

# Colonial Mimicry, Chinoiserie and *Loza Fina*: Making Sense of China in Mexico

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For people living in Mexico, the material culture of daily life and prayer drew extensively upon both local, hand-made objects and foreign imports. And objects from China figured prominently in this arrangement. Taking a cue from the writing of Annette Weiner, this paper considers Mexico as a site of symbolic density for the trade in Chinese porcelain.

Broadly speaking, I am interested in how porcelain from Jingdezhen was imbued with value in Mexico in early modernity and the implications of this valuation. My approach to the theme of this conference is therefore comparative. At issue is the degree to which patterns of consumption and desire differed from those of other foreign (i.e., not-Chinese) locations and cultural settings. It is the production of *loza fina*, I suggest, that defines the very possibility of such difference.

In the late 17th century, guild rules in the city of Puebla stipulated that *loza fina* should emulate porcelains made China. Of crucial importance was not the shape of the pot, the thinness of the walls, the translucence of the glaze—all material properties of great interest among Europeans seeking to emulate Chinese porcelain, and, certainly, for people in China who made and used porcelain. Rather what mattered in Puebla was colour, especially the use of blue. These blue-and-white ceramics were among the most heavily collected objects in Mexico, and writing of the day suggests that the people who were fond of such wares saw them as successful emulations and evocations of Chinese ceramics. Even so, no one in Puebla would have mistaken the vessel in figure 1 for porcelain. Porcelain from China was a separate and lovely thing, to be collected and displayed alongside *loza fina*.

What are we to make of this doubling—its sense of Chinese-ness, its imaginary and material construction of similarity? To answer this question, I consider a range of interpretive possibilities, from Chinoiserie to colonial mimicry and discourses of sufficiency. Ultimately, I wish to argue that *loza fina* is not merely, or even primarily an ethnographic curiosity in the history of world trade. Rather, in extending the connotative meanings of the porcelain of Jingdezhen, these ceramics open and shift the sense of China that material objects could call forth in early modernity.

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