Introduction

When Father Joachim Bouvet, S.J. (1656–1732), returned to Europe in 1697 from the Jesuit mission in Qing dynasty China, he brought with him a luxurious series of forty-three plates that he had had engraved and colored that year by Pierre Giffart (1638–1723). Giffart took great pains to replicate the details of the Chinese originals. The images included the Kangxi emperor (reigned 1662–1722) and members of the imperial family, prominent men and women of the Manchu elite, bonzes (Buddhist monks), soldiers, and scholar officials (figure 1), wearing either ceremonial robes or clothing appropriate to their rank and occupation. Many viewers admired the svelte elegance of the portraits of Chinese ladies with their exquisite coifs (figure 2), and European women were advised to emulate the appealing modesty and virtue of their East Asian counterparts. Bouvet's book with Giffart's images was published as *L'État présent de la Chine en figures* (The Present State of China in Images), dedicated to the duke and duchess of Burgundy. It was intended to demonstrate the cultural sophistication of China, which many felt compared favorably to "the happy reign of Louis XIV."[1] Indeed, Catholic France was the major market for the publication, and the Sun King himself was more than a little curious about his Chinese counterpart and the distant empire over

1. Pierre Giffart, *Officier de Robe Mandarin [Mandarin Official]*, from Joachim Bouvet, *L'état présent de la Chine en figures*, colored engraving, 1697.

2. Pierre Giffart, *Dame Chinoise Mandarine [Chinese Lady]*, from Joachim Bouvet, *L'état présent de la Chine en figures*, colored engraving, 1697.

which he reigned. Bouvet visited the French court to raise funds and recruit additional volunteers for the China mission. Although the results of his effort were less satisfactory than the Jesuit fathers had hoped, Bouvet's descriptions of the Qing empire served to increase an interest in China that was already evident. European knowledge of East Asia had been growing exponentially since the late sixteenth century, most of it owing to Catholic publications and a vast epistolary network of missionaries, scholars, ecclesiastical administrators, merchants, and diplomats. Even so eminent a philosopher

as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) so valued information about China that in 1705 he could write: "It is impossible for even a bare but accurate description of their practices not to give us very considerable enlightenment, and one that is much more useful in my view than the knowledge of the rites and furniture of the Greeks and Romans to which so many scholars devote themselves."[2] Leibniz's telling challenge to the paradigm of civilization in ancien régime Europe—Greco-Roman antiquity—indicates the intellectual esteem in which many of his contemporaries held the emerging discipline of Sinology.

The enthusiasm in France and throughout Europe that greeted *L'Etat présent de la Chine en figures* was characteristic of the highly positive view of the Qing Empire that pervaded the Western consciousness from the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in China in the last quarter of the sixteenth century until the imperial edict banning proselytization was promulgated by the Kangxi emperor in 1722. Initially optimistic about prospects for the conversion of the emperor and his court to Catholic Christianity, Western observers found that such hopes had dimmed considerably by the second decade of the eighteenth century and were virtually extinguished soon afterwards. China's immensity and remoteness from Europe precluded any colonial or military intervention, and because the Chinese refused to trade with the West on an equal footing, there was little recourse but to tolerate an exchange imbalance, given European demand for tea, lacquer, paper, porcelain, and other products for which the Chinese demanded payment in silver, only occasionally agreeing to accept woolen cloth, clocks, and astronomical instruments. The only avenue open for the expression of European frustration at what was viewed as an intolerable and humiliating situation was through culture, both textual and visual, an idea to which I shall return in due course.

Chinoiserie, a Western artistic style that adapted Chinese originals for its own purposes, was originally invested in more or less authentic depictions

