.

⁵⁷ Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhoofs Beelden*, p. 40.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

THE GROWTH OF KNOWLEDGE IN WRITINGS
OF THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

China had been the source of fabulous riches in European minds ever since Marco Polo's description. As these riches came within the reach of Dutch mercantile hands, they gradually became less "fabulous." Seventeenth-century Europeans began to have more access to knowledge about the contexts in which material culture was produced and used, and to match this emerging knowledge of Chinese goods to their understanding of production and manufacture in Europe. Material culture still shaped the image of the people that emerged in these accounts, but that image was now mediated by the European context. Porcelain remained one of the most striking examples of China's fabulous riches, but instead of merely expressing amazement at its manufacture, the accounts began to graft its multiple manufacturing processes onto what were assumed to be similar European ones. Descriptions of the production of the color blue, used to decorate the ceramics that circulated so widely during this time, provide a useful example to illustrate how European knowledge began to play a significant part in the understanding of Chinese porcelain.

One seventeenth-century account, the *Atlas Chinensis* of 1671, describes the origins of the color blue used to decorate porcelain as follows: "They generall use a certain Weed, which in the Southern Provinces is found in great abundance."⁵⁹ The *Atlas Chinensis* had been translated from Olfert Dapper's (1639–1689) 1670 Dutch original by the onetime dance master and entrepreneur John Ogilby (1600–1676), publisher of illustrated geographical works and maps.⁶⁰ Ogilby had a

⁵⁹ [Arnoldus Montanus], *Atlas Chinensis: Being a Second Part of a Relation of Remarkable Passages in Two Embassies from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Vice-Roy Singlamong and General Taising Lipovi, and to Konchi, Emperor of China and East-Tartary*, trans. John Ogilby (London: Tho. Johnson, 1671), p. 712. The English translation by John Ogilby is erroneously attributed to Arnoldus Montanus (1625–1683). See John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-hsi, 1666–1687* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 261 n. 26. See also Nicolas Standaert, "Seventeenth-Century European Images of China," *China Review International* 12, no. 1 (2005): 256.

⁶⁰ Olfert Dapper, *Gedenkwaerdig bedryf der Nederlandsche Oost-Indische Maetschappye op de kuste en in het Keizerrijk van Taising of Sina: Behelzende het Tweede gezantschap aen den onderkoning Singlamong en veldheer Taising Lipoui, door Jan van Kampen en Konstantyn Nobel. Vervolgt met een verhael van het voorgevallen des jaers zestien hondert drie en vierenzestig, op de kuste van Sina, en ontrent d'eilanden Tayowan, Formosa, Ay en Quemuy, onder 't gezag van Balthasar Bort; en het Derde gezantschap aen Konchy, Tartarsche Keizer van Sina en Oost-Tartarye: Onder beleit van zijne Ed. Pieter van Hoom: Beneffens een beschryving van geheel Sina* (Amsterdam:

good eye for business, but clearly knew little about plants. The word he translated as “Weed,” the generic term for plants in English, was “weed” in Dutch, a term no longer in ordinary usage, but commonly used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to refer to the plant *Isatis tinctora*. This plant, called woad in English, yields a blue dye and was widely employed in Europe to color cottons and woollens for clothing.⁶¹ Dapper connected the descriptions of the color blue in the Chinese context to his understanding of dying clothes in Europe, describing it as “a blue earth or mineral, with which clothing is dyed just as with pastel blue,” while Ogilby left his readers more in the dark, referring vaguely to “a certain Blue Earth or Mineral, with which they make a kind of Starch for the linnen.”⁶² The German translator of the same text clearly did know the term and translated it as “Weid,” but added that they also use “Indigo” to paint porcelain.⁶³ Indigo had long been known in Europe as a source of blue coloring, extracted from plants grown in Persia and India and brought to Europe in small quantities from as early as the sixth century.⁶⁴ The fact that neither woad nor indigo were used to decorate porcelain in China is less relevant here than the ways in which the descriptions of Chinese practices were shaped by assumptions based on European experience. It was probably not until the early eighteenth century, when the French Jesuit François Xavier d’Entrecolles (1664–1741) sent his famous letters (see below) about the manufacture of porcelain to the procurator of the China mission, Louis François Orry (1671–1726), that European readers first heard about the use of cobalt in creating the blue decorations that had already been so popular in Europe for over a century.⁶⁵ The knowl-

Jacob van Meurs, 1670). On Ogilby, see Benjamin Schmidt, “Mapping an Exotic World: The Global Project of Dutch Geography, circa 1700,” in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity A. Nussbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 22.

