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William Chambers's "Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, And Utensils" in Context: An Authoritative Guide To Chinese Visual Culture

*Porządkowanie wiedzy o Chinach
w nowożytnej Europie.*

„Designs of Chinese Buildings Furniture, Dresses, Machines, And Utensils” Williama Chambersa jako przewodnik po chińskiej kulturze wizualnej

Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils Williama Chambersa (1723–1796) tradycyjnie uznaje się za wzornik przeznaczony dla europejskich architektów i zleceniodawców zainteresowanych tzw. stylem chińskim. W niniejszym artykule podjęto próbę umiejscowienia traktatu Chambersa w szerszym kontekście postępów w dziedzinie nowożytnej (proto)sinologii i ówczesnych strategii radzenia sobie z nadmiarem wiedzy o chińskiej kulturze wizualnej. Niezależnie od oczywistej funkcji wzornika, publikacja Chambersa może być rozumiana jako część zjawiska, które dało początek wielu nowożytnym kompendiom dotyczącym Państwa Środka, takim jak naukowe publikacje jezuitów – dziełom mającym na celu uporządkowanie napływających chaotycznie informacji i przeformułowanie ich tak, by były dostępne szerszemu gronu odbiorców. Opierając się na pracach takich badaczy jak Ann Blair i Georg Lehner, w pierwszej części artykułu skoncentrowano się na nowożytnych sposobach porządkowania wiedzy sinologicznej i narastającej wówczas potrzebie stworzenia jej naukowej syntezy. W części drugiej problem „przeciążenia informacją” omówiony został w odniesieniu do chińskiej produkcji artystycznej i jej percepcji w Europie. Ostatnia część tekstu jest poświęcona analizie *Designs* Chambersa jako autorytatywnego kompendium, stworzonego w celu jednoczesnego uporządkowania wiedzy o chińskiej kulturze wizualnej i dowiedzenia nieautentyczności opisów i ilustracji zawartych w innych wydawanych wówczas wzornikach.

Słowa-klucze: William Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, *chinoiseries*, zarządzanie informacją, chińska kultura wizualna, architektura chińska, historia architektury

Traditionally, William Chambers's (1723–1796) *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils* (1757) have been referred to as a pattern book designed for European architects and patrons interested in the so-called “Chinese style.” This study seeks to locate Chambers's treatise in a broader context of both the European progress in the field of (proto-)sinology and the early modern strategies of coping with the abundance of knowledge about Chinese visual culture transferred to and disseminated in Europe. Its obvious role as a pattern book notwithstanding, Chambers's book may be presented as a part of the phenomenon that gave rise to authoritative works of reference such as scholarly Jesuit publications, i.e., compendia aimed at structuring the chaotic influx of information and reformulating it in a universally accessible way. Drawing on the research of scholars such as Ann Blair and Georg Lehner, the first part of the article centres on the problem of structuring sinological knowledge in the early modern period and the need for scholarly syntheses. In section two, the same problem of information overload was identified with regard to Chinese artistic production and its reception in Europe. Finally, the last part offers an analysis of Chambers's *Designs* as a normative work of reference conceived to simultaneously standardize knowledge about Chinese visual culture and to falsify the descriptions and illustrations included in other pattern books published at the time.

Keywords: William Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, *chinoiseries*, information management, Chinese visual culture, Chinese architecture, architectural history

This study seeks to present a close examination of William Chambers's (1723–1796) famous *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils* (1757) as a guide to Chinese visual culture. The *Designs* will be therefore considered with regard to their role as an authoritative work of reference, similar in both the goal and function to the scholarly projects published in the early modern period in order to control the increasing influx of knowledge about China experienced by the Western world. In the course of the analysis, I will argue that Chambers's aesthetic project sprang from the same need to structure the accessible data in a modern way, and to manage the chaotic overload of information regarding Chinese artistic production in the era of an omnipresent vogue for *chinoiseries*.

The focus is therefore on the specific place of Chambers's *Designs* in the context of the European reception of Chinese visual culture, the ways by which various forms of sinological¹ knowledge appeared in the West, and the strategies according to which such knowledge was structured. Two crucial questions addressed here are thus: what was known about Chinese artistic productions at different times and – more importantly – how this knowledge was managed and compiled into various authoritative publications, the point of arrival being Chambers's *Designs*, which, as I will try to demonstrate, cannot be detached from these factors and should not be reduced to a mere pattern book.

Recently, David Porter has pointed to an interesting discrepancy between Chambers's engagement in promoting the “Chinese style” and the fact that he was at the same time “compelled ... to disclaim any intent «to promote a taste so much inferior to the antique.»”² These two seemingly contradictory stances appear much less puzzling if explained with the eighteenth-century principle of *decorum*,³ based upon which Chinese *fabriques* were naturally treated as inferior to neoclassical, Graeco-Roman motifs, a circumstance which Chambers neither could nor wished to ignore. However, I would suggest that the author's motivation to publish *Designs of Chinese Buildings* arose not so much from the mere desire to propagate *chinoiseries* – since they were already sufficiently popular in Europe – but to compile the knowledge he himself gathered, and to edit it into an authoritative work of reference aimed at rebutting earlier pattern books that promoted, according to him, a distorted image of Chinese art.

It must be noted that the concept of “visual culture” is a relatively recent invention⁴ and was absent from early modern discussions on art or artistic culture. Such a notion was not

¹ The term “sinology” in this context was employed, for example, in David Emil MUNGELLO's *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

² David PORTER, “Beyond the Bounds of Truth: Cultural Translation and William Chambers's Chinese Garden,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 37, no. 2 (2004): 45.

³ Agnieszka MORAWINSKA, “Eighteenth-Century *paysages moralisés*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38, no. 3 (1977): 469.

⁴ The debates over the concepts of visual culture and visual studies at the end of the twentieth century have been summarized in John A. WALKER, Sarah CHAPLIN, *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University

known to Ming and Qing writers, and was only translated and introduced into Chinese art-historical context under the influence of Western theoretical debates (as *shijue wenhua*).⁵ However, since the sources I wish to analyse in this article, including Chambers's *Designs*, often assumed an all-encompassing perspective and elaborated on various topics such as architecture, gardening, furniture, engineering, ceramics, clothing, or even script – all historically falling under the umbrella terms of the “things Chinese,” the “Chinese style,” and *chinoiserie*⁶ – it seems justified to incorporate them all into the category of visual culture. After all, what united them was not exactly their materiality, but rather visuality, and the extent to which they needed to be seen (and not only read about) in order to be imitated or transformed into patterns.

Beyond any doubt, the reception of Chinese cultural production in the period under review was significantly broader than Chambers's treatise may suggest, and therefore the category of “Chinese visual culture” should include much more classes of objects than the ones featured in *Designs*. Nevertheless, since it is Chambers's book that will be the point of arrival in this article, I will focus mostly on architecture, garden design, and the other arts and crafts covered by the architect himself.

The presence of Chinese luxuries in early modern Europe has been thoroughly studied, and their reception constitutes a well-researched topic in the scholarship.⁷ It has been demonstrated and widely discussed how, having made their way to the West, these objects started to shape both the local visual culture and the image of China as constructed and understood by the Europeans. A slightly different yet parallel process is thus of interest for this article, namely the appearance of several scholarly compendia aimed at organizing the sinological knowledge imported to Europe. Chambers's *Designs of Chinese Buildings* is a perfect example of how the same phenomenon might have occurred in the area of visual culture.

The first section of this article addresses the accelerated influx of knowledge about China in early modern Europe and the ensuing need for synthesis, met by the members of the Society of Jesus who, at the time, exerted control over the official channels of data transmission and enjoyed great authority as providers of the most reliable scholarly information. Subsequently, in the second part, the same phenomenon has been identified in the

Press, 1997). More recent discussions were recapitulated in Marita STURKEN, Lisa CARTWRIGHT, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵ For a discussion of terminology in Chinese see WU Qiong, “Shijue wenhua yanjiu: puxi, duixiang yu yiti” (“The Genealogy, Objects, and Subjects of Visual Culture Studies”), *Wenyi lilun yanjiu (Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art)*, no. 4 (2015): 25–38. The problem of Chinese reception of Western theoretical terminology within the field of art history was also addressed in detail by WU Hong in his *Quanqiu jingguan zhong de Zhongguo gudai yishu; Chinese Arts and Crafts in a Global Perspective* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2017).

⁶ These terms, translated usually as *Zhongguo feng*, function also in Chinese art-historical reflection on the relations between Europe and China. ZHANG Shengqing, “Shiqi, shiba shiji Zhongguo jingcheng tuxiang zai Ouzhou” (“The Image of Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Beijing in Europe”), *Guoli Taipei Yishu Daxue Meishu xuebao (Taipei National University of the Arts Journal of Fine Arts)*, no. 2 (2008): 71.

⁷ The studies are abundant, yet some general ideas regarding the import of various luxuries and their influence upon European culture could be found in Eugenia ZUROSKI JENKINS, “«Nature to Advantage Dress»: Chinoiserie, Aesthetic Form, and the Poetry of Subjectivity in Pope and Swift,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009): 75–94; David PORTER, “Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste,” *Eighteenth Century* 35, no. 3 (2002): 395–411; Christiaan Jan Adriaan JÖRG, *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade* (The Hague: M. Nijhof, 1982); Donald F. LACH, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol. 2, b. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Hugh HONOUR, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: J. Murray, 1961); Joseph DOWNS, “The China Trade and Its Influences,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* 36, no. 4 (1941): 81–95.

field of visual culture, in which the import of objects and descriptions of Chinese art led to a persistent vogue for imitations, often contradictory or eclectic.⁸ As with tales, scholarly reports, and other written accounts, a natural result of this phenomenon was a need for some sort of visual guide or other authoritative work of reference that could structure the visual data and present it in a canonical form. This problem was directly identified by William Chambers, who also sought to provide a remedy – his own *Designs*, analysed at length in the third part of the article.

