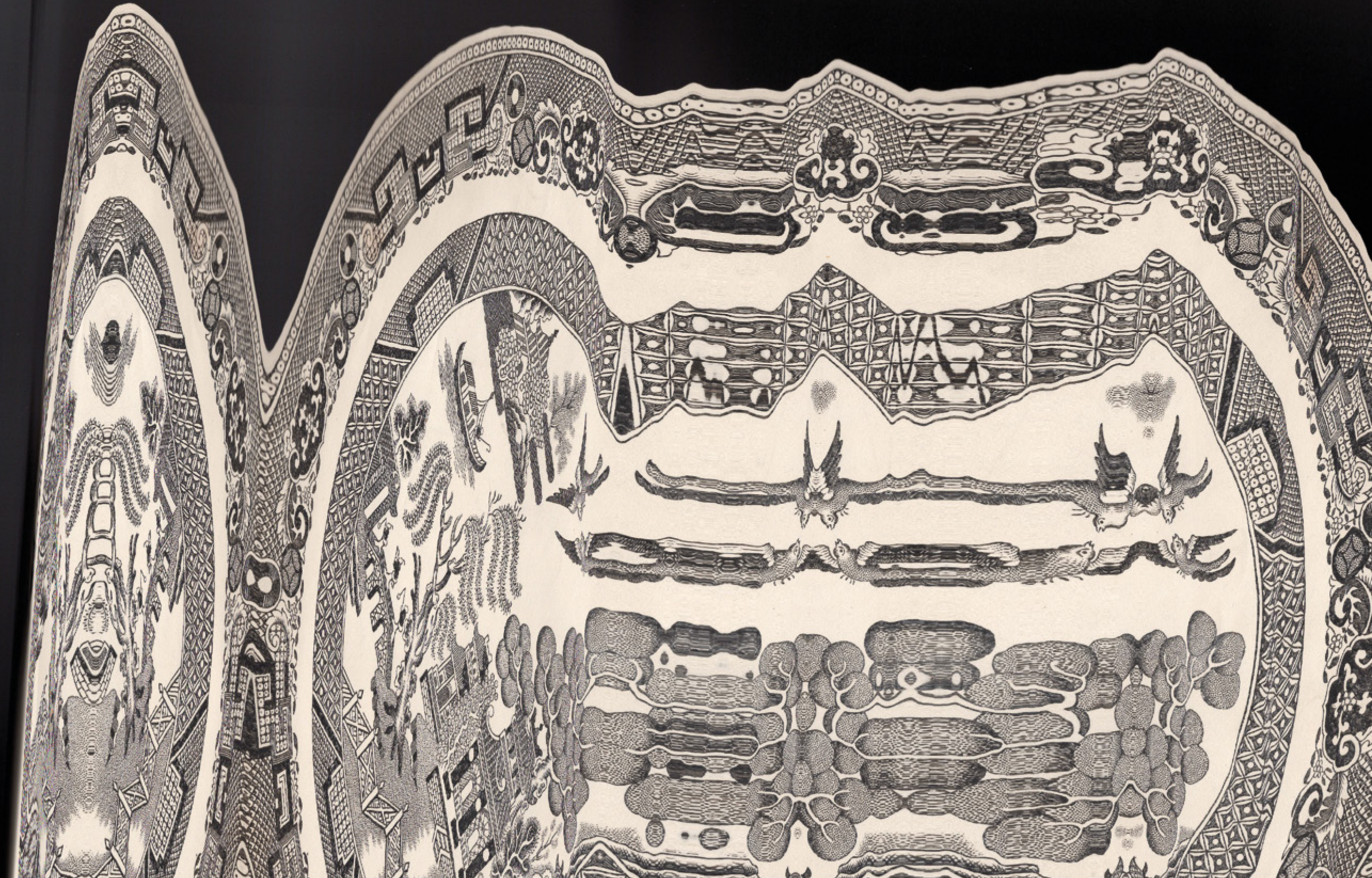


Legacy and Continuity

Willow Pattern Ceramics and Stories of 'Other'





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Legacy and Continuity: Willow Pattern Ceramics and Stories of 'Other' was commissioned by Stoke-on-Trent City Council as part of its centenary celebrations.

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Preface

In 2025, Stoke-on-Trent City Council marked the centenary of the City's status, conferred by King George V, through a year-long programme of cultural events. Among these, the exhibition *Willow Pattern Ceramics and Stories of 'Other'* was commissioned to critically reframe understandings of one of north Staffordshire's most iconic and globally disseminated ceramic designs. Curated by Professors Neil Brownsword (University of Staffordshire) and Tiejun Hou (Jingdezhen Ceramic University), the exhibition brought together objects from regional museum collections and private holdings to interrogate the complex and often paradoxical entanglements of Chinese ceramic traditions and British industrial production.

Through a series of scholarly interventions, the exhibition examined the cultural and literary symbolism of the willow motif within Chinese visual culture; the processes of imitation, translation, and stylistic adaptation by which Chinese export porcelain informed the emergence of the Willow Pattern in Britain. It also considered the design's subsequent re-circulation to China through late twentieth-century outsourcing practices undertaken by British manufacturers. In parallel, contemporary artworks extended these historical inquiries by critically engaging with themes of cultural appropriation, globalisation, and artistic reinvention, thereby situating the Willow Pattern within a transhistorical and transcultural framework spanning three centuries.

In conjunction with the exhibition, scholars from China and the United Kingdom were invited to develop these themes further through the international symposium *Legacy and Continuity*, held at Stoke Town Hall on 21–22 November 2025. The essays gathered in this publication both reflect and extend the contributions presented at that event.

Together, the symposium and exhibition mark a significant moment in recognising the shared ceramic heritage of two historic centres of global production: Stoke-on-Trent and Jingdezhen. This collaboration was formalised through a Cultural Concordat signed between Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Jingdezhen City Government, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, and the University of Staffordshire. The Concordat establishes a framework for sustained dialogue, research exchange, and cultural activity, foregrounding ceramics as both a material inheritance and a strategic medium for contemporary engagement.

Central to this initiative is the positioning of Stoke-on-Trent and Jingdezhen not as discrete or hierarchically ordered sites, but as mutually constitutive centres shaped by long histories of technological exchange, artistic innovation, and global trade. By situating the symposium and exhibition within this framework, the publication mobilises shared heritage as a critical lens through which to interrogate broader questions of cultural transmission, authorship, and the enduring legacies of exchange.



Detail of a Spode Willow Pattern (first) engraved copper plate for a small dish. Stoke-upon-Trent, c.1790. Courtesy of the Spode Museum Trust.

Introduction

Neil Brownsword

Within the material and visual culture of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Willow Pattern emerged as one of the most widely disseminated ceramic designs in history. Still in production to this day, its enduring legacy derives from its ability to function simultaneously as commodity, narrative image, and cultural myth. Adapted from Chinese blue and white export porcelain, the pattern's arrangement of birds, bridge, pagodas, willow tree and waterscape has become a familiar visual language through which ideas of domesticity, nostalgia, and exoticism coexist. Its commercial success coincided with the refinement of transfer-printing technologies during the 1780s, enabling Staffordshire manufacturers to produce visually sophisticated ceramics at unprecedented scale and affordability. Unlike hand-painted Chinese porcelain, transfer-printed wares circulated widely across class boundaries, entering both middle-class interiors and working-class households. Yet beneath its domestic appeal lies a more complex history of colonialism, labour, and cultural representation, which the exhibition *Willow Pattern Ceramics and Stories of 'Other'* seeks to elucidate.

Through the assembly of historic artefacts, cross-disciplinary scholarship, and contemporary artistic interpretation, this exhibition avoids nostalgic or celebratory readings of the Willow Pattern in favour of a pluralistic understanding of contemporary debates surrounding it. By challenging Eurocentric narratives that often privilege British industrial superiority, the exhibition foregrounds the asymmetrical relations of power and exchange that shaped the pattern's production and circulation. It repositions the Willow Pattern as a contested cultural object through which ideas of 'China' were aestheticised, consumed, and repeatedly reinterpreted within Western material culture.