⁶¹ De Lobel’s sixteenth-century herbarium has the following: “Woad makes the land of Toulouse rich and is brought from there to the Netherlands to dye the cloths” (our translation). See M. de Lobel, *Kruydtboeck oft Beschrijvinghe van allerley Ghewassen, Kruyderen, Hesteren, ende Gheboomten* (Antwerpen, 1581), 1:425.

⁶² Dapper, *Gedenkwaerdig Bedryf*, p. 246. Compare the English version: Montanus, *Altas Chinensis*, p. 709.

⁶³ “Hernach bemahlen sie die formirten Gefässe künstlich, mit mancherley Tieren, Blumen und Bäumen, wozu sie die Farbe Indigo oder Weid, so alda in den Süder Provinzien gahr häufig wächst, gebrauchen.” Olfert Dapper, *Gedenkwürdige Verrichtung der Niederländischen Ost-Indischen Gesellschaft in dem kaiserreich Taising oder Sina* (Amsterdam: Jacob von Meurs, 1676), 3:154.

⁶⁴ Robert Finlay, “Weaving the Rainbow,” *Journal of World History* 18, no. 4 (2007): 414.

⁶⁵ Cobalt, a chemical element that does not occur naturally on its own but can be extracted from various ores, remained unknown in Europe until the eighteenth century,

edge about Chinese manufactures in circulation throughout Europe was not uniform and was always mediated by contemporary European knowledge. It was the very circulation of this knowledge that not only explained what had previously been mysterious and marvelous, but also began to transform seventeenth-century European perceptions of the Chinese empire and its people.

The writings of the French Jesuit Louis-Daniel Le Comte (1655–1728), who described porcelain in a long letter to the Duchess of Bouillon, reveal how the expansion of technological knowledge began to transform attitudes toward the Chinese themselves. Le Comte had been selected for the first French China mission together with five other Jesuit scientists and arrived in China in 1688, where he remained for only three years.⁶⁶ When the work was presented at the Sorbonne in 1700, it was denounced as “injurious to the holy Christian religion,” but by then more than ten editions and translations had already appeared, and the public seems not to have been deterred by its censure by the Sorbonne theologians.⁶⁷

Le Comte, like Semedo and Nieuhof before him, places material culture at the center of his descriptions of the Chinese empire, providing extensive detail on the manufacture of silk, ceramics, and lacquered products. He is impressed by the use of lacquer, which preserves the wood to which it has been applied: “If during Meals there be any

while the Chinese used it for porcelain decorations as early as the Tang dynasty (618–907). See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 5, part 12, ed. R. Kerr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 501–503. In d’Entrecolles’s version, this is the way in which the blue is prepared: “One buries it in six inches of gravel that is in the furnace; it is roasted there for 24 hours, following which it is reduced to a fine powder. Unlike other colors, this is not done on a marble slab, but in a large unglazed porcelain mortar using an unglazed porcelain pestle.” (English translation adapted from Jan-Erik Nilsson, <http://gotheborg.com/letters/>, consulted on 9 November 2009). The French text can be found in Stephen Bushell, *Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain: Being a Translation of the T’ao Shuo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 193. On Orry, see Finlay, *Pilgrim Art*, pp. 48–50.

⁶⁶ David Mungello finds Le Comte “far less intellectually distinguished than the other Jesuits of the first French China mission,” and dismisses the work as “popular” and “untechnical,” but with “interesting illustrations,” reinforcing its “bestseller character.” Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1989), pp. 330–331.

⁶⁷ Louis le Comte, *Memoirs and Observations Topographical, Physical, Mathematical, Mechanical, Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical, Made in a Late Journey through the Empire of China, and Published in Several Letters Particularly Upon the Chinese Pottery and Varnishing, the Silk and Other Manufactures, the Pearl Fishing, the History of Plants and Animals, Description of Their Cities and Publick Works, Number of People, Their Language, Manners and Commerce, Their Habits, Oeconomy, and Government, the Philosophy of Confucius, the State of Christianity: With Many Other Curious and Useful Remarks* (London: Benj. Tooke and Sam. Buckley, 1697). See also Mungello, *Curious Land*, p. 334 and Dunne, *Generation of Giants*, p. 27.

