

Karen Tam

## Acheter un petit chinois: The Jesuit Museum of Chinese Art in Quebec

### Introduction

In 2011, I came across photographs dating possibly from the late 1920s or early 1930s of a Chinese warehouse full of objects and furniture with a sign: “Pour l'exposition à Montréal” (For the exhibition in Montreal) (fig. 1) and not much other information except that they were of the T'ou-Se-We art workshop in Zikawei, Shanghai, and had been in the collection of Catholic missionaries. Why my hometown of Montreal, I wondered, and to what exposition was this referring? Was it for an art exhibition or for one of the missionary exhibitions popular at the time in Quebec?



Fig. 1 Objects from the T'ou-Se-We orphanage art workshop in Zikawei for an exhibition in Montréal, c. 1930; courtesy of Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

Would I be able to trace the journey of these artefacts, from their inception, production, exportation, travel, exhibition, and possible purchase to discover where they ended up? Intrigued by the signage and objects, these photographs have led me on the subsequent search for and investigation of a once popular and now little known museum, the Musée d'art chinois (Museum of Chinese Art). This paper focuses on my *Nous sommes tous des brigands / We Are All Robbers* (2017-21) installations and touring exhibition that are inspired by this former Jesuit Museum of Chinese Art in Quebec, and will examine and question constructions and interpretations of Chineseness

through the use of artworks and cultural artefacts.<sup>1</sup>In my work, I look at the aesthetics and spaces of early twentieth-century North American Chinese restaurants, opium dens, karaoke lounges, and Chinatown curio shops as sites of cultural blending, interactions, and misunderstandings. I am revisiting and preserving these mixed historical spaces through recreating them as installations and sculptures. Although we can never fully grasp or know these historical places nor the attitudes that have shaped these sites, I suggest, through my installations, how our understanding of place and history can come through the corporeal experience of space and the materiality of objects.

The first part of this paper will be a brief introduction to the beginnings of the French Canadian Jesuits' activities in China and the Musée d'art chinois that they established in Quebec in 1931 for the presentation and understanding of Chinese culture and art, to educate and edify the faithful at home, as well as to raise funds for their missionary work in China. The museum disseminated these works of Chinese art for close to sixty years. Through their collection, now housed by the Musée de la civilisation à Québec (MCQ), missionary exhibitions, and newsletter *Le Brigand*, the Jesuits wanted to show China to the Quebec public, or at least their interpretation of China. While the museum was founded as a way to counter the negative prejudice that most Canadians had towards China based on past missionary accounts and their limited experiences with Chinese immigrants, I also suggest that through their exhibitions and collection, the Jesuits themselves shaped the interpretation and understanding – and perhaps even perpetuated stereotypes – of Chinese culture and the Chinese community in Quebec.

Collaborating with museums and communities in Quebec on my exhibition *Nous sommes tous des brigands / We Are All Robbers*, I have created a series of installations that take shape as contemporary imagined exhibition displays of the former Musée d'art

chinois with artefacts from the original Jesuit collection borrowed from the Musée de la civilisation à Québec (MCQ). These installation zones as well as other works that include sculptures, ornamental gates, a missionary kiosk, festive bunting, jazzy music, a village of pagodas, and *chinoiseries* lent by local communities and organisations, attempt to critically examine ethnic or cultural spaces. Mirroring both the meandering route that has led me from the 1920s-1930s photographs to my exhibition, and the route that viewers would wander within the exhibition, I will weave descriptions of the individual installations I have created throughout the following historical discussion, like a journey back and forth between the past and present. I will elaborate further the various stages of this project, and suggest how, revisiting the history and contexts of a collection such as the Musée d'art chinois can contest and allow new readings and narratives in the discourse of race and cultural representation, and can still be relevant to contemporary communities and individuals.

### The Musée d'art chinois

The first French Canadian Jesuit missionaries arrived in China in 1918 and were part of the mission in Xuzhou 徐州 (in northern Jiangsu Province, 500 km northwest of Shanghai) until 1949, when all foreign missionaries were expelled by the Communist Party, or in some cases imprisoned before being expelled. Before 1931, there was little information on Xuzhou available in Quebec but through their magazines and journals (*Canadian Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, *Le Semeur*, *La Nouvelle*), the Society of Jesus in Canada highlighted the early efforts of their missionaries in China. Nineteenth-century travel stories that had spread the popular image of a decaying China and negative representations of its people fuelled anti-Asian sentiment in Canada, forming prejudices towards the Chinese which many Canadians maintained. The mission was supported by many French Canadian donors convinced of the importance of the missionary cause. Quebec missionaries returned with objects (art, decorative, and knickknacks) from their overseas missions, and the most important of these collections of artefacts was that of the Jesuits' Musée d'art chinois, amassed between 1918 and 1939. The specimens brought back in 1923 by the trio of schol-

astics, Auguste Gagnon, Edouard Côté, and Georges Marin, stirred up wonderment and provoked so many questions about China and the Chinese, that it led to an early wish to assemble a collection in one place and regularly open it to the public.<sup>2</sup> The Xuzhou mission was publicised through lectures offered by Jesuit candidates destined for China. Initiated by Marin, Gagnon and Côté in 1924 during their theological studies in Montreal, the presentations occurred annually and aimed to convince other clergy and believers of the merits of their overseas missionary work.<sup>3</sup>