Central to the exhibition's curatorial framework is an examination of the historically uneven relationship between north Staffordshire and Jingdezhen - two ceramic centres connected through trade, technological transfer and imitation. From the late 1970s onwards, China's ceramics industry expanded rapidly through market liberalisation, technological reform, and international collaboration. British ceramic delegations visiting Jingdezhen and other production centres participated in technical exchanges that facilitated the transfer of manufacturing knowledge and industrial technologies to China. By the 1990s, however, manufacturers in north Staffordshire increasingly outsourced production overseas in response to rising costs, intensified global competition, and economic recession. This transition has since precipitated widespread factory closures, the erosion of intergenerational craft knowledge, and the decline of regional supplier networks, marking a profound reversal in industrial fortunes.

Within this shifting economic landscape, the Willow Pattern has assumed renewed symbolic significance as it was outsourced to China in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Developed in north Staffordshire through the adaptation of Chinese export motifs, the design re-emerged as a Chinese-manufactured export commodity circulating through contemporary systems of global labour and production. Chinese manufacturers simultaneously reinterpreted related blue and white ceramic traditions, often incorporating narrative branding strategies that echoed the Willow Pattern's familiar romantic mythology (Fig. 1). This cyclical return underscores the pattern's capacity to illuminate broader questions surrounding authenticity, cultural memory, and historical exchange. These thematic inquiries, developed through the exhibition's curatorial framework, were extended further via the international symposium *Legacy and Continuity*, which brought



Fig. 1. *Parasol Tree Pattern*, porcelain plate, People's Porcelain Factory Jingdezhen, China c.1990s. Private collection.

together scholars from the UK and China to critically interrogate the pattern's enduring material, visual, and ideological significance. The essays assembled here emerge from those interdisciplinary dialogues, collectively exploring the Willow Pattern through a range of historic and contemporary contexts.

Several contributors reposition Chinese ceramic production as an innovative and internationally connected system whose technological, aesthetic, and organisational structures profoundly influenced later European manufacture. Ning Chen and Hui Tang trace the historical evolution of the willow motif within Chinese literary, pictorial, and ceramic traditions, demonstrating how it functioned as a culturally coded image associated with landscape, emotional parting, and poetic contemplation - long before its adaptation within European decorative culture. Xianping Gao similarly reconstructs the rapid expansion of Jingdezhen's porcelain industry during the eighteenth century, presenting the city as a highly organised centre of manufacture characterised by specialised labour systems, advanced kiln technologies, and export-oriented production. Together, these studies relocate Chinese export porcelain not as a passive precursor to British industrial ceramics, but as a sophisticated and adaptive manufacturing network that shaped later European production systems.

Anne Gerritsen extends this transnational framework by reconsidering the Willow Pattern as the product of sustained exchanges between Jingdezhen and north Staffordshire in design systems, labour organisation, and manufacturing knowledge. Drawing upon Lothar Ledderose's theory of modularity, Gerritsen argues that Chinese porcelain decoration operated through recombinable motifs assembled into repeatable compositional units, enabling both standardisation and variation within large-scale production. Equally significant was Jingdezhen's highly specialised workshop structure, in which labour was divided into discrete tasks under close managerial oversight. Gerritsen discusses how knowledge of these manufacturing systems circulated

to Britain through travel accounts and translated texts, influencing figures such as Josiah Wedgwood and contributing to the organisation of Staffordshire potteries. The Willow Pattern therefore developed not only through the appropriation of Chinese imagery, but through deeper transfers involving industrial organisation, labour discipline, and modular design.

Questions of industrial competition and commercial transformation are further explored in Dashu Qin's study of Chinese export porcelain as one of the earliest internationally circulating commodities. Qin traces the movement of Chinese ceramics from global dominance to relative decline during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through successive phases of competition with Southeast Asia, Japan, and Europe. While emphasising China's resilience through adaptive production and extensive trade networks, Qin contrasts Jingdezhen's decentralised workshop structure with the increasingly technologically advanced organisation of European ceramic manufacture. Innovations such as transfer printing enabled British manufacturers to capture expanding consumer markets, while Chinese export wares increasingly adapted European decorative conventions and forms. Rather than presenting this transition as a simple narrative of decline, Qin demonstrates its uneven and regionally contingent character, highlighting China's continued commercial strength in Southeast Asia and the Americas even as industrial leadership shifted toward Europe.

Several essays examine how 'China' itself was constructed within British visual and literary culture through processes of mediation, adaptation, and fantasy. David Barker reframes the origins of the Willow Pattern as the outcome of cumulative technological innovation and commercial reinterpretation rather than a singular act of imitation. Drawing attention to circulated travel accounts and decorative pattern books, Barker demonstrates how European understandings of China were shaped through selectively interpreted images and texts that were subsequently transformed within British ceramic manufacture. The large-scale reproduction of these imagined 'Chinese' landscapes through transfer printing, expanded access to exoticised decorative wares while simultaneously reshaping the visual language of imitation itself.

Likewise, Tiejun Hou reexamines the origins of the Willow Pattern story, tracing how nineteenth-century writers adapted and reassembled Chinese literature into fictional narratives designed for British audiences. Hou regards these stories as forms of literary chinoiserie analogous to the Willow Pattern ceramics themselves: hybrid cultural constructs produced through translation, misreading, and imaginative reconstruction. In a further essay, Hou examines how the Willow Pattern became a vehicle for nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse, where it was repeatedly mobilised to construct an imagined China defined by backwardness and cultural inferiority in contrast to British modernity and imperial progress. The pattern's imagery and narratives were repeatedly adapted to contemporary geopolitical events, allowing domestic commodities to participate in wider imperial ideologies while obscuring the violence underpinning Anglo-Chinese relations.

Extending these debates, Ashley Thorpe situates the Willow Pattern at the intersection of Orientalism, industrial capitalism, and performative representation. Drawing upon Homi K. Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry and Doreen Massey's theories of relational place-making, Thorpe argues that the pattern articulated not only fantasies of China, but also the contradictions of British industrial modernity itself. The idyllic landscapes depicted on Willow Pattern ceramics masked the environmental and social transformations produced by industrialisation, including the displacement of rural labour into urban factory systems essential to capitalist production (Fig. 2). Staffordshire consequently emerges not as an isolated site of imitation, but as a central hub within wider networks of labour, trade, and imperial exchange.



Fig. 2. W.T. Copeland & Sons, engraving shop, Stoke-on-Trent, 1931. Image courtesy of the Holdway Collection.

Neil Ewins ultimately reframes the Willow Pattern as a transnational cultural and economic artefact whose significance lies in its extraordinary adaptability across changing markets, technologies, and cultural contexts. Through trade records, advertisements, retail archives, and material analysis, Ewins demonstrates how the pattern evolved from an eighteenth-century chinoiserie transfer print into a mass-produced emblem of domestic consumption and a commodified symbol of English heritage. Its continued survival depended not only upon aesthetic familiarity, but also upon affordability, replaceability, and the infrastructures of international trade. Yet the pattern's trajectory, from Chinese visual source to British industrial icon and eventually to Chinese-manufactured export commodity, also exposes the contradictions of modern globalisation. It reveals how cultural meaning is produced alongside industrial goods; how imitation, storytelling, and industrial scale shape perceptions of authenticity; and how narratives of heritage and national identity remain inseparable from histories of empire, labour, outsourcing, and environmental precarity. At a moment when rising energy costs, factory closures, and questions surrounding sustainable production continue to challenge the British ceramics industry, the Willow Pattern provides a critical lens to reconsider the intertwined histories of industrial modernity, cultural exchange, and global manufacture.

