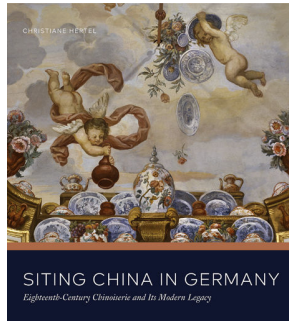


# CHRISTIANE HERTEL, *SITING CHINA IN GERMANY. EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CHINOISERIE AND ITS MODERN LEGACY*

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Reviewed by  
Anna Grasskamp

Chinoiserie is no longer what it used to be. During the nineteenth century, the term designated artifacts made in China *and* those made in Europe in a style associated with China; in the twentieth century it was only used for the latter, mostly in relation to the eighteenth century. During the last two decades, chinoiserie has been conceptually revised in publications that have not only re-mapped its previous Franco- and Anglo-centric geographies through the addition of a wide range of sites, but also diversified the term's meanings by including discussions of chinoiserie objects made in China or gifted to Chinese recipients.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have freed the study of chinoiserie from the overtly positive implications it had for eighteenth-century patrons, liberated research from the negative judgment applied by later observers, and studied “chinois”

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Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Ding Ning, with Lidy Jane Chu (eds.), *Qing Encounters. Artistic Exchanges Between China and the West*, Los Angeles 2015; Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Jennifer Milan (eds.), *Beyond Chinoiserie. Artistic Exchange between China and the West during the Late Qing*, Leiden 2019; Kristel Smentek, Chinoiseries for the Qing. A French Gift of Tapestries to the Qianlong Emperor, in: *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, 2016, 87–109.

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objects as sites of cultural mediation, translation, or encounter.<sup>2</sup> It is against the background of these recent and, in part, quite radical changes that Christiane Hertel's *Siting China in Germany* presents findings on the eighteenth-century phenomenon and its modern legacy.

Published in 2019, *Siting China in Germany* does not refer to the most recent books in the field: the edited volume *Beyond Chinoiserie* of 2019 that is interested in a decentered long-durée understanding of chinoiserie, and *Europas chinesische Träume* of 2018, a monograph by Hans Holländer focusing on German chinoiserie.<sup>3</sup> Yet, it seems no coincidence that the three books were published in close consecutive order as they all fill lacunae in previous research. Like *Beyond Chinoiserie*, *Siting China in Germany* covers three centuries and discusses chinoiserie as meaningfully linked to rococo and classicism and entangled with seemingly disparate cultural references; as in Holländer's monograph, Germany takes center stage in Hertel's book, which highlights the courts at Rastatt and Kassel, prioritizing them over the more well-known collections in Dresden, Munich, and Berlin.

While the first two chapters of the book focus largely on the agency of rulers as patrons, they also briefly address the work of comparatively well-studied makers of artifacts in Chinese materials and chinois style, such as Johann Friedrich Böttger and Johann Gregorius Höroldt at the Meissen porcelain manufactory. In addition, Hertel mentions ceramic workshops in Hanau, Ansbach, and Nuremberg as well as the artisans Johann Hiebel and Franz Pflieger who, at the court of Sybilla Augusta at Rastatt, "belonged to a larger group of Bohemian expatriates, most of them peasants forced to farm Baden-Baden's devastated, depopulated land" (pp. 22–23). The inclusion of some of the lesser-known production centers and individuals who mediated patrons' ideas and their material manifestations is crucial as chinoiserie itself is a system of representation which abounds in 'nameless' figures. It can only be fully understood by paying attention to the chinois 'figures on the wall', those who commissioned their creations *as well as* those in charge of implementing and crafting their patrons' ideas. If, as Hertel and others argue, chinoiserie is a translation effort, these artists and artisans are the missing link between something that does not exist – that is, a European regent's imaginary vision of China – and the reality of an artfully decorated residence somewhere in Germany.

## 2

Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie. Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Manchester 2014; Greg Thomas, Chinoiserie and Intercultural Dialogue at Brighton Pavilion, in: ten-Doesschate Chu and Ding (eds.), *Qing Encounters*, 232–247; Kristel Smentek, Global Circulations, Local Transformations. Objects and Cultural Encounter in the Eighteenth Century, in: ten-Doesschate Chu and Ding (eds.), *Qing Encounters*, 243–257. On the term chinois see Christiane Hertel, *Siting China in Germany. Eighteenth-Century Chinoiserie and Its Modern Legacy*, University Park 2019, 2.

## 3

ten-Doesschate Chu and Milan (eds.), *Beyond Chinoiserie*; Hans Holländer, *Europas chinesische Träume. Die Erfindung Chinas in der europäischen Literatur*, Munich 2018.

