

Michela Catto (ed.)

Enlightened by China

Representations and Myths
in 18th-Century Europe



VIELLA

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in 18th-Century Europe

edited by
Michela Catto

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Cover illustration: William Alexander, “A group of trackers of the vessel at dinner”, in *The Costume of China*, London, W. Miller, 1805, Archive.org.



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Visual Representations of China. Institutions, Society, and Nature in Western Illustrations (c. 1700-1840)

1. *The visual encounter with otherness*

The experience of human and cultural otherness in modern-age Europe was largely mediated through visual perception and imagery. In the pre-photographic era, illustrations complementing textual descriptions and the illustrated book in its many forms were among the principal tools carrying out such mediation, as numerous studies have increasingly documented.¹ This holds true especially for the countries and civilizations of the East, and notably for China. Of the earliest significant works on China in the 16th century, mostly stemming from Jesuit authors, many were accompanied by illustrations and, over time, substantial publications consisting solely of image collections also appeared.

The first such collection devoted to China – neither a travelogue nor an illustrated description, but a true series of portraits – was perhaps *L'Estat présent de la Chine en figures* by Father Joachim Bouvet (1697). This splendid collection of 43 engravings, executed by Parisian bookseller, publisher, and engraver Pierre Giffart (1643-1723) and modelled after original Chinese designs, depicted male and female types – representative figures rather than historical individuals – from the Chinese court and high society. Each type was rendered in both full colour and black and white and accompanied by brief captions, with particular attention to attire as an indicator of rank. The collection opens with a detailed “Idée du gouvernement de la Chine”, leaving no doubt as to the idealized framing of the Chinese imperial government as one of the world’s most perfect, ruled by excellent laws and a wise sovereign, lacking only the light of the Gospel but perfectly capable of receiving it:

In a word, if China is fortunate enough one day to be fully enlightened by the lights of the Gospel, as we have reason to hope, such a wise Government, receiving its final perfection from the Holiness of Christian Law, could be regarded as something even more perfect than Plato’s Republic, and all those beautiful ideas of government that our wisest politicians have ever imagined.²

1. Regarding the 18th century, see *Book Illustration in the Long Eighteenth Century: Reconfiguring the Visual Periphery of the Text*, ed. by Christina Ionescu, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

2. Joachim Bouvet, *L'Estat présent de la Chine en figures*, Paris, chez Pierre Giffart, 1697, p. 4. Translation mine.

Jumping forward approximately a century to the great personal collection of French Minister Henri Léonard Bertin³ – enriched by materials from Beijing and partly incorporated into the monumental *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, &c. des Chinois. Par les Missionnaires de Peking* (1776-1791) – one sees how the demand for illustrated depictions of China grew. This rising demand pursued the idea of authentic representation based on high-quality Chinese materials and expanded the variety of subjects depicted to encompass every aspect of social, cultural, economic, and natural life, as well as the landscape and geography of the Middle Kingdom. The *Mémoires* not only reflect this demand but also, through their illustrations, demonstrate the persistent tendency in the late 18th century to idealize China as a great nation governed by a wise emperor, protector of his subjects and patron of letters and the arts.⁴

It is well known that for much of the 18th century, the Jesuits of the Beijing mission devoted considerable effort to making the visual arts a tool of intercultural exchange and transmitting examples of Chinese artistic skill – especially in painting – to Europe, thereby countering detractors such as Cornelius De Pauw with his criticisms of Chinese artistic abilities, echoing a view already expressed in the *Encyclopédie*.⁵

Given all this, it is no surprise that the theme of visual representations of China in 18th-century European culture has been explored in the past 20 years from various perspectives, focusing on individual authors (Athanasius Kircher, Johann Nieuhoff, Johann van der Aa, Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, Bertin and the *Mémoires*, William Chambers, William Alexander), as well as through digital projects and museum exhibitions.⁶

3. John Finlay, *Henri Bertin and the Representation of China in Eighteenth-Century France*, New York-London, Routledge, 2020; Nathalie Monnet, “Art et politique sous les Qing” for the exhibition *Chine, l'Empire du trait* at the National Library of France in 2004; Chao-Ying Lee, “Les illustrations des *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* (1776-1791): comparaison des styles occidentaux et extrême-orientaux”, PhD dissertation under the direction of Daniel Rabreau, Université de Paris 1, 2004; Chao-Ying Lee, “L'enjeu politique et religieux des modes de représentation dans les *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* (1776-1791)”, *Histoire de l'art*, 51 (2002), pp. 87-99; Joseph Dehergne, “Une grande collection: *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* (1776-1814)”, *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, 72 (1983), pp. 267-298.

4. See n. 12 below.

5. “C’est une sorte de peinture que les Chinois font sur des éventails ou sur la porcelaine, où ils représentent des fleurs, des animaux, des paysages, des figures, &c. avec des couleurs fines & brillantes. Le seul mérite de leur peinture est une certaine propreté & un certain goût d’imitation servile, mais où l’on ne remarque ni génie, ni dessein, ni invention, ni correction” : “Peinture chinoise”, in *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, ed. by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, vol. XII (1765), p. 278, no author. See University of Chicago, ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Autumn 2022 edition), ed. by Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe, available online.

6. On the former, see the sections on China in the digital history project “Visualizing Cultures” at MIT, Boston, founded in 2002 by MIT professors John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa, available online; on the latter, see “China on Paper: European and Chinese Works from the Late Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century”, 6 November 2007-10 February 2008, at the Getty Center of the J. Paul Getty Museum, available online; “Imagining China: the View

Rather than dwelling on individual authors or themes, this essay seeks to understand how the visual experience of China evolved in European culture and public opinion between the 18th and 19th centuries, the image of China addressed here in a strictly figurative sense, albeit inseparable from textual aspects. To clarify, this study does not address cartography or topography despite the fundamental contributions that Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci, Martino Martini, and Giulio Aleni made to shaping the cartographic image of China between the 17th and 18th centuries,⁷ nor does it include specialized iconographies (e.g. the 23 plates of *Flora sinensis* by Michael Boym, Vienna, 1656) or decorative arts, that is, the vast array of figurative motifs on Chinese craft products imported into Europe; sparking the vogue for chinoiserie, these latter not only influenced taste and consumption but also helped fix among the Western public an aesthetic idea of China as linked to technical refinement, detail, chromatic vibrancy, and the exoticism of human and animal, floral, and vegetal motifs.