The Shape of China: Managing Sinological Knowledge in the Early Modern Period

The processes presented below could be described in terms of accelerated transmission and unprecedented accumulation of knowledge – two intertwined phenomena resulting in an ever-growing need to synthesize all the information accessible at a given point in time. As Ann Blair has rightly pointed out, the notion of “information overload” common in modern scholarship⁹ should not be considered an invention of the digital age. She argued, for instance, that the rapid growth in the number of books being published in Europe in the early modern period had already forced scholars to find new ways of managing information and structuring knowledge. The invention of the printing press had accelerated the cultural development of the continent as well as given rise to the scientific revolution on one hand,¹⁰ and aroused feelings of disillusionment and bitterness on the other, as it appeared clear to Western scholars that the entirety of human knowledge is beyond acquiring, let alone understanding.¹¹ Such a situation demanded appropriate solutions – before long, authoritative texts-institutions began to come on the market with the purpose to compile or sum up both the old and the new knowledge, and to serve as works of reference for all those who were overwhelmed by the excessive increase in the number of scholarly publications. Therefore, a natural consequence of both the information overload and the efforts to effectively curb it was the improvement of numerous forms of encyclopaedic compilations, leading finally to the achievement of a new genre of scholarly publication, the modern encyclopaedia.¹²

Within the field of (proto-)sinology, there existed problems that demanded similar solutions, and all-encompassing compendia were of utmost importance in the process of both disseminating and organizing the new information. Compared to the situation a hundred years earlier, the range of knowledge about China was already relatively broad in mid-seventeenth century Europe. Similarly, the data available in the 1650s could be by no means placed on a par with what was known about Chinese civilization in the 1750s. It

⁸ It should be stressed that the separation of the influx of scholarly information and visual objects serves only the purpose of convenience and clarity, since these two phenomena were closely intertwined and depended upon each other.

⁹ For a general introduction to the problem as identified in modern science see Torkel KLINGBERG, *The Overflowing Brain: Information Overload and the Limits of Working Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Marie Boas HALL, *The Scientific Renaissance: The Rise of Modern Science* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 17–49.

¹¹ Ann BLAIR, “Reading Strategies for Coping with Information Overload ca. 1550–1700,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, no. 1 (2003): 11–14.

¹² This is not to say, nevertheless, that managing scholarly information is a uniquely early modern (or even European) phenomenon, or that there were virtually no compilations or summaries of knowledge in the earlier periods. Conversely, Blair demonstrates in her more recent work that they had existed for a long time in the past, and that there were mostly perfected or reformulated between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. See Ann BLAIR, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

was the seventeenth century that saw, in particular, much progress in the field of sinology, with the works of Jesuit authors such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), Álvaro Semedo (1585/1586–1658), Michał Boym (1612–1659), Martino Martini (1614–1661), Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), Philippe Couplet (1623–1693), and many others, published since the 1600s. These authors pioneered new territory, both metaphorically and literally, since many of them travelled to China in person, and pushed forward the development of Chinese studies at the dawn of the Catholic mission to Asia.

Most importantly, however, there was a profound difference between the works authored by Jesuit scholars and many other publications on China, both earlier and contemporary. While accounts of other travellers had been present and widely read in Europe long before the Jesuit mission, as medieval narratives of Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (1182–1252), Benedict of Poland (1200–1251), and Marco Polo (1254–1324) demonstrate, the members of the Society of Jesus had a very different approach to Chinese culture, as their undertaking engaged a number of capable intellectuals who attempted to provide their European audience with a scholarly interpretation of what they saw and experienced.

The initial scarcity of even the most general information regarding China soon gave way to a wave of accounts, stories, and reports calling for reliable syntheses. This need was, unsurprisingly, satisfied by the Jesuits who strived to control the more scholarly channels of knowledge transmission. The impressive evolution of sinology in the period stretching from the 1580s to the 1750s was consequently marked by a steady transition from hermetism (used as a means of assimilating Chinese culture into the European context) to a category of universal knowledge,¹³ coinciding with a ubiquitous vogue for *chinoiseries* in all domains of European cultural production, including art, literature, and philosophy. The passage from hermetism to a scientific discipline was not only quantitative. It was as much due to the amount of information arriving in Europe by a variety of ways as it was due to the developing methods of managing and structuring the new knowledge, a task painstakingly carried out by generations of scholars, almost universally affiliated with the Society of Jesus, each and every of them sharing the common goal of publicizing the mission and coping with the overflow of information. Compilers and synthesisers all contributed to the process of “shaping China” in the eyes of the Europeans, to put it in Georg Lehner’s words.¹⁴

It is therefore no wonder that the most famous seventeenth-century compilation of sinological knowledge, *China Illustrata* (1667), was edited by Athanasius Kircher, a German Jesuit who established one of the largest collections of curiosities in seventeenth-century Europe, stored and displayed in Collegio Romano.¹⁵ As a polymath, theologian, inventor, and lover of bizarreries, Kircher was fascinated by the cultures of the Middle and Far East, and revelled in discovering links – real or fictional – between them, especially in the field of linguistics. He was in regular correspondence with his fellow members of the Society of Jesus, which enabled him to receive first-hand accounts on Chinese culture, history, and language. Although he never travelled to the East in person, he was a talented compiler and an able author, qualities which allowed him to create an exceptionally seminal treatise

¹³ MUNGELLO, *Curious Land*, 29–31.

¹⁴ Georg LEHNER, *China in European Encyclopaedias, 1700–1850* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3.

¹⁵ Paula FINDLEN, “Scientific Spectacle in Baroque Rome: Athanasius Kircher and the Roman College Museum,” in *Jesuit Science and the Republic of Letters*, ed. Mordechai FEINGOLD (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 232.

on China.¹⁶ Kircher, together with other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors, profited mostly from the early modern (although well-entrenched in Christian thought) idea of *curiositas*,¹⁷ “curiosity,” the same concept that lay at the root of both intellectual and material interest in the “things Chinese,” and contributed to the creation of numerous cabinets of curiosities and *Wunderkammern*.¹⁸ The “illustrative” potential of *China Illustrata* manifested, of course, not only in the tendency to present an overview of China, but also in the wish to attach numerous engravings (maps among them) to the publication, therefore allowing the readership to finally see that remote country.¹⁹ A largely sensational work, Kircher’s treatise creatively combined reliable knowledge, exaggerated tales, the author’s private opinions, and Jesuit propaganda.²⁰

In the eighteenth century, on the other hand, chiefly in response to the newly emerged Enlightenment movement, sinology was subject to rationalizing narratives and was consciously turned into a “scientific” endeavour much closer to the modern sense of the word. The intensification of contacts between China and the West at the turn of the eighteenth century gradually led to an enfeeblement of the Jesuit monopoly on the transmission of information from China to Europe.²¹ Later, when the authority and hegemony of the order was compromised by the ill-famed Chinese rites controversy, resulting in the ban imposed on Catholic proselytism by the Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) and Yongzheng (r. 1722–1735) Emperors, the position of scholarly Jesuit publications was superseded by other intellectual projects, such as the French *Encyclopédie*. This process coincided with the order’s serious political, organizational, and financial problems, eventually ending in its dissolution in 1773.²²

One of the last greatly influential compilatory texts on China authored by a member of the Society of Jesus was Jean-Baptiste du Halde’s (1674–1743) *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* (*Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political, and Physical Description of the Empire of China and Chinese Tartary*), a monumental compilation published in Paris in 1735, and subsequently translated into English in 1739.²³ Du Halde’s position as a sinologist was similar to Kircher’s several decades earlier in that he never travelled to China, relying only on works published by fellow Jesuits,²⁴ yet his work had a significant advantage over other reports – it was illustrated, much like *China Illustrata*.

¹⁶ See Don Cameron ALLEN, “The Predecessors of Champollion,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 104, no. 5 (1960): 528–536.

¹⁷ Edward PETERS, “The Desire to Know the Secrets of the World,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62, no. 4 (2001): 594.

¹⁸ See Caroline Walker BYNUM, “Wonder,” *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 1 (1997): 1–26.

¹⁹ Other specialized compendia were available too, such as Michał BOYM’S *Flora Sinensis* (Viennae: Typis Matthaei Rictii, 1656) or Philippe COUPLET’S *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (Parisiis: Apud Danielem Horthemels, 1687).

²⁰ It may be also noted that the full title of Kircher’s treatise reads *China monumentis qua sacris qua profanis nec non variis naturae et artis spectaculis aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata* (*China Illustrated by Means of Her Monuments, as Sacred or Idolatrous as They Come, Together with Various Wonders of Nature and Art, and Proofs of Other Memorable Things* – translation AK), stressing that it is dedicated primarily to curiosities and peculiarities of China and Chinese culture, and promising to take the reader for a sort of intellectual journey to an unknown yet fascinating land.

²¹ George H. MINAMI, “The Yasukuni Shrine Incident and the Chinese Rites Controversy,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 66, no. 2 (1982): 205–207.

²² Jonathan WRIGHT, “Suppression and Restoration,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits*, ed. Thomas WORCESTER (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 263.

²³ Joseph DOWNS, “The China Trade and Its Influences,” 86.

²⁴ James Andrew ROGERS, “L’image de la Chine dans l’*Encyclopédie*,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie*, no. 22 (1997): 92–93.

Although Du Halde's treatise exerted a significant influence on the French *encyclopédistes*, and was considered state of research at that time,²⁵ it should be regarded as one of the final stages of the "Chinese project" undertaken by scholars affiliated with the Society of Jesus.