Father Joseph-Louis Lavoie (1886-1968), the founder of the Musée d'art chinois and the missionary newsletter, *Le Brigand*, spent 1924-28 in China as a missionary in Xuzhou, before being called back to Canada in 1928 to become the procurator of the Missions Étrangères de Chine, a Jesuit institution founded in Quebec to raise funds for their missionary operations in China. For the missionary exhibition of Montreal in 1930, where Jesuits and other communities displayed hundreds of objects from China and around the world, to represent the Xuzhou mission, Father Lavoie ordered furniture and *bibelots* (knickknacks) from Shanghai which apparently thrilled the 200 000 visitors.<sup>4</sup> When the exhibition closed, some objects, photographs and cards were presented as gifts to the various colleges and missionary groups run by the Jesuits across Canada. The most beautiful Chinese artefacts were selected and transported to Quebec City where Father Lavoie inaugurated his Musée d'art chinois on 15 February 1931. Visitors would pass a monumental Chinese-style arch to arrive at the Maison Châteauvert mansion, the museum's first location at 653 chemin Sainte-Foy, next door to the Procure des Missions (Missions Procure).<sup>5</sup>

As a nod to the Musée's colourful arc de triomphe, viewers to my exhibition are greeted at the entrance by one of my three *Ornamental Gates* (2017) which mark the passageways to the different installation zones (fig. 2). Each of these gates is a simplified version of a *paifang* or *pailou*, a traditional Chinese architectural arch or gateway that, outside of China, is found in many Chinatowns. These arches serve to greet visitors yet, at the same time, demarcate the limits and boundaries of Chinatowns. In my versions of the gates, they are decorated with wood cut-outs

with imagery of ginseng, soybeans, and grapes – commodities traded between China and Canada. The former two are exported to Canada, while the grapes reference the nascent wine industry in China. Hanging above the gates and zigzagging across the various installation zones are strings of *Salut à la Victoire* (*Bunting*) (2017), colourful bunting, or triangular flags made from chinoiserie-patterned fabric mixed with images of New France. These decorations are customarily used on festive occasions but here I am asking what colonial history has been erased and what is being celebrated, in our present age of fear-mongering and escalating xenophobia?



Fig. 2 Karen Tam; installation view of *Nous sommes tous des brigands / We Are All Robbers* exhibition, including *Ornamental Gates: Ginseng, Soybeans, Grapes*; 2017; birch plywood cutout panels, wood; dimensions of cut-out panels: 31.75 x 243.84 x 1.9 cm; as installed at EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe.

Once Father Lavoie had acquired the property on Grande-Allée street in 1934, the Procure des Missions de Chine, the Musée, and *Le Brigand* were brought together under the same roof, the latter two complementing each other, with one moving us to compassion, and the other enchanting us.<sup>6</sup> This residence was better located than the Musée's previous site, welcoming more and more visitors, which, for Lavoie, meant financial support for the mission via the visitor-benefactors. It also had another value: the educational and aesthetic experience for the visitor. The collection could convey a positive narrative of Chinese culture and civilisation, and enlighten visitors, who might become benefactors who would contribute to the mission. The museum featured works of art and decorative objects organised in large cabinets of curi-

osities that visitors could admire at leisure, as well as photographs received regularly from China that aimed to stimulate religious fervour. Some objects were sent from colleagues in Shanghai for exhibition, or to be sold at profit for the mission or for forthcoming missionary exhibitions.

Items were also sourced from the workshops of the T'ou-Se-We Orphanage 土山灣 (pinyin: Tushanwan) that was built in Zikawei (Xujiahui) in 1852 by the Catholic Diocese of Shanghai, and run by Jesuit missionaries who housed, clothed, and fed displaced orphans. The Jesuits operated an art school for the orphans to acquire the skills necessary to support themselves, and purportedly trained Western-style painters, sculptors, printers, skilled craftsmen, and photographers in China. There were several workshops, each with a managing director, who was often a European Jesuit with mastery in the craft. These workshops included print-making, photography, publishing, painting, stained glasswork, metal casting, embroidery, and wood-working. The art school was a place where Western and Chinese cultures could mix and integrate with one another. Objects from the T'ou-Se-We orphanage workshop were exhibited at international expositions, notably those of 1900, 1915, 1933, and 1939, and were awarded prizes and medals.<sup>7</sup> They were also sold overseas to support the mission. Such items were similar to the two wooden model pagodas in my installation, *Village des pagodes* (2017) (fig. 3), which, together with other objects provided from the orphanage workshops, were



Fig. 3 Karen Tam; *Village des pagodes*; 2017; installation with found, borrowed, and fabricated pagodas; dimensions variable; as installed at EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe.

from the original collection of the Musée d'art chinois (loaned for the installation from the MCQ). During the course of my research for the exhibition, I came to the realisation that they were possibly the ones in the 1920s-1930s photographs that had set me off on this search, and this was later confirmed when I found a document in the MCQ archives, entitled "Liste des objets pour l'exposition à Montréal du Orphelinat de T'ou Se We".<sup>8</sup> The *Village des pagodes* installation is a set of various miniature and model pagodas made of plastic, wood, metal, and cardstock. The image of the pagoda is recognisably Chinese and associated with Chinese culture, having been used in fairs and exhibitions, such as the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition where model pagodas made by the T'ou-Se-We workshop were shown. Besides the wooden models from the Musée d'art chinois (borrowed from the MCQ), among my set of pagodas are: two small "fake" ivory pagodas *Wild Protectors at the Mountain Pagoda I & II (phosphorescent)* (2017), referencing the ivory models of the Musée and bearing logos of Chinese companies; a cardstock pagoda in the shape and form of the pagoda in Montreal's Chinatown that was constructed in 1967 as part of the City of Montreal's plans to revitalise Chinatown and later torn down when the land was expropriated by the government; two wooden pagoda-shaped display units; and a few readymade 3D metal model pagodas. Throughout the display of these model pagodas are plastic toy soldiers depicting military figures from the Boxer Rebellion, WWII-era and modern Chinese Army.