Grease or Pottage spilt, if it be presently wiped with a wet Clout, one not only finds no remainders or signs of it, but does not so much as perceive the least smell." But crucially, Le Comte then goes on to describe the manufacturing processes involved. The varnish, he records, is made by taking "distils from a tree," and there "must be Oil mixt with it." Tables and chairs required two or three layers of varnish, and in all these processes he finds that patience "contributes the most to the well succeeding."⁶⁸ Here the technology is entirely knowable, and the suggestion is that if patience is all that is required, then surely the French could match, if not better, the Chinese. It is a view he makes explicit in his discussion of porcelain manufacture: "If so be the Ingenious would please to make some Experiments, and operate diligently, by making use of several sorts of Waters, after the above-mention'd manner, it might not be impossible to succeed."⁶⁹

For Le Comte, the "mystery of Porcelain, that they have so long sought after in *Europe*," was more a question of a fortunate possession of natural resources than any great skill on the part of Chinese potters. He concludes that the water in Jiangxi is "clearer and cleaner" than in other places, and "impregnated with some particular Salts, proper to purifie and refine the Clay." He concedes that the necessary clay might be hard to obtain outside of Jiangxi, but wonders whether "perhaps it is not much different from some soft Stones that are found in several Provinces of *France*."⁷⁰ In fact, all the steps that Le Comte describes were familiar to his European contemporaries: the washing of the clay that was found in the mountains, the pounding of the clay to form a fine powder, the addition of water, the beating, and finally the shaping on a wheel. He explains that potters dry the blanks in the sun at morning and night, though not "when the Sun waxes too hot, for fear of warping it." The dried bodies are then decorated and glazed with "a very fine Broth or Ly of the Matter of the same Porcelain, wherewith they pass several strokes upon the Work, that gives them a particular whiteness and lustre." Here, too, there are myths to dispel: In Siam he had been told that "the white of an Egg, and shining Bones of Fish" might serve as ingredients for glazes, "but this is but a phansie." Finally, as Le Comte himself concludes: "it is a mistake to think that . . . its Composition is so very difficult; if that were so, it would be neither so common, nor so cheap."⁷¹

⁶⁸ Le Comte, *Memoirs and Observations*, pp. 152–153.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 158, 160.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 158–159.

The more detailed and precise the knowledge of the manufacture of luxury products such as lacquer and porcelain, the less admiration these observers seem to muster for their producers. Once, the finest porcelains had seemed to require the Chinese to be patient, diligent, and accurate; their manufacture attested to their civilization and made them appear superior. With Le Comte, a more cautious voice begins to be heard. He is highly critical of the “mutilated” human figures painted on porcelain vessels, claiming that in this the Chinese “disgrace themselves in the Opinion of Strangers . . . who imagine that they are in effect as monstrous in their shape, as they appear in the Pictures.”⁷² Le Comte feared that his friends at home would conflate the bodies appearing on the porcelain and the bodies that made them. It was, in a sense, the same association that Rubruck had made: the definition of a people by the luxury goods they produced. When those goods began to lose their status in Europe—not just by their sheer ubiquity but by knowledge of the technology and the ability to create them in Europe—perceptions of the producers of these goods also began to change.

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, knowledge gave rise to disillusion. The letters of Père d’Entrecolles, detailing every step of the manufacturing process in Jingdezhen, mark the conclusion of the transition in attitudes from uncritical awe and admiration to a more comprehensive understanding of ceramic technology. D’Entrecolles dated his first letter from Raozhou the first of September, 1712, modestly expressing the hope that his detailed description of the manufacture of porcelain might be of some use in Europe.⁷³ The letters were indeed received with great interest, as the number of subsequent translations and editions suggests.⁷⁴ Like Le Comte, d’Entrecolles is by no means uncritical of Chinese material culture, and he is even more explicit in shifting his criticism from the objects themselves to the people who created them. Although the big merchants were making money out of the laborious processes of ceramics manufacture, for

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁷³ Père d’Entrecolles, “Lettre au Père Orry de la mesme Compagnie, Procureur des Missions de la Chine & des Indes.” Appendix in Bushell, *Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*, p. 181.

⁷⁴ The letters first appeared in 1717 in a volume of letters from Jesuits under the title *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*. A second edition of this collection appeared in 1781. In 1735, Père du Halde included them in his four-volume *Description géographique de l’empire de la Chine*, and in 1736, R. Brookes included them in his translation of Du Halde’s work under the title *The General History of China*.

most Chinese, the ceramics industry was unprofitable. For every kiln load that succeeded, a hundred others failed. The quality of the wood, the temperature of the fire and the atmosphere in the kiln were all unpredictable and could cause the firing to fail, especially when the potters were attempting to fire “new and often bizarre shapes” for the European market.⁷⁵ Appalled by the conditions under which Jingdezhen kiln workers labored, he does not spare his readers descriptions of the piles of corpses and bones that had to be burnt at the end of each year. The Chinese, who had once been characterized as patient artisans possessing extraordinary skills, had in d’Entrecolles’s account become anonymous laborers, victims of both the greed of the merchants and the insatiable desire of the European consumers.