of the Eastern empire, but beginning in the early eighteenth century, authenticity and humanized depictions of Chinese bodies, architecture, leisure pastimes, and performances of social rank gave way to a grotesque, dehumanized, and, in the case of male bodies especially, a remarkable degree of feminization. Chinese architecture, rather than being rendered as intriguingly exotic and the product of an old and venerable civilization, was visualized in eighteenth-century chinoiserie as flimsy, insubstantial, and hopelessly antiquated. Similarly, distinctions of rank, so important in both Western and Asian cultures, were blurred, a means of both denigrating and mocking authentic Chinese social practices. This book will examine the history of contact between the Roman Catholic Church and Catholic courts and late Ming and early Qing China, in the context of the role of the latter in the Western imagination. My argument centers on the notion that perceptions of China were favorable, often extravagantly so, until the collapse of the Catholic missions there in the last years of Kangxi's reign. Although some Westerners continued to praise China, most began to disparage it as a corrupt empire ruled by a feminized and decadent court. European chinoiserie was a key player in this dramatic change in tack, and I consider it as a form of political and cultural expression, in opposition to traditional interpretations of the phenomenon as merely a flight of Rococo fantasy indulged in by artists in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. A reconsideration of chinoiserie as an intellectual change agent in the alteration of Western thinking about China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is the goal of this book.

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Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the founder of the Jesuit mission in China, was arguably the first prominent European Sinologist. His letters and the works published by his followers did much to transmit a realistic image of China to Europe. Ricci's high praise of the late Ming emperors with whom he had

contact helped create favorable comparison of East Asian monarchs to Catholic European rulers. Of the Chinese political structure, Ricci wrote: "If of this kingdom [China] one cannot say that philosophers are kings, at least with truth one will say that the kings are ruled by philosophers."[3] Such a statement helped promote a flattering view of the imperial administration, as did the description of the requirement that those seeking to occupy important public offices in China take civil service exams, a practice that some argued the European polities should adopt. Although the Jesuits recommended the wise rule of scholar officials to their readers back home, in practice the imperial system was far from ideal, as many merchants and other missionaries who had to deal with it could (and did) testify.

A map of Beijing, published in 1662 and preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (figure 3), shows the Chinese administration to great advantage. In the image, two seated Chinese worthies flank a cartouche bearing the text *Pecheli sive Peking Imperii Sinarum Provincia Prima* (Pecheli or Peking, First Province of the Chinese Empire). The cartouche is decorated with a pair of large exotic birds. Each of the officials, their feet resting on ample cushions, is shaded from the sun by a standing servant who holds a gold sunshade with cloth flaps. The more richly dressed official has a fabric panel on his torso decorated with two cranes, auspicious birds that also indicate high rank. Both officials and attendants are represented in naturalistic proportions, and the distinctions of rank between them are obvious, even to a European audience. Western representations of Chinese men and the imaging of niceties of social and political rank, phenomena that change through the period considered here , are a major theme of chapter 3.

The notion of Chinese exceptionalism, developed in tandem with the rise of Sinophilia during the middle decades of the seventeenth century, was fomented in part by the laudatory accounts of the Jesuits and in part by the widespread enthusiasm for the Chinese luxury objects coming into Europe in enormous quantities. Porcelain and lacquer especially encouraged the

3. Map of the province of Beijing, with figures, colored engraving, 1662. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.

exceptionalist argument, because Europeans were still ignorant of the actual processes that created such exquisite, and to them mysterious, objects. Louis-Daniel Le Comte articulates the exceptionalist claim most clearly in his *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine* (New Observations on the Present State of China), published in 1696, a book much indebted to earlier publications, in particular Father Athanasius Kircher's *China monumentis, qua sacris qua profanis illustrata* (The Monuments of China, Both Sacred and

Profane Illustrated; usually called simply *China illustrata*), of 1667.[4] By the end of the seventeenth century, both economic and political exchanges between France and the Qing court in Beijing were well developed, and European chinoiserie, which was then extremely fashionable, was largely positive in its characterization of East Asia. The cultural, political, and scientific admiration of China, however, would soon veer dramatically in a negative direction.

The historian Nicholas Dew has aptly characterized European Sinophilia in the age of Louis XIV as "baroque orientalism," a phrase that also suggests a helpful way to think of the exoticized but admiring attitude toward China visualized in chinoiserie.[5] The study of global history in this period was dominated by a universalizing gaze that welcomed Chinese chronicles, many of them undeniably ancient, as contributions to the scholarly reconstruction of the past. But when the eighteenth-century Enlightenment rejected universal history in favor of discrete national narratives, Chinese sources were increasingly viewed with suspicion, their august pedigree impugned. In addition, baroque orientalism, as a highly developed phenomenon that predated European colonialist adventures in East Asia, not only situated China beyond European control, but also placed it on an equal footing with the Ottoman, Persian, and Mughal empires, which had stood outside Western power dynamics long before the eighteenth century. This is a crucial point, because when the Qing emperors definitively rejected Christianity and free trade with the West in the 1720s, Europeans could do very little to counter them.