In connection with this exhibition and making a small reference to the T'ou-Se-We orphanage workshops, I involved the local community and school groups in the *DIY Chinoiserie Workshops* (2016-20) zone, where some replica objects would be produced for and displayed within the exhibition, or could also be taken home as a slice of the exotic "East". The workshops are animated by myself, educators, or self-guided with handouts and include paper-cutting, creating a nesting cardboard pagoda, a card teapot, a papier-mâché vase, an ivory carving, etc. Through the creative process of making art objects, these workshops allow the exhibition space to be one of openness, while encouraging reflection on various ex-

amples, imaginings, and interpretations of the "East".

Pieces created by the orphanage workshops were displayed at missionary exhibitions in Quebec, such as those organised at Joliette (1927), Montreal (1930 and 1942), Trois-Rivières (1935), Sherbrooke (1941), and Saint-Hyacinthe (1951). These events brought together dozens of religious communities to promote their mission work, past and present. The Quebec Jesuits participated in every missionary exhibition and through their booths, the created exotic shows and celebrations, they aimed to arouse in the viewers feelings that oscillated from pity to indignation, depending on the circumstances. These vast mass spectacles, which also included World Fairs like Montreal's Expo '67, were opportunities to promote the missions and to use the objects collected abroad as tools to move the faithful at home<sup>9</sup>. Described by the Jesuits and the popular press in glowing terms as a "fairy land" with its "artistic treasures," the Musée d'art chinois employed a similar approach.<sup>10</sup> Highlights of the 1930 exhibition in Montreal were the Chinese furniture (screens, chests, tables, chairs, etc.) made in the T'ou-Se-We orphanage, silk embroideries, and Chinese Christian art. China was projected through the beauty of its arts and crafts. The Jesuit booths also showed a positive image of Chinese civilisation through the works of the orphans. Rather than showing the reality of the people and a country at war, they emphasised the exotic and aesthetic appeal that echoed the permanent exhibit at the Musée d'art chinois. By the time of the tricentenary of Montreal, in 1942, Canadian Jesuits and other missionaries had been interned by the Japanese in concentration camps in Shanghai and Beijing. Rather than draw attention to the distressing situation in China at a time of celebration in Canada, Father Lavoie emptied the museum to fill the Jesuit kiosk with pagodas and other objects imbued with an exotic aura. However, when the Jesuits chose to show the reality of their mission in Xuzhou, the depiction of the sufferings of the white missionaries – considered as "the New France martyrs" – prevailed over that of Chinese individuals who were represented by objects. These types of fissures are what interest me most, as they are examples of colonial attitudes and mentalities that exist even today – particularly the lack of recognition



of the contradictions between being fascinated with a different culture while simultaneously rejecting and fearing its peoples. With my exhibition, I am asking viewers to spend time within the space I created, and through their interaction with and experience of the installations, I hope that they will also come to realise and question such historical and cultural disconnects. The materiality and historicity of the objects and installations themselves can help us examine the power of the Orientalist gaze. In the absence of the body on display, the objects in the missionary exhibitions and in the Musée d'art chinois become "epidermalised" or "raced" by their location, use, presentation, or affiliation with a racially defined community, as art historian Jennifer González writes.<sup>11</sup> They are transformed into objects of desire, and in the absence of the racialised body, they stand in for and attest to its presence.



Fig. 4 Karen Tam; *Kiosque des gestes oubliés*; 2017; installation with found, borrowed, and fabricated objects; 183 x 549 x 244 cm; as installed at EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe.

Questioning these types of displays and interpretations of culture and community, my *Kiosque des gestes oubliés* (2017) installation (fig. 4) recreates and combines how the Jesuits and other religious groups arranged their missionary kiosks and exhibits on China. The installation includes original objects (framed mirror, carved wooden screen, armchair, carved wooden writing desk, dragon-headed floor lamp, shelving unit) from the collection of the Musée d'art chinois along with other readymades, found items, and several of my fabricated sculptures in the form of faux porcelain vases made of papier-mâché. The latter includes *The Sporting Life (Football)* (2015)

(fig. 5), my playful version of Ming dynasty flasks where my dragons engage in modern day activities and sports. In addition, a recording of the *Musique des brigands* (2017) soundtrack plays in the installation space. This is made of six musical pieces which I have re-scored: three of which are orientalist Tin Pan Alley songs found in the monthly periodical *Canada qui chante* (published between 1927 and 1930), and from which I have removed the orientalist lyrics while thinking about what is included and what is left out in any representation of culture.<sup>12</sup> The other three works are jazzed up sections of Charles d'Ambleville and Jean-Joseph Marie Amiot's *Messes des Jésuites de Pékin*, written in the seventeenth century for liturgical use in Beijing. The original mass included Chinese chants, perhaps as an attempt to bring some musical familiarity to what may otherwise have sounded very "foreign" to a Chinese audience or congregation of the seventeenth century.



Fig. 5 Karen Tam; *The Sporting Life (Football)*; 2015; papier-mâché, Chinese newspaper, pigmented India ink, gouache; 38 x 23 x 23 cm; Collection Hamelys.