In conjunction with *Willow Pattern Ceramics and Stories of 'Other'*, the exhibitions *Meeting in China: Blue Willow Re-imagined* and *Neil Brownsword: Legacy and Continuity* extend the project's historical and theoretical concerns through contemporary artistic practice. Bringing together works by staff, students, and associates from Jingdezhen Ceramic University alongside Brownsword's transdisciplinary interventions, these exhibitions position the Willow Pattern as a dynamic site of cultural translation, historical re-inscription, and political negotiation.

While grounded in the legacy of blue and white porcelain traditions, artists from Jingdezhen reinterpret the motif through a range of contemporary materials, technologies, and visual languages. Several works foreground fragmentation, reconstruction, and material transformation to expose the complex histories embedded within the Willow Pattern. In *Echoes from Afar*, Jingjing Zhang reconstructs the motif through layered ceramic sherds suggestive of archaeological remains or maritime debris, evoking histories of circulation, loss, and recovery associated with global porcelain trade (Fig. 3). Similarly, *Century-Crossing Willow Pattern Interlocking Plates* by Lejun Liu and Liyan Ouyang establish a dialogue between Jingdezhen and Stoke-on-Trent through paired ceramic forms that juxtapose traditional blue and white decoration with contemporary ceramic printing technologies. By translating a historically two-dimensional motif into sculptural and spatial form, the work destabilises the fixity of the original pattern and foregrounds its ongoing technological and cultural transformation (Fig. 4 – see overleaf).

Other works emphasise the symbolic and poetic dimensions of the willow motif while extending its cultural resonance into contemporary global contexts. Wei Wang's *The Genealogy of Willow* merges Chinese calligraphic traditions, English lettering, and historical painting manuals into hybrid visual compositions that unsettle distinctions between text and image, tradition and modernity, and Chinese and Western visual systems. Likewise, works such as Qingli Wang's *The New Era* explicitly address contemporary cultural exchange, integrating traditional ceramic techniques with contemporary imagery to articulate new forms of intercultural dialogue (Fig. 5). Through processes of reinvention, technological experimentation, and symbolic layering, these works relocate the Willow Pattern not as a static emblem of chinoiserie, but as an evolving framework where artists negotiate heritage, identity, and global interconnectedness.

With *Legacy and Continuity*, Neil Brownsword expands upon themes uncovered through *Willow Pattern Ceramics and Stories of 'Other'*, by examining the social and material legacies of industrialisation, deindustrialisation, and globalisation. Central to Brownsword's practice is an investigation into intangible cultural heritage: the tacit skills and procedural memory transmitted across generations yet increasingly threatened by technological and economic transitions. Through coordinated reenactments of artisanal practice, Brownsword renders forms of 'know-how' visible, emphasising the human agency embedded within ceramic manufacture while challenging the reductive logic where skilled labour is rendered obsolete. During the exhibition, Brownsword collaborated with master painters Jon French and Lang Wang - whose interventions transformed historic Willow Pattern ceramics into sites of dialogic exchange and political reflection.

French's contributions involved painting onto the reverse surfaces of historic Willow Pattern platters by meticulously transcribing Brownsword's digitally manipulated distortions of the original design and its Chinese export forerunners (Fig. 6). These fractured and glitched interventions disrupt the formal coherence traditionally associated with the pattern, exposing the instability that underpinned the Western appropriation and industrial reproduction of Chinese visual culture. Digital distortion functions here not simply as a formal device, but as a metaphor for mistranslation, displacement,



Fig. 3. *Echoes from Afar* (detail), reconstructed plates, Jingjing Zhang, 2025.



Fig. 5. *The New Era*, porcelain plate, Qingli Wang, 2025.



Fig. 5. Century-Crossing Willow Pattern Interlocking Plates, powder printed ceramic, Lejun Liu and Liyan Ouyang, 2025.



Fig. 6. *Obfuscation Series*, digital print, Neil Brownsword 2025.

and asymmetrical cultural exchange. By fragmenting familiar imagery, Brownsword reveals the Willow Pattern as a constructed visual system shaped through replication, mediation, and industrial circulation.

This destabilisation is intensified through French's depiction of outsourced ceramic production in East Asia. The work stages a powerful historical reversal: a former north Staffordshire ceramic painter, displaced through deindustrialisation, reproduces the image of an Indonesian worker hand-painting bone china destined for Western markets. Painting becomes a politically charged act through which the recursive movements of global labour and manufacture are materially reenacted (Fig. 7). In doing so, the work exposes continuities between colonial trade networks and contemporary systems of outsourced production, while also reflecting upon the social precarity experienced within former industrial centres such as Stoke-on-Trent.

In parallel, Lang Wang's interventions enact a distinct process of cultural reclamation (Fig. 8). Descended from generations of literati painters in Jingdezhen, Wang overlays historic Willow Pattern ceramics with traditional Chinese landscape painting, reasserting visual languages and aesthetic traditions previously appropriated and reformulated through British industrial manufacture. These interventions do not merely decorate the existing ceramic surface; they symbolically reclaim it by reinscribing Chinese painterly traditions onto objects historically associated with British ceramic identity. The resulting works establish a layered dialogue between export imagery, industrial reproduction, and literati aesthetics, complicating notions of originality, authorship, and cultural ownership. Cultural re-inscription therefore emerges not only as an aesthetic strategy, but also as a political act whereby inherited narratives embedded within the object are destabilised, and re-authored.

Together, the interventions of French and Wang transform the Willow Pattern into a contested visual field where histories of appropriation, labour, displacement, and cultural memory are critically negotiated. Through distortion, overlay, reenactment, and re-inscription, *Legacy and Continuity* demonstrates how contemporary ceramic practice can engage the political and historical conditions embedded within decorative forms. Brownsword consequently repositions the Willow Pattern not as a nostalgic symbol of heritage, but as a critical lens through which broader issues of industrial modernity can be explored.

Rather than reinforcing reductive binaries between East and West, original and copy, or tradition and innovation, the Willow Pattern exists as a fluid cultural form continually reshaped through commercial circulation, industrial transformation, and cross-cultural reinterpretation. Its enduring presence across shifting historical and geopolitical contexts reveals how material objects accumulate layered and often contradictory meanings through processes of repetition, adaptation, and exchange. Viewed through the perspectives assembled in this publication, the pattern becomes a site where questions of representation, historical memory, industrial change, and cultural power continue to be negotiated.

Meeting in China: Blue Willow Re-imagined - participating artists:

Zejiang He, Leiyang Li, Lejun Liu, Qijun Lu, Liyan Ouyang, Zhenggeng Tang, Lang Wang, Qingli Wang, Wei Wang, Yan Wu, Luo Xiacong, Jingjing Zhang, Liwei Zhang, Luosang Zhunge ZhuoLin, Hua Zou.

Legacy and Continuity - participating artists:

Neil Brownsword, Jon French, Lang Wang



Fig. 7. *Legacy and Continuity*, performative installation, Neil Brownsword and Jon French, 2025.



Fig. 8. *Legacy and Continuity*, performative installation, Neil Brownsword and Lang Wang, 2025.



Detail from a vessel painted with children at play under a willow tree.
Late Ming Dynasty 1628-1644.

An Analysis of the Evolution of the Willow Pattern on Ceramics during the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties

Ning Chen, Hui Tang

Since the seventeenth century, with the rise of global trade, Chinese porcelain was exported to Europe in large quantities and this profoundly influenced European culture and art. As Chinese porcelain was expensive at the time, Western potters attempted to crack the mystery of making porcelain. Compared with Meissen, which successfully produced hard-paste porcelain as early as 1708, Britain did not achieve the same success until 1748. However, the iconic 'Willow Pattern' that became popular across Europe was standardized in Britain.¹ By the mid-eighteenth century, the British had developed a fascination with Chinese-style gardens as many aristocrats and wealthy merchants created 'Anglo-Chinese' gardens adorned with pavilions, rockeries, and streams, creating a 'chinoiserie' fashion. 'In the park, fields were fenced with criss-cross Chinese palings, brooks were spanned by delicately arched Chinese bridges, and a wild profusion of exotic temples sprang up among the oaks and beeches.'² European understanding of Chinese gardens largely came from Chinese crafts such as porcelain, lacquerware, and embroidery. Among these, porcelain with willow patterns produced during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties played a particularly significant role. To this day, Jingdezhen continues to produce wares featuring such designs, now referred to as 'Suzhou Garden' or 'Classical Garden' patterns.

