‘Frailty, thy name is China’: women, chinoiserie and the threat of low culture in eighteenth-century England

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In the eighteenth century, the expanding trade conducted by the East India Company with China reinforced the latter’s material presence in England. Indeed, England became a vast market for Chinese goods which, in turn, paved the way for the blossoming of chinoiserie objects. This growing enthusiasm for things Chinese fuelled the ongoing debate on taste and beauty. The craze for chinoiserie resulted mainly, but not solely, from feminine appreciation of these imported or created commodities. Among them, tea and china especially, but also wallpapers or textiles encountered a real success. Women became collectors of objects in the Chinese style, and their increasing consumption of these exotic products spurred an aesthetic turmoil among the champions of the classical taste. Thus in the 1750s at the height of the ‘Chinese fashion’, negative aesthetic judgements on chinoiserie emerged, which mapped out a gendering of this artistic style, whereby Chinese wares became metaphorical representations of women. Looking at various examples taken from periodicals (the World, the Spectator, the Idler) and pictorial representations (such as William Hogarth’s The Harlot’s Progress), this article examines how the feminisation of the style was developed as a popular topos in the eighteenth century in a deliberate intention to present both chinoiserie and its female aficionados as emblems of low culture. It will be shown how the female appetite for this other form of artistic expression was perceived as a manifestation of a perverted taste, and a threat to nascent English aesthetics. The gender-oriented representation of this exotic
art will be studied as the production of a male dominant discourse in an attempt to curb the propagation of the new style and the endangering power of women in the realm of art, culture and taste.

‘Frailty, thy name is woman’.¹ In Act I, scene 2 Hamlet reproaches his mother Gertrude with her total disrespect for his father’s death as she just does not comply with the mourning period and is about to remarry her brother-in-law Claudius. Following Hamlet’s reasoning, woman, then, is frailty; that is, total unreliability, inconstancy, and weakness. Indeed, Gertrude is perceived by her son as lacking moral fortitude and dominated by a strong appetite for lust and pleasure. Frailty became a byword for women throughout the centuries, in particular in the eighteenth century when women’s appetites for consumption of various commodities were under close scrutiny, as one excerpt from James Arbuckle’s 1729 *Hibernicus Letters* regarding women’s purchases of Chinese porcelain exemplifies: ‘[M]any a fantastick Female gratify her Passion for China Ware with what might be a sufficient Portion for her, if she were not herself as frail as her China’.² In these lines, the craving for Chinese porcelain appears as another form of frailty linked to female extravagance, unreasonableness and irrationality, whilst the image of porcelain as a metaphor for women is clearly established: ‘if she were not herself as frail as her China’.

This article seeks to show how the trope of porcelain was part of a global chinoiserie imagery that served as a network of topoï to define female frailty. Since women came to be seen as fragile pieces of porcelain, there follows an examination of the various cracks in the female material, which were seen as emblematic of female frailty.

The notion of frailty circumscribes the artistic characteristics of chinoiserie that can account for the connection between an exotic style and female idiosyncrasies, and shows how the association between chinoiserie and the female taste was the result of nascent English aesthetics defined against a foreign taste and against the emerging judgements of female subjects. I will argue that the attempt to define the feminine sphere by focusing on the female taste for exoticism was the embodiment of a distrustful male discourse on the attitudes of women towards art and culture.

**Chinoiserie and Femininity**

The passion for Chinese export wares started in the seventeenth century on a small scale, then intensified in the last two decades of the seventeenth century only to expand dramatically in the eighteenth century, the latter being marked by a strong enthusiasm for chinoiserie. By chinoiserie, I mean Chinese products that were manufactured in China, but which were intended for exportation, and what we may call ‘pseudo-Chinese’ products made in England which imitated a Chinese style. At the time, it was common for Chinese artifacts to be called ‘Indian’ and a Chinese style to be known as the ‘Indian style’ since China was seen as one country in the more global East Indies and as Chinese products were brought by the East India Company. Moreover, numerous Chinese articles such as wallpapers and lacquered wares followed a commercial route
via India, being first shipped from China to India and then brought back on board private ships from India to England, hence the term ‘Indian’ instead of ‘Chinese’. This confusion in coining the style also reveals how imaginary the vision of China was in English minds and how the artifacts represented an imaginary decorative far eastern Other suited to the tastes of English purchasers, rather than a true vision of Chinese arts and crafts. As John MacKenzie clearly points out: ‘chinoiserie, the construction of an imaginary Orient to satisfy a western vision of human elegance and refinement within a natural and architectural world of extreme delicacy, was as much a product of Chinese craftsmen as of the West’.3