The campaign by missionaries in Quebec, such as l'Oeuvre de la Sainte Enfance (The Holy Childhood

Association) and the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception encouraged school-children to “acheter les petit chinois à 25 sous,” (buy a Chinese baby for 25 cents).<sup>13</sup> In return, they received a photograph of ‘their’ orphan and the privilege of naming him or her (giving the orphan a Christian name).<sup>14</sup> This system was reproduced by the Jesuits and introduced in their schools from the 1930s, to convince young French Canadians to help the children of the Chinese mission. One of the last campaigns by the Sainte Enfance in Quebec went on until the late 1950s and 1960s despite the fact that it was almost a decade after Catholic orphanages had been closed by the People’s Republic of China.<sup>15</sup> The aim of these campaigns was to finance the missions in China, and later in Africa where the orphans were referred to as “les petits Chinois d’Afrique”.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 6 Karen Tam; *Acheter un petit chinois*; 2017; installation with borrowed objects; dimensions variable; as installed at EXPRESSION, Centre d’exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe.

My *Acheter un petit chinois!* (2017) installation (fig. 6) is a community space constructed of borrowed bibelots collected from an open call to the public for any Chinese trinkets or chinoiseries they might have acquired (or inherited) at the Musée’s gift shop or at

missionary exhibits, together with postcards and items related to the “petit chinois” campaign. The venues in Saint-Hyacinthe, Rimouski and Sherbrooke put out calls in their communities, and a number of individuals in both places responded by generously lending their chinoiseries and sharing the stories behind them. The *chinoiserie* submissions received included albums of photographs, copies of *Le Brigand*, cards from this campaign, a collection of porcelain erotica, a mahjong set, an embroidered jacket, a silk painting depicting Jesus and Mary with Chinese features, books, and carved cork works. A few individuals, including a retired nun, who lent me the cards with their orphans’ photographs, happily reminisced how as children they would compete with each other to collect as many of these orphan cards as they could. The venues also approached local religious organisations to borrow items related to this campaign as well as artefacts they acquired during their missionary work in China.

As this exhibition is touring to communities that are predominantly non-Asian, I am curious to learn what knowledge or preconceptions people have of Chinese culture and the Chinese community (whether positive, negative, informed, or based on stereotypes). I wanted to see what kind of *chinoiserie* objects people kept at home and how they themselves relate to China or to Chinese culture. I decided to present these objects back to the communities as one form of engagement, and by placing their *chinoiserie* in an exhibition context, I am asking them to reflect and question their reason for collecting and holding on to them. Through their collections of chinoiserie objects, I hope to start a dialogue about our individual biases and relationship with objects and cultures, while making the parallel between their own collections and that of the Musée d’art chinois. Perhaps in seeing their bibelots on display, mirroring (on a smaller scale) the Jesuits’ museum and its collection, they have another way of accessing the history I am examining. It is important to highlight this type of visual culture because over time even the smallest knickknack can influence the way one views or experiences a different culture. Following each exhibition, the *chinoiserie* materials are documented and returned to their owners.

## Collecting the Other

From 1918, when their missionary activities expanded to Xuzhou, French-Canadian Jesuit missionaries were asked to send Chinese artefacts for the first missionary exhibitions, and by 1931, there was enough inventory to fill the Musée d'art chinois. Father Lavoie wanted to expand the collection by several times in order to attract more visitors to the museum, and between 1932 and 1938, he paid several thousand dollars for Chinese art, souvenirs, postcards, and mission books for the museum and its store.<sup>17</sup> Jesuits in Quebec would send huge shopping lists to their colleagues in China to acquire objects in Shanghai and Xuzhou, or from the mission's orphanages. Some items were donated or were gifts to an individual missionary, who then passed them on to a senior Jesuit. Quebec Jesuits could not rely on knowledgeable sinologists for collecting outside the orphanage. This task was therefore left to enthusiastic amateur collectors (such as Fathers Lavoie and Rosario Renaud) or young priests and language students. Ignorant of the value and use of the objects on the inventory orders, the acquirers in China could simply follow the lists and generic instructions given by Jesuit colleagues in Canada.

The stock market crash did not seem to affect sales of Chinese bibelots, which grew to the extent that in 1934, Father Lavoie opened a boutique attached to the museum. He made regular requests to colleagues in China to bring or send back specific objects or knickknacks (at a reasonable price) to stock the museum and its curio shop. These bibelots would please or be useful to the buyer, and included objects such as a peasant's outfit, fans, ivory cigarette holders, back scratchers, etc. He did not choose them for their aesthetic value, nor was he concerned with authenticity, rarity, or antiquity. Nevertheless, in 1931, a local journalist described the museum as "a corner of the Celestial empire, transported by enchantment, to our city of Quebec".<sup>18</sup> The Musée was included in guides of recognised museums and on Montreal tourist circuits. The numerous visitors were encouraged to be charitable for the benefit of the Xuzhou mission and buy souvenirs such as missionary publications on Xuzhou and postcards of China, with those scenes showing the missionaries at work being most popular with the general public. The ceaseless flow

of visitors (amateur art lovers, connoisseurs, and the curious) from within the province and the United States had the museum shop constantly restocking its inventory of Chinese goods. Unlike visitors to the Musée who could leave with an exotic souvenir "Made in China" as evidence of their travels not to China but to the Chinese museum, and as material proof of their contribution to the Catholic mission, there is no merchandise for visitors to buy in my 'gift shop' *La boutique des brigands* (2017) (fig. 7). This installation of vitrines and display units placed throughout the exhibition route aims to reflect the role of the Musée's gift shop in the merchandising of culture. A range of "fake" and "real" chinoiserie objects – some historical, some bought, others of my own creation – populate these vitrines. Among the items in this section are fans, postcards, embroidered handkerchiefs and linen, water-pipes, cloisonné balls, and clay figurines sourced from Chinatown souvenir shops, discount stores, eBay, or given to me by friends and relatives. Other objects in jade and wood, metal locks, a jewellery case, a silver bell service, and a wooden tabernacle carved in the form of a Chinese gate with dragons atop its eaves, were lent by the Société du patrimoine religieux du diocèse de Saint-Hyacinthe, and other religious orders, as well as the MCQ.