Competing Imageries: The Need for a Visual Synthesis

The influx of knowledge described above was accompanied by the import of objects, yet oriental luxuries had been accessible in the West long before any comprehensive and scholarly narrative of Chinese culture was written, which is why they could independently inspire ideas regarding the aesthetic as well as moral qualities of the civilization that produced them.²⁶ It is commonplace to say that in the years 1400–1800, Chinese *objets d'art* in Europe gradually made a way from rare artefacts stored and displayed in cabinets of curiosities²⁷ to fashionable accessories available everywhere in the continent and flooding the market.²⁸ Yet it is worth noting that there existed a clearly visible split between the time first Chinese luxuries arrived in Europe in significant amounts (mid-sixteenth century, although they were certainly accessible earlier) and the moment the Jesuit mission was undertaken (late 1580s). This gap appears to be even larger if one takes into account the actual period in which more or less scholarly works of first-hand witnesses who lived in China for longer (the first one being Ricci's *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, 1615) were published in the West, that is, the beginning of the seventeenth century.

This is to say that the initial import of East Asian goods in larger amounts to early modern Europe lacked sufficient scholarly context for approximately one hundred years, and that these artefacts were assessed mostly based upon their rarity, exoticism, and the curiosity they piqued. China's artistic production had almost no shape or face in sixteenth-century Europe but the one furnished by imported luxuries, such as monochromatic, blue-and-white or tricoloured porcelain, lacquer objects, or textiles. Neither landscape painting nor calligraphy – the arts valued in China more highly than pottery – were particularly known among the Westerners. The accounts left in the medieval times by people like Marco Polo were enough to stimulate the interest in international trade and to tempt their readers with a possibility of there being more lands and countries to discover, but they certainly did not suffice to provide the Europeans with a frame of reference to understand the culture that had produced all these luxuries.²⁹

The situation was somewhat reverse in the first half of the eighteenth century. Indeed, there was a proliferation of visual representations of China in Europe at the time, but these images did not suffice to fulfil the expectations of the readers, as much was said about the Far East that required more detailed depictions, with architecture being a prime example

²⁵ Ibid., 97.

²⁶ See Robert FINLAY, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World's History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

²⁷ Craig CLUNAS, *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 197.

²⁸ Christiaan Jan Adriaan JÖRG, *The Geldermalsen History and Porcelain* (Groningen: Kemper Publishers, 1986), 8. It has been estimated that around three million pieces of porcelain arrived in Europe in the years 1604–1657. T. VOLKER, *Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company: as Recorded in the Dagh-Registers of Batavia Castle, Those of Hirado and Deshima and Other Contemporary Papers, 1602–1682* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 227. See also Stacey PIERSON, "Production, Distribution, and Aesthetics: Abundance and Chinese Porcelain from Jingdezhen, AD 1350–1800," in *Abundance: the Archaeology of Plenitude*, ed. Monica SMITH (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017), 230.

²⁹ Donald F. LACH, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol. 1, b. 2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 730.



FIGURE 1 *A fanciful representation of a pagoda with a more accurate rendition of Chinese architecture in the background from Athanasius Kircher's China Illustrata (inserted between the pages 134–135)*

of this situation.³⁰ Decorated porcelain, although ubiquitous, could provide only very limited knowledge about Chinese buildings or garden design. Seventeenth-century scholarly treatises did not attach particular attention to these topics, but rather treated them as additional cultural information. In *China Illustrata*, for instance, an entire part was dedicated to “architecture and other mechanical arts”, but the focus was on bridges rather than other structures.³¹ The engravings inserted in the text helped to imagine Chinese buildings to some extent; many illustrations depict them somewhat accurately, yet mostly in the background (Fig. 1). In the context of the seventeenth-century state of knowledge about Chinese architecture, Johan Nieuhof’s famous detailed depictions of the Porcelain Pagoda in Nanjing or the Forbidden City, printed in *Het Gezantschap der Neêrlandsche Oost-Indische Compagnie, aan den grooten Tartarischen Cham, den tegenwoordigen Keizer van China (An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces, to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperor of China)*, must have partly assuaged the desire to visualize China, and partly aroused a thirst to see more.

I would argue that the process of the accumulation of objects as well as the gradual transition of their status from rare curiosities to ubiquitous and fashionable objects was analogous to the one presented above whereby written or oral knowledge about China was disseminated in the West. The different dynamics of these two phenomena, however, led to paradoxical situations in which scholarly knowledge sometimes overlapped with the information furnished by the luxuries themselves, and sometimes diverged from it. Much like with the influx of cultural data, which became overabundant and increasingly chaotic as the time passed, the circulation of Chinese art as well as its descriptions fuelled various – and at times contradictory – ideas of “Chineseness” (that is, of the imagined quality that made a thing essentially “Chinese” in the eyes of Westerners). As attempts to imitate or creatively reproduce these imported luxuries, European *chinoiseries* – innumerable competing versions of “Chineseness” – both contributed to the definition of these ideas and clouded them.

It was therefore one thing to constantly attempt to imitate the ubiquitous porcelain imported to Europe in great amounts in the seventeenth century and a whole different issue to debate, suppose, the intricacies of the Chinese theory of laying out gardens, a heated discussion which remained largely theoretical for a relatively long period of time, until Matteo Ripa (1682–1746), an Italian missionary and servant at the court of the Kangxi Emperor,³² brought his depictions of the imperial gardens in Chengde to England.³³ Some types of objects and representations – samples of Chinese visual culture – were thus

³⁰ Craig CLUNAS, “Nature and Ideology in Western Descriptions of the Chinese Gardens,” *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident*, no. 22 (2000): 153–166.

³¹ There is, however, a short passage describing Chinese housing and residential buildings, mostly those in the form of courtyard houses (*siheyuan*), called “nunneries” (*monasteria monialium*) by the author. Athanasius KIRCHER, *China monumentis qua sacris qua profanis nec non variis naturae et artis spectaculis aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata* (Amstelodami: Apud Jacobum à Meurs, 1667), 216.

³² MUNGELLO, *The Great Encounter of China and the West*, 66.

³³ Patrick CONNER, “China and the Landscape Garden: Reports, Engravings and Misconceptions,” *Art History* 2, no. 4 (1979): 431; Basil GRAY, “Lord Burlington and Father Ripa’s Chinese Engravings,” *The British Museum Quarterly* 22, no. 1–2 (1960): 40–44; Li Xiaodan, WANG Qiheng, “Qing Kangxi nianjian Yidali chuanjiaoshi Ma Guoxian ji Bishu Shanzhuang tongbanhua” (“The Italian Missionary Matteo Ricci and the Copper Engravings of the Jehol Summer Mountain Resort Produced in the Kangxi Period”), *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan (Palace Museum Journal)* 123, no. 3 (2006): 44–51; WANG Xun, *Zhongguo meishushi (History of Chinese Art)* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2018), 414.

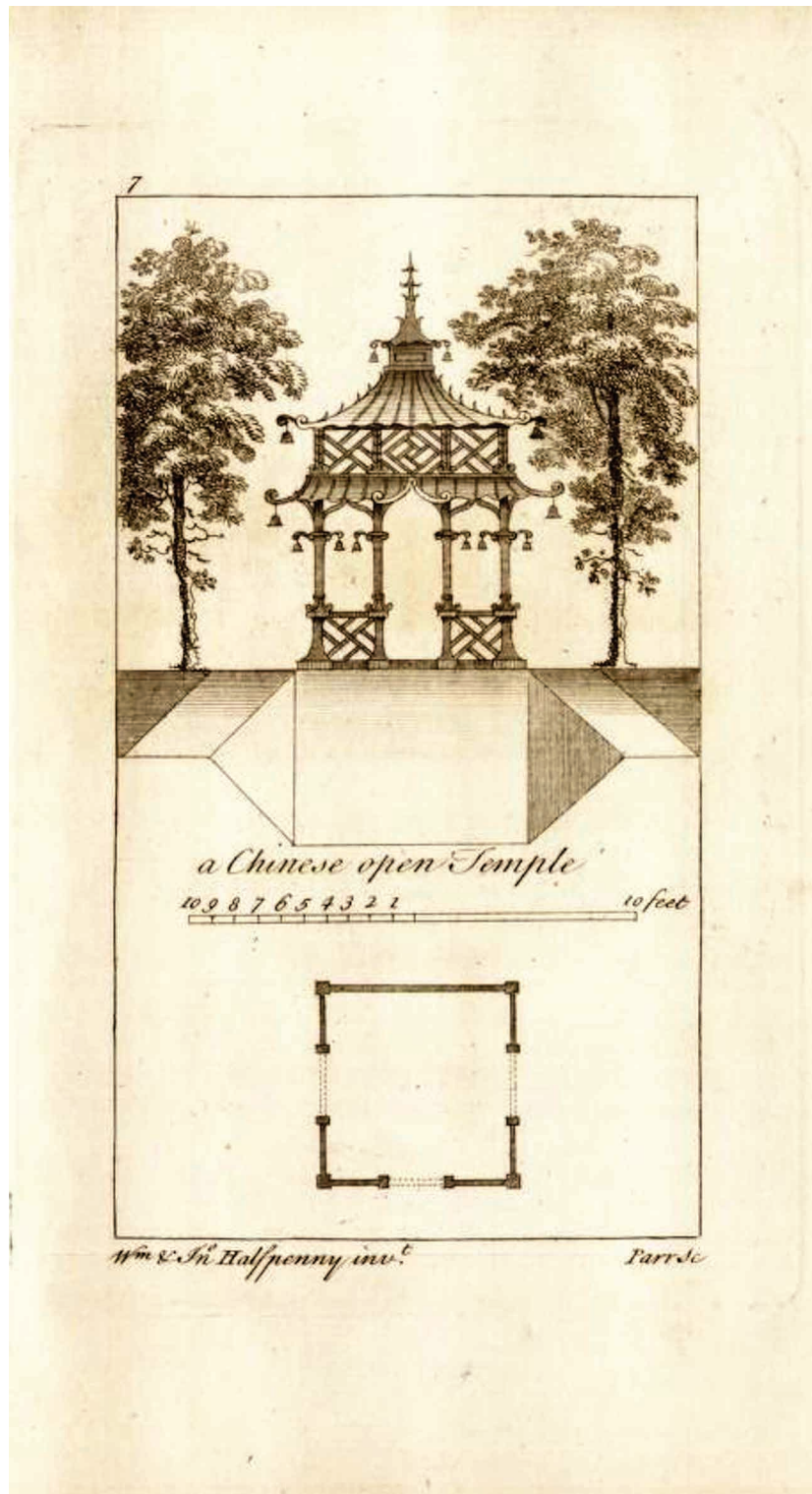


FIGURE 2 "A Chinese open temple." Plate 7 from *The Country Gentleman's Pocket Companion and Builder's Assistant for Rural Decorative Architecture* published by John and William Halfpenny, London, 1753