With the vast compilation of the Jesuit historian Jean-Baptiste Du Halde’s (1674–1743) magnum opus, *La description de la Chine*, the comprehensive knowledge about eighteenth-century China available in Europe was brought together in a single publication.⁷⁶ As Voltaire (1694–1778) famously said about Du Halde, this man, who had never left Paris and read no Chinese, provided the “fullest” and “best” description of China available in the world.⁷⁷ With this definitive account on the most important traded commodities, the processes of manufacture were now completely available to Europeans.⁷⁸ Material culture continued to form a focal point for eighteenth-century visitors, but fascination with its modes of manufacture had given way to skepticism over the inventiveness of its people.

⁷⁵ D’Entrecolles, “Lettre au Père Orry,” p. 202 (our translation).

⁷⁶ *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise, enrichie des cartes générales et particulières de ces pays, de la carte générale et des cartes particulières du Thibet, & de la Corée; & ornée d’un grand nombre de figures & de vignettes gravées en taillédouce* (La Haye: H. Scheurleer, 1736), in four volumes.

⁷⁷ “Quoiqu’il ne soit point sorti de Paris, et qu’il n’ait point su le chinois, [il] a donné, sur les *Mémoires* de ses confrères, la plus ample et la meilleure description de l’empire de la Chine qu’on ait dans le monde.” Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire avec des notes, et une notice sur la vie de Voltaire* (Paris: Didot, 1869), 4:28.

⁷⁸ A prepublication announcement about the *Description* states: “Du commerce des Chinois, soit au dedans de la Chine, soit au dehors; & comme ce commerce consiste principalement dans les ouvrages de Vernis, dans la Porcelaine, & dans les Soyeries; on expliquera comment se fait leur Vernis & leur Porcelaine à quoy l’on ajoutera l’extrat d’un ancien Livre Chinois qui enseigne la maniere d’élever & de nourrir les vers à Soye, pour l’avoir & meilleure & plus abondante.” See Isabelle Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine: La description de J.-B. du Halde, jésuite, 1735* (Paris: Éditions de l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2002), p. 370.

IRRITATION AND DISTRUST IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ACCOUNTS

In 1719 a young Scottish physician named John Bell set out for Beijing as part of a Russian embassy sent by Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725) to the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722). Bell was an experienced traveler; having arrived in Russia in 1714 he had the following year taken the position of physician on the Russian embassy to Persia, a “long, tedious and dangerous journey” that had lasted three years.⁷⁹ The embassy to Beijing—overland through Siberia and Mongolia and back again—would take another three years, but Bell was evidently enthusiastic enough to accept a substantial pay cut to secure the position. He was not disappointed; in fact he was delighted with the China he discovered, concluding the relevant section of his journal by reflecting gratefully that providence had “afforded me an opportunity, far beyond my expectations, of gratifying my curiosity in the most ample manner.”⁸⁰

Bell’s enthusiasm and delight were unusual. While the French were increasingly convinced they had the knowledge and the resources to match Chinese manufactures, the Germans had already achieved this. In 1710, potters at Meissen had finally succeeded in creating Europe’s first true hard-paste porcelain, bringing to an end a monopoly their Chinese counterparts had enjoyed for over a thousand years.⁸¹ For many, the expansion of European knowledge of porcelain manufactures had also led to disillusion with their producers. Bell, meanwhile, was enchanted and pondered the validity of the idea that clay had to be buried for a century “before it is fit for use.”⁸² His experience, thus, harked back to an earlier age, when travelers saw only a civilized and picturesque land yielding rich merchandise, ignoring the irritations that would characterize later accounts and perhaps not yet fully cognizant of the difficulties of commerce.

⁷⁹ Bell, *Journey from St Petersburg to Peking*, p. 2. On the embassy, see also *Memoirs of Father Ripa, During Thirteen Years’ Residence at the Court of Peking in the Service of the Emperor of China*, trans. Fortunato Prandi (London: John Murray, 1844), pp. 102–113.

⁸⁰ Bell, *Journey from St Petersburg to Peking*, p. 189.

⁸¹ The manufactory at Meissen had started to produce its own porcelain in 1710. Deposits of china clay were found near Limoges, facilitating the manufacture of hard-paste porcelain at Sèvres after 1765, and around the same time in Cornwall, initiating the production in England. See N. J. G. Pounds, “The Discovery of China Clay,” *The Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 1, no. 1 (1948): 20–33 for more details. Finlay (“Pilgrim Art,” p. 143) gives the date of the discovery at Meissen as 1708.

