1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Lu, Xinyao (2022) "Empire, Exoticism, and Heterotopia: The Interior of a Chinese Shop," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2022.120109

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol12/iss1/9>

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Empire, Exoticism, and Heterotopia:

The Interior of a Chinese Shop

Xinyao Lu

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The Dutch empire in the seventeenth century was a global trading center and an avid consumer of Chinese porcelain. As a result, the flood of imagery from China and about China transformed into melded decorative motifs that fashioned mercantile aesthetics for European consumers.¹ Artists who were inspired by those exotic objects went on to create artifacts to cater to the interests of the upper class. For instance, an artifact from the V&A museum reveals the hybridity of the melded oriental motifs and the Netherlandish painting tradition (fig. 1). The painting depicts an imaginary Chinese shop packed with Chinese porcelains and other oriental objects. In a similar fashion, a series of female customers with Persian and Indian styles of clothes appear in the centre of the scene, looking around curiously. The miniature used to function as a pleated Chinese fan, though it was later expanded into a painting, probably for a commemorative purpose because fans were expensive and ephemeral accessories.² The depicted scene of the miniature and its transformation from a fan to a

¹ Dawn Odell, "Porcelain, Print Culture and Mercantile Aesthetics," in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, ed. by Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 142.

² Suet May Lam, "From Ephemeral to Eternal: Unfolding Early Modern 'Fashion' for Asia," in *European Fans in the 17th and 18th Centuries: Images, Accessories, and Instruments of Gesture*, ed. by Miriam Volmert and Daijela Bucher (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 252, 257.

painting both suggest the desire to collect and the western hegemonic thoughts to regulate the exotic objects within a western norm.

This essay aims to demonstrate that mercantile trading was a crucial way for the empire to gain visual knowledge about its counterpart, and that the imagination of a space overflowing with exotic objects from hybrid cultures under a European architectural or artistic structure forms an imperial fantasy. Because the west learned about the east mainly through the imported objects, their imagination of the oriental space is a space of “heterotopia,” a concept proposed by Foucault that refers to spaces that exist in the real world, a space of otherness. The oriental space is a fantasy that exists in reality, corresponding to the definition. It is a mirror that reflects the anxiety of the west to collect more treasures from the east.

The thirst for oriental luxuries is conveyed through the dislocated exotic objects from their original context into a space of Netherlandish perspectivism. Netherlandish painting perspectivism can be understood as an ‘art of describing’ that pays attention to the textures, colours, surface of objects, and their placement in a legible space.³ The main aim of a Netherlandish painting is to describe an object in as tactile a fashion as possible, even though the general perspective of the space will be slightly distorted. Therefore, the audience is welcomed to start from any point of the painting to enjoy the great details of objects as if walking into a room of collection. In the miniature “Interior of a Chinese shop,” the Netherlandish artist painted Chinese porcelains at every possible corner. They appear on the floor, on the furniture, on the shelf, behind the curtain, and even being picked up by a group of people in the background. Though the porcelains are carefully drawn with great details, the arrangement of the objects is casual. As pictorial elements of exoticism, they only have a

³ Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. by Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 13.

decorative function in the scene. Meanwhile, the original context of the Chinese porcelains was discarded because the artist had never travelled to the east. He presumably studied the objects in Europe instead. The miniature thus corresponds to the concept of “heterotopia of deviation,” an institution wherein we place individuals whose behaviour is deviated from the norm.⁴ In Foucault’s description, this emplacement emerges from a society that is too vast and complex to manage social disorder in an organic way. Therefore, the society must produce emplacements where deviation may be managed. Because an empire is vast and complex, according to Foucault’s theory, it is a corollary that spaces of deviation emerge within an empire. In relation to the painting, the material, composition, perspective, and the selection of the objects in the miniature establishes the norm of the west, but the exotic patterns and details of each object are outside of the norm.

The accumulation of porcelains indicates mercantile fetishism under mercantile trading. W. Schmidgen introduces the notion of “mercantile fetish” to describe the economic system of the early modern period in Europe. Enumeration was a crucial element to balance the trade in the context of mercantilism because trading in the early modern period relied on a detailed list of material objects that featured specific designation, qualification, and classification. Enumeration seems to be inclusive, but the list is virtually selective and reductive, muffling the human presence and emphasizing pure materiality.⁵ From the perspective of mercantilism, we could explain why the Chinese porcelains on the painting are disarrayed. Under the mercantile trade mode, it is not possible to set a clear boundary between the use value and the exchange value, because there is hardly any universal knowledge between the trading countries. As trading objects, the porcelain is reduced as enumeration on the list. When it is transferred from the east to the west, the porcelain’s use

⁴ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986): 4.