Origin of the Willow Culture in China

Willow is the collective name for plants of the genus *salix* in the family Salicaceae. There are approximately 520 species of willow worldwide, with 257 found in China, including weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*), dryland willow (*Salix matsudana*), river willow (*Salix chaenomeloides*), basket willow (*Salix integra*), Taiwan willow (*Salix morii*), Yunnan willow (*Salix cavaleriei*), water willow (*Salix warburgii*), grey willow (*Salix cinerea*), silver willow (*Salix argyracea*), Korean willow (*Salix koreensis*), and white willow (*Salix alba*). These species are excellent for soil conservation, sand fixation, embankment protection, and landscaping.³ Willows are hardy plants, tolerant of cold, dampness, heat, and drought. They are mostly propagated through cuttings and are highly adaptable. In China, willows have existed since the Palaeolithic Age, with willow pollen discovered in the Malan Loess of the Late Pleistocene epoch on the Loess Plateau, dating back over 50,000 years.⁴ Oracle bone inscriptions from the Shang Dynasty (c.1600–1046 BC) contain pictographic characters representing 'willow',⁵ and *The Book of Songs* mentions 'breaking willows to fence the garden.'⁶ Thus, China has a long history of cultivating and utilizing willows, gradually forming a rich willow culture, encompassing willow landscaping, willow-themed paintings, the surname 'Liu' (柳), willow worship and folk customs as well as poetry, allusions, and idioms related to willow. Among these, willow landscaping and willow painting mutually influence and reinforce each other, laying a solid foundation for the emergence and widespread use of willow patterns in ceramic decoration.

The Willow Landscape

Willows were already used for landscaping in imperial gardens as early as the Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220). *The Book of Han* contains multiple records of withered willows reviving in the Shanglin Park during the Western Han period. For instance, in the spring of the third year of the Yuanfeng era (78 BC) under Emperor Zhao of Han, 'a great stone on Mount Tai stood up by itself, and a withered willow in Shanglin Park was revived and grew anew.'⁷ Another example comes from *Sanfu Huangtu*, which records the extensive planting of willows along the banks of the Ba River in Chang'an during the Han Dynasty, noting: 'The Ba Bridge, east of Chang'an, spans the river. Han

people would see off guests at this bridge, breaking willow branches as farewell tokens.'⁸ This marks the beginning of the ancient Chinese custom of 'breaking willows to bid farewell.' During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties (AD 220–589), people also enjoyed planting willows for scenic beauty. Tao Yuanming, the 'Gentleman of Five Willows' of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, famously wrote: 'By my cottage grow five willow trees thus I style myself as the Gentleman of Five Willows.'⁹ Jia Sixie of the Northern Wei Dynasty systematically summarized techniques and economic benefits of willow cultivation in *Qi Min Yao Shu* (Important Arts for the People's Welfare): 'To plant willows, in the first or second month, take tender willow branches as thick as an arm and about a foot and a half long. Burn the lower end for two or three inches, then bury it completely, keeping the soil well-watered. Multiple shoots will sprout; keep the most vigorous one and remove the rest. If young spring shoots were planted in the sixth or seventh month, they would grow twice as fast, as their leaves are greener and sturdier.' 'One 'mu' (approx. 0.067 hectares) can grow 2,160 willow saplings; 30 'mu' yields 64,800 saplings. At eight coins per sapling, the total profit would be 518,400 coins.'¹⁰ This indicates that Willow cultivation was large-scale and commercialized by that time.

By the Tang and Song Dynasties (AD 618-1276), willow landscaping became even more widespread, inspiring countless poems. For example, the Tang poet He Zhizhang's famous 'Ode to the Willow' reads: 'A slender tree adorned in jade-green hue, Ten thousand branches droop like fringes sway. Who tailored these delicate leaves so new? The vernal wind, like scissors, wrought in May.' Another example is Liu Yong's 'Watching the Sea Tide: The Splendid Southeast landscape', describing West Lake's beauty in Hangzhou: 'Smoky willows grace painted bridges, Wind-fluttered curtains, emerald screens, A myriad homes in staggered rows.'¹¹ The poet not only depicted willows but also bore the surname 'Liu' (柳, 'willow') a delightful coincidence. In the Southern Song Dynasty, willows were also planted as roadside trees. Fan Chengda's travel notes record: 'On the 16th, entering Guilin's borders... tall maples and ancient willows lined the road, forming a grand thoroughfare reminiscent of Ansu (modern Xushui County, Hebei).'¹² This shows that Guilin in Guangxi, like Hebei, used maples and willows as roadside trees.

In the Ming Dynasty, Tianhe Liu (1479-1546), an official in charge of flood prevention, invented six willow-planting methods for embankment protection. His *Wen Shui Ji* records that during the Yellow River dredging project in 1535, '2.8 million willows were planted'.¹³ Willow landscaping became ubiquitous in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. To this day, whether in the West Lake of Hangzhou or Suzhou's classical gardens in the Jiangnan region, the Slender West Lake of Yangzhou along the Huai River, or northern gardens like Beijing's Summer Palace, weeping willows grace every scene.

Willow Paintings

During the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties, paintings featuring willow patterns as scenic elements began to emerge. For example, the Song Dynasty copy of Gu Kaizhi's 'Goddess of the Luo River', now housed in the Palace Museum in Beijing, is a narrative painting based on Cao Zhi's 'Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River' from the Three Kingdoms period (AD 220-280). It depicts the fleeting encounter between Cao Zhi and the Luo River goddess by the riverbank, with willows densely planted along both shores as a backdrop to the figures.¹⁴ In the 1960s, three brick-printed murals from the Southern Dynasties depicting the 'Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove and Rong Qiqi' were unearthed in Jiangsu Province, China. Each figure was separated either by bamboo (broad-leaved bamboo), trees (such as pines and ginkgos), or weeping willows.¹⁵ After the Tang Dynasty, willows gradually moved beyond their role as mere background elements in paintings. Dong Yuan, a Southern Tang painter revered as the 'founder of the Southern School of landscape

painting, was particularly skilled at depicting willows. His work 'Waiting for the Ferry at a Summer River Mouth'¹⁶ features ten weeping willows along the embankment, their leaves clustered or sparse in varied arrangements, yet without a sense of wind-blown movement a technique Dong Yuan pioneered to convey the stillness of a windless summer day.¹⁷

By the Song Dynasty, willow-painting techniques had matured. Emperor Huizong's 'Literary Gathering'¹⁸ places a grand willow as the backdrop to an imperial garden banquet, while monumental works like 'A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains'¹⁹ include detailed willow groves. Smaller-scale works themed around willows also flourished, such as 'Fishing Boat on a Willow-Lined Stream',²⁰ 'Cloud-Piercing Willows in the Shade'²¹ and 'Summer Retreat in a Willow Courtyard'.²²

Ming Dynasty artist Qichang Dong summarized Song willow-painting techniques in *Essays written in the Painting Zen Studio*:

Song artists often painted weeping willows or dotted-leaf willows. Weeping willows are not hard to depict, just assure the branches follow a natural flow. The artistry of dotted willow leaves lies in the rounded canopy, rendered with diluted green ink, evoking a rustling, wind-swayed vitality. Branches should balance light and shadow. Note that in early spring, willows lack long tendrils, and by late autumn, they appear withered these seasonal nuances must be perceived and rendered with the right colouring.²³

The Yuan Dynasty also produced masterful willow painters like Zhao Mengfu and Sheng Changnian. Zhao's 'Water Village' drew inspiration from Dong Yuan's techniques. Wu Lifu, in *On Master Painters*, praised the willows that:

Perhaps depicting the villa of Zhao's friend Qian Dejun, the roadside willows cluster and scatter, their heights and angles each exuding unique charm. Near the shore, a few rocks stand among reeds, flanked by two willows, one upright with evenly spaced leaves, the other slanting right, denser on the left. Three tall willows by the bridge cast shade over a drifting boat, while distant cottages underscore the theme of summer respite.²⁴

Thus, Yuan willow paintings transcended techniques to embody artistic whimsy. During the Ming and Qing periods, willow landscapes were refined by artists like Shen Zhou, Zhang Feng, Wu Bin, Fan Qi, and Wu Li, who emphasized delicate brushwork and vigorous lines. Fan Qi's early Qing 'Joyous Fishermen in a Willow Village' is highly decorative, capturing the romantic lyricism of a fishing scene:

By the willow-green river, still waters run deep,
A fisher lad's song drifts where willows weep.