*Siting China in Germany* takes the idea of “cultural translation” seriously and – in contrast to the work of other scholars – goes far beyond its discursive use in general terms. In her discussion of chinoiserie’s afterlife during the nineteenth century in Chapter Three, Hertel examines a garden pavilion at Dresden whose wall decorations combine Italianate with chinois and “Japanese” aesthetics. She argues that this merging of elements is related to the mission of nineteenth-century translators who borrowed from a disparate range of sources and language systems to achieve the most “authentic” German version of a foreign text, creating a new canon of extra-European readings within the newly established framework of world literature. As a translator might borrow a term from another European language to label an extra-European phenomenon in a German text, the Dresden pavilion visually merges Italianate and chinois elements and, thereby, “one language falls into the other, with the aim, and perhaps result, of conveying something authentic about China” (p. 128).

Chapter Four takes the reader to an imaginary version of eighteenth-century Germany, designed under the impact of Germany’s brief period of colonialism in China, the Weimar of Thomas Mann’s novel *Lotte in Weimar*, in which the author applies various modes of montage using “the domain of the Orient” (p. 147) to stabilize different layers of past and present and construct links between Germany under Nazi rule and China. Hertel’s interpretation of the role of ‘China’ in Mann’s work, and the meanings that Chinese and chinois objects and books on China had for him, suggest that the writer was aware of the “deep history of chinoiserie” (p. 147) in Germany. Again, Hertel engages with translation theory, unraveling multiple narrative planes rich in evocative imagery.

The fusion of fantasies of the foreign that Hertel observes in the nineteenth-century garden pavilion at Dresden was only possible without the agenda of “cultural and economic comparison lessons” that was materialized in court environments during the eighteenth century. These “lessons”, as Chapter Two shows, were obsessed with the articulation of superiority through the medium of porcelain, as, after 1709, china was no longer made exclusively in China, but also produced in Saxony. Such “lessons” were also manifested in the pairing of classicism and chinoiserie in architecture and landscape design. As Hertel reveals through the analysis of different “frames” of interpretation and display in the parks at Kassel, the mixing of chinois garden elements with a Dutch windmill or a Turkish mosque was not contradictory, but made sense within the cultural-political landscape of artificial harmony where an uncultivated wilderness blended into designed landscapes and elements of non-European origin were paired with ruins that evoked classical antiquity.

Chapter Two shows how China was measured against Greece and Rome, not just in terms of aesthetics but also in relation to philosophy, through the example of a chinois house first used for banquets and later as a Confucian temple to supplement a series of

garden huts, each of which was dedicated to an ancient European thinker. This elite framing of Chinese intellectual culture took place in courtly environments partly accessible to the public and went hand in hand with larger re-framings of Chinese thought in academia. Chinoiserie at the court of Kassel was a meaningful response to – and local subversion of – other paradigms of garden theory perpetuated at that time. It “perhaps also served the didactic purpose of inculcating [...] tolerance” (p. 93) through its pairing of China and Greece and the fusion of philosophy and religion at a time when the Rites Controversy provoked heated debate over the compatibility of China’s Confucianist rituals with Christian beliefs.

The chinois ‘village’ at Kassel, in which the later Confucius temple was situated, seems to have housed a group of women of African descent who came to Germany from the United States of America in 1783. These women, as well as the men and boys of color employed in military service at the Hesse-Kassel court, achieved relative freedom compared to their presumed previous status as slaves. However, the limits of the women’s new-found freedom are illustrated by their display in “fantasy costumes” alongside German shepherds who “had to wear Chinese clothes when guests were present” (p. 94) and the fact that they were likely housed – and to a certain extent exhibited – in chinois buildings “feminized” by dragons with large female breasts as “erotic motif[s] of fecundity and maternal nourishment” (pp. 86–87).

Hertel explains away the “discomfort” (p. 94) she encounters in scholarly accounts of this setting by discussing the playful strategies of masquerades at court festivities, in which black-faced agents had comical roles. While her contextualization of people of color in theatrical frameworks of period entertainment makes sense, one should perhaps not shy away from identifying the conditions in which the women lived, worked, and “performed” – the artificial framework of a chinois village that could be seen by visitors to the park – as on a par with the display of animals in a zoological garden’s fantasy versions of African or Asian landscapes. Such a framing is in line with period accounts based on anatomical studies cited by Hertel that come to the racist conclusion that “the African *Mohren* border slightly closer to the species of apes than to the Europeans” (p. 95). Objectified by a setting in which intimate living space and staged existence overlapped, displayed as human status symbols and eroticized by “fantasy costumes” and feminizing chinois designs, these women presumably testified to tendencies that sexualized the other in seemingly playful but essentially disrespectful and cruel ways. This interpretation remains speculative, in particular as Hertel bases her assumption that the women lived and worked in the chinois parts of the park on the interpretation of another historian who writes that the women of color “originally seem to have inhabited” (p. 94) that space, something that is dismissed as “rumor” elsewhere, as is dutifully recorded in the endnotes (p. 198, note 157).