⁸² Bell, *Journey from St Petersburg to Peking*, p. 160.

Bell is impressed by the “cleanly and beautiful vessels” of porcelain he encounters, “unrivalled by the similar products of any other nation,” and even recognizes in the idyllic countryside “those romantick figures of landskips which are painted on the China-ware and other manufactures of this country.”⁸³ He marvels at the fact that porcelain can be produced and sold so cheaply, and, in stark contrast with d’Entrecolles’s graphic descriptions of corpses, Bell highlights the great social importance of the trade, “afford[ing] employment to vast numbers of poor, who, otherwise, would be useless and burdensome to the publick.”⁸⁴ On two occasions Bell is able to visit a porcelain manufactory, where he finds that the “cleanly” vessels are matched by the openness and honesty of his Chinese hosts. “But . . .,” he concedes, “though the people were very complaisant, and showed me every thing I desired them, I returned as ignorant as I went thither; and, I am persuaded, that, before a person can get any knowledge of the affair, he must be bred a potter.”⁸⁵ Bell’s lack of insight and admiration of his hosts stand in inverse relation to Le Comte and d’Entrecolles’s knowledge and disenchantment.

John Bell’s professed ignorance and idealized descriptions found an eager readership, and the much anticipated account of his travels was eventually published in 1763 in two volumes. Printed by Robert and Andrew Foulis of Glasgow, it sold for one guinea the set, and this first run was soon exhausted by the long list of distinguished subscribers.⁸⁶ Lengthy extracts were reprinted in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* and the *Annual Register* later that year, and subsequent editions, including translations into French and Russian, attest to the strong public interest in the work for the remainder of the eighteenth century.⁸⁷ Yet even as Bell was admiring “those romantick figures of landskips” in 1720, the global porcelain landscape had already altered dramatically.

The extent to which the Meissen “discovery” of porcelain impacted the way Europeans thought about the material culture of China is difficult to gauge, but the shift visible in French travel records corresponds to a slightly harder tone also evident in English accounts of the first decades of the eighteenth century. In 1719, Daniel Defoe (1660?–1731), formerly the owner of a brick and ceramic tile works,⁸⁸ has Robinson Crusoe dismissive and skeptical about Chinese ceramic achievements:

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 160.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 225–231.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸⁸ On Defoe’s career as a brick and ceramic-tile maker see F. Bastian, *Defoe’s Early Life* (London: MacMillan Press, 1981), pp. 190–194.

“As this [China-ware] is one of the Singularities of *China*, so they may be allow’d to excel in it; but I am very sure they excel in their Accounts of it; for they told me such incredible things of their Performance in *Crockery Ware*, for such it is, that I care not to relate, as knowing it could not be true.”⁸⁹ Like Le Comte in the previous century, Defoe sees natural resources as the only advantage possessed by the Chinese, adding that “if we had the same Clay, we should soon outdo them, as much as we do in other things.”⁹⁰

This sense of distrust links Defoe’s fictional account to a real one: that of 1748 by Commodore George Anson (1697–1762).⁹¹ Anson was of aristocratic stock; his uncle on his maternal side was Thomas Parker, the Lord Chancellor, and when he sailed from Portsmouth in 1740 aboard the HMS *Centurion* he commanded a fleet of six vessels and more than 1,800 men. Anson’s objective had been to attack Spanish possessions in South America, but the squadron suffered heavily from bad weather, and several ships were lost. Although the British managed to capture one of the Manila galleons on its journey between Acapulco and the Philippines, the *Centurion* was badly damaged and in desperate need of supplies when it sailed into Canton in 1743. But rather than receive the supplies and treatment he considered he deserved, Anson was continuously stalled, and for a long time was even unable to gain an audience with the Viceroy of Canton.⁹² On shore a British officer

⁸⁹ Daniel Defoe, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe; Being the Second and Last Part of his Life, and of the Strange Surprising Accounts of His Travels Round Three Parts of the Globe* (London: W. Taylor, 1719), p. 311. On Defoe’s generally negative view of China and its manufactures see Markley, *Far East and the English Imagination*, pp. 189–201; Theodore Nicholas Foss and Donald F. Lach, “Images of Asia and Asians in European Fiction, 1500–1800,” in *China and Europe: Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Thomas H. C. Lee (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1991), pp. 165–188; and G. A. Star, “Defoe and China,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43, no. 4 (2010): 435–454. On Defoe’s disavowal of Chinese export porcelain, see Lydia H. Liu, “Robinson Crusoe’s Earthenware Pot,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 728–757.