2. Documentary illustrations: scope and method

The focus here is on documentary illustrations, those intended to convey depictions of Chinese reality alongside printed descriptive texts or through iconographic collections (watercolors or engravings) with or without brief explanatory texts. The adjective “documentary” is used in the awareness that it does not equate to “objectivity”: even realistic illustrations, those not the result of artistic invention, are inevitably influenced by the intentions of their creators and the contexts in which they were produced and disseminated. Every illustrated representation reveals some degree of transformation, be it idealizing or denigrating, exoticizing or domesticating.

The aim is to highlight changes and possible trends in the evolution of illustrations of China available in Europe from roughly the mid-17th to the mid-

from Europe, 1500–1700”, September 2009-January 2020, at the Folger Shakespeare Library, available online; as well as the large exhibition at the Palace Museum in Beijing, “Portrayals from a brush divine”, June 2015-April 2016, for the tercentenary of Castiglione’s arrival in China, available online.

7. Marco Caboara, *Regnum Chinae: The Printed Western Maps of China to 1735*, Leiden, Brill, 2022; *Remapping the World in East Asia: Toward a Global History of the “Ricci Maps”*, ed. by Mario Cams and Elke Papelitzky, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2024; Eugenio Menegon, *Un solo Cielo. Giulio Aleni S.J. (1582-1649). Geografia, arte, scienza, religione dall'Europa alla Cina*, Brescia, Grafo, 1994; Giulio Aleni, *Geografia dei paesi stranieri alla Cina. Zhifang waiji*, translation, introduction and annotations by Paolo De Troia, Brescia, Fondazione Civiltà Bresciana-Centro Giulio Aleni, 2009; *Scholar from the West: Giulio Aleni S.J. (1582-1649) and the Dialogue between Christianity and China*, ed. by Tiziana Lippiello and Roman Malek, Brescia-Sankt Augustin, Fondazione Civiltà Bresciana and Monumenta Serica Institute, 1997; Federico Lombardi SJ, “Martino Martini: The Jesuit who introduced China to Europe”, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, June 2023; Giuseppe O. Longo, *Il gesuita che disegnò la Cina. La vita e le opere di Martino Martini*, Milan, Springer, 2010; *La storia della cartografia e Martino Martini*, ed. by Elena Dai Prà, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2015.

19th century, privileging a broad perspective over close analysis of individual works and authors.⁸ To this end, the first step was to draft a preliminary, and necessarily incomplete, inventory identifying the quantity, nature, authors, and dissemination channels for these images.

This inventory yielded 30 main titles, from Johann Nieuhoff's *L'ambassade de la Compagnie orientale des Provinces Unies vers l'empereur de la Chine* (Leiden, 1665) to Thomas Allom's *The Chinese Empire Illustrated* (London–New York, 1842–1845, 2 vols), spanning a long series of works. Of these, the most significant include Kircher's *China illustrata* (1667), Olfert Dapper's *Atlas Chinensis* (1671), Pieter Boudewyn van der Aa's *La galerie agréable du monde* (1729), Du Halde's *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* (1735, 4 vols), the aforementioned *Mémoires* (1776–1791), Alexander's *The Costume of China* (1805), and George Henry Mason's *The Costume of China* (1800) and *The Punishments of China* (1801): a mix of travel accounts or descriptive syntheses and image collections with explanatory texts, such as Bouvet's work. Excluding important works with few or no illustrations, e.g. Le Comte's *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine* (1696), the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, Joseph-Marie-Anne de Moyriac de Mailla's and abbé Jean-Baptiste Gabriel Alexandre Grosier's *Histoire générale de la Chine* (1785), and André Everard Van Braam Houckgeest's *Voyage de l'ambassade de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales hollandaises, vers l'empereur de la Chine* (1794–1795) – the corpus amounts to over 2,300 illustrations. Rather than a close analysis, which would be impossible here, the study offers a dual perspective: highlighting quantitative and qualitative aspects, and focusing on certain themes and cases of particular significance in light of evolving knowledge about, and overall relations between, Europe and China.

8. For example, Marcia Reed, "Bernard Picart on China: 'Curious' Discourses and Images Taken Principally from Jesuit Sources" and Catherine E. Clark, "Chinese Idols and Religious Art: Questioning Difference in *Cérémonies et Coutumes Religieuses*", in *Bernard Picart and the First Global Vision of Religion*, ed. by Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, Los Angeles, The Getty Research Institute, 2010, pp. 215–234 and 235–250, respectively; Steff Nellis, "A Cabinet of Religious Curiosities. Theatricality and Performativity in Bernard Picart's Illustrations for the *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (1723–1737)", *Images Re-vues*, Hors-série 12 | 2024, available online; Paola Von Wyss Giacosa, "Visual Provocations. Bernard Picart's illustrative strategies in *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*", in *Feeling Exclusion Religious Conflict, Exile and Emotions in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Giovanni Tarantino and Charles Zika, London, Routledge, 2019, pp. 233–258; Paola Von Wyss Giacosa, "Investigating religion visually: On the role and significance of engravings in Athanasius Kircher's discourse on Idolatry", *Asdiwal*, 7 (2012), pp. 119–149; Jing Sun, *The Illusion of Verisimilitude: Johan Nieuhoff's Images of China*, Universiteit Leiden Repository, 2013, available online; Chao-Ying Lee, *Visions de l'Empire du Milieu. Illustrations des Mémoires concernant les Chinois*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2016; Chen Yushu, "William Alexander's Image of Qing Cina", *Monumenta Serica*, 67, 2 (December 2019), pp. 397–440; Stacey Sloboda, "Picturing China: William Alexander and the visual language of Chinoiserie", *The British Art Journal*, 9/2 (Autumn 2008), pp. 28–36.