Although Chinese curiosities stimulated the interest of male, as well as female virtuosi, the chinoiserie style was perceived as the province of femininity. When the passionate china collector Mary of Orange arrived in England after the Glorious Revolution, contemporary commentators observed that she introduced the craze for oriental porcelain that had already been all the rage in Holland. Daniel Defoe thus noted in A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain: ‘The queen brought in the custom or humour, as I may call it, of furnishing houses with chinaware, which increased to a strange degree afterwards’.4 One might note in passing the word ‘humour’, to which I will come back later, which introduces the idea of disease and fancy, with a hint at irrationality, and is to be found in many a satire on china collectors.

As a matter of fact, women were in charge of furnishing their homes with these exotic objects, particularly their bedroom and the dressing room where porcelain cabinets often took pride of place. They revelled in the purchase of porcelain, silks, wallpapers, lacquer wares, furniture and other ornaments in the Chinese style. The passion for buying chinoiserie items was not a female preserve though, as evidenced by Andrew Fountaine’s deep interest in porcelain and his famous porcelain closet in Drayton.5 If fun was poked at male virtuosi for their predilection for Chinese wares, satire was fiercer against women and their love for chinoiserie. The first crack in the female material, or rather the first characterisation of female frailty, was conveyed through one of the most pervasive idioms of chinoiserie, namely the trope of porcelain, as first pointed out by Cleanth Brooks in The Well-Wrought Urn.6 Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace and Aubrey Williams have shown that the association of the fragile and superficial nature of porcelain was used to symbolise the moral and social fragility of women.7 Virtue or vice was metaphorically characterised by the image of unbroken or cracked china. Thus women became objects of consumption like the china they consumed: the purer the bride-to-be was, the more precious she was on the market, exactly like uncracked porcelain. One may wonder why china was chosen, and not, for example, lacquer wares that could also display cracks. Apart from the historical and contextual answer mentioned above, I suggest an artistic reason to explain why porcelain might have been chosen.

In seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, pearls represented female purity and chastity. Their mother-of-pearl-like quality could lead to symbolical interpretations of the bearers of pearls. Pearls usually symbolised honesty and virtue, but of course, if worn by prostitutes, then they epitomised debauchery. I suggest that, as had been the case
with the emblem of pearls, the meaning of the texture of porcelain can be regarded as
a continuation of the semiotic quality of pearls in an attempt to capture the essence of
women. The translucid whiteness of porcelain could, like the lustrous surface of pearls,
represent honesty and virtue. Indeed the analogy between the texture of pearls and that
of porcelain is reinforced by the semantics of the very word ‘porcelain’, which comes
from the Portuguese and Italian ‘porcella’ and refers to a white seashell. Porcelain was
celebrated for its ‘mother-of-pearl’ quality and became closely linked to femininity.
Thus, the porcelain cup replaced the Venus-shell and became the new attribute of
modern English women. In several English conversation pieces, a fine garniture de
cheminée stands on the mantelpiece, whilst women handle porcelain tea-table accou-
trements as a symbol of politeness and refinement. On the contrary, in Hogarth’s
famous Harlot’s Progress plate 2, the Harlot, Moll is deliberately breaking her china tea
set at the arrival of the Jew to create diversion and enable her lover to flee. The fall of
china then symbolises the female loss of chastity and honesty. If cracked or broken,
therefore, porcelain symbolised vice and depravity in a metaphorical substitution for
the women it stood for.