Commissioned by his friend Liang Yemei, Fan Qi imaginatively rendered northern waterways with the misty charm of Jiangnan, infusing the scene with poetic reverie.²⁵

The Origin of Willow Patterns on Ceramics in the Song-Jin Period (960-1234)

Willow patterns appeared on ceramics much later than their use in horticulture or as decorative elements on silk and paper. Through research, the authors have identified that the earliest ceramic kilns producing willow patterned wares were the Cizhou Kiln of the Song-Jin period and the Ding Kiln of the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234). While Cizhou's willow designs continued until the sixteenth century, Ding Kiln's willow patterns only appeared on the wares of the late Jin Dynasty.

The Willow Pattern on Cizhou Ware

The Cizhou Kiln was one of China's most representative folk kilns. Centred in ancient Cizhou (modern Hebei), it formed the largest northern folk kiln network, spanning Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, Shandong, Shaanxi, and Inner Mongolia. It is also the earliest known kiln that depicted willow patterns on ceramics.

A Northern Song white-glazed pillow with brown 'egret in lotus pond' design,²⁶ bearing the 'Made by Zhang Family' mark and housed in the Linzhou Cultural Museum (Henan), features a willow in the upper right corner. The tree's gnarled trunk is rendered with short parallel strokes to suggest shading, while partially obscured branches sway with delicate lines conveying wind motion. The Museum of the Nanyue King Mausoleum (Guangzhou City) holds a Song-Jin white-glazed pillow with black 'willow, bamboo, and egret' decoration.²⁷ Here, the willow's trunk is outlined with trembling brushstrokes, while its crowded branches and leaves are crudely depicted with dense clusters of straight lines, reflecting an immature artistic approach. Another Jin-Yuan pillow at the same museum,²⁸ with a 'Qu Yuan's Drowning' narrative scene, shows the poet standing by a riverbank beneath a willow. The tree's shaded trunk and wind-tossed branches, overlapping with clouds, employ the same linear techniques seen earlier.

Other similar examples include: A Cizhou pillow with 'Xiangru Inscripting the Bridge' scene of the Jin Dynasty in the Palace Museum,²⁹ on which the willow branches lack a trunk but share the same linear treatment. A similar pillow excavated in 1973 from Xigang Tomb, Nanlai Village, Ci County, Hebei Province,³⁰ could confirm the stylistic consistency. These examples demonstrate Cizhou Kiln's pioneering yet evolving portrayal of willows from early experimental forms to mature narrative elements in later periods.

Another category of Cizhou ware pillows with white slip and black-brown designs feature more decorative willow patterns, where the tree serves as the primary background. For example, a Northern Song white pillow with a black brown 'scholar riding a horse' design,³¹ collected by the Palace Museum from the Mixian kiln site (Henan, 2003), shows a galloping horse and a robust willow. The trunk is filled with brown pigment and outlined in black, while the branches and leaves occupy the upper half of the composition, meticulously arranged in interconnected '人' (ren) and '个' (ge) shaped strokes. Similarly, a Jin Dynasty pillow excavated from the Shangcheng site in Zhengzhou, Henan, in 2001 depicts two noblewomen playing chess, each flanked by a willow.³² The trees are nearly symmetrical, with gnarled trunks rendered in scattered short strokes to mimic bark texture. Their branches fill the upper register with orderly '人' or '个'-shaped leaf clusters.

By the late Ming Dynasty (sixteenth century), Cizhou kilns still produced willow-patterned wares. A white jar with brown-black landscape figures³³ with the seal 'the thirty-seventh year of the Jiajing Reign' (1558), unearthed from the tomb of Liu Xiang and his wife in Taizhou, in Jiangsu in 1988, retains the weeping willow motif, though the brushwork evolves into elongated, Orchid-leaf-like strokes.

Summary

Based on the currently examined and collated materials, as early as the Northern Song Dynasty, the Cizhou kiln system had already begun producing vessels decorated with willow patterns. According to the author's research findings, this represents the earliest known case of such decorative motifs. Furthermore, during the Song, Jin, and Yuan periods, willow tree patterns in Cizhou-type wares appeared almost exclusively on white-ground black or brown-glazed ceramic pillows. The composition and stylistic features of willow patterns on ceramic pillows from the Cizhou ware system during the Song, Jin, and Yuan periods, they can be broadly categorized into two types:

Type 1: A single willow tree appears as a secondary motif within floral-bird scenes or figure-narrative scenes. The willow is typically positioned in the upper right or upper left corner of the main composition. Some depictions include the tree trunk and roots, while others omit them. In nearly every case, the top or most of the willow canopy is 'hidden', with only partial branches and leaves exposed to serve as a complementary element. These pieces exhibit refined brushwork, with willow branches and leaves rendered in delicate, overlapping long and short lines to emphasize the swaying motion of the tree in the wind.

Type 2: Two or more willow trees appear as the primary or sole background element, often filling the entire frame while still 'hiding' most of the canopy. The brushwork in these pieces tends to be bolder and more rigid, with willow branches arranged in a more structured manner. The leaves are typically depicted as connected '人'-shaped (inverted V) or '个'-shaped (Y-shaped) strokes, creating a repetitive, patterned effect.

The production of Cizhou type white-ground black-brown glazed wares featuring willow motifs persisted at least until the late Ming Dynasty (sixteenth century), though the painting style became increasingly simplified and coarser over time.

Willow Patterns on Ding Ware

The renowned Ding Kiln (Qu County, Hebei Province), one of the 'Five Great Kilns' and six kiln complexes of the Song era, produced few wares with willow patterns in its early stage. A late Jin Dynasty white-glazed dish with moulded 'boating in lotus pond' design,³⁴ was excavated from Chaghanhada Sumu, Inner Mongolia, in 1987. After careful examination, the authors found a half-hidden willow trunk and three branches with leaves on the upper left corner their broad leaves suggesting summer foliage. It is a pity that no moulded willow patterned Ding ware later than the Jin Dynasty has been identified to date.