⁹⁰ Daniel Defoe, *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: With His Vision of the Angelick World* (London: W. Taylor, 1720), p. 141. Elsewhere Defoe describes with some pride the rise of the British porcelain industry and its ability to compete creditably in the European market (*A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain. Divided into Circuits or Journeys*, 7th ed. [London, 1769], 1:2).

⁹¹ *A Voyage Round the World in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV, by George Anson, Esq; Commander in Chief of a Squadron of His Majesty’s Ships, sent upon an Expedition to the South-Seas*, compiled by Richard Walter (London: John & Paul Knapton, 1748). On the complicated issue of the authorship of this work, see Glyndwr Williams, *The Prize of All the Oceans: The Triumph and Tragedy of Anson’s Voyage Round the World* (London: Harper-Collins, 1999), pp. 237–241.

⁹² For an English rendition of a Chinese perspective of the events in Canton in 1743, see Arthur Waley, *Yuan Mei: Eighteenth Century Chinese Poet* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1956), pp. 205–209.

was robbed, and one of the masts of the *Centurion* was stolen, while everyday transactions with Chinese merchants, who were alleged to stuff their chickens with stones to command better prices, left Anson fuming with rage.⁹³

Under such circumstances, Chinese material culture was perhaps never likely to be met with a sympathetic eye from Anson, but the way his views are expressed is nonetheless revealing. He finds in Chinese painting none of the “ease and grace” of European artists, “and it may perhaps be truly asserted, that these defects in their arts are entirely owing to the peculiar turn of the people, amongst whom nothing great or spirited is to be met with.”⁹⁴ “That the *Chinese* are a very ingenious and industrious people . . .” he concedes,

is sufficiently evinced, from the great number of curious manufactures which are established amongst them, and which are eagerly sought for by the most distant nations; but though skill in the handicraft arts seems to be the most valuable qualification of this people, yet their talents therein are but of a second rate kind; for they are much outdone by the *Japanese* in those manufactures, which are common to both countries; and they are in numerous instances incapable of rivaling the mechanic dexterity of the *Europeans*.⁹⁵

For Anson, imitation is all a Chinese workman can manage, laboring “under that poverty of genius, which constantly attends all servile imitators,”⁹⁶ and he is incapable of producing any “works which require great truth and accuracy.”⁹⁷ The language of the complaints is highly significant, and the lack of “truth and accuracy” perceived in Chinese manufactures extends easily in Anson’s account to their producers, and to society as a whole. “Their magistrates are corrupt, their people thievish,” he fumes, and “in artifice [and] falsehood . . . the Chinese are difficult to be paralleled by any other people.”⁹⁸ Even the Chinese language, which reflected “obstinacy and absurdity,” was the instrument of a dishonest people, since “the history and inventions of past ages, recorded by these perplexed symbols, must frequently prove unintelligible; and consequently the learning and boasted

⁹³ Walter, *Voyage Round the World*, pp. 397–398.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 411–412.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 393, 414.

antiquity of the Nation must, in numerous instances, be extremely problematical.”⁹⁹

Anson’s account anticipates a more subtle but unmistakable late eighteenth-century turn against the Chinese people, and against China in general, that can be related directly to material culture. By 1764 even Voltaire, a noted Sinophile, wondered in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* why “we go to China looking for clay, as if we had none.”¹⁰⁰ And the once magical ceramic-repairing abilities of the Chinese that had so amazed Ricci and Navarette were now in evidence on European streets. A handbill of Edward Coombs [Coombes] of Queen Street, Bristol, “China burner & mender” (fl. 1778–1820), one of a number of repairers active in Britain during the late eighteenth century, advertises: “Burns all Sorts of Foreign China, such as Dishes, Plates, Bowls, Basons, Tea-Pots, Boats, Coffee-Pots, Mugs, &c. Likewise, Rivets and Rims China Bowls and Glasses in the neatest Manner.”¹⁰¹

Europe, then, had changed significantly by the time Lord Macartney’s (1737–1806) official British delegation—the first of its kind after the mission of 1787–1788 had been aborted—arrived in China in 1793. From the outset, the Macartney mission was inextricably linked to material culture, as for the first time a range of manufactured decorative products from Britain was being presented officially within China. Of primary importance were the objects intended as gifts for the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–1795), which it was hoped would impress the Chinese with evidence of Britain’s technological expertise. Much has been written about the Macartney mission and its failure to secure the trade concessions it sought from the Chinese, which historians have tended to treat as an inevitable consequence of a cultural divide made manifest by the issue of the kowtow.¹⁰² The question of how material culture was understood on both sides has received far less attention.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 412–413.

