

Gendered Utopias in Transcultural Context: Chinese Porcelains and English Women's Writings, c. 1650-1750

Professor David Porter

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This talk will explore a curious and unexpected convergence in the iconography of Chinese transitional ware porcelain and new genres of English women's writing in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century, and will offer reflections on the methodological problems raised by such instances of historical simultaneity.

How did English writers and consumers respond to the remarkable influx of luxury goods and aesthetic ideas from China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? The service of tea in willow-patterned porcelains now seems to us a quintessentially English ritual. But how, exactly, were these exotic commodities transformed from curious rarities in the Restoration period to everyday goods in Jane Austen's day? And how did the alien visual sensibility evoked by imported Chinese wares interact with English literary culture along the way?

In Addison's *Spectator* essay of April 12, 1711, the narrator describes the unexpected juxtaposition of treasured books and imported Chinese porcelains in a wealthy widow's library. The essay's explicit association of imported Chinese objects with a female literary space is not altogether surprising. Twenty years earlier, Queen Mary had first inaugurated the fashion of decorating interiors with Chinese wares, filling every room in her apartments at Hampton Court with imported porcelain and lacquerware. Well-heeled women collectors followed suit, and for most of the eighteenth century, the use and display of these exotic objects would be closely associated with women's quarters in the homes of the elite.

We can readily imagine, then, that imported Chinese objects might have often wound up in close proximity to the treasured books we know these women also purchased in large numbers. To what extent might each have created a resonant space for the contemplation and enjoyment of the other, leading the delights of reading and viewing to be reciprocally enhanced? Literary critics often take it upon themselves to reconstruct the particular fantasies that texts made available to readers of a given time and place. Academic devotees of the written word are considerably less adept, however, at taking a larger anthropological view of how texts and visual objects might function together in the production of cultural meanings. What if we allowed the possibility that the exquisitely decorated Chinese wares that graced the shelves of a woman's library in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century might have functioned as material correlatives to the books arrayed beside them? Examined closely alongside the female-authored fictions, poetry, and essays that provided the immediate literary context of their consumption in England, the scenes depicted on the illustrated porcelains of the early Qing dynasty evoke an alluring imaginative space that are likely to have resonated in profound and unexpected ways with Leonora and her peers.

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