

Chinoiserie in Germany

Uta Lauer 劳悟达
Hamburg University

Folio 1 (with the Lady)

It is no coincidence that the Age of Enlightenment, the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, was also the Age of Chinoiserie in Europe. The term *chinoiserie* is predominantly applied to the decorative arts and architecture. Certain motives and pictorial elements were especially popular. These included pagodas, pavilions, rice-straw hats, parasols, sedan chairs, arched bridges, junk boats and kimono-like garments. There was also an interest in Chinese materials and techniques, namely lacquer and porcelain. The style of Chinoiserie is well attested for France, where it was assimilated into the rococo style, and England, and only to a lesser extent for Germany. This presentation will present important examples of Chinoiserie in Germany and discuss the question, why and how such a *kitsch*-image of China could evolve, despite the factual knowledge of China existing in Europe at the time.

Folio 2

In Hamburg, the sister city of Shanghai, at the Museum for Arts and Crafts (Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe), there is a beautifully decorated musical instrument, a cembalo, dated 1728, created by the foremost instrument maker of his time, Christian Zell (ca. 1683-1763). Courts all over Europe ordered instruments from Zell who had his workshop in Hamburg. The pictorial band around the main body of the cembalo depicts scenes "in the Chinese taste", idyllic landscapes with pavilions and people clad in kimono-style garments, wearing pointed straw hats and occasionally sporting a parasol.

Folio 3

It is quite conceivable, that the composer Georg Philip Telemann (1681-1767), who was the director of music at the city of Hamburg, had personally played on this very cembalo. It was one of Telemann's many achievements, that he not only used the cembalo as an accompanying instrument, but that he wrote music for the cembalo as a solo instrument. While attending a music soirée, the audience could take in these Chinese scenes and allow themselves to be carried away to this ideal, distant land.

Folio 4

Other composers wrote musical pieces on Chinese themes. When Empress Maria Theresia of Austria (1717-1780) made preparations for a feast in 1754, she specifically ordered Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) to write an opera on a libretto by the Italian poet Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782), titled: *I Cinesi* (The Chinese). It is an Arcadian, romantic story, but instead of shepherds the opera is peopled with the more exotic Chinese.

Folio 5

Chinese scenes could be found on prestigious luxury objects, like the tea set of 1724 at the Münchner Residenz (Munich residency). This exquisite set had been painted by Johan Gregorius Höroldt (1696-1775) in Meißen. It had only been a few years earlier, that Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682-1719) had discovered the secret of how to make genuine porcelain in 1708. Böttger had been an apothecary apprentice and

was known for his alchemist experiments. When Duke August the Strong in Dresden heard the rumour, that Böttger could make gold, he immediately had Böttger brought to his Court. The Duke had hoped to thus fill his empty state money coffers. This did not work out but Böttger, locked up in a laboratory at Albrechtsburg in Meißen, discovered something at least as precious as making gold and that was the secret of making porcelain. Until then, porcelain had to be imported from China at high costs. These were luxury articles only few could afford.

Folio 6

Porcelain from Meißen painted with Chinoiserie by Höroldt was much sought after. They were the perfect blend of a Chinese material, porcelain, with Chinese motives. There were copy books with Chinese motives, on which porcelain painters and other artisans could base their designs.

Folio 7

One illustrated book which was widely circulated throughout Europe was Jean-Baptiste Pillement's (1728-1808) *A New Book of Chinese Ornaments*. His images are playful and imaginative. Pillement had never been to China but he worked in Portugal, the Netherlands and England, countries entertaining direct trading links with China through their East India Companies. It is likely, that he had seen illustrated books and prints, depicting and describing life in China.

Folio 8

One of the most influential books which had shaped the image of China in Europe in the seventeenth century was written by the German Jesuit monk, Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680). The large folio book, titled: *China Illustrata „China monumentis qua sacris qua profanis... alierumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata“*, simply known as "China Illustrata", was published in Amsterdam in 1649. Kircher too had never been to China but he corresponded regularly by letter with fellow Jesuits working in China. Thus Kircher received first-hand eye-witness accounts of life in China. It must be said, that these letters and reports from the Jesuits in China were intentionally positive, describing the Empire in the best possible light. The reason for this partial, one-sided view of China was, that the Jesuits wanted to convince the Pope in Rome to continue to support their mission.