By drawing an analogy between porcelain and women as mere surfaces, masculine
voices revealed another correlative crack in the female material, that of vanity in relation
to women’s attitudes towards consumption and luxury. By indulging in the
consumption of Chinese luxury goods, women were seen as guilty of extravagance
whilst the effects of their voracious appetites caused serious concern as regards the
economic interests and artistic sanity of the nation. James Arbuckle in the same letter
of 1729 indicated that England was on the verge of ruin because of human vanity mate-
rialised in the consumption of luxurious items: ‘Our Vanity … is all confined to
ourselves, and for the most part displays itself in very trifling and perishable Objects:
and by that means the Expence laid out in gratifying it, is just … lost to the Publick’.9

Together with vanity, deceitfulness appeared as another attribute of women, who
were accused of stripping their husbands of their money in order to buy foreign goods,
in particular tea and porcelain, thus draining the nation of its riches, as evinced by
Addison in one essay of The Lover, no. 10, dated from 17 March 1714:

The common way of purchasing such trifles … is by exchanging old suits of cloaths
for this brittle ware. … For this reason my friend TRADEWELL in the city calls his
great room that is nobly furnished out with China, his wife’s wardrobe … in reality
this is but a more dextrous way of picking the husband’s pocket …10

In this essay, there appears a definition of women in direct opposition to the portrait
of men drawn by Addison. As evinced by the onomastics, husbands are presented as
active, hard-working and honest tradesmen, like Mr Tradewell, while women indulge
in idleness. Then follows a discourse on pragmatism that celebrates efficiency and
severely condemns the female love for Chinese porcelain, which is seen as useless and
ruinous:

But in the last place, China-Ware is of no use. Who would not laugh to see a smith’s
shop furnished with anvils and hammers of China? The furniture of a lady’s favourite
room is altogether as absurd: you see jars of a prodigious capacity that are to hold
nothing. I have seen horses and herds of cattle in this fine porcelain, not to mention the several Chinese ladies, who perhaps are naturally enough represented in these frail materials.¹¹

The metaphor of women as porcelain reappears here, where the motif of Chinese women painted on porcelain seems apt again to be associated with such a fragile texture as porcelain through the expression ‘these frail materials’. The adverb ‘naturally’ refers to the apparent immediacy of the relation between women and the texture of porcelain through the idea of frailty, as if the image obviously sprang to mind. We might also perceive a hint at frailty being the ‘nature’ of women if we consider the noun ‘nature’ from which the adverb is derived.

Moreover, the image of hollowness conveyed by the reference to empty porcelain jars that are deemed useless, connects to the idea of female idleness formerly identified. A blacksmith’s shop displays sturdy tools, as work and productivity are of paramount importance, and is opposed to a lady’s boudoir full of porcelain gimcracks. This focus on usefulness raises a question on the status of chinoiserie, as it seems that Chinese or pseudo-Chinese wares are denied access to cultural recognition by being excluded from the artistic realm. Indeed, they are paradoxically deemed acceptable if they are useful commodities, but, we might ask, should works of art be seen as useful? In the eighteenth century, the status of chinoiserie hovered between domestic functionality and ornamentation but when chinoiserie entered the realm of the decorative, its artistic value was questioned. Chinoiserie was indeed given a very low artistic status as it challenged the classical notions of art.

**The Cultural Value of the Female Taste for Chinoiserie**

Robert Morris, in the postscript of the *Architectural Remembrancer*, dated from 1751, analysed the Chinese style as the epitome of what he called ‘impropriety of ornament’.¹² Morris’s description of Chinese decorative designs underlines the reproaches that the champions of the classical style levelled against chinoiserie, namely the absence of harmony, the lack of proportion, and gaudiness. What necessarily ensued was that women had but little brain to be tempted by such insignificant objects:

[T]he (improperly called) *Chinese Taste* … consists in *meer whim* and *chimera*, without *rule* or *order*, it requires no fertility of genius to put in execution; the principals are a good choice of *chains* and *bells*, and different colours of *paint* … *serpents, dragons, and monkeys*, etc.¹³