Yuan and Ming Dynasty: The Developmental Stage of the Willow Pattern on Porcelain

If the Qing Dynasty represented the flourishing phase of the willow pattern on porcelain,³⁵ then the three centuries from the mid-to-late Yuan period (1330s–1340s) to the late Ming period (1630s–1640s) marked the developmental and evolutionary stage of this pattern. After the Yuan Dynasty, willow patterns began to appear on blue-and-white porcelain produced in Jingdezhen. As the academic consensus currently dates the creation of Yuan blue-and-white porcelain to around the 1330s,³⁶ the emergence of willow patterns in Jingdezhen cannot be earlier than the above-mentioned time. During the Ming Dynasty, aside from sporadic appearances on Longquan celadon in the early Ming Dynasty, willow patterns primarily appeared on Jingdezhen porcelain. With continuous innovations in polychrome decorative techniques such as underglaze blue and *doucai* (contrasting colours) in Jingdezhen during the Yuan and Ming Dynasty, willow patterns gained increasing prominence as backgrounds for figural narratives, animal scenes, and landscape compositions. This prevalence stemmed from multiple cultural factors: in Chinese tradition, as the word 'willow' (柳 liú) sounds similarly with the word 'retain' (留 liú), the willow becomes a metaphor of 'retaining someone from leaving.' The custom of 'breaking willow branches' (折柳) as a farewell gesture, dating back to the Han Dynasty, became particularly prominent in ceramic paintings to depict parting scenes. In landscape depictions, willow trees served as essential riparian elements. Their flowing branches introduced dynamic movement to compositions while subtly conveying the implication of warm spring blossoms, making them ideal for such imagery.

Willow Patterns on Yuan Dynasty Porcelain

On Jingdezhen blue-and-white porcelain with figural narrative motifs of the Yuan Dynasty, weeping willows serve as predominant background elements. Comparative studies by scholars suggest that these Yuan blue-and-white figural narrative motifs primarily drew inspiration from illustrations of 'The Five Types of Pinghua Stories' of the Yuan Dynasty, as well as patterns from woodblock prints, paintings, murals, textiles, and ceramic patterns from other kilns, reflecting rich cultural connotations.³⁷ Through comparative analysis of illustrations from the Zhizhi reign (1321-1323) edition of *Fully Illustrated Pinghua-storytelling* (全相平话), this study reveals striking stylistic parallels between Yuan blue-and-white figural narrative motifs and the book's woodcuts.³⁸ The willow features characteristically sturdy trunks with curved forms, bark textures are rendered through short strokes and dark speckling to simulate scars and leaves predominantly are '人' or '个'-shaped configurations. Notably, this publication predates the earliest Yuan blue-and-white porcelain. Comparative examination of Song-Yuan court and literati paintings further demonstrates that Yuan *Zaju*-opera and *Pinghua*-story dynamic art forms with dramatic narratives exerted greater influence on ceramic figural design than traditional court or scholarly paintings, as the former resonated more profoundly with people's daily lives.

The Yuan blue-and-white covered jar with the design of 'Zhaojun Departing the Frontier'³⁹ collected in the Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Japan, features a central scene where Wang Zhaojun and two attendants are framed by drooping willow branches. The robust willow trunk is rendered with chiaroscuro effects and raised bark nodules, while slender pendant branches cascade downward, their needle like leaves arranged in continuous '人'-shaped (herringbone) or '个'-shaped (pine-needle) patterns. Multiple branches of varying lengths encircle the upper bodies of the three figures, forming triangular composition. The willow (柳 liǔ), homophonic with 'retaining' (留 liú), likely symbolizes Zhaojun's nostalgia for her homeland an intentional metaphor by Yuan painters. The Yuan blue-and-white prunus vase with design of 'Four literati's Love for Flowers',⁴⁰ excavated in 2006 from the Ming-era tomb of Prince Yingjing in Zhongxiang, Hubei province, depicts willow backgrounds in two of its four panels: 'Wang Xizhi Admiring Orchids' and 'Zhou Dunyi Cherishing Lotuses'. Both scenes showcase willows with sinuous trunks and prominent nodules highlighted through reserved white spaces, their branches arching horizontally above the figures' heads to create spatial depth. The Yuan blue-and-white jar with the design of 'Guiguzi Descending the Mountain',⁴¹ acquired by renowned dealer Eskenazi, portrays a gnarled willow extending dynamically leftward behind Su Dai (the envoy inviting Guiguzi). The trunk's volumetric form is achieved through cobalt gradations, while clusters of pendant branches envelop Su's torso, with leaves meticulously painted in regimented herringbone patterns. Comparatively, the Yuan blue-and-white prunus vase with the design of a scene from *Romance of the Western Chamber* collected at the Victoria and Albert Museum⁴² replicates this willow schema, its drooping branches enveloping the semi-silhouette of Madam Cui gesturing toward Hongniang. The 1986 Yuan blue-and-white *Yuhuchun*-vase with the design of 'Maoshu Admiring Lotuses' from Wanyao Village, Shangrao, Jiangxi Province,⁴³ features a vertically dominant willow trunk guiding the composition's visual flow, under which the lotus-loving scholar sits contemplatively, willow leaves again arranged in the herringbone or pine-needle shape.

Willow patterns also appear on smaller Yuan blue-and-white goblets with narrative motifs. For instance, a Yuan blue-and-white bamboo-joint goblet with the design of 'Zhaojun Departing the Frontier',⁴⁴ excavated from Nandajie, Liangzhou District, Wuwei City, Gansu Province, depicts Wang Zhaojun cradling a pipa on horseback at the cup's centre, her head framed by semi-concealed willow branches. Though spatially constrained, the simplified

pendant branches still exhibit the continuous ‘人’-shaped (herringbone) or ‘个’-shaped (pine-needle) leaf clusters. Recent excavations in a late Yuan stratum at Luoma Qiao, Jingdezhen, have yielded small blue-and-white sherds with willow patterns, such as a rhombus-mouthed *quanpan* (wine cup tray) sherd.⁴⁵ Its willow branches and leaves, rendered in a manner identical to earlier Yuan examples, confirm the stylistic continuity. Beyond figural narratives, willow patterns also feature in Yuan blue-and-white porcelain with animal-themed decorations. A pair of Yuan blue-and-white *kundika*-bottles with the design of ‘Jade Rabbit’,⁴⁶ excavated in 1984 at Miaoqian Town, Qingyang County, Anhui Province, depicts willows as key landscape elements. The robust trunks bear raised nodules, yet the willow branches diverge stylistically from typical Yuan blue-and-white conventions, instead mirroring the delicate, wind-swept linearity seen in a Jin-Yuan Cizhou ware ‘Qu Yuan’s Drowning’ pillow, with silk-thin strokes layered asymmetrically to evoke breezy movement.

Summary

Although the number of extant Yuan blue-and-white porcelain pieces is quite limited, those featuring willow patterns in narrative scenes account for a relatively large proportion. The depicted willow branches are twisted and robust, with the trunks largely shaded to highlight a three-dimensional effect, which is likely influenced by the Cizhou kiln ceramic decorations of the Song and Jin periods. Additionally, the surfaces of the willow trunks frequently feature protruding scars and grooves, a distinctive characteristic of Yuan blue-and-white willow motifs.

In Yuan blue-and-white porcelain, many willow branches and leaves are rendered in continuous ‘人’-shaped or ‘个’-shaped pine-needle patterns. A corresponding prototype for this style can be found in the white-ground black-and-brown painted porcelain pillows of the Cizhou kiln from the Song and Yuan periods, as well as in Yuan-era *Pinghua*-storytelling illustrations predating the emergence of Yuan blue-and-white. Even the rare example in Yuan blue-and-white where willow branches and leaves are depicted with overlapping, floating lines can be traced to another type of Cizhou kiln porcelain pillow from the Song and Yuan periods.

Regardless of the size of the vessel, the painting technique of willow patterns in Yuan blue-and-white is relatively refined. Neat and clean willow branches and leaves often surround the heads or upper bodies of figures, forming a triangular background. A deliberate space is maintained between the branches and the figures’ heads, a technique known in traditional Jingdezhen porcelain painting as ‘water path’ (*shuilu*) or ‘passageway’ (*tonglu*), ensuring visual flow and preventing the composition from appearing overly rigid.

Beyond figure and narrative scenes, willow patterns also appear as primary backgrounds in Yuan blue-and-white decorations featuring animal themes, such as the rabbit motif.