at hand, while other remained underrepresented, and their interpreters needed to rely on anecdotal evidence to analyse them. Some forty years before the appearance of Ripa's engravings, William Temple (1628–1696), who actively advocated in favour of oriental gardens and the mythical Chinese-style *sharawadgi* in his well-known essay *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus* (1685),³⁴ similarly relied on stories told by those “who have lived much among the Chinese.”³⁵ Given the lack of visual representations, an appeal to those who might have seen Ming and Qing gardens in person was the only available means to buttress one's authority as an interpreter of “Chinese” art. Additionally, a completely different issue was the problem of reliability – if there was a growing need to utilize Chinese-style architecture or ornaments in Europe, it faced a complete lack of any scholarly, let alone practical, treatise on the art of this remote country. From the perspective of a seventeenth-century beholder who had never embarked on a journey to East Asia, it was virtually impossible to assess the accuracy of either Kircher's or Nieuwhof's representations of China, even though their works could be to some extent used as pattern books.³⁶ Many other designs circulated privately,³⁷ outside of the context of scholarly publications or merchants' reports, intensifying the competition between disparate realizations of “Chineseness.”

What made the question of accuracy an even more urgent problem was the increasing interest in the genre of pattern books of the “Chinese style.” The information overload mentioned earlier found its equivalent in the eclectic visualities and imageries fostered in such publications. A perfect (and probably the most notorious) example would be William and John Halfpennys' (dates of birth and death unknown) *Chinese and Gothic Architecture Properly Ornamented* (1752) and *Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste* (1755), two pattern books that both played a role in stabilizing a canon of visual representations of China in eighteenth-century Europe. Their vision of *chinoiserie* was a conventional one, employing central-plan pavilions, vaguely oriental ornaments, pointed roofs, and slightly upturned eaves (Fig. 2).³⁸ These objects were seen as decorative *fabriques* meant for informal contexts (“rural architecture” in the words of the authors themselves), with classical Graeco-Roman edifices set as examples worth imitating in monumental and public buildings, according to the eighteenth-century principle of *decorum*. As far as garden follies were concerned, however, accuracy gave way to imagination and eclecticism. And if some kind of synthesis was needed to properly structure the influx of scholarly information about China, there was a similar perception of chaos regarding her artistic production, a feeling expressed directly by William Chambers.

³⁴ For a discussion concerning the term *sharawadgi* see Ciaran MURRAY, “Sharawadgi Resolved,” *Garden History* 26, no. 2 (1998): 208–213 and Gervase JACKSON-STOPS, “Sharawadgi Rediscovered. The Chinese House at Stowe,” *Apollo* 136, no. 374 (1993): 217.

³⁵ William TEMPLE, “Upon the Gardens of Epicurus,” in *Sir William Temple's “Upon the Gardens of Epicurus” with other seventeenth-century garden essays*, ed. Albert Forbes SIEVEKING (London: Chatto and Windus, 1908), 53.

³⁶ See Kristoffer NEVILLE, “The Early Reception of Fischer von Erlach's *Entwurf einer historischen Architektur*,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 66, 2 (2007): 160–175; Sheng-Ching CHANG, *Natur und Landschaft. Der Einfluss von Athanasius Kirchers “China Illustrata” auf die europäische Kunst* (Berlin: Reimer, 2003), 110–127.

³⁷ Patrick CONNER, *Oriental Architecture in the West* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 23–25.

³⁸ The same repertoire of “Chinese” motifs was employed by authors of other pattern books, most of them very similar to the publications of the Halfpennys. Cf. Matthew DARLY, *New Book of Chinese Designs Calculated to Improve the Present Taste* (London: published for the author, 1754); Paul DECKER, *Chinese Architecture, Civil and Ornamental* (London: printed for the author, 1759).

A Guide to Chinese Visual Culture: Chambers's Designs

Eighteenth-century pattern books were not only practical aids for architects and garden designers, but also ways of organising knowledge about the “Chinese style.” Their credibility, however, was a whole different issue, and quickly came to be questioned by those who had an opportunity to appreciate Chinese architecture and gardens in real life, including William Chambers, who sailed with the Swedish East India Company, three times embarking upon the journey to Asia and visiting Canton twice.³⁹

Chambers was the most influential architect of the “Chinese style” in the second half of the eighteenth century,⁴⁰ one of his major projects being the famous pagoda in Kew Gardens, commissioned in 1762 by Princess Augusta, the founder of the park. As for his publications, his incontestable achievement was providing his readers with a concise yet practical manual of what he perceived as Chinese arts and crafts, therefore contributing to the on-going process of furnishing the new and ordering the old knowledge about China.⁴¹ This process, which began with the import of Asian luxuries to Europe as well as the influx of stories and reports of travellers, had undergone several complicated turns by the half of the eighteenth century, major of which were demonstrated above. In 1757, Chambers published his seminal *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils*, which appeared in print simultaneously in a French version under the title *Desseins des edifices, meubles, habits, machines, et ustenciles des Chinois ; Auxquels est ajoutée une descr[ription] de leurs temples, de leurs maisons, de leurs jardins, etc.*

The rationale behind Chambers's work was almost a scholarly one. Not only did he undertake the task of classifying the knowledge about Chinese art to which he had access, but also attempted to rebuke certain misconceptions which he thought had arisen with regard to this topic:

It is difficult to avoid praising too little or too much. The boundless panegyrics which have been lavished upon the Chinese learning, policy, and arts, shew with what power novelty attracts regard, and how naturally esteem swells into admiration ... Every circumstance relating to so extraordinary a people must deserve attention; and though we have pretty accurate accounts of most other particulars concerning them, yet our notions of their architecture are very imperfect: many of the descriptions hitherto given of their buildings are unintelligible; the best convey but faint ideas; and no designs worth notice have yet been published.⁴²

³⁹ Robert C. BALD, “Sir William Chambers and the Chinese Garden,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 11, no. 3 (1950): 287–288.

⁴⁰ The impact of Chambers's architecture, pattern books, and theories has been analysed by many scholars. For the most seminal or recent studies see: CONNER, *Oriental Architecture*, 76–84; *Sir William Chambers und der Englisch-chinesische Garten in Europa*, ed. Thomas WEISS (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 1997); Gerd-Helge VOGEL, “Wunderland Cathay. Chinoise Architekturen in Europa – Teil 2,” *Die Gartenkunst*, no. 16 (2004): 339–382; Izabela KOPANIA, *Rzeczy – Ogrody – Wyobrazenia. Chiny w kulturze Rzeczypospolitej czasów Stanisława Augusta* (Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 2012), 254–304.

⁴¹ Catherine BOUSQUET-BRESSOLIER, “Histoire et méthodes de la représentation de l'espace XVI^e–XVII^e siècles,” *École pratique des hautes études. Section des sciences historiques et philologiques. Livret-Annuaire*, no. 12 (1998–1999): 169–172.

⁴² William CHAMBERS, *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils* (London: published for the author, 1757), f. ar^o.

What Chambers realized very well was that the proliferation of objects, accounts, descriptions, and indeed scholarly publications blurred the image of Chinese art in the West, leading to a visual chaos bearing little or no relation to the “originals” that numerous European architects were so keen on imitating. It was apparent for Chambers that the fallacious representations of “Chineseness” called for at least some reaction from a person who enjoyed authority as an expert in the field. Consequently, a number of fundamental features of the *Designs* distinguish this particular publication from other conventional pattern books: a specific strategy of enhancing the author’s authority, the way of organizing knowledge, and a holistic approach to Chinese visual culture, as exemplified by the plates constituting the work’s main part. These features can all be understood as direct results of Chambers’s ambition to address the increasing visual chaos engendered by the proliferation of competing versions of *chinoiserie*, and, more importantly, as a consequence of the desire to provide the readership with a reliable visual guide to China’s arts and crafts.