3. *Thematic variety and shifting focus*

A first noteworthy element is the thematic variety of the illustrations: in varying proportions depending on the author, they cover subjects from views and landscapes to institutions, social and economic life, natural resources, and religion. Kircher (1667), in his 68 illustrations, emphasizes animal and plant subjects followed by writing and religion; Johan Nieuhoff (1665) focuses nearly half of his one 133 images on city views, landscapes, and nature; Dapper (1671), in 89 illustrations, grants equal importance to landscapes, social figures, institutions, and administration. Van der Aa (1729) devotes 40 per cent of his 249 illustrations in his three “Chinese” volumes to city and monument views; Du Halde addresses geography in over 60 per cent of his 101 illustrations, with the remainder equally divided among other themes; the 16 volumes of the *Mémoires* (1776-1791) contain 176 illustrations, nearly half depicting political-institutional and historical themes, and 26 per cent on culture, science, and music. Alexander, an artist with the Macartney Embassy (1792-1794), in his 35 sketches inserted into George Thomas Staunton’s *Authentic Account of the Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (1797) focuses mainly on urban and rural views, followed by politics and institutions, and then economic, technical, and infrastructural themes, giving less attention to religion (nine per cent); in his *Costume of China* (1805), 48 plates depict, in descending order of frequency, politics and institutions, economic activities and trades, and especially rural landscapes; in *Picturesque Representations of the Dress and Manners of the Chinese* (1814), over half the images concern trades, professions, and social figures, with a consistently small share devoted to religious subjects. This distribution is nearly identical in Jean-Baptiste Joseph Breton de la Martinière’s *La Chine en miniature* (1811-1812), Bazin de Malpière’s *La Chine, mœurs, usages, costumes* (1825), and Auguste Borget’s *La Chine et les Chinois* (1842), where 85 per cent of the 32 images are social, clothing styles, or economic subjects. Rural and urban landscapes, scenes of domestic and social life, and various economic activities predominate (77 per cent) among the 128 splendid illustrations of Allom’s *China in a Series of Views* (1842-1845).

Over nearly two centuries, there was a visible decline in attention to religion and cults and a marked increase in interest in society – its economic activities, classes, figures, and trades – and in landscape and urban views, with a consistently stable, but never majority, space devoted to representations of imperial authority, administration, and power. In short, the real daily and material life of contemporary China increasingly attracted the European gaze more than its institutional, religious, and cultural aspects – a development linked to accelerating commercial contacts and the more substantial Western presence in China (mainly Canton) at the end of the 18th century and, especially, in the early decades of the 19th century. After the First Opium War, with the opening of the “Treaty Ports” and greater mobility, the possibilities for interaction in inland China and variety of visual accounts of Chinese society – e.g. in the medical field⁹ – went on to grow

9. Sijie Fan, “A Study on Lam-quai’s Medical Image (1836-1855) Based on the Chinese and Western Visual Interaction Mode”, School of Art and Design, Guangzhou Maritime University,

exponentially; from the mid-1840s, photography changed the Western visual perspective on China dramatically.

A second noteworthy element is that, despite the suppression of the Jesuit Order, the Jesuit channel for supplying illustrations to Europe (especially France) continued to play a key role in the late 18th century thanks to the protection and encouragement of minister Bertin, as well as the related Sinophile discourse. In the final years of the century, especially after the Macartney Embassy, the landscape changed. Previously, there had been only a few image collections derived from sketches made on site by merchants, soldiers, officials, or non-religious artists, such as Chambers's *Designs of Chinese Buildings...* (1757). After Macartney, however, this became the prevailing means of collecting and distributing images of China, produced by both European and Chinese hands, and especially Cantonese workshops such as Lamqua's specializing in export watercolors depicting clothing styles, social figures, flora, and fauna.¹⁰ In parallel, a European – especially British – vision emerged that was less sensitive to the Sinophile motifs of Enlightenment culture and increasingly critical of Chinese society, raising questions about how this shift would affect image production, especially in terms of subject choice. To clarify this aspect, it is necessary to look back at some iconographic motifs favoured by the Sinophilia of Du Halde and shared by Jesuits and Enlightenment thinkers.

4. *Iconographic motifs of Sinophilia*

Examples of subjects expressing Jesuit admiration for China, shared by much of Enlightenment culture, include the figure of the emperor and his exercise of power; productive activities (agriculture, weaving, fishing), the industriousness of the population and its harmonious relationship with nature; and the life and doctrine of Confucius. Each is articulated through sub-themes well represented in the illustrations. These themes are already present in 17th- and early 18th-century works by Kircher, Nieuhoff, and Van der Aa, whose images continued to circulate well into the 18th century.

The emperor, in all his majesty, appears both as a solitary figure and participating in ceremonies and processions – the famous portraits of Qianlong and his consorts by Giuseppe Castiglione (1736-1770s) are a vivid example.¹¹

2023; Stephen Rachman, "Memento Morbi: Lam Qua's Paintings, Peter Parker's Patients", *Literature and Medicine*, 23/1 (Spring 2004), pp. 134-159; "Lam Qua Paintings", Medical Historical Library, Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library at Yale, available online; *Imagining Chinese Medicine*, ed. by Vivienne Lo and Penelope Barrett, Leiden, Brill, 2018; Ari Larissa Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body between China and the West*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2008.

10. Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984.

11. The main body of Giuseppe Castiglione's work is held at the Palace Museum in Beijing as evidence of the official portraiture of 18th-century imperial China (see <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh104/giuseppecastiglione/en/index.html#main>). See also Michèle Pirazzoli-

The *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* also exalt the figure of the emperor, especially in connection with military and peaceful achievements.¹² The former is exemplified by the series of 16 engravings executed in France at Qianlong's behest to glorify the victorious campaigns of 1755-1759 against the Zungars or Oirats ("Eleuths" in Jesuit texts) in northwest China. Officially described as "pacification" of Central Asian frontier areas, these were in fact systematic conquest and extermination campaigns causing hundreds of thousands of deaths. Jesuit artists Castiglione, Jean Attiret, Ignatius Sichelbarth, and Jean-Damascène Sallusti were tasked with creating large-scale paintings, whose preparatory drawings were subsequently sent to France in 1767. Here, Charles Nicolas Cochin produced copper engravings published in a splendid boxed edition with Chinese text,¹³ and Isidore-Stanislas Helman published a version in 1785 (*Suite des seize estampes représentant les conquêtes de l'empereur de la Chine*) (Fig. 1). This was a remarkable exercise in cultural diplomacy, intended to facilitate the Franco-Chinese commercial relations initiated years earlier by Louis XV's commission of the "Les tentures chinoises" tapestries at Beauvais, based on François Boucher's designs – an iconographic ensemble expressing rococo chinoiserie.¹⁴