Chinoiserie decoration was perceived as an easy style and was reduced to a mere superimposition of ornaments on a surface. This vision can be seen as a way to come to terms with the Orient, as an ‘orientalisation’ of the Chinese style since the English had no knowledge of Chinese art. Edward Said’s theory of orientalism can be here aptly applied to the eighteenth-century English vision of Chinese art, since it seems that the Far East was disguised and imprisoned in this negative and reducing discourse on chinoiserie, which can thus be seen as a somewhat ‘dominating framework’¹⁴ established by the champions of neoclassicism.
The childish pleasure given by nonsensical fantasies seems to have been what pleased men and women in chinoiserie, but was claimed to be a female characteristic. Charles Lamb’s essay, *Old China*, in *The Last Essays of Elia*, first published in 1823, confirms the feminisation of the taste for Chinese porcelain with hindsight:

I have an almost feminine partiality for old china. … we have all some taste or other, of too ancient a date to admit of our remembering distinctly that it was an acquired one. … I am not conscious of a time when china jars and saucers were introduced into my imagination.¹⁵

The taste for chinoiserie seems to be located in a precognitive state. Charles Lamb remembers that he was fond of the inarticulate quality of chinoiserie, a world of fantasy dominated by imagination. Such a world is a world for children, and femininity is linked to childishness. ‘Chinese vessels are playthings for women of all age’, Addison said in *The Lover*.¹⁶ And for Charles Lamb, the whole appreciation of chinoiserie motifs on porcelain came from some impressionistic experience:

I had no repugnance then—why should I now have?—to those little, lawless, azure-tinctured grotesques, that under the notion of men and women, float about, uncircumscribed by any element, in that world before perspectives—a china tea-cup.¹⁷

The bidimensional nature of Chinese perspective certainly challenged the Western canons of perspective. Here chinoiserie figures are presented as vaguely or hardly gendered since the spectator can only catch a glimpse of ‘the notion of men and women’, hovering between hybrids and humans—‘grotesques’—in a ‘lawless’ world of wonder ‘before perspectives’, untouched then by the principles of Western art. Moreover, it seems again that the chinoiserie style underwent a process of ‘orientalisation’ due to its perceived superficial prettiness. To use John M. MacKenzie’s expression, if the Chinese culture ‘was prettified’¹⁸ by the English, it could also never reach the status of the beautiful.

Although chinoiserie was widely accepted, it was also widely criticised by arbiters of taste. Women were stigmatised as the lovers of a grotesque and unnatural style, the Chinese style, ‘where’, Joseph Warton argued in *The World*, ‘neither perspective, nor proportion, nor conformity to nature are observed’.¹⁹ Their lack of artistic judgement was thus underlined. In the same essay, Warton explained how a painting by Guido was neglected for a Chinese pagod at an auction sale, denouncing ‘the exorbitant prices given for these SPLENDID DEFORMITIES … while an exquisite painting of Guido passed unnoticed, and was set aside as unfashionable lumber’.²⁰ Lamenting on the triumph of novelty and fashion over true beauty, Warton’s moralising tone aimed at the reformation of female mores:

Happy should I think myself to be able to convince the fair connoisseurs … that no genuine beauty is to be found in whimsical and grotesque figures, the monstrous offspring of wild imagination, undirected by nature and truth.²¹

The superficial quality of this art, seen as entertaining, but not as conceptual, began to be synonymous with low culture. This unnatural style stood for a celebration of deviance, creating an unorthodox stylistic temptation for the audience, and thus a threat to good taste. When setting the criteria of beauty, Lord Shaftesbury had declared in his
Characteristicks: ‘The senseless part of mankind admire gaudiness: the better sort and those who are good judges admire simplicity’.\textsuperscript{22}

Chinoiserie was essentially sensuous. The champions of the classical taste believed that with the Chinese taste, novelty and curiosity were sought after but not real beauty. Those criticisms fostered the formation of a male discourse on women through the use of chinoiserie, and a discourse on chinoiserie through the reference to women, where both were undermined. It seems from this common belief that chinoiserie can therefore be read as an early form of kitsch in these texts. In his book \textit{Kitsch and Art} Thomas Kulka states that:

\begin{quote}
The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable … Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes … Kitsch thus combines low aesthetic intensity with high emotional intensity.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