The casual treatment of the possibility that the women lived, worked, and performed in the chinois space raises a larger issue: the book's engagement (or non-engagement) with extra-European networks of colonialism and their European implications. Hertel is not alone in referring to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany as in "a state of precoloniality" (p. 4) towards China. While Germany had no colonies in China before the late nineteenth century, German chinoiserie was deeply entangled with (and in part modeled on) examples of chinoiserie from European countries that were linked to China and Taiwan through indirect colonial networks of unequal trade or direct forms of rule and exploitation. As many of Hertel's examples illustrate, the German reception of artifacts made in China and chinoiserie as such were filtered through and shaped by the Dutch and British encounters with Asia. Hertel goes on to observe that, through Dresden's celebrated eighteenth-century reinvention of china from Saxon clay, "Meißen succeeds where the Dutch did not" (p. 28) despite years of experimentation with chinois ceramics at Delft. Does this mean that German chinoiserie was essentially a response to non-German visions of Asia that were appropriated to demonstrate the symbolic mastery of colonial appropriation while not actually being in possession of any colonies in Asia? Can German chinoiserie, then, primarily be understood as an expression of fierce competition within Europe and as a symbol of Germany's desire to rival the French, Dutch and British 'mastering' and 'reshaping' of Asia, its people, and commodities?

Looking at the delftware tiles on the kitchen walls at Amalienburg in Munich's Nymphenburg palace [Fig. 1], we follow Hertel's gaze to a frame of European-style tiles and disruptions in the center. If put together as originally intended and found in settings across France and the Netherlands [Fig. 2], the tile panel, according to Dawn Odell, "presents a 'picture of' China without allusion to being an object from China, firmly fixing its status as a representation and thus creating a surface upon which to demonstrate Dutch artistry".<sup>4</sup> Odell relies on Maxine Berg's argument that "the practice of 'imitation' was fundamental to the production of material goods that had at their heart an 'economy of delight' and of 'modern luxuries'" whose production "relied upon a perception of the exotic and oriental provenance of traditional luxury goods".<sup>5</sup> To Odell, the "tile panel, and others like it, also encourages a distanced viewing that moves earthenware from being a material for the creation of utilitarian objects to a material for the creation of surfaces across which artists appropriate and re-position imagery from other media and other cultures. While celebrating the 'Orient,' the panel also

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Dawn Odell, *Delftware and the Domestication of Chinese Porcelain*, in: Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja (eds.), *EurAsian Matters. China, Europe, and the Transcultural Object, 1600–1800*, Cham 2018, 175–202, here 192.

5

Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford 2005, 45. Cited after Odell, *Delftware*, 192.



[Fig. 1]

Unknown artist, Tile panel, c. 1690–1730, tin-glazed earthenware/faïence, measures unknown. Integrated into François Cuvilliés, Display kitchen, 1734–1739, Amalienburg, Nymphenburg Palace park. Photo: Christiane Hertel, in: ead., *Siting China in Germany. Eighteenth-Century Chinoiserie and Its Modern Legacy*, University Park 2019, plate 5.



[Fig. 2]  
Unknown artist, Tile panel, c. 1690–1730, tin-glazed earthenware/faience,  
170 × 79 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, BK-NM-12400-443. In the public domain.

domesticates the porcelain that first brought these exotic Asian images to the Dutch republic by transforming a pseudo-porcelain material into a vehicle for the display of Dutch, rather than Chinese, craftsmanship.”<sup>6</sup> It seems that the unknown arranger of the Dutch tiles in Nymphenburg was not capable of taking the “distanced” mode of viewing required for seeing the ‘bigger’ picture. Instead, this re-interpretation of the Dutch version of ‘China’ is limited by a close fixation on individual tiles that cannot be properly re-placed in the overall puzzle. In a way, the unidentified worker sabotages the larger German project of competing with Dutch appropriations of Asia and ‘Asia’. Taking this further, we could read this act as symbolizing the recalcitrance of matter in the hands of the executor of a patron’s idea, and representative of the creative potential for artistic deviation. Thinking in the spirit of eighteenth-century competitiveness, we may today consider this German rearrangement of Dutch tiles as even more layered and interesting than its perfectly assembled siblings in the Rijksmuseum and elsewhere.

Hertel’s highly insightful, carefully researched and generously illustrated book gives a voice to paintings, objects, monuments, gardens, artisans, patrons, and other figures previously unheard or unheard of. It tackles the intimidating complexity of the materially and culturally multi-layered objects associated with chinoiserie by carefully disentangling their seemingly contradictory meanings through the use of visual analysis, period texts, and translation theory. *Siting China in Germany* is a rich and complex book that constitutes a milestone on a road connecting Europe and Asia much traveled by artists and scholars alike.