Among the many plates in the *Mémoires*, none depict Qianlong's western campaigns. Yet this subject does appear in volume I, where Father Amiot acknowledges its historical significance: what was a pretext for imperial celebration and diplomacy, Amiot calls a "tragedy, of which I was a witness... A revolution by which an entire nation is annihilated deserves, without doubt, a place in the annals of the universe", even though no one in the West was aware of it at the time.¹⁵

T'Serstevens and Marco Musillo, *Giuseppe Castiglione: 1688-1766. Peintre et architecte à la cour de Chine*, Paris, Thalia Edition, 2007.

12. "Ce grand Prince [Qianlong], dont le portrait gravé d'après le dessein original, qui a été envoyé de Péking l'année dernière, décore le frontispice de cet Ouvrage, réunit le génie & les talents de l'homme de lettres avec la science & l'art du gouvernement": *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, &c. des Chinois. Par les Missionnaires de Pekin [J. Amiot, P.-M. Cibot, F. Bourgeois, A. Kao]* (hereafter *Mémoires concernant les Chinois*), 15 vols, Paris, chez Nyon, 1776-1791, vol. I, "Préface", p. x. The portrait of Qianlong, "dessiné d'après nature par Panzi Jésuite" and engraved by Martinet, is accompanied by the following caption: "Occupé sans relâche à tous les soins divers d'un Gouvernement qu'on admire le plus grand Potentat qui soit dans l'Univers est le meilleur Lettré qui soit dans son Empire".

13. See <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53192455s/fl.item>. See also Niklas Leverenz, "Drawings, Proofs and Prints from the Qianlong Emperor's East Turkestan Copperplate Engravings", *Arts Asiatiques*, 68 (2013), pp. 39-60, available online.

14. See the exhibition "Une des provinces du rococo: la Chine rêvée de François Boucher", Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie de Besançon, <https://memoirevive.besancon.fr/page/une-des-provinces-du-rococo-la-chine-revee-de-francois-boucher>, on which Juliette Trey, "Chinoiseries à Besançon, La Chine rêvée de François Boucher", *Revue de l'art*, 212/2 (2021), pp. 78-83.

15. Letter from Father Amiot to Bertin, Beijing, 4 October 1772, in *Mémoires concernant les Chinois*, vol. I, p. 326.



Figure 1. Isidore-Stanislas Helman, *Suite des Seizes Estampes représentant les Conquêtes de l'Empereur de la Chine*, 1785, planche 3, gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Alongside military deeds, peaceful achievements also exalt the emperor, integrating the traditional themes of antiquity, stability, efficiency, and the paternal character of Chinese institutions. Three iconographic examples stand out: the first is the set of 12 original Chinese plates published in the *Mémoires* to commemorate relief efforts after the 1742 Yangzhou flood, testifying to imperial solicitude;¹⁶ the second is the traditional image of the emperor presiding over the Spring plowing ceremony (*qin geng*), already known in Europe from earlier texts and celebrated in official silk scrolls from the Yongzheng era (1723-1735),¹⁷ with numerous illustrations available in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, notably

16. “Description de l’inondation de la ville de Yen-Tcheou-Fou et de son territoire, en 1742”, in *Ibid.*, vol. IX, 1783, pp. 454-507.

17. Zhang Jingni He Beijie, 《雍正帝祭先农坛图》系列 图卷考释与典礼空间述要 (“The ‘Emperor Yongzheng’s Sacrifice to the Altar of Agriculture’ Serial Scroll with the Spatial Ceremonies Reviewed”), 故宫博物院院刊 (*Journal of the Palace Museum*), 4/264 (2024), pp. 66-87; Jacques Marx, “L’Empereur de Chine ouvrant le premier sillon: réception et exploitation politique de l’image dans la culture française du XVIII^e siècle”, *NCUJH*, 2014. The ceremony is mentioned by Martino Martini, Jean-Frédéric Bernard in *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses des peuples idolâtres, représentées [...] par la main de Bernard Picart*, Amsterdam, J. F. Bernard, 1723-1743, vol. II, part I, pp. 229-230, Jean-Baptiste Du Halde in *Description de la Chine*, 4 vols, Paris, Le Mercier, 1735, vol. II, pp. 69-70, Montesquieu in “Bonne Coutume de la Chine”, in *Esprit des Lois*, Geneva, 1750, vol. II, book XIV, ch. 8, p. 15, Denis Diderot in “Agriculture”, in *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné*, vol. I (1751), p. 184 (see University of Chicago, ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Autumn 2022 edition), available online, Moyriac de Mailla and Grosier, *Histoire générale de la Chine*, 1785, vol. II, pp. 34-37, Voltaire, Pierre Poivre, and many other authors.



Figure 2. Isidore-Stanislas Helman, *Cérémonie du labourage faite par l'Empereur de la Chine*, 1786, online collection, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

the frontispiece of volume I of Abbé Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes* (La Haye, chez Gosse, 1774) and Helman's *Cérémonie du Labourage Faite par l'Empereur de la Chine* (1786) (Fig. 2). The third example of appreciating the majesty of imperial power is found in admiration for the architecture of imperial residences and parks, mirrors of imperial grandeur and care for nature. This admiration is visually conveyed through a series of illustrations: the 36 views of Jehol's Summer Palace by Matteo Ripa (1711-1713), which so influenced the English desire for oriental-style gardens via Lord Burlington and William Chambers;¹⁸ the 40 views of Yuanmingyuan commissioned by Qianlong (1738-1744); the 20 later views of European-style palaces (1783-1786) (Fig. 3) known in France among the Bertin circle, and Louis-François Delatour in particular;¹⁹ and the 96 engravings by Le Rouge inspired by silk paintings from Beijing.²⁰

The theme of agriculture brings us to another recurring iconographic motif: not only the diligent cultivation of fields and skilled irrigation, but the industriousness

18. *Ideas of Chinese Gardens: Western Accounts, 1300-1860*, ed. by Bianca Maria Rinaldi, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, ch. 8, "Matteo Ripa (1682/1746)", pp. 83-90.