⁵ Wofram Schmidgen, “Robinson Crusoe, Enumeration, and the Mercantile Fetish,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35.1 (2001): 21-22.

value is context-bound. It generates a new value of use in the European context, which represents an imperial fantasy. The destabilization of value between radically differentiated social orders generates fetishistic qualities.⁶ Under the influence of fetishism that the porcelain is imbued with in Europe, the object is embedded in a new life different from its original context. In this bizarre oriental space on the painting, the east is objectified through the list of items that are visually displayed. The painting is thus a graphical enumeration of trading items that reflects the desire for “epistemological credibility.”⁷ However, the appearance of arbitrary inclusiveness is inherently selective. That power to select and arrange multiple spaces and multiple times demonstrates that it is a space of heterotopia.⁸ The power to juxtapose several emplacements in a single real place implies a willingness to organize opposition in a strategic manner, in order to produce a sense of completeness and a perception of order.

The mingling of different cultures that are generally located to the east of Europe reflects the cosmopolitan nature of mercantile trading. The space is a hybridity that does not refer to any specific country or actual place in the east, but a place of “otherness” that is condemned by Edward Said as a result of western hegemony.⁹ The eighteenth-century mania for Chinoiserie is attributed to the fascination with exoticism within the romance of empire.¹⁰ In the painting, the annatto furniture, folding screen paintings, and the exotic themes on the panels hanging on the wall all have different origins. Objects from Persia, India, and China are gathered together. The excess of the visually exotic elements is actively selected by the

⁶ Schmidgen, 28.

⁷ Schmidgen, 22.

⁸ Foucault, 26.

⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 5.

¹⁰ David L. Porter, “Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 35.3 (2002): 398.

west as an articulation of difference, referring to the boundary between the west and the east instead of a concrete region.¹¹ The polarity set by Said between the Orient and the Occident, however, should be treated vigilantly in this scene, because the boundary between the Self and the Other is not that clear. Not only do the different oriental cultures fuse together, but the European setting also insinuates into the space. The blurring between the east and the west reveals the willingness of the west to gain an epistemological and comprehensive knowledge of the world, but at the same time, the west infuses it with their own fantasy and expectation of how the orient should look according to the paradigm of European knowledge structure. Moreover, though different cultures were mingled in the scene, they were aesthetically incompatible to each other. It was the taxonomy and classification that changed the empire's own reflexive image. The origins of the objects could be discerned and traced in reality, however, within the surreal space of imperial fantasy, their intact linkage with their original context transformed the space of Europe, rather than the space of the east.

Exoticism is an ideological structure that runs behind mercantilism to encourage the circulation of trade. Pinney introduced the term "Creole Europe" to describe the phenomenon of xeno-figures, which are artefacts that are made from a hybrid culture and reveal multi-cultural attribution. He declared that the exotic is "a privileged state of liminality and anxiety."¹² Therefore, exotic objects frequently appeared as a person-thing or quasi-object in the early modern period. They are expressive of an agency beyond the "classificatory abilities of colonial structures."¹³ The preservation of object autonomy is a way to separate the self from the other, but the mingling of different oriental cultures suggests a typical western willingness to comprehend the knowledge of the world through classification and scientific

¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question...", *Screen*, 24.6 (1983): 19.

¹² Christopher Pinney, "Creole Europe: The Reflection of a Reflection," *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, no. 20 (2002): 148.

¹³ Pinney, 148.

spirit. Ironically, imperial fantasy slips into the seemingly inclusive, objective, and reasonable world of the archive, resulting in a mirror that reflects nothing except the desire of itself. It indicates the power of heterotopia to enact a break from the normal flow of time and to pursue eternity. The miniature gathers different times and geographies into an archive, revealing a timeless image of the orient. The anachronism of the miniature results in a stable stereotype of the east that is more emotionally powerful than scenes which are historically accurate.

