

# Seeing China: Porcelain in European Travel Accounts, 1650-1800

Dr Anne Gerritsen & Dr Stephen McDowall  
*University of Warwick, UK*

Can the material culture of an empire tell us something more about its civilisation in general? It has sometimes been claimed that Qing China failed to impress eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travellers because of its lack of resemblance to art; that the romantic expectations created by painters of porcelain plates and cups were too high, and inevitably led to disappointment.<sup>1</sup> But John Bell (1691-1780), an eighteenth-century visitor who loved China and was impressed by everything he encountered, saw in the Chinese hills precisely those “romantick figures of landscapes which are painted on the China-ware and other manufactures of this country.”<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines a range of travel accounts written by Europeans in China between the middle of the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth, and argues that the shift in the Sino-European relationship evident over that period can be explained in part by a change in the way ceramics and ceramic technology were understood.

<sup>1</sup> See for example Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (London: John Murray, 1961) pp. 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> John Bell, *A Journey from St Petersburg in Russia, to Peking in China, with an Embassy from his Imperial Majesty, Peter the First, to Kamhi Emperor of China, in the Year MDCCXIX* (rpt.; J. L. Stevenson ed., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) p. 117.

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## Cultures of Ceramics in Global History, 1300-1800

University of Warwick, 22-24 April 2010



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