19. Delatour later dealt with this in his *Essais sur l'architecture des Chinois* (1803). See John Finlay, "Henri Bertin (1720-1792) and Images of the Yuanmingyuan in Eighteenth-century France", in *Collecting and Displaying China's "Summer Palace" in the West: The Yuanmingyuan in Britain and France*, ed. by Louise Tythacott, London-New York, Routledge, 2018, pp. 124-137.

20. Georges Louis Le Rouge, *Le jardin anglo-chinois à la mode. Cahiers XV-XVI-XVII*, 1786.

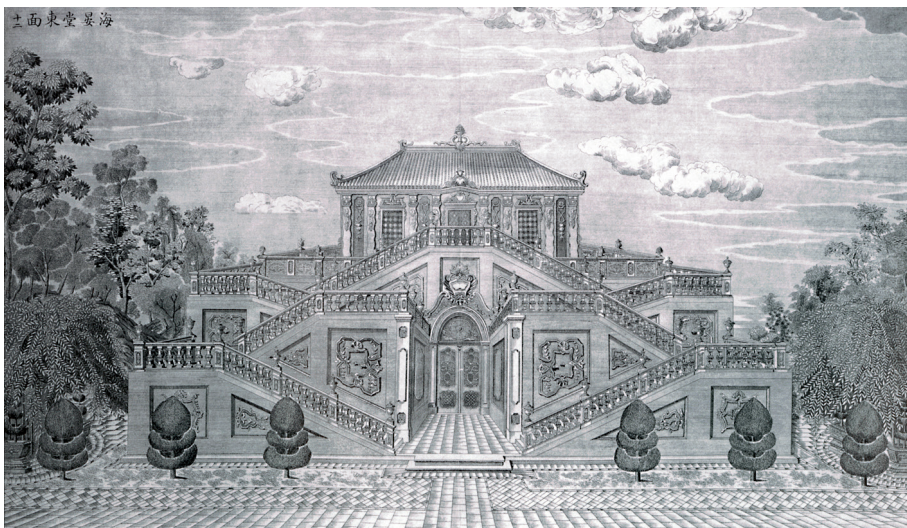


Figure 3. Giuseppe Castiglione, from drawings by Yi Lantai, Yuanmingyuan, Garden of Perfect Brightness, “East Façade of the Room of the Calm Ocean”, 1783-1786, Special Collections, Getty Research Institute.

of the Chinese people and their harmonious relationship with a bountiful, fertile nature.²¹ This theme is well rooted in traditional Chinese iconography, for instance the *Gengzhitu* (Pictures of Tilling and Weaving), a classic Song dynasty scroll collection about rice cultivation and sericulture that was often reprinted under the Qing; other albums were also dedicated to cultivation.²² The *Gengzhitu* was reprinted and expanded in 1696 at the initiative of Emperor Kangxi, who added his own verses, and Castiglione made painted reproductions. This repertoire also spread to Korea and Japan, providing decorative motifs for export crafts such as porcelain, fans, wallpaper, and screens, and it was certainly very familiar to the Jesuits.²³ Although there is no evidence of *Gengzhitu*-derived printed

21. To get an idea of the image of Chinese botanical beauty as seen through the eyes of the Jesuits, one must refer to the splendid unpublished collection by Pierre-Martial Cibot, *Plantes e fleurs de la Chine*, 1772, available online in the Bibliothèques numériques of the Institut de France.

22. For example on cotton cultivation, see “Les très riches heures de la cour de Chine: chefs d’oeuvre de la peinture impériale des Qing, 1662-1796: exposition présentée au musée Guimet du 26 avril au 24 juillet 2006”, Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux- Musée des arts asiatiques Guimet, 2006.

23. Nathalie Monnet, *Le Gengzhitu. Le livre du riz et de la soie. Poèmes de l’empereur Kangxi, Peintures sur soie de Jiao Bingzhen*, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2003; Jia Luo, “A Study on the Historical Evolution, Value, and Inheritance Innovation of Farming and Weaving Pictures”, *Al-Qantara*, 9/3 (2023), pp. 12-27; Roslyn Lee Hammers, *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving. Art, Labor, and Technology in Song and Yuan China*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2011.



Figure 4. “Barques chinoises: Manière singulière de pêcher”, in Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *Description de la Chine*, Paris, Le Mercier, 1735, vol. II, p. 162, Archive.org.

illustrations in 18th-century European publications, Du Halde does extensively describe Chinese agricultural and sericultural techniques and provides detailed illustrations, although apparently not directly from the *Gengzhitu*.²⁴ Other illustrations in his *Description* convey the idea of nature’s generosity as well as Chinese industriousness, inventiveness, and harmony with nature in the fields and waterways. A recurring iconographic theme in this sphere is cormorant fishing (Fig. 4), found in Nieuhoff (1665), Dapper (1670), Staunton (1797), Jean-Baptiste Benoît Eyriès (1822), Bazin de Malpière (1825), and Allom (1845).

The final theme to briefly consider is Chinese religion – a complex subject, here suffice it to note that 17th- and 18th-century iconography oscillates between unsympathetic depictions of pagan idolatry and Buddhist priests, and representing Confucius. The latter is presented positively in Jesuit publications, from *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687) to Le Comte and Du Halde, where Confucius is depicted as a sage philosopher, assuming a hieratic pose with draped robes, ritual headgear (*mianguan*), and a calm, unperturbed gaze. In the 18th century, the Jesuit

24. Du Halde, *Description de la Chine*, vol. II, p. 208 ff.

affinity with Confucius found new and more important outlets of iconographic expression. The *Mémoires* (vol. XII, 1785) feature a “Vie de Confucius” compiled by Father Amiot from Chinese texts, accompanied by 18 plates engraved by Helman, freely reinterpreting drawings copied by Amiot most probably from *Shengji tu* (“Illustrations of the Sage’s Deeds”), a Ming-era illustrated biography released in several versions, one from 1758, with images numbering from 30 to over 100.²⁵ Amiot’s “explications” created on the basis of the plates, especially those depicting Confucius’s posthumous veneration, underline – in line with the Jesuit view of Confucianism – that he is revered as “the Doctor of the nation and the Sage par excellence, Master of the nation”, not the object of superstitious devotion.