When looking at Chinese wares, the figures and motifs were obviously easily recognisable to the English public, what Kulka defines as ‘effortlessly identifiable’. Following J. G. A. Pocock’s theory of ‘civic humanism’\textsuperscript{24} and applying it to what John Barrell called ‘the republic of the fine arts’\textsuperscript{25} in eighteenth-century England, it seems that the immediacy of the sensuous pleasure brought by the visual and tactile consumption of chinoiserie objects clashed with the idea of beauty conceived as a rational concept by eighteenth-century civic humanists. Indeed, \textit{The World} described wallpaper with chinoiserie motifs—one of the most popular items from China—as a decorative object ‘where all the powers of fancy are exhausted in a thousand fantastic figures of birds, beasts and fishes, which never had existence’.\textsuperscript{26} If we are to follow the reasoning of the arbiters of taste, chinoiserie style was of a low aesthetic intensity but provided the audience with a high degree of emotional pleasure, thus corresponding to the definition of ‘kitsch’. The contemplation of Chinese wares did not lead to a higher conceptual state evoking order and harmony, but would indeed have been thought pleasant for the easy exoticism that emanated from them.

Chinoiserie can thus be classified under what Genette calls subjectivist hedonism\textsuperscript{27} or what Kant calls the pleasant, but not the beautiful.\textsuperscript{28} Thus chinoiserie appeared as an artistic style belonging to low culture as it did not stimulate intellectually, but called for the power of the imagination, whilst women appeared as the consumers of this low culture. Chinoiserie helped define spheres of high art and low art in the emerging material culture of eighteenth-century England.

\textbf{The Chinese Taste as Female Insanity}

By showing that chinoiserie represented low culture and by stigmatising women as the vehicles of chinoiserie, men put an end to competition and rivalry in the realm of arts, and put women back in their proper sphere. Men were the ones who did the Grand Tour, so they had access to knowledge and could appreciate ancient art. Women were more often confined to fripperies, among which was chinoiserie, a low and deviant form of art that could only appeal to fools.
Indeed the last blow administered to female connoisseurs was aimed at destroying female judgement once and for all by showing how mentally and intellectually fragile women were. Mental frailty then came into the arena, whereby women were presented as sick individuals who were the victims of fancy. The fictional character of Harriet Brittle who appears in the essay no. 109 published in John Hawkesworth’s periodical *The Adventurer* in 1753 is emblematic of this female mental fragility, as the character sinks into madness when some of her china is broken. The onomastics here again—‘Brittle’—links the notion of frailty to the essence of women. The description of the lady’s cell in the asylum of Bedlam indicates that she has transformed her cell into a porcelain closet, a typical lady’s dressing room which is filled and decorated with priceless chinoiserie items:

You wonder to see that cell beautified with Chinese vases and urns. It is inhabited by that famous virtuoso lady Harriet Brittle, whose opinion was formerly decisive at all auctions, where she was usually appealed to about the genuineness of porcelain. She purchased at an exhorbitant price, a Mandarin, and a Joss, that were the envy of all the female connoisseurs, and were allowed to be inestimable. They were ... carefully packed up in different boxes: but the brutish waggoner happening to overturn his carriage, they were crushed to pieces. The poor lady’s understanding could not survive so irreparable a loss; and her relations, to soothe her passion, had provided those Chelsea urns with which she has decorated her chamber, and which she believes to be the true Nanquin.  

The fate of Lady Brittle’s psychological and mental state is analogous to that of her porcelain, since both undergo an irremediable fracture. The Chinese statuettes end up shattered, whilst Lady Brittle loses her mind. For John Gilbert Cooper the Chinese style was the result of a distorted judgement, ‘the abortive Conceptions of a distem- per’d Fancy’, a sign of the sickness of the female mind. He thus said in Letter 9 of his *Letters Concerning Taste* written in 1755 that ‘the new Gentry of the City, and their Leaders the well-dress’d Mob about St. James, were seiz’d, ... with a Chinese Madness’.  