Folio 9

The great German humanist philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) also had a profound interest in China. Like Kircher, Leibniz corresponded intensively with Jesuits¹ and other scholars in China. In 1697, his book *Novissima Sinica Historiam Nostri Temporis Illustrata* [ill. 4] was published. Many of his insights regarding China originated from the contact with the Italian Jesuit Claudio Filippo Grimaldi (1638-1712; Chinese name: 闵明我). Grimaldi was astronomer, mathematician and engineer at the Court of emperor Kangxi. The Emperor sent Grimaldi as his envoy to Rome in 1689. It was there, that Grimaldi and Leibniz met and Leibniz grasped this rare opportunity to ask Grimaldi an infinite number of questions regarding China. After Grimaldi's return to China, the two men continued their discussions through correspondence.

¹ Leibniz' correspondence with Jesuits in China has recently been edited and published by Widmaier, Rita (ed.). *Der Briefwechsel mit den Jesuiten in China (1698-1714)*. Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 2006.

Folio 10

In a letter to Grimaldi, dated twenty-first of March 1692, Leibniz emphasizes his conviction, that it is of utmost importance that China and Europe learn from each other, that the flow of knowledge runs both ways and that China and Europe should join their merits and achievements to reach something even better and more enlightening for the good of mankind. Leibniz and other philosophers idealized China as an utopia come true, with an enlightened ruler, highly educated scholar officials and a harmonious state order.

Folio 11

The realities of ordinary Chinese people's life, poverty, illiteracy, disease and slave-like dependency did not feature in such idealized scenarios.

Eighteenth century Europe was ravaged by wars, notably the Seven Year War (1756-1763) and the numerous wars of succession. Entire landscapes were devastated, villages burnt down, looting, rape and murder were rampant. It is against this background, that a yearning for peace and stability, a longing for a better life gained momentum. State leaders, philosophers and academics seriously sought for political solutions which would lead to peace and order. China, or more precisely the positive image shaped by the reports of the Jesuits they had-, seemed to offer such solutions.

Folio 12

Theatre plays, such as the *Orphan from China* (L'Orphelin de la Chine) by the French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778), published in 1755, contributed significantly to spread enlightened ideas. This play was loosely based on a translation of the Yuan period Chinese play 赵氏孤儿. In Voltaire's play and other publications, the philosopher idealized the Chinese emperor as an enlightened monarch and he praised educated, erudite scholar officials. He thought very highly of the fact, that officialdom in China was not hereditary but that any man could become an official through study and success in the imperial exams.

Folio 13

It is not without piquancy, that Voltaire dedicated his play to the Duke of Richelieu (1696-1788), the grand nephew of Cardinal Richelieu, a defender of the absolute power of the sovereign. This indicated a major shift in philosophical and political thought away from absolutism towards enlightenment.

Folio 14

Such ideas did not remain confined to the sphere of theatre, the stage, but eventually affected political reality. Voltaire exchanged letters with King Frederic II. (1712-1786) of Prussia, also known as Frederic the Great. The king was open to experiment with enlightened ideas in political practise. He advocated freedom of religion, introduced compulsory school attendance and, at least in theory, postulated that all are equal before the law. A year before the end of the Seven Year War, King Frederic II. made peace with Sweden. The peace treaty of Hamburg was signed on the twenty-second of May 1762 and Telemann, the musical director of the city of Hamburg, composed a solemn cantata (registered as TWV 14:12) for the occasion.

Folio 15

Now that peace had been achieved, Prussia could recover from the war years. King Frederic II. turned his attention towards the building of a leisure castle, the famous

Sanssouci near Potsdam. Two particularly splendid buildings were erected “in the Chinese style”. These were the so-called Dragon House and the Chinese House. The Dragon House was loosely modelled on Chinese pagodas. It had curved roofs and the end of the water pipes were shaped in the form of dragons, hence the name of the building.

Folio 16

The Chinese House was splendidly adorned with gilded life-size figures, representing Chinese. On top of the roof is a seated mandarin official, carrying a parasol. At ground level are pairs of figures, drinking tea, playing musical instruments, carrying fans and engaging in friendly conversation. Peace and happiness, this was a Chinese utopia, realized in architectural and sculptural form at Sanssouci castle.

Folio 17

Another castle which through the use of Chinoiserie expressed enlightened ideas about a Chinese ideal state was Duke August the Strong’s castle of Pillnitz near Dresden. Lavishly spread out along the banks of the river Elbe, many of the buildings are adorned with painted bands of Chinese scenes.