5. Changing attitudes and new visual regimes

By the late 18th century, two important changes had occurred: one contextual, the other specifically concerning “Chinese” illustrations. The first, evident in the last quarter of the century, was a marked shift in European opinion on China that involved abandoning the admiration that had characterized much of 18th-century culture and adopting a view of the Middle Kingdom as “stationary” (Smith, 1776), obstinately closed to the West, and plagued by official corruption and imperial oppression – no longer paternal.²⁶ The Macartney Embassy reinforced

25. Chao-Ying Lee, “Integration of Foreign Culture with Local Culture: The Icons of Confucius in *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* (1776-91) in France”, *Commenti accademici sul cristianesimo cinese*, 4 (December 2007), pp. 109-135; Julia K. Murray, “Illustrations of the Life of Confucius: Their Evolution, Functions, and Significance in Late Ming China”, *Artibus Asiae*, 57, 1/2 (1997), pp. 73-134. A 1758 version of *Shengji tu* comprising 53 b/w xylographies on paper is available online in the Irish Chester Beatty Online Collections.

26. On this, I would like to refer to some writings in which I have explored this issue from various angles: Guido Abbattista, “European perspectives on China: a prescriptive turn”, *Diciottesimo Secolo. Rivista della Società Italiana di Studi sul Secolo XVIII (SISSD)*, 7 (2022), pp. 35-44; Guido Abbattista, “The Despotism of the Plough, Throne and Tradition: Commercial Enlightenment and China in the *Histoire des deux Indes*”, in *Le Siècle des Lumières. VI. Qu’est-ce que les Lumières? Nouvelles réponses à l’ancienne question*, Moscow, Naouka, 2018, pp. 84-109; Guido Abbattista, “Chinese Law and Justice: George Thomas Staunton (1781-1859) and the European Discourses on China in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries”, in *Law, Justice and Codification in China and the European Thought*, Trieste, Eut, 2017, pp. 1-135; Guido Abbattista, “How to Deal with China. New Questions in the Third Edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes* (1780)”, in *Autour de l’abbé Raynal. Genèse et enjeux politiques de l’Histoire des deux Indes*, ed. by Antonella Alimento and Gianluigi Goggi, Ferney-Voltaire, Centre international d’étude du XVIII^e siècle, 2017, pp. 171-187; Guido Abbattista, “Europe, China and the ‘Family of Nations’: Paradoxes of the ‘Commercial’ Enlightenment in the Sattelzeit (1780-1840)”, in *China’s Development from a Global Perspective*, ed. by María Dolores Elizalde and Wang Jianlang, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, pp. 122-195; Guido Abbattista, “At the Roots of the ‘Great Divergence’: Europe and China in an 18th Century Debate”, in *Cultural Transfers, Encounters and Connections in the Global 18th Century*, ed. by Matthias Middell, Leipzig, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2014, pp. 113-162.

these opinions through works such as Staunton's official *Account* (1797), and especially John Barrow's *Travels to China* (1804). The shift affected not only English culture, already less susceptible to Enlightenment infatuations, but also European culture more broadly as the latter was increasingly influenced by the perspective of Western merchants active in Canton and subjected to countless restrictions and abuses.²⁷ A new era in Sino-Western relations began, marked by growing pressure from European mercantile nations, soon joined by the United States. These pressures led to further embassies – the Dutch Isaac Titsingh (1794-1797), the Russian Yurii Golovkin (1805), the British William Amherst (1816-1817) and Lord William Napier (1834) – whose failures only exacerbated Western frustration with the Chinese empire, but had the positive result of greatly increasing the quantity and quality of visual accounts of China. This work was now produced by artists accompanying diplomats and by compilers, editors, and artists eager to satisfy growing European curiosity about every aspect of China, especially its everyday reality.

An additional factor was the public's growing familiarity with Chinese objects due to the increasing importation of luxury and mass-consumption goods and memorabilia, including illustration albums produced in Canton for the Western market by specialized Chinese artists such as Lamqua, Tingqua, and Puqua, who ran true artistic workshops.²⁸ This familiarity resulted in a profound typological, stylistic, and thematic change in the illustrations available to the European public and in the resulting image of China. Whereas previously Jesuit-produced illustrations, even those disseminated via the *Mémoires*, had been destined mainly for small circles of collectors and intellectuals, especially in France, from the early 19th century onward a much broader typological and iconographic variety became widely available through mass-market print editions.

To conclude, let us briefly examine some aspects of this change and the authors of illustrated collections on China published between the early 1800s and 1845. Alexander (1767-1816) stands out: as an artist with the Macartney Embassy, he was the first European artist to observe the Chinese interior. He produced nearly 1,000 sketches in China (now in the British Library, with a selection of 111 included in the 2004 edition of Macartney's *Journal*) and, upon his return, he developed watercolors that were repeatedly used as models for published engravings. The most important of these were the 46 plates in the *Atlas* accompanying Staunton's *Account* (1797), itself enriched by 35 small engravings from Alexander's drawings. But above all there were the 48 plates of his *Costume of China* (1805) and the 48 images of *Picturesque Representations of the Dress and Manners of the Chinese* (1814): a monumental testimony to late 18th-century imperial China as viewed by an English artist. The value of this extraordinary series lies in its lively, ideologically unfiltered depictions, not so much of places and institutional figures as of urban and especially rural scenes and the lifestyles

27. I have dealt with this mainly in the previously cited "Chinese Law and Justice".

28. See n. 10 above.



Figure 5. William Alexander, “Dwelling of a Mandarin”, in *The Costume of China*, London, W. Miller, 1805, Archive.org.