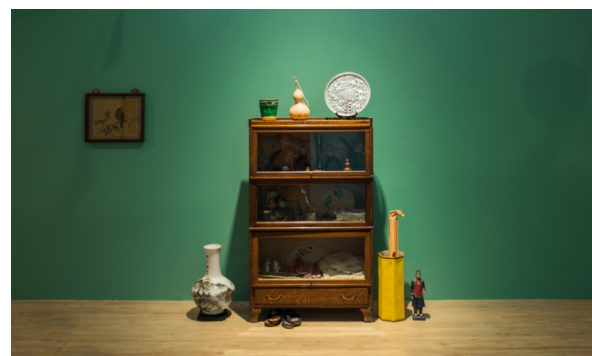


Fig. 7 Karen Tam; detail of *La boutique des brigands*; 2017; installation with borrowed and fabricated objects; dimensions variable; as installed at EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe.

Objects acquired by the French-Canadian Jesuits were not necessarily fine art but chinoiseries, as they were made in the Chinese style for the Western market. The museum collection included sculpted wood, frames, jade, ivory, figurines illustrating Chinese daily life, embroidery, bronzes, lacquer, cloisonné ware,



paintings on silk, dazzling costumes, drawings, books, and even an imperial bed. Handicrafts were made in the T'ou-Se-We orphanage workshops, which also produced hybrid Western-style furniture that used Chinese wood and ornamentation, Chinese Christian artworks, and liturgical objects, all of which demonstrated to museum visitors not only the virtuosity of the Chinese protégés but also evidence of their conversion.<sup>19</sup> The museum exhibited its collection and photographs in sumptuous rooms staged in a bourgeois atmosphere familiar to its visitors, where it deployed the exoticism of China to seduce viewers. The rooms were cosy and “Chinese but not too much” as France Lord notes in her study of the collections and missionary exhibitions of the Quebec Jesuits.<sup>20</sup> Ownership of these objects by the Jesuits was legitimate, stressed Father Louis-Joseph Goulet in a letter from 1990, and not “emprunts militaires” (war loot), which Western powers often helped themselves to in conquered countries.<sup>21</sup> The items were paid for, or donated with consent. The Jesuits continually defined China on Western terms and despite the museum’s aim to counter prejudices towards the Chinese people, the image of a ‘civilised’ China that Lavoie showed through the displays (and in his memoirs) was a distorted one, and quite a contrast from the daily life of the inhabitants of Xuzhou. I would add that it was also far from the reality of the Chinese communities within Quebec and Montreal. During this era, the Chinese in Canada experienced much discrimination, facing anti-Chinese sentiments and racist legislation. In 1885, the Canadian government levied a \$50 head tax on Chinese immigrants entering Canada as part of the Chinese Immigration Act, and raised that amount to \$500 in 1903. Finally, in 1923, the Canadian government adopted the Chinese Exclusion Act, which effectively banned almost all Chinese immigration. The act was not repealed until 1947.

### ***Le Brigand***

The missionary review *Le Brigand* (fig. 8) and the museum were the principal publicity or propaganda vehicles of Canadian Jesuit activities in China. Published six to seven issues per year, *Le Brigand* entertained its readers on Chinese culture, and informed them about the apostolic activities of the Canadian Jesuits in Xuzhou, and the use of their



Fig. 8 Karen Tam; detail of *La boutique des brigands*, including copies of *Le Brigand* showing the interiors of the Musée d'art chinois; 2017; installation with borrowed and fabricated objects; dimensions variable; as installed at EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe.

financial contributions. Considered as original as its name, each eight-page issue of *Le Brigand* was mimeographed with illustrations, drawings, photographs, and engravings by artists inspired by the articles, lists of needs, donor names, news, classified ads, statistics, and transcripts of letters sent by missionaries stationed in China. The latter reported life in China including floods, droughts, famines, epidemics, incidents of banditry, and so on. At once literary, humorous, comical, and serious, it had its readers laughing or in tears. While, on the one hand, most of the articles in *Le Brigand* praised Chinese culture and endeavoured to actively oppose anti-Chinese prejudices, there were others that demonstrated intolerant and condescending judgment and attempts to impose the Jesuits' Christian values on certain practices of the Chinese converts which they deemed superstitious. The title of the magazine recalls that its founder and editor-in-chief, Father Lavoie had been a victim of banditry in 1926 in China. In the first issue, Lavoie writes that the name 'brigand' could only have been thought up by someone who had been in China, and that they saw themselves (the mission and the church) as similar to professional beggars and Chinese brigands, in so far as they share the same instincts and manners, and their faithful as their “victims”. He describes the brigand's methods of working, including coming to your home at night, and always being courteous — politeness in one hand and a revolver in the other —



to make you understand he is the master.<sup>22</sup> Prior to 1945, when he was succeeded by Father Louis Bouchard, Lavoie oversaw the design and publication of *Le Brigand* with help from two of his nieces who took on the office work for many tiring and long years, including the engraving and printing of *Le Brigand*, filling up the pages when needed and when inspiration escaped their uncle. The library at the Seminary of Saint-Hyacinthe, which has a complete set of *Le Brigand*, was kind enough to lend the first two volumes along with antique books relating to the missions in China for my installations.