Chambers found it necessary to structure the knowledge both for his readers and himself, and therefore decided to produce an order-projecting treatise – a form of rationalized guide or manual of the “Chinese style.” As an aesthetic project, the *Designs* reveal much affinity with scholarly compendia aimed at fighting the information overload described before and presenting knowledge in an accessible yet canonical form. The architect stated:

These [designs – A. K.] which I now offer to the publick are done from sketches and measures taken by me at Canton some years ago, chiefly to satisfy my own curiosity. It was not my design to publish them; nor would they now appear, were it not in compliance with the desire of several lovers of the arts, who thought them worthy the perusal to the publick, and that they might be of use in putting a stop to the extravagancies that daily appear under the name of Chinese, though most of them are mere inventions, the rest copies from the lame representations found on porcelain and paper hangings.⁴³

It was therefore a social project as well, and a “scientific” account supported by measurements allegedly made by the author himself. The mention of measurements authenticated the information he provided and established him as an authority,⁴⁴ a first-hand witness who seemingly took a chance to examine and evaluate what he saw. Moreover, Chambers emphasized the opportunity he had to discuss the intricacies of Chinese art theory with local artists such as “Lepqua, a celebrated Chinese painter” with whom he claimed to have “had several conversations on the subject of gardening,” the reason why he “acquired sufficient knowledge of their notions on this head.”⁴⁵

Chambers’s authority was thus constructed in a way similar to the one enjoyed by Kircher or Du Halde – in both their works, the appeal was made to the people who had a chance to live in China and were therefore well acquainted with the local culture. In *China Illustrata*, Kircher admitted for instance:

What I long ago promised in my catalog of books, I am now going to do, being led to this by reports for the last ten years about the huge Chinese Empire and the delusions of it and the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See also LIU Yu, “The Real vs the Imaginary: Sir William Chambers on the Chinese Garden,” *The European Legacy* 23, no. 6 (2018): 676.

⁴⁵ CHAMBERS, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, 14.

neighboring kingdoms with ancient superstitions. Fr. Martin Martini of Trent, the illustrious author of the Chinese *Atlas* and my former pupil in mathematics, communicated to me many things, his keen insight having been well trained for this by his mathematical studies. He left out nothing of the curiosities or customs of those tribes. In regard to the natural realm, especially geography and astronomy, he was not content just to examine things, but wanted to write down a record of what he had seen for the benefit of literature.⁴⁶

The author went on listing the missionaries whose information contributed to the final shape of *China Illustrata*, and assured the reader that “these men are distinguished for their scholarship and great experience” (“viri studiorum cultu insignes, nec non magna rerum experientia docti”), the reason why his own compendium could aspire to become an authoritative work of reference. Similarly, Du Halde strengthened his authority in the first half of the eighteenth century by mentioning the “frequent conversations he had with some missionaries who returned from China, during their stay in Europe” (“les fréquens entretiens que j’ai eu avec quelques missionnaires revenus de la Chine, pendant le séjour qu’ils ont fait en Europe”).⁴⁷ It was by no means an accidental remark, given the recent context of the Chinese rites controversy, which toppled Jesuits authority and their monopoly to disseminate China-related knowledge.

In sum, Chambers laid claim to a three-fold authority when it came to the problem of *chinoiseries* and their sources: apart from the obvious fact that he was a practising architect (1), an important factor in his assessment of China’s architecture, he had actually journeyed to that country (2) and was in close contact with the natives who helped him to understand the theoretical foundations of her art (3). The outward authority of a Chinese expert proved to be a useful polemical tool in other treatises, especially when it came to responding to scathing criticism coming from other architects who scolded Chambers for his ideas on garden design.⁴⁸ In 1773, he added an “explanatory discourse,” written allegedly by a Chinese named Chet-qua, to his *Dissertation on oriental gardening*, the first edition of which appeared in print a year earlier. Chet-qua was a real person, an artist who travelled to London and whom Chambers actually met there, but impersonating him served the purpose of buttressing the architect’s authority as a specialist in the field, and the text was certainly not a genuine document.⁴⁹

Chambers’s self-established authority constitutes an important problem for the scholarship, since there exist several contradictory interpretations of the quality and sources of the artistic conventions he fostered and propagated, with some authors claiming that his ideas concerning architecture and garden theory were derivative of earlier English

⁴⁶ “Quod iam dudum in meorum librorum catalogo pollicitus sum, modo, fidem liberando, praestandum duxi, eo vel potissimum consilio inductus, quod a duobus circiter lustris ingentem rerum Sinicarum, vicinorumque regnorum de antiquitatibus et superstitionibus, quibus dictas gentes miserandum in modum involutas referebat, copiam coacervarim; quarum quidem primo P[ater] Martinus Martinius Tridentinus, eximius ille *Atlantis Sinici* scriptor, olim privatus meus in mathematicis discipulus, non exiguam suppellectilem communicavit, qui uti ingenio acuto et perfervido, mirumque in modum curioso, mathematicisque disciplinis ad haec probe instructo pollet: ita quoque nil curiosarum rerum, sive mores istarum gentium, sive naturam rerum spectes, quo gratam sibi posteritatem, potissimum geographiae et astronomiae scriptores obligaret, omisit.” KIRCHER, *China Illustrata*, 3. The English translation was given after Athanasius KIRCHER, *China Illustrata*, trans. Charles D. van Tuyl (Muskogee: Indian University Press, 1987), iv.

⁴⁷ Jean-Baptiste DU HALDE, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*, vol 1 (La Haye: chez P.G. Lemerancier, 1736), ix.

⁴⁸ PORTER, “Beyond the Bounds of Truth,” 46.

⁴⁹ LIU Yu, “The Real vs the Imaginary,” 676.

texts⁵⁰ and others trying to link them to actual Chinese conceptions of laying out landscape parks.⁵¹ Apart from this discussion, which may never be fully conclusive due to the lack of corroborating evidence and details of Chambers's sojourn in Canton, his claim to authority bears many similarities to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholarly literature, as does the way he identified the problem of the proliferation of distorted images falsely claiming to represent Chinese art.

This is by no means a coincidence. Chambers was surely acquainted with the above-mentioned publications on the topic printed at the time and did not rely uniquely on his own observations.⁵² In the preface, he cited Du Halde on several occasions,⁵³ and mentioned Louis le Comte (1655–1728),⁵⁴ another Jesuit envoy who spent a few years in China at the end of the seventeenth century.⁵⁵ Similarly to the way in which he demonstrated his own accounts, Chambers's approach to sinologists privileged only the sources coming from the people who travelled to China, or had the most recent knowledge, and therefore could be presented as “eye-witnesses” of Chinese culture, regardless of their confession.

In keeping with the aspirations of the author, the written material presented in *Designs* was structured into three main categories, with a separate chapter dedicated to every of them: on buildings, machines as well as dresses, and gardens. The first of these parts is the largest and covers different types of structures encountered by Chambers in China, such as temples, towers, and private houses, with a separate section dedicated to columns. These divisions do not reflect of course the actual state of Chinese architecture in the eighteenth century, especially with “temples” and “towers” falling into two separate categories, but their creation was probably deemed necessary by the author. They regulated European terminology used to refer to various types of buildings (the author stressed, for instance, that both “temples” and “towers” were called “pagodas” by the Westerners) and helped to introduce original names as “equivalents” for previously used technical terms.⁵⁶

In connection with Chambers's interests in the technological aspects of what he had seen in Canton, Adrian von Buttlar has recently pointed to the bracketing system (*dougong* spelled variously),⁵⁷ one of the defining features of China's architecture.⁵⁸ A simple version of the Chinese roof support system was indeed represented on the plate XII (Fig. 3), yet it cannot

⁵⁰ PORTER, “Beyond the Bounds of Truth,” 47.

⁵¹ J. BARRIER, *William Chambers. Une architecture empreinte de culture française. Suivi de Correspondance avec la France* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2010), 155–168. Barrier suggested that Chambers might have come in contact with the famous Ming treatise on laying out gardens, Ji Cheng's *Yuan Ye*, although this could have been possible only through Chinese interpreters, as he himself did not have any command of Classical Chinese. See also Pierre HUARD, Ming WONG, “Les enquêtes françaises sur la science et la technologie chinoises au XVIII^e siècle,” *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 53, no. 1 (1966): 188. Moreover, it has been suggested in the scholarship that Chambers's vision of “Chineseness,” and in particular of the so-called Chinese gardens, was a conscious response to the supremacy of the “Enlightened” rationality. See Yue ZHUANG, “Fear and Pride: Sir William Chambers' *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening*, Burke's Sublime and China,” in *Entangled Landscapes: Early Modern China and Europe*, ed. Yue ZHUANG, Andrea M. RIEMENSCHNITTER (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), 56–95.

⁵² Antoine GOURNAY, “Jardin chinois en France à la fin du XVIII^e siècle,” *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, no. 78 (1991): 263.

⁵³ CHAMBERS, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, f. br^o.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁵ Bianca Maria RINALDI, *Ideas of Chinese Gardens: Western Accounts, 1300–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 74.

⁵⁶ CHAMBERS, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, 1.

⁵⁷ Adrian von BUTTLAR, “Chinoiserien in deutschen Gärten der 18. Jahrhunderts,” in *Sir William Chambers und der Englisch-chinesische Garten in Europa*, ed. Thomas WEISS (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 1997), 69–71.

⁵⁸ Laurence G. LIU, *Chinese Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1989), 30–32.