of lower social strata.²⁹ While such subjects had sometimes featured in earlier illustrations – even in Kircher, Dapper, and Du Halde in the late 17th and early 18th century – Alexander offered works of great artistic refinement, attention to detail, chromatic taste, and a naturalistic realism never before seen, akin to the innovations of contemporary English landscape artists such as Turner and Constable.³⁰ There are no interpretive distortions or biases: what prevails is a taste for faithful, sympathetic representations of individuals, groups, landscapes, architecture, and work techniques (Figs 5-6). Notably, Alexander produced the first image of foot-binding – a practice known to and textually described by Western observers, but never illustrated until his ethnographic sketch appeared in Staunton’s *Account* (Fig. 7).³¹ Yet, if one seeks among Alexander’s images the critical stance toward Chinese society found in Staunton’s text, or even more so in Barrow’s or in later early 19th-century writings, one is disappointed. At least in this case, the illustrations run counter to an increasingly unfavourable climate of opinion toward China. Iconographically, this climate is evidenced by the first

29. Alexandra Loske, “Shaping an image of China in the West: William Alexander (1767-1816)”, Brighton & Hove Museum, s.d. [probably 2016].

30. See *William Alexander: An English Artist in Imperial China*, Brighton, Brighton Borough Council, 1981, p. 14. On Alexander (and Mason), see also Chen Yushu, “William Alexander’s Image of Qing China”, *Monumenta Serica*, 67 (3 July 2019), pp. 397-440, available online; William Alexander and George Henry Mason, *Views of 18th Century China: Costumes, History, Customs*, foreword by Lord Maclehoose of Beoch K.T., London-New York, Gramercy, 1988.

31. *An Authentic Account of the Late Embassy*, London, Nicoll, 1797, vol. I, p. 423.



Figure 6. William Alexander, "A group of trackers of the vessel at dinner", in *The Costume of China*, London, W. Miller, 1805, Archive.org.

Western satirical image of a Chinese subject: James Gillray's famous depiction of Macartney's imperial audience (1793-1794), the progenitor of a vast series of satirical prints on China that went on to flood the British and European public sphere during the Opium Wars, Taiping Rebellion, and Boxer Rebellion.

Alexander's work circulated widely, was translated into French, and was reused or even plagiarized by French authors such as Bazin de Malpière and Allom: "For at least half a century, it remained the only unquestionably authentic and composite depiction of China", and it stimulated a late vogue for chinoiserie in England at the turn of the two centuries.³² To fully appreciate Alexander's contribution, two other aspects of the early 19th-century visual panorama on China deserve mention. First, the widespread European diffusion of Chinese-produced illustrations, especially from Puqua's Canton workshop, with collections in the

32. William Alexander. *An English Artist*, pp. 14-15.



Figure 7. William Alexander, "The foot bandage", sketch in G. L. Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*, London, Bulmer & Nicoll, 1797, vol. I, p. 423, Archive.org.

British Museum and Victoria & Albert Museum.³³ The most famous of these are colour albums of Chinese social types, full-length, decontextualized, and done in a modest, schematic, even naïve style which, while retaining distinctly Chinese aesthetic qualities, were also adapted for English publications. Mason, for example, explicitly states that the 60 plates of his *Costume of China* (1800) (a different work from Alexander's) derive from drawings purchased in Canton (where Mason stayed in 1789-1790) and engraved in London by John Dudley: "Pu-Qua, Cantòn, delint. Dudley, London, sculpt". Mason is also known for another collection, *The Punishments of China* (1801), which perfectly expresses the changing climate of opinions and perspectives on China. The theme of corporal punishment, appearing in earlier illustrations since the mid-17th century (even in Alexander), was emphasized so as to highlight its singularity, such as the use of the "cangue", or portable pillory. Montesquieu's claim that China was governed "with the stick" refers to the practice of bamboo beating, generalizing its significance. By the late 18th and early 19th centuries this theme became central, treated independently to document the cruelty of Chinese justice, its invasive regulation of individual behaviour, and its distinctiveness as compared to European customs. Western encounters with Chinese justice were not only documentary or figurative but also direct, as shown by the cases of crew members of the British East Indiamen *Lady Hughes* (1787) and *Neptune* (1807) in Canton; the latter is famous by virtue of Staunton's positive role as an interpreter and the

33. Iside Carbone, *Glimpses of China Through the Export Watercolours of the 18th-19th Centuries. A Selection from the British Museum's Collection*, PhD dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 2002.

contemporary painting of the Chinese court scene.³⁴ Especially when highlighted by Mason's commentary, therefore, a survey of the variety, harshness, and even ingenious sophistication of corporal punishments inflicted daily on Chinese subjects (Figs 8-9) – the phrase “Chinese torture” still denotes particular cruelty – could only confirm for Western audiences the idea of China's radical otherness. Such representations inspired compassion for “suffering Chinese humanity” and, above all, fostered complacency among Europeans secure in the conviction that they lived in a part of the world where such cruelties were not permitted, thus creating a new element in Orientalist stereotypes.³⁵

As in Mason, the tension between image and text is even more evident in other illustrated collections about China, revealing how text tends to overshadow or even contradict the image. A French precedent appears in *Costumes Civils actuels de tous les Peuples connus* (1788), where the future follower of Babeuf Sylvain Maréchal, in his “Notice historique sur les Chinois”, writes scathing and negative judgments while the six accompanying colour illustrations of Chinese social figures are devoid of denigrating aspects. The most significant example, however, is Allom.