Folio 18

There are not only the stereotype elements of pagodas, rice-straw hats and parasols but actually meaningful scenes like the Chinese Emperor conducting the rice-plating ritual. Curved roofs are another quote from Chinese architecture. The Duke was well known for his admiration of Chinese porcelain. He said about himself that he had the “maladie de porcelaine (porcelain sickness)”. His collection of Chinese porcelain included Ming and Kangxi objects. These had been imported into Europe through the Dutch East India Company. Traders acquired these precious porcelains at the Leipzig Fair and sold them to August the Strong. In 1717, the Duke exchanged six hundred soldiers for one-hundred-and-fifty Chinese vases from King Frederic Wilhelm I. of Prussia. These became known as the so-called “Dragoner vases”. Today, August the Strong’s extensive porcelain collection is housed at the Zwinger in Dresden.

Folio 19

The interest in China and things Chinese was wide-spread throughout the German realm in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When the Elector Maximilian II Emanuel (1662-1726) of Bavaria came to power after long wars of succession, he had Nymphenburg Castle built. He ordered his Court Architect Josef Effner (1687-1745) to do the designs. Often, the Elector intervened personally which occasionally led to frictions with his Court architect. The most Chinese building at Nymphenburg Castle in Munich is the *Pagodenburg*. In name, although not in shape, the building is modelled after a Chinese pagoda.

Folio 20

It is in the interior, that the Chinese taste is most pronounced. The walls and ceilings of the ground-floor are decorated with blue-and-white designs, depicting Chinese scenes. These are inspired by Ming blue-and-white porcelain.

Folio 21

The upper storey displays painted Chinese silks on the walls, imported from China, and lacquered panels. Here, like in so many castles in Europe, we find a mix of

objects and designs made "à la Chinoise", and real, original products imported from China.

Folio 22

In 1789, a five storied wooden pagoda of twenty-five meters in height was constructed in the English Garden in Munich. Its name is "Chinesischer Turm (Chinese Tower)", and its design was based on the well-known pagoda at Kew Gardens near London. The tower burnt down several times but was always rebuilt. Today, it is one of Munich's most popular beer-gardens.

Folio 23

Landgraf Friedrich II of Kassel did not limit himself to the odd quote from Chinese architecture. He designed a whole village which he called *Mulang* in the park at Wilhelmshöhe, near Weißenstein Castle. In 1781, the project was completed. There were agricultural buildings, stables for cows, pigs and sheep, a kitchen, a dairy, houses for farmers and a banquet hall. The Landgraf employed several salaried farmhands, including black women. During banquets and festivities, these workers had to dress up as Chinese in exotic costumes to underline the Chinese character of these gatherings. On the grounds of this "model village" were also a church, a mosque and a pagoda. Together, these three buildings symbolized the peaceful co-existence of different religious beliefs. In the Christian dominated German realm of the time, this was a remarkably progressive and open-minded stance!

Folio 24

The pagoda was built according to copper-print engravings in a book by Charles Over. The book, published in 1758 had fifty-four illustrations and bore the interesting title: *Ornamental Architecture in the Gothic, Chinese and Modern Taste*. The pagoda was also known under the name "Chinese Temple".

Folio 25

Inside were figural sculptures, now largely destroyed. These included a seated figure of the Buddhist deity Budai. The garment is open over his large belly; he holds a folding fan in his right hand and is surrounded by a flaming halo. Another standing figure in a niche was that of a Daoist priest. Clad in flowing silk garments, wearing a cap on his head, he holds a fly whisk in his left hand. Today, these sculptures can only be glimpsed at through old photographs. Yet, it gives us an idea, how much Landgraf Friedrich II of Kassel was interested in many aspects of Chinese life, including religions like Buddhism and Daoism.

Folio 26

Mulang village was both, an exemplary philosophical settlement and a luxury toy.

Folio 27

Looking back at the Chinoiserie of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, at pagodas, pavilions, curved roofs, dragons, painted Meissen porcelain, the inlay in lacquered furniture and musical instruments, blue-and-white ornamented tiles, figures in Chinese attire, painted wallpaper and tapestries with Chinese scenes-, it may seem bucolic, fanciful, even kitsch. Yet, Chinoiserie also has to be understood as a yearning for a better world, a peaceful society based on principles of enlightenment, a utopian vision. Distant China, from which Europeans had heard so many amazing things, like for example, that advancement in rank and office depended on learning

and education and not on hereditary position-, was the ideal model on which to project one's own hope for the future. There was a deep interest in China and a serious engagement with all aspects of life in China. The philosopher Leibniz strongly advocated learning from each other, China from Europe and Europe from China. His attitude was one of mutual respect for the achievements of the two different cultures. In this regard, we both, in Germany as well as in China, can carry on the spark of the philosopher's age, to continue learning from each other.