Evidently, the space of heterotopia is not about oriental cultures in its usual sense, but about the western representation of cultures in the east. What is the influence of the imperial fantasy then? What is the effect of the discrepancy between reality and fantasy? The west assumed an empire that also promoted mercantile economy and treasured marvelous luxuries, but the reality was quite different. In China, for instance, the Qing Dynasty was still in an age of natural economy, and merchants had the lowest social status after the scholars, farmers, and artisans. The concept of “empire” is ontologically different in the east. Thomas Richard explained an empire as a “nation that has taken over too many countries too far away from home to control them effectively.”¹⁴ The impulse to expand, capture, and colonize other cultures is a distinctive characteristic of the western concept of “empire.” However, the imperial Chinese tributary system suggests an entirely different concept of “empire” that does not aim at territorial expansion. The system was a network of loose international relations that recognized China as the focus. The other nations surrounding China had to send a tributary envoy to China on a schedule and acknowledge its superiority and precedence, but the political actors within the tributary system were independent and autonomous.¹⁵ The

¹⁴ Thomas Richard, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (Brooklyn: Verso, 1993), 1.

¹⁵ Samuel C Chu and Kwang-Ching, *Liu Hung-Chang and China's Early Modernization* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994; repr. Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2016), 177.

empire in the east flourished in a different way from the scene depicted in the miniature, and that caused cultural bias, misunderstanding, and even wars between the east and the west. The desire of mercantile trading was not fulfilled between China and Europe, and that fantasy of a rich eastern empire was disillusioned finally when the Opium War started. As a result, the miniature foreshadowed the tension between the east and the west. The oriental space that European merchants desired and dreamed of represents both the desired object and the idealized self. That empire, fulfilled with women and luxuries from different cultures, is what the Europeans desired. Therefore, the placeless space lies beyond the actual and the tangible, beyond the duality of the self and the other.

Though the European fantasy became an obstacle when the west confronted the east in reality, that same imagination gradually became a widely accepted knowledge that circulated among the European upper-class. The shifting function of the miniature from a fan into a privileged panel suggests that knowledge about the oriental objects was taken more seriously than before. The miniature was presumably designed for European court ladies because the fan was an important accessory for women, not men.¹⁶ It was supposed to be a visually pleasurable scene that fantasized the world of the east, a luxurious fan that enhanced the possessor's social status. The promotion into a panel heightened the significance of the scene into a commemorative fine art that contains allegorical meaning and aesthetic value. It also indicates that the imperial fantasy conveyed by the miniature was not a marginalized imagination, but a cultural stereotype that pervaded Europe, especially among the elites. Thus, specific knowledge about the exotic objects gradually formed the oriental aestheticism. In this way, the imperial fantasy invaded the field of fine art and art history, in which the European upper-class could discuss the world from a seemingly god's eye view without intervening in the real world of the east. That threshold of imperial fantasy corresponds to the

¹⁶ Porter, 402.

characteristics of heterotopia: there is entrance and exclusion to get into the emplacement.¹⁷ Some process or performance is required to enter these emplacements. If the emplacement appears to be open to everybody, it may lead visitors not to a true interior but instead to yet another kind of exterior enclosure. The miniature is a particular product of European elites in that, even though it depicts the east, the people from the east would not find themselves related to the scene. The east is excluded from the oriental space.

The imperial fantasy revealed in the miniature continues to the present. Nowadays we can still find such spaces of heterotopia inside the museum. For instance, the British Museum collects and displays objects from all over the world. The dislocated objects, the intact materiality, and the unrelated white cube turns the painting into a reality. Likewise, the tension and misunderstanding between the west and the east are magnified by globalization and the rise of China. Imperial fantasy used to be a motivation for the west to trade with the east, but that stereotype of a timeless and boundless oriental world would not result in a colonial history in the present world as in the past. Therefore, the miniature is also a vigilant caution against imperial fantasy as it only represents the illusion of the self instead of a true knowledge about the other.

Appendix

¹⁷ Foucault, 26.

Figure 1. Anonymous, *Interior of a Chinese shop*, anonymous, 1680-1700, fan leaf, London, Victoria and Albert Museum. <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O96508/interior-of-a-chinese-shop-fan-leaf-unknown/> (Accessed on 21 November 2021).

About the author

Xinyao Lu is Art History major at the University College London. She intends to do interdisciplinary research across visual art, art history, and Chinese Studies.

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