The four volumes (in two tomes) of *China, in a Series of Views* (1842-1845), with its 128 beautiful black-and-white steel engravings by the architect and topographer (who apparently never visited China), reinterpret earlier drawings, sketches, and illustrations by missionaries, diplomats, and artists.³⁶ Allom develops an array of themes inspired by the encyclopedic desire to document Chinese society in all its facets, from nature to institutions, from daily work to ceremonies and leisure (Fig. 10). His is an idealized, “romantic” vision dominated by landscapes and views of rivers, waterfalls, and mountains, with high-quality images characterized by strong naturalistic realism and lively representation. Allom constructs a spectacular and picturesque visual geography of China where nature and human actions intertwine through highly scenic depictions of productive activities, agricultural practices, lifestyles, rituals, and places of worship; the landscape and natural elements are always key players, even in “genre” scenes. Beyond their descriptive effect, the plates convey an exotic atmosphere and a sense of fascination that certainly shaped the European imagination of the first half of the 19th century, thanks in part to subsequent English, French, German, and Spanish editions. The collection's accompanying text by Anglican clergyman and Irish author George N. Wright, however,

34. For a discussion of Staunton, son of George Leonard, secretary to Macartney's embassy, and himself a very young participant in the mission before becoming an employee of the East India Company in Canton, Chinese interpreter and translator of the “Qing Penal Code”, see my publication “Chinese Law and Justice”.

35. On Mason, see Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, modernity, and Chinese Pain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 61-94.

36. An easily accessible digital edition of *China, in a Series of Views* is available online in The New York Public Library Digital Collections. On the French edition, see Charline Monseur, “Spotlight on China – An Analysis of L'Empire Chinois Illustrated by Thomas Allom and Described by Clément Pellé”, *MaRBL*, 6 (1 July 2014), available online.



Figures 8-9. George Henry Mason, “IX. The Rack” (above) and “XIII, The wooden collar” (below), in *The Chinese Punishments*, London, Miller & Bulmer, 1801, Archive.org.

presents a very different picture. Political-institutional aspects, economic practices, productive techniques, social forms (rigid social distinctions), customs (foot-binding, infanticide), and religious cults (Buddhism), according to Wright, reveal a stagnant country hopelessly mired in tradition and incapable of technical revitalization where the exploitation of vast manpower has hindered the introduction of machinery, symbol of Western progress. Wright even approved of the recent war – the First Opium War, 1840-1842 – in the name of civilization,

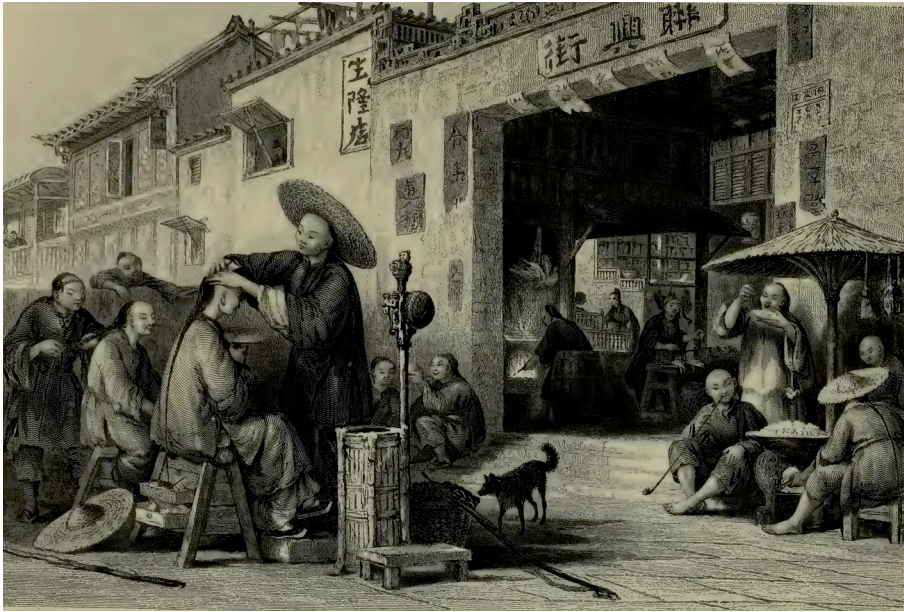


Figure 10. Thomas Allom, “An itinerant barber”, in *The Chinese empire: historical and descriptive, illustrating the manners and customs of the Chinese, in a series of steel engravings*, 2 vols, London-New York, The London Printing and Publishing Co., 1858 [1842-1845], vol. I, p. 73, Archive.org.

deploying the rhetoric of commerce, free enterprise, and civilizing mission, thus counterposing the rhetoric of modernity against a pictorial apparatus inspired by a naturalist and traditionalist picturesque style.

Ambiguity, caught between fascination and Orientalist alienation, also characterized other contemporary illustrated works such as Borget’s *La Chine et les Chinois* (1842). Unlike Allom, Borget travelled the world and spent 10 months in China, representing it in sketches and drawings, 34 of which became plates in the 1842 illustrated work that was subsequently reissued in England; Borget’s 200 sketches later illustrated Paul-Émile Daurand-Forgues’s *La Chine ouverte* (1845). These works combine a documentary approach with a naturalistic attention to detail and a penchant for the picturesque, portraying China as both alluring and fundamentally foreign. The representation emphasizes China’s sophistication yet underscores its stagnation (“stationnaire”), presenting it as a subject of both curiosity and critique. This depiction highlights a society dominated by oppressive (“écrasant”) despotism and suggests that China is no longer suitable for the idealized mythologization previously offered by Jesuit accounts. Far from justifying British imperialism, however, this vision lacked the sense of Western superiority and the idea of a civilizing mission aimed at “opening up” and transforming the Celestial Empire: “Il faut bien reconnaître” – Borget conceded

to the Chinese – “ce qu’il y a de logique dans le mépris dont les Chinois accablent les Européens”.³⁷

From Alexander and Mason onward, throughout the first three to four decades of the 19th century illustrated collections and works revealed, in their choice of subjects, figurative style, and intended audience, an immeasurable distance from the great age of Jesuit erudition, aristocratic collecting, and Enlightenment polemics. China continued to exert an extraordinary fascination on the West – a magnetism which, unfortunately, coexisted with the pursuit of policies and objectives that, for the late Qing empire, marked the beginning of its “century of humiliation”.

37. “À l’envisager d’une manière philosophique, le gouvernement chinois n’est qu’un despotisme infertile, maintenu par un espionnage actif et par une responsabilité sans limites, une sorte de patriarcat tyrannique dont la terreur assure l’autorité”: Paul-Émile Daurand-Forgues, *La Chine ouverte*, Paris, H. Fournier, 1845, pp. 122 and 366.