Willow Patterns on Ming Dynasty Porcelain

In the early Ming Dynasty, the Imperial Ware Factory was officially established in Jingdezhen.⁴⁷ This marked Jingdezhen’s rise as the national centre of porcelain production. In the late Ming Dynasty, Wang Shixing, when describing the flourishing state of Jingdezhen’s porcelain industry, remarked: ‘Throughout the nation and even in foreign lands, wherever boats and carts reach, there is no place without Rao ware (Jingdezhen porcelain).’⁴⁸

The porcelain-making techniques of Jingdezhen since the Yuan Dynasty, despite suffering some disruption during the wars of the late Yuan and early Ming periods, quickly recovered and continued to develop in the Ming Dynasty. Compared to the Yuan Dynasty, willow motifs on Ming porcelain became more diverse, though they still mostly served as important

background in decorative scenes. These motifs could be either realistic or impressionistic, appearing in narrative scenes conveying emotions, as well as in landscape scenes combining elements such as flowers, birds, waterside villages, and fishermen.

Through research, it has been found that the decorative patterns on porcelain from the early Ming periods of Hongwu (1368–1398) and Yongle (1403–1424) were already quite rich. These designs retained traditional motifs like interlocking floral scrolls and floral sprays while also incorporating new floral and fruit patterns influenced by foreign cultures. Common floral decorations included peonies, chrysanthemums, *Lingzhi*-fungus, plum blossoms, clover, floral medallion, and lotus pedestals with the Eight Buddhist Emblems. However, willow patterns were extremely rare during this time and have so far only been found on Yongle-era wares featuring auspicious children-at-play motifs.

The reasons for this scarcity can be traced to several factors. From the Hongwu era to the early Yongle period, domestic conflicts had not yet fully subsided, and Jingdezhen’s porcelain industry was still in the process of recovery. The painting of underglaze blue (*qinghua*) and copper-red (*youlihong*) on porcelains remained difficult to control, making the production of finely painted narrative scenes with intricate human figures yet unfeasible. Furthermore, after the ninth year of Yongle (1411), the imperial court imposed strict restrictions on the dissemination of theatrical performances. According to the *Ming Hui Dian* (*Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty*) published in 1411, the court issued a ban: ‘Actors performing zaju-drama or xiwen-play are forbidden from portraying past emperors, empresses, loyal ministers, martyrs, or the images of ancient sages and worthies. Violators shall be punished with one hundred strokes of the rod. Households, whether official or common, that permit such performances shall be equally guilty.’⁴⁹ Under such stringent legal constraints, narrative figure scenes based on theatrical themes naturally declined, and willow patterns often used as backgrounds in such scenes became even harder to find.

Willow Patterns on Early Ming Porcelain

The authors of this paper contend that the earliest willow patterns on Ming imperial porcelain appeared on the wares decorated with children at play during the Yongle-period (1403–1424), such as the one in the collection of the Taipei Palace Museum.⁵⁰ These designs depict 16 infants frolicking amidst garden rocks and trees - including willows - within courtyard settings, symbolizing the ‘Four Consorts and Sixteen Sons’, an allegory for imperial progeny and dynastic perpetuity. The willows depicted exhibit archaic vitality: the trunks are rendered with deeply grooved bark nodules; branches articulated in precise linearity and leaves meticulously arranged in diminutive ‘人’-shaped (herringbone) or ‘个’-shaped (pine-needle) configurations. This auspicious motif, embodying desires for imperial continuity and abundant offspring, became canonical in court porcelain. Its legacy persisted through successive reigns; Xuande (1426–1435), Zhengtong (1436–1449), Tianshun (1457–1464), Chenghua (1465–1487), Zhengde (1506–1521), Jiajing (1522–1566), and Wanli (1573–1620) establishing ‘Children at Play’ as quintessential Ming imperial decor. The wares with ‘Children at Play’ of the Xuande-period (1426–1435) also incorporated willow elements, such as the one in the collection of the Taipei Palace Museum.⁵¹ While retaining the Yongle-period compositional framework, Xuande examples introduced a critical innovation: the six-character reign mark *Da Ming Xuande Nian Zhi* (大明宣德年制) inscribed on bases is a definitive authentication feature of Ming imperial porcelain.

Beyond ‘Children at Play’ motifs, the ‘Ladies in a Poetic Autumn Evening’ design emerged as another quintessential Ming imperial porcelain motif, with the earliest examples appearing on blue-and-white wares of the Xuande-era

(1426–1435). These pieces visualize Tang poet Wang Jian’s (or alternatively Du Mu’s) Autumn Evening verses: ‘Silver candles cast cold light on painted screens in autumn glow, Gauze fans flutter to catch fleeting fireflies’ transient show. / Palace steps chill as night’s dark waters flow, / Sitting, she gazes at Altair and Vega’s celestial woe.’⁵² The designs meticulously translate poetic imagery, with the clustered dots symbolizing the Cowherd (Altair) and Weaver Girl (Vega) stars. A contemplative noblewoman is accompanied by attendants who are catching fireflies or tending incense. There are also architectural elements like candle stands and screens. Such motifs, appearing on large bowls, dishes, stem bowls, and stem cups,⁵³ employ standardized court painting templates. The courtyard willows feature robust trunks textured with bark nodules, pendant branches rendered in refined ‘人’ (herringbone) or ‘个’ (pine-needle) leaf clusters. Some two hundred years later, the Imperial Kiln of the Qing Dynasty revered Xuande prototypes, producing meticulous replicas like the Kangxi blue-and-white ‘Autumn Evening’ bowl,⁵⁴ which replicates the composition and reign mark of the Xuande bowl (*Da Ming Xuande Nian Zhi* 大明宣德年制). The only difference lies in the fact that the cobalt blue on the Kangxi ware turns out to be more splendid.

Notably, the renowned Xuande imperial ware ‘blue-and-white cricket jars’ (宣德青花蟋蟀罐) also incorporated willow patterns paired with fauna compositional tradition dating to the Yuan Dynasty. In 1993, archaeologists excavating the Xuande-era stratum at Jingdezhen’s Zhushan Imperial Kiln site uncovered a blue-and-white cricket jar with design of Egrets and Orioles.⁵⁵ Its exterior and lid feature meticulously painted willows while two orioles interact dynamically with the willow foliage—one gripping a branch is about to take off, and the other clutches a pendant twig while glancing backward. This interplay imbues static ceramic surfaces with vitality, exemplified by the delicately lifted willow branch suggesting motion. The lid portrays a gnarled willow trunk rendered through masterful brushwork: layered strokes and dense cobalt speckles simulate bark textures, while wind-swept branches cascade with naturalistic foliage is a deliberate departure from Song-Jin Cizhou ware’s schematic ‘人’ (herringbone) or ‘个’ (pine-needle) design. One oriole perch contemplatively on a branch, contrasting with its airborne counterpart, creating a dialogue of stillness and motion. Paired with egrets on the jar’s opposite side, this design represents Du Fu’s Tang verse: ‘Two orioles sing amid emerald willows’ grace. A line of egrets ascends the azure space.’ (两个黄鹂鸣翠柳，一行白鹭上青天) This enables people to deeply appreciate the beauty of poetry from over 1,200 years ago and the interest of porcelain paintings from over 600 years ago. It can be said that this willow-pattern ware is one of the masterpieces of porcelain paintings featuring willow trees throughout history.

While Jingdezhen dominated Ming willow decorations, Longquan celadons—also designated as official wares during the early Ming—merit attention.⁵⁶ A Longquan celadon foliate-rimmed dish with incised willow patterns,⁵⁷ housed in Istanbul’s Topkapi Palace, predates Jingdezhen’s earliest Ming willow pattern. Its central medallion features a willow carved in high relief: the trunk coils rhythmically while layered branches intertwine with vitality. Flanking the willow, delicate grasses and a withered tree heighten the contrast between vigor and decay—an exceptional instance of willow as primary motif in ceramic history.