When talking about the female passion for collecting china in *The Lover*, Addison talked of a ‘malady’. And Defoe used the word ‘humour’. This reference to disease is linked to the theory of humours in relation to women. Women were seen as prone to hysteria or melancholy, so the consumption of chinoiserie became a threat to them as they could easily fall into bouts of passion and fever. The opposition to Nature is correlated by the reference to disease. The enthusiasm for chinoiserie is then seen as a mental illness that distorts the concept of nature. If women were dominated by fancy, instead of reason, then their love for chinoiserie could be represented as a mental illness that corroded and poisoned natural taste and true art. Women were thus denied the noble status of learned collectors, for the reference to mental incapacity offers a discourse on the dubious status of women as competent and reliable artistic judges. Lady Brittle cannot tell the difference between Chinese porcelain and European chinoiserie, which then reveals her lack of expertise. Moreover, the linguistic deformation of the name ‘Nankin’, which becomes ‘Naquin’ in the essay, reveals the corruption of the understanding of the true essence of Chinese
porcelain in England and puts emphasis on the ignorance of the real English purchasers who know no better than the fictional Lady Brittle. Female collectors of porcelain, such as the well-known Duchess of Portland and her likes, were often the objects of satire in many periodical essays. In Henry Mackenzie’s *Lounger* no. 79, dated from 1786, the virtuoso and auction bidder Lady Bidmore, a fictional character, stands for all the female lovers of Chinese wares and English imitations. The description of Lady Bidmore’s china-room, or ‘museum’ is thus reminiscent of the interiors of many country houses and mansions in England, such as Lady Betty Germaine’s china closet at Knowle:

[P]iles of plates and dishes, and pyramids of cups and saucers, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. In one quarter was a rampart of tureens and soup-dishes, in another an embattlement of punch-bowls … The dark blue of Nankeen was contrasted with the ancient red of Japan, the production of Dresden was opposed to the manufacture of Seves, and the mock Saxon of Derby to the mock Indian of Staffordshire. In the ornamental porcelain, the eye was completely lost in a chaos of pagodas, wagging-headed mandareens and bonzes, red lions, golden dogs, and fiery dragons.32

In this extract, ‘Nankin’ undergoes another linguistic deformation, being now spelt ‘Nankeen’, a proof of the orientalisation of Chinese porcelain which is appreciated for its exoticism and not for its genuine origin. This assemblage of wares shows how the principles of collecting rationally are put aside. The profusion of wares exhibited in this female museum destroys any attempt at a rational taxonomy of aesthetics. Classification does not rule the arrangement, which is dominated by an accumulation of precious wares. The only attempt at classification leads to a division between factories or between contrasting colours according to subjective criteria. The conclusion is that women are not academic collectors, and should not be trusted as regards connoisseurship.

The feminisation and foreign nature of chinoiserie were two major elements that made the style appear suspicious to men and defined its complete ‘otherness’. Like the mysterious Chinese Empire which was seen as a threatening Other which resisted England and flowed the latter with its goods, women were thus seen as debilitating and dangerous ‘others’ who were in possession of a subversive power that could potentially infect society, and even blur genders. Indeed, many criticisms were targeted against male connoisseurs who were seen as fops with effeminate mores. In an essay published in *The Connoisseur* in 1755 Richard Owen Cambridge reproached male virtuosi for being ‘apes[s] of female foppery … equivocal half-men, … neuter somethings between male and female’,33 simply because they enjoyed chinoiserie.

Female frailty was therefore an ideological construction that resulted in the production of a normative discourse on women, a male prescription aimed at condemning women’s activities in the realm of art and culture. For the total success of chinoiserie would have meant a social recognition of the discriminating power of women in art, and an accepting of a foreign, un-English artistic style. Nonetheless it cannot be denied that the female appreciation of chinoiserie contributed to the mapping out of fashion in the growing consuming and leisure society of the eighteenth century.
Notes

[8] See, for example, Arthur Devis’s *Mr and Mrs Bull* (1747). In the painting, the couple is sitting in the drawing-room. The symmetrical arrangement of the statues and vases bespeaks harmony, and reflects the taste of the lady, whilst the presence of a Buddha statuette in the middle enhances the whole.
[13] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
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