My exhibition title, *Nous sommes tous des brigands / We Are All Robbers*, is inspired by the Jesuits' missionary review, *Le Brigand*. At the same time, the title relates to issues around cultural exchange, appropriation, and authenticity. Instead of pointing the finger at the viewer or one particular group and accusing them of cultural appropriation, I am playfully suggesting that we should be inclusive in this charge and say that we, collectively, are all practising varying forms of theft, of borrowing and cultural exchange; we are all robbers. In my installations, real furniture and artefacts sit side-by-side with replicas from other sources and are further jumbled with my own fabricated pieces to create a new "old" version of a historical space; the mixing of old and new, real and fake, questions notions of authenticity. At first glance, all seems to fit together, but as the viewer looks closer, she or he may become perplexed, spend more time within the space, and begin questioning every object encountered within the exhibition. What interests me about authenticity and copies is how the act of making fakes and copies blurs what is real and what is fiction. Replicas in installations bring us closer to the historical through the objects' materiality. To understand an object is to reconstruct it, and to reconstruct an object is to understand it and its materiality. My own understanding of an object and a particular place comes from making, handling, and reproducing it using similar techniques and methods of fabrication. I am less interested in what is original and authentic than the ways interactions and exchanges can form new histories and realities.



Fig. 9 Karen Tam; *Quand j'étais chinois: Razzia*; 2017; embroidery on chiffon and organza, wood; 66 x 122 x 1 cm; as installed at EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe.

Another work inspired by *Le Brigand* is *Quand j'étais chinois* (2017) (fig. 9) which includes two sets of eight circular fans entitled: "Les étoiles en voyage" and "Razzia", chapter titles in Father Lavoie's memoir, *Quand j'étais chinois* (When I was Chinese), of his time in China from 1924 to 1928.<sup>23</sup> I have turned some of the sketches and illustrations in Lavoie's memoir and in *Le Brigand* into embroideries. The choice of fans is a reference to the thirty-three cases containing six hundred fans which the future bishop of Xuzhou, Philippe Côté, sent to the Musée for its boutique in 1930.

### Donation

The museum, its maintenance, and the expenses of collecting were eventually viewed by the missionaries in Xuzhou as an extravagant luxury they could not afford. Although the Musée was no longer enriched with new objects after 1939, it continued to be very active. *Le Brigand*, the Musée, and the Procure des Missions de la Chine moved a third time in 1943. After Father Lavoie's departure as procurator and editor of *Le Brigand* in 1945, his successor Father Louis Bouchard paid little attention to the museum. It was relocated to Montreal in 1946, and stayed open until 1970, when its collection was shared among the Jesuit houses including the Procure des Missions itself, and was no longer available to the general public.<sup>24</sup> Significant pieces were also lent to different schools, colleges, and for outdoor exhibitions in Quebec (as they had been for past missionary exhibitions as well as the

World's Fair of 1967). Due to the age of the dwindling number of Jesuits as well as their view that a relatively young museum would be in a better position to care for and to make these artistic treasures known to the public, the Jesuits contacted the MCQ in 1989 to discuss donating their Chinese collection, the Musée d'art chinois. After receiving the necessary authorisation from Rome – from the Superior General of the Society of Jesus and the Vatican – in 1990 the Jesuits donated the collection of approximately 1800 objects acquired by missionaries in China, which included tables, chairs, folding screens, an imperial bed, other furniture in sculpted wood (teak, oak, camphor), secular and religious pieces such as ivory artefacts, figurines, games, pipes, musical instruments, fans, etc. There were also 800 iconographic documents. Prior to the donation, photographs of the furniture and objects showed all these items being used in everyday life.



Fig. 10 Karen Tam; *From Yiwu to You*, 2016-2019; cyanotype; running dimensions: 1250 x 230 cm; as installed at EX-PRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe.

The last installation zone I will discuss in this paper is *From Yiwu to You* (2016-2020) a room installation of hexagon cyanotypes that will eventually span close to 12.5 m in length (fig. 10). Yiwu Market, in Zhejiang province, is a massive wholesale market supplying countries around the world. I chose to use cyanotype to produce my own faux Dutch Delftware tiles (the blue-and-white tiles that were popular and which decorated homes and fireplaces in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries throughout Europe) and to also reference the origins of blue-and-white porcelain. Those historic European porcelain rooms, outfitted with *chinoiserie* decor or lined with wall-mounted collections of porcelain, were inspired

by a period of increasing trade with China, during which wealthy Europeans could indulge themselves in exoticised East Asian motifs. For the galleries in Saint-Hyacinthe and Rimouski, I presented two walls with this work, which will grow as the exhibition travels. The imagery blends historical, mythical, and present-day events, figures, motifs, and technology, such as Mu Guiying (a legendary woman warrior and prominent figure in the *Generals of the Yang Family* stories); a horse and rider originally painted by the Italian Jesuit missionary Giuseppe Castiglione who became court painter to three of the Qing dynasty emperors; the Jade Rabbit lunar rover (contemporary space exploration referring to the traditional motif of the Jade Rabbit in the moon), drones, silkworms, hami melons from Xinjiang, etc. These allude to the trade, travel, consumerism, and exchange, which took place historically – and still does, from China's east coast, for example, Yiwu Market, Zhejiang province – to the rest of the world via the historic and modern Silk Roads, along the Taklamakan Desert, Gobi Desert, Dunhuang, the Karakoram Highway (also known as the China-Pakistan Friendship Highway), and other points on the land and maritime routes. The purpose of this work is to contest the current popular belief and media stories that claim trade with China has always been one-sided. The installation also questions the motives behind China's investments in the infrastructures of developing countries in Eurasia.