¹⁰⁰ [Voltaire,] *Dictionnaire philosophique, portative* ([Geneva: Gabriel Grasset,] 1764), p. 87.

¹⁰¹ Handbill from the Blathwayt family papers, dated 1797. Gloucester Archives. D1799/A390. The Bristol Museum and Art Gallery holds a number of ceramic objects bearing the marks of local repairers.

¹⁰² See, for example, Earl H. Pritchard, “The Kowtow in the Macartney Embassy to China in 1793,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (February 1943): 163–203. On the Macartney kowtow in Western historiography, see James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 232–237.

¹⁰³ An exception is Maxine Berg, “Britain, Industry and Perceptions of China: Matthew Boulton, ‘Useful Knowledge’ and the Macartney Embassy to China 1792–94,” *Journal of Global History* 1 (2006): 269–288.

In August 1793 the British delegation prepared to display a selection of gifts in a specially designated part of the Garden of Perfect Brightness (*Yuanmingyuan*) to the north of Beijing. The display was considered by the British to be of immense importance to the embassy as a whole, and in his journal entry of 24 August, Macartney estimates that his men will take “six or seven weeks at soonest” to complete the task.¹⁰⁴ While still under construction the display was examined by three of the emperor’s grandsons:

They particularly admired the clocks and the vases of Derbyshire porcelain. They, however, asked which we thought, our porcelain or theirs, to be preferable. The answer returned to them was that ours was considered as very precious of its kind, otherwise it would not have been offered to the Emperor; but that the value we set upon theirs was easily to be seen by the great quantities which were every year purchased by our merchants at Canton and sent in our shipping to England; and they seemed to be very well satisfied with this indirect explanation.¹⁰⁵

Thus the British display is immediately established as part of a context of competition between the two nations, and it is with some pride that Macartney later notes that despite the “careless indifference” affected by visitors to the British display, “they could not . . . conceal their sense of the beauty and elegance of our Derby porcelain, when they saw the ornamental vases belonging to Vulliamy’s clocks.”¹⁰⁶ To these observations Sir George Staunton’s (1737–1801) account of 1797 adds that “these specimens of the beauty of European manufacture were universally acknowledged and extolled.”¹⁰⁷ Later in his account Staunton takes his argument a step further, claiming that clay can be processed to a better standard “by the improved mills of England, than by the very imperfect machinery of the Chinese,” while

¹⁰⁴ *An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord Macartney during his Embassy to the Emperor Ch’ien-lung 1793–1794*, ed. J. L. Cranmer-Byng (London: Folio Society, 2004), p. 41.

¹⁰⁵ Macartney, *Embassy to China*, pp. 42–43.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235. Macartney uses the term “Derby” or “Derbyshire” porcelain in a general sense (most of the British-made ceramics were from Staffordshire). The mission brought with it a catalogue and selected items of Wedgwood porcelain to the value of £169 17s (p. 273).

¹⁰⁷ Sir George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China; Including Cursory Observations Made, and Information Obtained, in Travelling through that Ancient Empire, and a Small Part of Chinese Tartary* (London: G. Nicol, 1797), 2:341–342.

the “precarious” nature of Chinese porcelain manufacture could surely be controlled by European science: “Mr. Wedgwood’s thermometer, founded on the quality, observed by him . . . of clay contracting in proportion to the degree of fire to which it is exposed, might certainly be of use to a Chinese potter.”¹⁰⁸ And this British perception that their own technology had now matched, and even surpassed, that of China is further suggested by Macartney’s failed attempts to recruit British cotton and ceramics specialists to the embassy: “I at last found that the failure arose in some degree from a jealousy, which arose in some men’s minds of any tradesmen sent with me remaining in China, and communicating some of the most valuable processes of their art, instead of returning home fraught with new lights from hence.”¹⁰⁹ The jealously guarded secrets of manufacture now belonged very much to European producers.¹¹⁰

Macartney expresses admiration for “the excellent quality of the China silk,” the “beauty and variety of their porcelain,” and indeed their “great skill in many branches of the arts,”¹¹¹ but he is far from universally impressed. “Their printing, such as I saw, is merely a wooden cut,” he observes, and “from the necessary accuracy of the process, and the tediousness of the execution, it would seem that new publications are not very frequent, and that knowledge is not so rapidly disseminated in China as in England.”¹¹² Once again, the identity of the Chinese is for Macartney closely tied to their productions. They possess some skill in the art of the garden, he concedes, but it is a skill “upon which they value themselves so highly, as they do indeed upon everything else that affords them the slightest pretension.”¹¹³ And throughout the embassy, Chinese responses to British manufactures provide a great source of annoyance. He grumbles that “notwithstanding their complete ignorance” the Chinese officials had “pretended to understand, at half a word, all the machinery” of the British telescopes.¹¹⁴ Chinese workmen are “not accustomed to handle articles of such delicate machinery”

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:300–301.