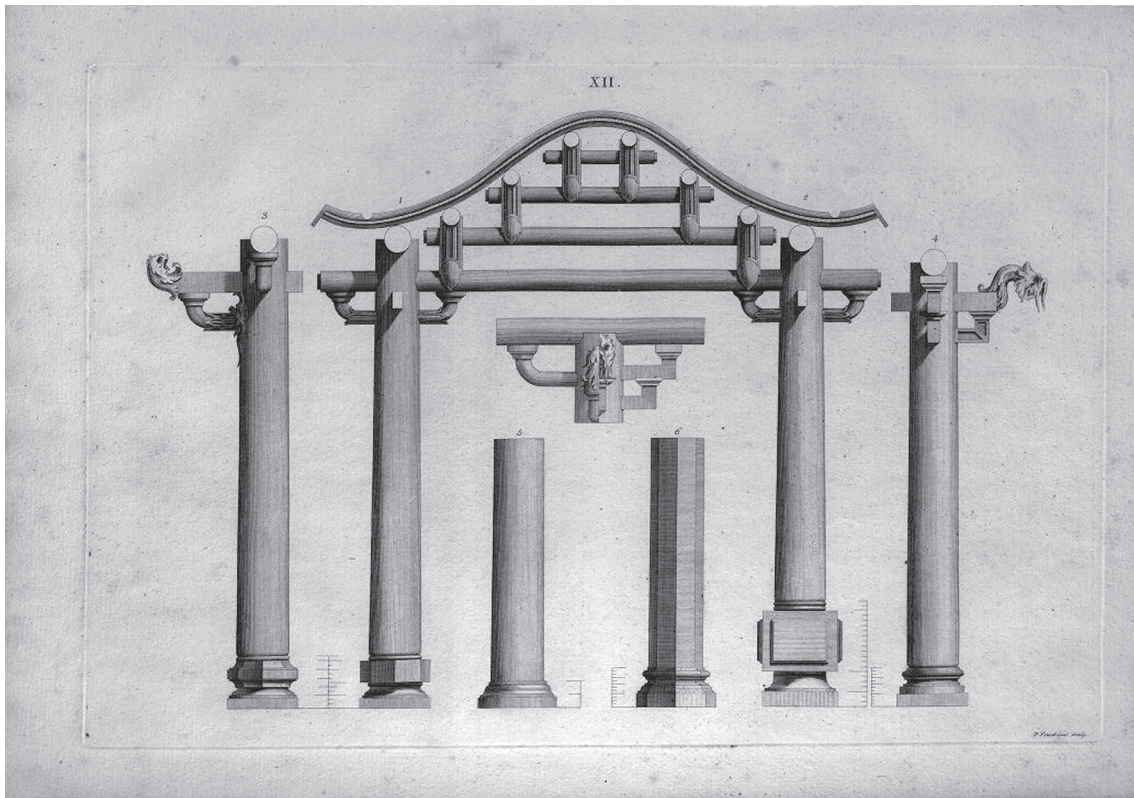


FIGURE 3 *Chinese columns and roof support system.*
 Plate XII from *Chambers's Designs of Chinese Buildings*

be considered a *dougong* in the strictest sense, mostly because it lacks the *dou* elements, that is, the wooden sockets into which small supporting brackets (*gong*) were inserted.⁵⁹ The central illustration on that plate comes closest to what a traditional Chinese bracketing system would be, but it betrays Chambers's unfamiliarity with the technical side of constructing *dougongs* – the traversal brackets should have been tucked deeper into the socket, had it been the author's idea to represent them accurately. Moreover, the introductory explanations printed in the *Designs* did not inform the reader about the intricacies of using the *dougong* system, nor did they mention the most important aspect of their social role, that is, stressing the rank of the building to which they were added, since only public edifices could be equipped with elaborate bracketing. Chambers was probably not aware of this fact, yet another proof of his fragmentary knowledge. However, even if incomplete, his theoretical essay played a role in distinguishing the *Designs* from other pattern books, as most of them included but superficial forewords dedicated to the practical aspects of the publications.⁶⁰ What is more, the very idea of abstracting Chinese buildings from a sort of pseudo-natural background, such as contrived garden space often presented in conventional pattern books (compare Fig. 2), and separating it into structural modules, was revolutionary in the sense that it assumed an intellectual (and encyclopaedic) interest in the main principles of China's architecture.

⁵⁹ *Zhongguo jianzhu shi (A History of Chinese Architecture)*, ed. PAN Guxi (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 2008), 277–278.

⁶⁰ William and John HALFPENNY, *The Country Gentleman's Pocket Companion, and Builder's Assistant for Rural Decorative Architecture* (London: printed for Robert Sayer, 1753), 1–2.

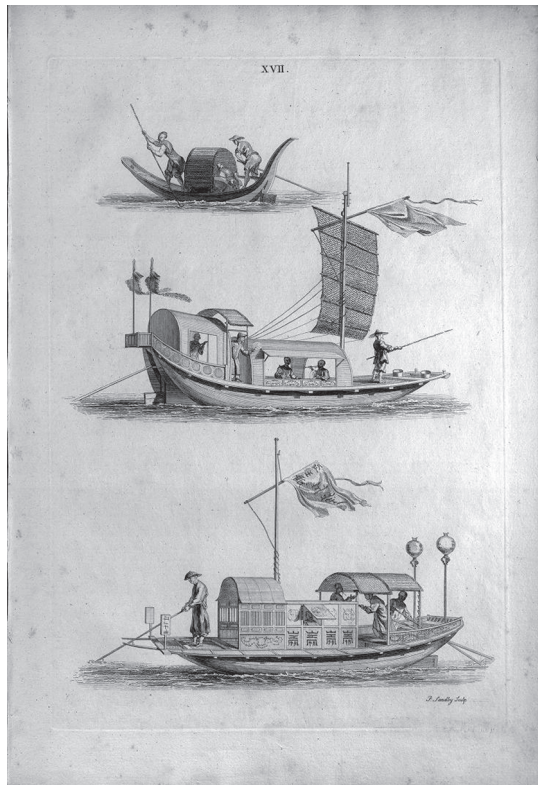


FIGURE 4 Chinese boats. Plate XVII from Chambers's *Designs of Chinese Buildings*

Other plates in the *Designs* are likewise informative when it comes to reconstructing the idea of “Chineseness” as nurtured by Chambers. Unlike William and John Halfpenny, whose plates presented rather figments of imagination than structures bearing any actual resemblance to works of Chinese architecture, Chambers insisted on depicting real edifices, and made an attempt at structurally reconstructing the rules that governed the creation of various buildings, at least when it came to declarations. The emphasis on measurements turned out to be perfunctory, because the initial exaggerated statements and promises to represent Chinese objects based on the author’s own sketches were not fully substantiated on the plates – a mélange of Western and oriental styles, although more convincing than in the case of the Halfpennys, never ceased to be an element of Chambers’s imagined “Chineseness.”⁶¹ The great effort that he put in refuting his rivals’ vision of Chinese architecture as well as the scathing criticism with which he approached all the “copies from the lame representations found on porcelain and paper-hangings”⁶² were in fact another polemical way of asserting his own authority as a curator of the most accurate image of Chinese visual culture.

Nonetheless, it is principally the remaining plates that reveal Chambers’s ambition to organize the knowledge about China and her art in an all-embracing manner, and to counter the chaotic influx of information mediated by other publications circulating on the market. Even if the focus was predominantly on architecture, to reduce *Designs of Chinese Building, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils* to a mere pattern book is to ignore many other visual materials presented on Chambers’s plates, which I would like to

⁶¹ CONNER, *Oriental Architecture*, 76–77. See also Hans VON TROTHA, “Chinesische Gärten – Landschaftsgärten: Wie chinesisch ist der Englische Garten,” in *China in a Global Context: Perspectives on and from China*, eds. Jens DAMM, Mechthild LEUTNER, Hauke NEDDERMANN (Zürich: LIT Verlag), 5–6.

⁶² CHAMBERS, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, i.

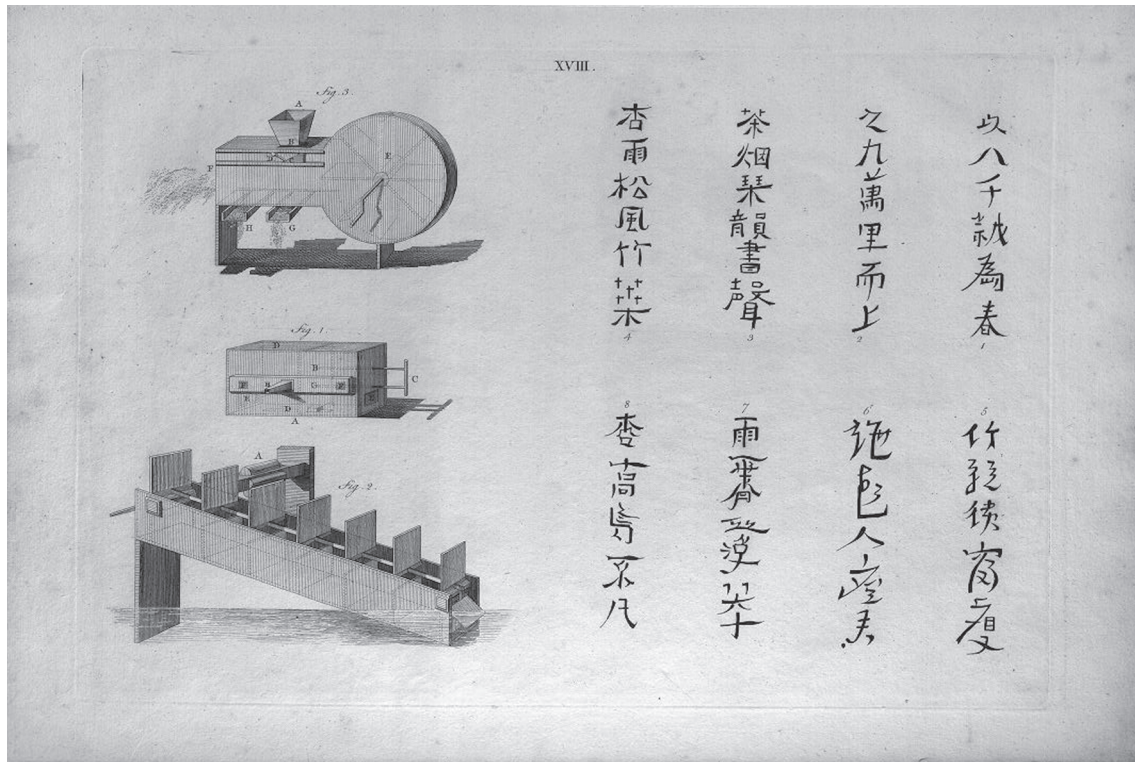


FIGURE 5 *Chinese machines and two samples of Chinese writing. Plate XVIII from Chambers's Designs of Chinese Buildings*

bring to the fore here. Although the author identified himself as an architect, he offered to the reader a broad selection of illustrations representing various elements of Chinese artistic and technical production, such as “furniture, utensils, machines, and dresses,”⁶³ intentionally incorporated into the title. Machines could be certainly inscribe in the centuries-old Vitruvian paradigm of classifying architecture, yet other items listed by Chambers represent Chinese visual culture in general, a fact of which the author himself was acutely aware:

It was not my intention to touch on any thing that did not immediately belong to my profession. However, as I had by me designs of the Chinese dresses, drawn with a good deal of accuracy, I judged it would not be amiss to publish them, as I believe they are the exactest that have hitherto appeared. Some of them are picturesque, and may be useful in masquerades, and other entertainments of that kind, as well as in grotesque paintings.⁶⁴

The utilitarian justification provided here, namely that depictions of Chinese clothing may serve as pattern plates for masquerade ball costumes, should not obscure the obvious fact – Chambers’s ambition was to provide the Western public with the most accurate representations of China’s arts and crafts that had ever come out of a printing press, and that he intended to achieve it by quoting some even more curious examples of China’s artistic production, such as boats of different shapes and sizes (Fig. 4), machines, and

⁶³ *Ibid.*, f. br^o.

⁶⁴ CHAMBERS, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, 14.

“calligraphy” (Fig. 5), the last of which might have been either used in a practical way as a decorative pattern⁶⁵ or treated as curious illustrations of a writing system both unfamiliar and fascinating to the Europeans.

Compared to the plates included in other pattern books available at the time, Chambers’s *Designs* were characterized by an unprecedented ambition to depict as much of Chinese visual culture as possible. This was because, apart from numerous representations of extravagant temples or summer houses, the publications authored by the Halfpennys featured illustrations of many other objects that could be easily imitated by the enthusiasts of the “Chinese style,” such as windows, furniture, palisades, or even bridges – fashionable additions to gardens filled with fancy *fabriques*. Matthew Darly, the author of *A New Book of Chinese Designs Calculated to Improve the present Taste*, already in 1754 decided to depict for his readership Chinese genre scenes and boats.⁶⁶ The expanding scope of objects included in similar pattern books corresponded clearly with the demands of the market.⁶⁷ In his *Designs*, Chambers was therefore following the general trend⁶⁸ and simultaneously moving beyond it, combining the functions of a standard pattern book and an illustrated treatise on Chinese culture, similar to the ones written by Kircher or Du Halde.

The significant dose of imagination involved in Chambers’s architectural depictions notwithstanding, some of the plates provide the reader with accurate depictions of diverse Chinese crafts. Plate XV (Fig. 6), for instance, dedicated to containers and vessels, features a rather faithful representation of a *ding*, an ancient ware common during the Shang (1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046–256 BCE) dynasties,⁶⁹ and later imitated under the Ming and Qing, often in the form of a “tall-legged *ding*” (*gaojiao ding*). Similarly, many of the seemingly fanciful pictures gathered on the same plate, such as the teapot with bamboo sides topped with a twig, were in fact genuine examples of Chinese Yixing pottery, as was demonstrated by William Sargent.⁷⁰ Naturally, this is not to say that all of these objects were based on sketches made by Chambers in Canton; it is a known fact that he made use of depictions already available in Europe and was urging his relatives and friends to send such material to him,⁷¹ the goal being to compile them into one all-encompassing collection.

The strategy behind amassing so many different objects – representing various materials, techniques, and styles – in one publication was certainly a practical one, and well in line with the obvious role of the *Designs* as a pattern book. Chambers was, however, simultaneously inclined to show the diversity of “Chineseness” and was doing so partly in response to other authors and their “lame representations,” to put it in his own words. In fact, the Halfpennys were excruciatingly repetitive when it came to constructing their

⁶⁵ And it indeed was – the Chinese House at Stowe features a set of somewhat deformed “Chinese” characters probably borrowed from Chambers’s *Designs*. See Emile DE BRUIJN, “Stowe’s ‘Unread’ Chinese Garden Pavilion,” *ABC Bulletin*, February (2012): 9–10.

⁶⁶ DARLY, *A New Book of Chinese Designs*, plates 96 and 116.

⁶⁷ Robert A. LEATH, “After the Chinese Taste: Chinese Export Porcelain and Chinoiserie Design in Eighteenth-Century Charleston,” *Historical Archaeology* 33, no. 3 (1999): 53–54.

⁶⁸ Pattern books published after Chambers’s *Designs* are another proof of the increasing interest in the “things Chinese” other than architecture or furniture. Paul Decker, whose pattern book appeared in print in 1759, two years after the work by Chambers, likewise incorporated illustrations of Chinese boats. DECKER, *Chinese Architecture, Civil and Ornamental*, plate 16.

⁶⁹ TIAN Zibing, *Zhongguo gongyi meishu shi (A History of Chinese Craft)* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2014), 52–53.

⁷⁰ William R. SARGENT, *Treasures of Chinese Export Ceramics from the Peabody Essex Museum* (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2012), 177.

⁷¹ CONNER, *Oriental Architecture*, 76.



FIGURE 6 *Various examples of Chinese pottery.*
Plate XV from Chambers's Designs of Chinese Buildings

vision of fancy Chinese architecture and ornaments. Their books relied on the never-changing repertoire of almost identical forms: waved roofs, awkwardly upturned eaves, spikes, and floral decorations, all of which could be endlessly reproduced according to the rules of the same architectural grammar. Chambers's plates, on the other hand, present a wider array of forms and objects, difficult to pin down with one single and precise label, their place of origin being the only unifying feature.

This is also the reason why the samples of Chinese characters chosen by Chambers deserve some extra attention, in particular given the great interest Western intellectuals displayed for Chinese writing, with Kircher famously speculating that they are in fact all pictographic and can be traced back to simple representations of elements or animals,⁷² a theory which later inspired Leibniz to develop his ideas of a *characteristica universalis*.⁷³ However fallacious these presumptions were, they sparked interest in Chinese characters, and Chambers's *Designs* furnished illustrations perfect for assuaging the desire to see them without referring to heavy scholarly tomes. Needless to say, for anyone even superficially acquainted with sinographs, it is clear that these representations are far from being accurate, with all the awkwardly traced strokes and a general lack of proportion immediately betraying the author's unfamiliarity with the Chinese writing system. Nonetheless, they communicated the general idea of what the script looked like, yet without any additional explanations, therefore reducing it to mere visuality.

The holistic approach to Chinese visual culture presented in the *Designs* explains Chambers's decision to depict machines or even boats, and to refrain from explicitly mixing images belonging to different artistic traditions, as was often done in the eighteenth century, since "Gothic" and "Chinese" patterns were treated as equally befitting garden follies. An important goal of Chambers's publication was therefore to focus uniquely on China, albeit assuming varied perspectives, a task parallel to the one undertaken by Kircher, Du Halde, and other scholars-compilers who insisted on giving a broad overview of the whole country as well as its culture, and who equally focused on things such as climate, architecture, clothing, or engineering. Chambers's plates bear much more resemblance to the illustrations attached to the work of Du Halde than to the pattern books written by the Halfpennys.

The very purpose of Chambers's book was, to refer again to Lehner, to visually "shape China" in the minds of the readers, and to counter other imaginative depictions of her culture available on the market. It was aimed at reducing the visual chaos resulting from the excessive vogue for the "things Chinese." The lack of any professional explanation and system of organizing new information needed an authoritative response, and this was precisely the reason for which Chambers decided to incorporate commentaries to the plates gathered in the *Designs*. Almost every illustration in his treatise was accompanied by text, and if the Halfpennys added only simple descriptions to every plate that they

⁷² See Bolesław SZCZEŚNIAK, "The Origin of the Chinese Language According to Athanasius Kircher's Theory," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 72, no. 1 (1952): 21–29.

⁷³ David Emil MUNGELLO, "Leibniz's Interpretation of Neo-Confucianism," *Philosophy East and West* 21, no. 1 (1971): 3–4. For Leibniz's interest in Chinese language and philosophy, especially the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*) see: Eric S. NELSON, "The *Yijing* and Philosophy: From Leibniz to Derrida," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (2011): 377–396; Stephen E. MCKENNA, Victor H. MAIR, "A reordering of the hexagrams of the I Ching," *Philosophy East and West* 29, no. 4 (1979): 421–441; James A. RYAN, "Leibniz's Binary System and Shao Yong's *Yijing*," *Philosophy East and West* 46, no. 1 (1996): 59–90; David Emil MUNGELLO, *The Great Encounter of China and the West* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 101–104.

included in their pattern books, mostly in order to indicate the ideal location for every building, Chambers attempted to summarize what he had learnt or observed with the aim to synthesize the knowledge about Chinese art and to enrich it with appropriate cultural or geographical context, much like Kircher in his *China Illustrata*:

As the climate of China is exceedingly hot, they employ a great deal of water in their gardens. In the small ones, if the situation admits, they frequently lay almost the whole ground under water; leaving only some islands and rocks, and in their large ones they introduce extensive lakes, rivers, and canals.⁷⁴

Contrary to Kircher, however, Chambers was not interested in sensational stories and curiosities, a telling example of how the modus of structuring knowledge about China had evolved since the second half of the seventeenth century. In fact, the *Designs* come sometimes closer to the French *Encyclopédie*, since they display a similar pursuit to replace unreliable information with a structured and trustworthy system of knowledge illustrated by means of objective cross-sections, measurements, and accurate descriptions. The drive to synthesize the data led, naturally, to a reductive approach, propelled by the fact that Chambers, as was mentioned before, never travelled outside Canton – what he meant by “China” was in reality the small part of the country which he had a chance to see.