## Conclusion

For close to sixty years, first in Quebec City and then in Montreal, the Musée d'art chinois disseminated the Jesuits' interpretations of Chinese art and culture. Through their collection, newsletter, participation in missionary exhibitions, the Jesuits wanted to show a specific China to the Quebec public. Father Lavoie founded the museum as a way to combat the negative prejudice that most Canadians had towards China based on past missionary accounts and their limited experiences with Chinese immigrants who often worked as laundrymen and in restaurants. The use of propagandistic tools by the Jesuits created a missionary mentality among its populace in Quebec. With *Le Brigand*, the public would have seen China through the eyes of a Jesuit, and as each publication yielded and helped raise more revenue for the mission, thou-

sands of people were persuaded to subscribe. Meanwhile the museum's strategy of exoticism seduced elderly visitors into leaving bequests to the Society of Jesus. Yet through the practice of collecting and exhibiting the Other, the Jesuits themselves shaped the understanding, and perhaps even perpetuated stereotypes of Chinese culture and the Chinese community for generations of Quebecers. The paternalistic perception of China formed by the Jesuits has left palpable traces in Quebec culture, such as certain popular expressions, especially "p'tits Chinois à 25 sous la pièce" which makes allusion to the Holy Childhood Mission that mobilised generations of schoolchildren to support the missionary work.<sup>25</sup>

Moving through my installations and the exhibition, the architecture and space interacts with the viewer's body and she or he becomes an active participant; bending one's head down as one walks past the ornamental gates; kneeling to see the miniature metal pagodas; looking up to the bunting that zigzags across the space; sitting at the *DIY Chinoiserie Workshop* table and following the instructions to make one's own *chinoiserie* paper-cutt; reading and flipping the pages of a copy of *Le Brigand*; hearing the music I arranged and composed based on Orientalist Tin Pan Alley tunes and a seventeenth-century Jesuit mass while peering around the corner; entering a room and being surrounded by a blue-and-white landscape. My exhibition project looks at the construction of Asianness or Chineseness, as demonstrated by the Musée d'art chinois. It explores an exotic Chinese space created in the West by non-Chinese individuals. Through the art installations, readymades, found items, fabricated sculptures, and original objects from the Musée d'art chinois, I want to reveal the importance of these types of public display places in producing a specific Chinese spatiality, and to critique the type of colonial or historical displays in museums that exoticise another culture. By collecting the Other (the unfamiliar and foreign), the exotic becomes domesticated and commodified for Western consumption within the Musée, in the pages of *Le Brigand*, and the homes of the museum's visitors and benefactors. Using and reactivating the collections and archives to revisit how this museum, the Jesuit missionary activities in China, and *Le Brigand* have informed and shaped the inter-

pretation and understanding of Chinese culture for generations in Quebec, I aim to question a prevalent tendency to view the Chinese communities and culture through objects, commodities, and their material culture rather than engaging with the people themselves. This requires constant re-negotiation and re-visiting of a collection's context and history, and asks how they can be reread, reinterpreted, and confronted. With my exhibition and its installations, I intend to start a dialogue and open up the conversation with the audience about our individual biases, whether simply having the viewer move and interact in the space with their body, become fascinated with the historical objects from the MCQ, or perplexed with the mixture of found, borrowed, and fabricated artefacts and sculptures, or even recognise an event they had participated in as children. As an artist of Chinese descent and growing up in the French-speaking part of Canada, I have always been interested in the cultural and linguistic tensions that arise whenever different communities live side by side, and it has been a wonderful exercise in engagement with people in the local communities, museums and their staff, religious organisations, my family and friends. Considering how our perceptions are constantly challenged and evolving, I am asking all of them to reconsider their relationship and engagement with the Other and to interrogate the problematics of history, memory and their representations.

## Endnotes

1. *Nous sommes tous des brigands / We Are All Robbers* will travel to four galleries and museums in Quebec, Canada. Presenting galleries include: EXPRESSION, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, Saint-Hyacinthe, (Winter 2017-2018); Musée régional de Rimouski, Rimouski, QC (Spring 2018); Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke, QC (Autumn 2019); Plein sud, centre d'art actuel à Longueuil, Longueuil, QC (Autumn 2021).
2. Rosario Renaud, *Le Diocèse de Sūchow (Chine): Champ apostolique des Jésuites canadiens de 1918 à 1954*, Montreal 1982, p. 29.
3. Samuel C. Fleury, *Le financement canadien-français de la mission chinoise des Jésuites au Xuzhou de 1931 à 1949: La Procure de Chine*. Master's thesis in history, Quebec 2014, p. 53.
4. Renaud 1982, *Le Diocèse de Sūchow*, p. 29.
5. *Le Brigand*, no. 6, February 1931, p. 1.
6. Renaud 1982, *Le Diocèse de Sūchow*, p. 30.
7. Benoît Vermander, *Les Jésuites de la Chine: De Matteo Ricci à nos jours*, Brussels 2012, p. 86.
8. Orphelinat de T'ou-Sè-Wè, Zi-Ka-Wei. Exhibition inventory. *Liste des objets pour l'exposition à Montréal (Canada)* [ca. 1930]. Folder CA-89-176. Archives at the Musée de l'Amérique francophone, Musée de la civilisation, Quebec, Canada.
9. France Lord, *The Silent Eloquence of Things: The Missionary Collections and Exhibitions of the Society of Jesus in Quebec, 1843-1946*, in: *Canadian Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples:*