Throughout the eighteenth century, however, Europe used chinoiserie increasingly to feminize and trivialize the "Celestial Empire" in the popular imagination, so that by 1800 China had been transformed from the baroque orientalist society of philosopher-kings, able administrators, and producers of modern luxury marvels to a squalid, corrupt, and backward despotism in which a tottering throne oppressed the populace. The lingering Jesuit view

of an exemplary China was slowly extinguished.[6] It was even suggested that Chinese "frivolity" was caused by a lack of the virility necessarily associated with a vibrant civilization, and progressives claimed that Qing society had much in common with the louche aristocracy of the ancien régime, a censorious characterization also brought to bear on the rococo during its period of decline.[7] When the Qianlong emperor died in 1799, the European colonial project had developed sufficiently to bring China to heel, as it did during the First Opium War (1839–42), and the Western colonial powers neither forgot nor forgave their earlier impotence vis-à-vis the Beijing court.

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This book makes three arguments about the history of European chinoiserie from about 1600 to the end of the eighteenth century.

First, it introduces the vital importance of the Christian mission in China to both social and artistic developments in Europe. My narrative focuses especially on the Catholic courts, where fervent hopes of converting the Ming and Qing emperors to Roman Catholicism waxed until they collapsed utterly over the fraught issue of the Chinese rites, which are discussed in chapter 1. Although the Western desire to convert China to Christianity was probably sincere, the mission was also promoted as a means to open lucrative markets in East Asian goods, which were much in demand. Art histories of chinoiserie have largely ignored the role of the Church and its efforts to convert the East, except as a source of the images that appeared in missionary publications and as a resource for visual material. The Church's role in cultural and artistic exchange, however, extended well beyond providing an image database for artists. Decisions made by the Curia in Rome and by a series of popes had a direct impact on the China mission, as well as on European attitudes toward the Chinese Empire through time.

Second, the book argues that a fundamental change occurred in the chinoiserie aesthetic in the early years of the eighteenth century, a widely rec-

ognized phenomenon that has been attributed almost exclusively to the rise of the rococo style, with its whimsical fantasies, some of which just happened to have a vague association with East Asia. The command by the Kangxi emperor and his successors, the Yongzheng (reigned 1722–35) and Qianlong (reigned 1735–99) emperors, that missionary activities cease played a vital role in the aesthetic shift in chinoiserie in the mid-eighteenth century, giving a highly negative charge to images of Chinese people, architecture, clothing, and even social practices. (It should be noted that Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong are not personal names but designations for periods of reign. Because of their relative familiarity, they are often used to refer to the emperors themselves, and I shall use the terms interchangeably for persons and periods.)

Third, the shift from appreciating China as a venerable, well-governed realm to disdaining it as an entity that was decadent, rickety, unthreatening, feminized, and on the verge of collapse is seen most clearly in the gross distortions and feminization of the Chinese male body, a phenomenon that lays the foundation for later visualizations and characterizations of East Asians. Ancien régime chinoiserie transformed the Western conception of China, from the promotion of it as fundamentally similar—and for many equal—to the West into a denigration that underscored difference and reimagined the East as utterly alien and indubitably inferior.

I begin my argument by examining the role of the Church, from the Middle Ages on, in exchanges between Catholic Europe and East Asia. This discussion culminates in the definitive establishment of the Jesuit mission under the leadership of Matteo Ricci, one of the most influential champions of China in the early modern era. Ricci and his small band of brothers made fundamental contributions to the emerging discipline of Sinology, and provided the most trusted sources of knowledge about China until their claims began to be seriously interrogated during the Enlightenment. After arguing for the importance of Jesuit ideas in the development of the more positive

forms of European chinoiserie characteristic of the seventeenth century, I turn to the mania for chinoiserie from about 1600 to its remarkable transformation during the 1720s, precisely the decade in which the Manchu emperors forbade further Christian proselytizing. I see this development as a vicarious punishment by the West of a previously admired polity that had haughtily rejected Catholic Europe's most precious commodity—the "true" religion. Because China was impervious to military coercion and unyielding to Western attempts to establish free trade (reducing the West to sending silver to purchase Chinese goods), one of the few venues remaining in which to assert European superiority was visual culture. It has long been recognized that an effective way to create hierarchy is to feminize rivals, and that is exactly what happened in much chinoiserie of the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century.