I have argued earlier that the problem any interpreter of Chinese luxuries in the first half of the sixteenth century would encounter was an almost total absence of reliable information, both cultural and scholarly (not to mention any technological evidence), required to properly contextualize these products. This situation changed around the second half of the seventeenth century, when the accumulation of stories, reports, and various other accounts led to a dominance of words over objects, since much was described that could not be depicted at that time. Chambers presented his *Designs* as a perfect remedy for both these visual and intellectual predicaments – his book incorporated “exact” and “accurate” illustrations of Chinese arts and crafts paired with necessary commentaries organized thematically. The transitions between different stages of knowledge-formation, with regard to both written and visual sources on China, constitute an important context for Chambers’s project, and help to locate it in the history of Sino-Western relations. The *Designs* are therefore something more than a mere pattern-book of a “Chinese style,” given the circumstances in which they were published. At the time, it was a visual guide to Chinese culture understood holistically, with the ambition of becoming an authoritative work of reference not only for architects or designers, but also for the general public.

⁷⁴ CHAMBERS, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, 16.

*Porządkowanie wiedzy o Chinach w nowożytnej Europie.
„Designs of Chinese Buildings Furniture, Dresses,
Machines, And Utensils” Williama Chambersa jako
przewodnik po chińskiej kulturze wizualnej*

Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils (1757) Williama Chambersa tradycyjnie uznaje się za wzornik mający służyć XVIII-wiecznym artystom – zwłaszcza architektom – zainteresowanym popularnymi ówczesnie *chinoiseries*. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie dzieła szkockiego autora w innym świetle – jako przewodnika po chińskiej kulturze wizualnej, zbliżonego celami i funkcją do licznych nowożytnych traktatów porządkujących napływające do Europy wiadomości o Chinach. Ponieważ między XVI a XVIII w. liczba informacji o Państwie Środka docierających na Zachód osiągnęła niespotykaną wcześniej skalę, ówczesni uczeni starali się ustrukturyzować wiedzę tak, by stworzyć spójny i dostępny szerszej publiczności kanon. Dzieło Chambersa, choć poświęcone jest głównie architekturze, obiektom użytkowym i dekoracyjnym, zostało w toku analiz ukazane jako autorytatywne kompendium chińskiej kultury wizualnej, wymierzone przede wszystkim w krążące po Europie niecisłe i niemiernoradne relacje, opisy i wyobrażenia na temat sztuki Państwa Środka.

W pierwszej części artykułu omówiono historię przepływu wiedzy między Państwem Środka a krajami europejskimi, począwszy od czasów, w których uległ on znacznej intensyfikacji (2. połowa XVI w.), a skończywszy na latach 50. wieku XVIII, to znaczy momencie publikacji *Designs of Chinese Buildings* Chambersa. Misja ewangelizacyjna prowadzona przez przedstawicieli Towarzystwa Jezusowego była jednym z najważniejszych kanałów obiegu informacji na temat Chin. W miarę rozwoju jezuickiego projektu chrystianizacyjnego, a także stabilizacji szlaków handlowych między Wschodem i Zachodem, ilość różnorodnych – i niekiedy sprzecznych – informacji przekazywanych do Europy zaczęła wymagać strukturyzacji. Odwołując się do badań nad zjawiskiem „przeciążenia informacją” (*information overload*) w nowożytności, prowadzonych przez badaczki i badaczy takich jak Ann Blair czy Georg Lehner, zwrócono uwagę, że autorzy wielu pojawiających się w tej epoce traktatów normatywnych starali się jednocześnie odpowiedzieć na rosnące zainteresowanie Chinami i uporządkować coraz liczniejsze wiadomości na temat tego kraju. Kolejni uczeni, tacy jak Matteo Ricci, Martino Martini, Michał Boym czy Athanasius Kircher, podejmowali

próby systemowej organizacji wiedzy, przygotowując specjalistyczne kompendia przeznaczone do użytku szerszej publiczności. Na przełomie XVII i XVIII w., w odpowiedzi na słabnący autorytet Towarzystwa Jezusowego i spór o ryty chińskie, rozwinęły się kolejne kanały napływu i strukturyzacji wiadomości na temat Państwa Środka.

Kultura wizualna, której poświęcona jest druga część artykułu, zajmowała w opisanym obiegu wiedzy miejsce szczególne. Jakkolwiek w wieku XVI i w początkach XVII liczba obiektów luksusowych importowanych z Chin do Europy, zwłaszcza porcelany, stale rosła, to przed rozpoczęciem jezuickiej misji chrystianizacyjnej niewiele wiadomo było o państwie, z którego pochodziły wszystkie te obiekty. Brakowało bowiem szczegółowych relacji osób, które mieszkaly w Chinach i mogłyby służyć za bezpośrednie źródło informacji. Z czasem ogromne zainteresowanie Państwem Środka i napływ wiedzy doprowadziły do sytuacji zgoła odwrotnej – w XVIII w. wiele się pisało i mówiło o tym kraju, ale stosunkowo mało wiedziano o dziedzinach takich jak jego architektura czy sztuka ogrodowa. Duża część sprzecznych wersji „chińskości” prezentowanych wówczas w sztukach wizualnych wynikała z powszechnej przewagi tekstu nad obrazem i braku dokładnych ilustracji – doprowadziła też ostatecznie do przeciążenia chaotycznymi i niespójnymi wizjami budowli czy parków. Krążące po Europie eklektyczne wzorniki cieszyły się dużym powodzeniem, ale oparte były w przeważającej większości na fantazjach i fragmentarycznych opowieściach, niewystarczających, by wypracować spójny obraz kultury wizualnej Państwa Środka. Odpowiadając na potrzeby rynku, autorzy podobnych publikacji łączyli także motywy zapożyczone z wyobrażeń na temat sztuki tureckiej czy indyjskiej, wplatając je w *chinoiseries*. W tej sytuacji liczne konkurujące ze sobą wizje „chińskości” skutkowały wizualnym chaosem dostrzeganym przez XVIII-wiecznych komentatorów.

Jedną z osób szczególnie krytycznie wypowiadających się na temat nieposkromionej fantazji ówczesnych twórców wzorników „stylu chińskiego” był William Chambers, którego *Designs of Chinese Buildings* poddano dokładnej analizie w trzeciej części niniejszego artykułu. Uważna lektura wstępu

do publikacji ujawnia wyraźne społeczne zaangażowanie autora. Architekt traktował swoją pracę jako bezpośrednią odpowiedź na chaos informacyjny i wizualny związany z próbami imitacji obiektów pochodzących z Państwa Środka. Chambers obrał sobie za misję uporządkowanie dostępnej w jego czasach wiedzy i przedstawienie jej w formie normatywnego kompendium czy przewodnika po chińskiej kulturze wizualnej. By go jednak stworzyć, musiał uwiarygodnić swój autorytet jako specjalisty, co czynił na trzy sposoby: (1) odwołując się do swojego doświadczenia jako czynnego architekta; (2) podkreślając swoje podróże do Chin; (3) przytaczając wypowiedzi mieszkańców tego państwa, z którymi miał być w stałym kontakcie. Podobnymi strategiami konstruowania własnej wiarygodności posługiwali się także inni nowożytni autorzy tworzący kompendia o Państwie Środka, w tym Athanasius Kircher i Jean-Baptiste du Halde. Chambers pragnął ponadto zebrać w swoim traktacie jak najwięcej różnorodnych przykładów z obszaru chińskiej kultury wizualnej – poza architekturą zamieścił w *Designs of Chinese Buildings* również wizerunki obiektów ceramicznych, mebli, maszyn, strojów, łodzi czy kaligrafii. Starał się w ten sposób odpowiedzieć na eklektyczny charakter popularnych wówczas wzorników, w których zamieszczano przeróżne przykłady *chinoiseries*, nie ograniczając się wyłącznie do budowli.

Wysiłkom Chambersa zmierzającym do uporządkowania wiedzy na temat sztuki Chin towarzyszyło również pragnienie normatywizacji, skłaniające go do wielokrotnego powoływania się na pomiary, jakich miał dokonać w trakcie swojego pobytu w Państwie Środka. Nacisk na dostarczenie XVIII-wiecznej publiczności jak najdokładniejszych i najwyraźniejszych przekrojów i schematów miał być sposobem na rozwiązanie powszechnego wówczas problemu niedostępności szczegółowych ilustracji, utrudniającego studiowanie sztuki chińskiej. Chambers z całkowitą świadomością doprowadził zatem do matematyzacji i standaryzacji wyrysowanych przez siebie obiektów – dzięki temu jego plansze mogły stanowić nie tylko praktyczne wzorniki, lecz także przedmiot dalszych badań nad kulturą wizualną Państwa Środka. Mimo licznych nieścisłości w odwzorowywaniu poszczególnych elementów architektonicznych, takich jak zworniki (*dougong*) wspierające chińskie dachy, Chambers był w istocie pierwszym europejskim autorem podchodzącym do omawianego przez siebie tematu w tak systemowy sposób. Wyrażona w *Designs of Chinese Buildings* chęć zapanowania nad zamętem informacyjnym i zalewem niespójnych wizji „chińskości” czyni jego dzieło wyjątkowym, a także pozwala traktować je jako jeden z najciekawszych przykładów nowożytnych praktyk zarządzania wiedzą.

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