- Representing Religion at Home and Abroad*, eds. Alwyn Austin and Jamie S. Scott, Toronto 2005, p. 206-207.
10. "Fondation d'un musée chinois chez les Rev. Pères Jésuites," *Le Soleil*, March 31, 1931, p. 28.
  11. Jennifer González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, Cambridge, MA 2008.
  12. The six musical pieces are: *Fleur de Chrysanthème (Fox Trot)*, *Nuits de Chine (Fox Trot)*, *Actiones Nostras*, *Les Oeufs Chinois*, *Ave Maria*, *Acte d'Humilité*, all (2016-2017).
  13. The amounts varied between 25 cents to one dollar.
  14. L'Oeuvre de la Sainte-Enfance (The Holy Childhood Association) was a charity set up in France during the 19<sup>th</sup> century to raise money from French children who would donate a small monthly sum to save starving and abandoned Chinese babies. Henrietta Harrison, *A Penny for the Little Chinese: The French Holy Childhood Association in China, 1843-1951*, in: *American Historical Review*, vol. 113 no. 1, 2008, p. 73.
  15. Alwyn J. Austin, *Saving China: Canadian Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1888-1959*, Toronto 1986, p. 164.
  16. Sophie-Laurence Lamontagne, *Tous missionnaires!*, in: *Cap-aux-Diamants*, no. 26, 1991, p. 58.
  17. Fleury 2014, *Le financement canadien-français de la mission chinoise des Jésuites au Xuzhou de 1931 à 1949*, p. 80.
  18. "Fondation d'un musée chinois chez les Rev. Pères Jésuites," *Le Soleil*, March 7, 1931, p. 28.
  19. Lord 2005, *The Silent Eloquence of Things*, p. 220.
  20. Lord 2005, *The Silent Eloquence of Things*, p. 223.
  21. See letter from Louis-Joseph Goulet, "Donation du musée chinois au musée de la civilisation" (October 29, 1990), Archives at the Musée de l'Amérique francophone, Musée de la civilisation, Quebec, Canada.
  22. *Le Brigand*, vol. 1 no. 1, March 1930, p. 1.
  23. Joseph-Louis Lavoie, *Quand j'étais chinois*, Montreal 1961.
  24. It moved to 762 Sherbrooke Street West in Montreal. *Le Brigand*, no. 98, October 1946, p. 3.
  25. Jacques Langlais, *Les Jésuites du Québec en Chine (1918-1955)*, Quebec 1979, p. 309.

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Benoît Vermander, *Les Jésuites et la Chine: De Matteo Ricci à nos jours*. Brussels 2012.

## Picture credits

Fig. 1 © Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

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## Summary

Incorporating visual research and artistic approach, this paper examines and questions constructions and interpretations of Chineseness through the use of artworks and cultural artefacts in collections such as the Jesuit Museum of Chinese Art in Quebec. Opened in 1931, this museum was established for the introduction and understanding of Chinese culture and art, to educate and edify the faithful at home, as well as to raise funds for their missionary work in China. Its collection featured works of art and decorative artefacts sent by colleagues in Shanghai for forthcoming exhibitions or in order to be sold at profit for the mission. Objects were not chosen necessarily for their aesthetic value, authenticity, or antiquity. Visitors could leave with an exotic souvenir as personal material proof of contribution to the Jesuits' missionary work. For more than 60 years, the museum disseminated these works of Chinese art, and



through their collection (now housed by the Musée de la civilisation à Québec) and newsletters, the Jesuits wanted to show China to the Quebec public, or at least their interpretation of China. While the museum was founded as a way to counter negative prejudice that most Canadians had towards China based on their limited experiences with Chinese immigrants, this paper discusses how, through their exhibitions and collection, the Jesuits themselves shaped the perception and understanding of Chinese culture and the Chinese community in Quebec, and perhaps even perpetuated stereotypes. Collaborating with museum and communities, my exhibition and art installations, *Nous sommes tous des brigands / We Are All Robbers* (2017-2020) are contemporary imagined exhibition displays of this museum with artefacts from the original Jesuit collection. In doing so, I suggest how revisiting the history and contexts of this collection can allow new readings and narratives in the discourse of race and cultural representation.

### Author

Karen Tam is a Montréal artist of Chinese descent whose research focuses on the constructions and imaginations of 'ethnic' spaces through installations in which she recreates Chinese restaurants, karaoke lounges, opium dens, curio shops and other sites of cultural encounters. She has exhibited her work and participated in residencies in North America, Europe, and China, including the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the He Xiangning Art Museum. She holds a PhD in Cultural Studies from Goldsmiths, University of London and a MFA in Sculpture from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work can be seen at: <http://www.karentam.ca>

### Title

Karen Tam, Acheter un petit chinois: The Jesuit Museum of Chinese Art in Quebec, in: *Asia Collections outside Asia: Questioning Artefacts, Cultures and Identities in the Museum*, eds. Iside Carbone and Helen Wang, [kunsttexte.de/Transcultural Perspectives](http://kunsttexte.de/Transcultural), no. 4, 2020 (13 p.), [www.kunsttexte.de](http://www.kunsttexte.de).