¹⁰⁹ Cited in Bannister, *First French Embassy to China*, pp. lxxiv–lxxv.

¹¹⁰ One might draw a contrast here with the “great liberality of mind” shown by Macartney’s official host, who “sent a Mandarin to the distance of forty miles with orders to get for us some pieces of petuntse and kaolin and other materials used by the Chinese in the manufacture of their porcelain” (Macartney, *Embassy to China*, p. 138).

¹¹¹ Macartney, *Embassy to China*, pp. 231, 241.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 241–242.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

as those brought by the delegation,¹¹⁵ and he is irritated by Chinese officials, who believed, characteristically, “that labour, not skill, was the only thing necessary” to assemble the emperor’s gifts.¹¹⁶ Above all, Macartney is exasperated that “neither Qianlong himself nor those about him appeared to have any curiosity” with regard to the inventions brought by the delegation, and he concludes that it is “the policy of the present Government to discourage all novelties, and to prevent their subjects as much as possible from entertaining a higher opinion of foreigners than of themselves.”¹¹⁷ The Chinese have become for Macartney ignorant and backward when it comes to British goods, and arrogant and deluded when it comes to their own.

CONCLUSION

Michael Adas is right to stress the highly critical attitudes toward Chinese science and technology of the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and Jesuits like Le Comte and Dominique Parennin (1665–1741), whose writings on China shaped the views of Europe’s great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century intellectuals.¹¹⁸ But Adas gives short shrift to material culture, and, arguably, imported luxury goods from China such as porcelain reached far greater numbers of Europeans than did the writings of these men. Indeed, the visitors to China whose accounts we have explored here seem to have been aware of the widespread interest in manufactured goods held by their domestic audiences. European accounts of pre-nineteenth-century China were from the very beginning inextricably linked to interpretations of material culture, and for the writers of these accounts the very identity of the Chinese people is formed in part by an ability to produce such goods. Polo had described the Chinese manufacture of porcelain in amazed admiration—the preternatural patience and foresight required of a potter who put aside clay for future generations was surely indicative of a superior civilization. As Europeans began to understand better the processes of manufacture, and the objects themselves increasingly came within reach of a wider cross section of society, their awestruck admiration for the Chinese people began to break down. By the eighteenth century the steady, patient confidence of the Chinese had for

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 94.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 234 (romanization altered for consistency).

¹¹⁸ Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, pp. 81–95.

Macartney and Staunton become a backward, unresponsive arrogance. And where in the seventeenth century the “art and invention” of Chinese artisans had amazed Johan Nieuwhof and his delegation, these qualities had a century later become “artifice and falsehood” for George Anson.

By adding explorations of the role of material culture and of porcelain in particular in these early modern Sino-European encounters to Adas’s analysis of European observations on Chinese science and technology, a more complex picture emerges. While it is impossible to measure with any certainty the degree to which any one aspect of a culture informs any one observer’s response, we would argue that for European travelers, perceptions of Chinese material culture and the construction of “Chineseness” were from the beginning mutually generating. The hitherto underacknowledged role of “things” assumes a greater significance within the wider context of the Sino-European relationship, which, as Macartney set sail for the return voyage to Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, sat on the brink of a complete breakdown. The connections that shaped the early modern world have thus far been explored primarily by area studies specialists and economic historians. The addition of material culture into this history has the potential not only to provide a more nuanced understanding of the period, but also, as here, to highlight the ways in which these connections could break down.

How then did Chinese observers understand the British material culture presented by the Macartney mission? The official position was famously articulated by the Qianlong Emperor himself, as he rejected British products in two edicts that would later be taken up by early twentieth-century historians as landmarks of Qing China’s stubborn refusal to modernize.¹¹⁹ The unofficial Chinese position was perhaps somewhat more complicated. A list of items unloaded by the embassy when it landed near Tianjin as recorded in a local gazette included dwarfs, fantastical creatures, and an enchanted pillow capable of transporting a sleeper across continents instantaneously.¹²⁰ For a moment at least, Europe had become even more exotic than the blue-and-white willow-pattern fantasies of Cathay being produced in Staffordshire.

¹¹⁹ For Qianlong’s edicts, see Pei-kai Cheng and Michael Lestz, eds., *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1999), pp. 103–109. On the edicts’ place in Western historiography see Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, pp. 238–239.

¹²⁰ Macartney, *Embassy to China*, p. 59.