It is standard practice in the history of art as a discipline to make works of art and material culture the chief category of evidence in an argument, but if the millions of objects imported into Europe from East Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are taken into account, it is also problematic. I must necessarily severely restrict my examples, and even though quantities of chinoiserie objects do not support my argument, I make no apology for selecting those that do. Still, the widely acknowledged shift from "good China" to "bad China" in chinoiserie that took place in the second quarter of the eighteenth century cannot have materialized only from artistic choices and changes in taste. It is too widespread, too sudden, and too decisive.

Confining my arguments to Catholic courts and elites has helped me focus more closely on the Church's role in the development of chinoiserie in a global context, but it has the disadvantage of presenting relatively little evidence from the United Provinces (now known as the Netherlands) and the British Isles, which were both hugely important emporia for East Asian goods that also made significant contributions to chinoiserie. With few

exceptions, I base my narrative on objects produced in Catholic states for Catholic patrons, juxtaposed to works of East Asian art available in Europe and including evidence from the Protestant maritime powers only for purposes of comparison. The study of global chinoiserie has been more deeply developed in the British and Dutch contexts than in the context of Catholic Europe, thanks to the work of scholars such as Christiaan Jörg, Dawn Odell, Julie Hochstrasser, and Stacey Sloboda, among others. I hope that this book helps expand the discourse.

In addition to the challenges presented by the almost unfathomable quantity of East Asian works of art and material culture available as artistic inspiration for chinoiserie, there is an additional problem in the broad range of objects. Europeans imported from China (and sometimes Japan) printed and unprinted fabrics that served as points of departure in chinoiserie designs for wallpaper, clothing, folding screens, fans, endpapers for books, and many other utilitarian and decorative objects. Hugh Honour's pioneering study, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay*, provides myriad examples of such objects.[8] Lacquer furniture from Japan and later China became popular as early as the sixteenth century, and by the 1700s, antique lacquer panels imported from the East were being cannibalized from earlier pieces of furniture and incorporated into new ones of Western manufacture. A stunning example of such hybrid furniture is a *commode à vantaux* (chest of drawers with doors), circa 1780, by the celebrated Parisian cabinetmaker *(ébéniste)* Adam Weisweiler (1744–1820), now in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City (figure 4). In it, five antique Japanese lacquer panels are incorporated into a modern construction of ebony, mahogany, marble, and gilt copper alloy. Indeed, many *ébénistes* adapted the Asian forms seen in imported lacquer to decorate furniture of entirely European production. Chinese silver was also admired and its deployment in chinoiserie parallels that of lacquer, especially in Great Britain. There, a spectacular silver epergne, made in 1761 and attributed to Thomas Pitts (active 1744–93) and also preserved in Kansas

4. Adam Weisweiler, commode *à vantaux*, ebony, marble, mahogany, lacquer, and gilt copper, ca. 1780. Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

City, imitates figural and architectural forms ultimately derived from Chinese art and architecture (figure 5).

By far the most important Chinese luxury import, however, was porcelain, a substance whose polished, radiant surfaces and great durability fascinated Europeans, often to the point of obsession. Although my narrative includes works in a variety of media, I privilege porcelain, for it was without question the most ubiquitous East Asian art encountered in Europe. Western attempts to manufacture porcelain whose quality compared to that produced by the Chinese were realized only in the eighteenth century, despite sustained and determined efforts. Asian porcelain was also the most impor-

5. Thomas Pitts (attributed to), epergne, silver, 1761. Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

tant single source of authentic motifs, although woodblock prints included in books and produced by Chinese artists were also highly influential.[9] In European porcelain, however, one sees the earliest indications of the dismissive, feminized image of China that came to dominate chinoiserie in the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century, a perception that permeated the Western imaginary until the relatively recent emergence of China as an economic powerhouse and a global military presence.