Willow Patterns on Mid-Ming Porcelain

The Zhengtong (1436–1449), Jingtai (1450–1456), and Tianshun (1457–1464) reigns marked a pivotal phase in Jingdezhen’s ceramic development, witnessing private kilns advancing toward greater technical sophistication and aesthetic refinement.⁵⁸ During this period, numerous large jars and vases with figural narratives were produced during this period, but those incorporating willow patterns as background remained scarce. A rare example is the

blue-and-white jar with figural narrative scenes⁵⁹ in the Shanghai Museum collection, which depicts willows flanking a pavilion alongside osmanthus trees. The robust trunks support cascading branches rendered in the manner of dispersed rain-like strokes among clouds, embodying the vibrant aesthetics of private kiln production. Meanwhile, the imperial kiln continued developing ‘children at play’ bowl designs inherited from Yongle-Xuande traditions, albeit with subtle stylistic divergences. A Zhengtong-Tianshun blue-and-white ‘children at play’ bowl in the Shanghai Museum⁶⁰ and dozens of similar pieces in the Taipei Palace Museum⁶¹ demonstrate evolutionary changes: the form of bowl became more elongated with reduced footings, while willow patterns adopted delicate, densely painted herringbone and pine-needle leaf clusters—retaining earlier composition but more refined in execution.

During the Chenghua (1465–1487), Hongzhi (1488–1505), and Zhengde (1506–1521) reigns, Jingdezhen’s ceramic industry sustained the brilliance of that of the Yongle-Xuande era while the private kilns continued to thrive. Ming contemporaries lauded their dynasty’s ceramics: ‘The finest porcelains of our age hail from the Xuande and Chenghua kilns, the former excels in blue-and-white, the latter in polychrome’,⁶² a testament to the achievement of Chenghua ceramics. A Chenghua *doucai* (斗彩, dove-tailing colours) cup with ‘scholars in landscape’⁶³ in the Palace Museum collection exemplifies willow patterns within figural narratives. Although it’s small, the cup’s decoration is richly detailed. On one side depicts Wang Xizhi (a famous calligrapher in the fourth century) observing geese in water, attended by a green-robed page holding books. Behind them, a gnarled willow emerges, its trunk textured with moss and grass-like motifs to evoke antiquity. The willow’s trunk, branches, and leaves are outlined in underglaze blue, its trunk painted in overglaze purple, and foliage in overglaze green, creating vivid chromatic contrasts. Delicate, thread-like branches and leaves gently sway leftward, imbuing the scene with dynamism. Notably, the leaves abandon the rigid ‘人’ (herringbone) or ‘个’ (pine-needle) schematics, reflecting stylistic innovation. This piece exemplifies the continuity of willow patterns as narrative elements in mid-Ming Jingdezhen ceramic decoration.

While mid-Ming the imperial kiln continued producing ‘children at play’ with largely unchanged compositions, private kilns introduced innovative variations. A pair of Chenghua blue-and-white bowls with ‘children at play’,⁶⁴ excavated from a 1979 Ming tomb in Jiangsu Province, illustrates this shift. Each bowl’s exterior depicts eight children divided into two groups engaged in games of plucking cassia branches, gathering lotus flowers, and attending imperial civil examination, which are separated by willow trees. The interior centre shows two children playing with lotus stems under courtyard willows. Compared to the design of imperial wares, those of the private bowls simplify the composition, reducing sixteen children to eight and rendering willows with looser brushwork. Though retaining sinuous trunks and layered foliage, the potter painted the branches in a free style, abandoned the rigid ‘人’ (herringbone) or ‘个’ (pine-needle) leaf patterns while mirroring the naturalism seen in Chenghua *doucai* ‘scholar’ cups. It must be pointed out that cruder variants emerged in private kilns too, such as a Hongzhi (1488–1505) blue-and-white dish⁶⁵ from Jilin Province. While its central motif replicates the willow-shaded children scene, the exterior omits figures entirely. The willow is reduced to sparse, comb-like strokes a stark departure from the imperial refinement.

The willow pattern also appeared as central elements in mid-Ming floral and avian designs. A Chenghua *doucai* (unfinished) bird-and-flower box,⁶⁶ excavated from Jingdezhen’s Zhushan imperial kiln site in 1983, epitomizes this trend. Its lid centres on a willow beneath which two orioles perch, singing amid fluttering butterflies and bees a homage to Du Fu’s poem ‘Two orioles sing amid emerald willows’ Grace’ (两个黄鹂鸣翠柳). Compared to Xuande

prototypes, the willow trunk appears more sinuous, rendered with heightened chiaroscuro contrast to emphasize its three-dimensionality, while scattered broken branches and nodules add textural complexity. Although the painting of willow leaves retains the continuous ‘人’ or ‘个’ shape to a certain extent, the overall brushwork is gentle, presenting a smooth feel as if a gentle breeze has passed by.

The Willow Pattern on Late Ming Porcelain

During the late Ming period, the introduction of high-yield American crops (such as corn) spurred population growth and commercial prosperity, fostering a burgeoning demand for cultural refinement among urban elites. The Wanli reign (1573–1620) witnessed advancement in woodblock printing technology,⁶⁷ with willow patterns frequently appearing in illustrations.⁶⁸ These prints depict willows with rugged trunks and sparse foliage rendered through linear strokes, diverging from the schematic ‘人’ (herringbone) or ‘个’ (pine-needle) leaf patterns of the Yuan *Pinghua*-storytelling woodcuts. With the technological improvement of Jingdezhen’s private kilns, by the Jiajing period (1522–1566), the imperial kiln adopted the system of ‘official wares fired in private kilns’ (官搭民烧),⁶⁹ disseminating willow patterns previously confined to early-mid Ming imperial wares into broader ceramic production.

The willow pattern in the late Ming imperial wares, is exemplified by a Jiajing blue-and-white spittoon with the design of ‘Three Goats Herald Prosperity’⁷⁰ in the collection of Taipei Palace Museum. The vessel depicts a goat (symbolizing auspiciousness) beneath a willow rendered with angular branches and rigidly geometric foliage. Linear strokes replace earlier herringbone/pine-needle leaf clusters, while sparse dotted leaves punctuate straight pendant branches. This stylized approach represents a novel experimentation in depicting the traditional Chinese willow pattern.

Jingdezhen private kilns in Late Ming period produced an extensive variety of willow-patterned wares. Beyond traditional figural narratives, willow patterns proliferated in landscape and fishing-themed scenes. A Wanli-era (1573–1620) blue-and-white bowl⁷¹ in the Shanghai Museum exemplifies this trend. Its exterior features densely packed decorative elements (pines, bamboos, plums, peonies, pagodas, and birds) among which a willow on a distant islet is rendered with linear outlines and gradient washes. The stylized branches resemble coconut fronds, flowing like banners with almost unrecognizable leaves. A blue-and-white bowl,⁷² excavated from a Wanli-Tianqi (1573–1627) hoard in Anhui Province, centres on a riverside willow with a robust trunk. Rapid linear strokes outline the trunk, filled with broad cobalt washes, while three clusters of newly sprouted branches suggest a partially withered tree. Sparse dotted leaves adorn the branches, echoing the minimalist aesthetics reflected in the Jiajing spittoon a clear influence of late Ming imperial stylistic innovations. The exterior replicates this design, adding pavilions and boats to the willow-river landscape. A late Ming blue-and-white underglaze red dish with ‘Fishing Boat’⁷³ in Tokyo National Museum further demonstrates willow’s adaptability. The design depicts a black-canopied boat with a poling fisherman on the left bank, three underglaze-red fish swimming in the centre, and a gnarled willow on the right cliff. The willow’s lower trunk is powerfully rendered, while a single upright branch sprouts from the broken upper trunk, bifurcating into delicate twigs. Executed in linear outlines and gradient washes, the branches, devoid of leaves, embody refined simplicity.

Summary

The design layout and decorative techniques of the willow pattern in early to mid-Ming imperial kilns were clearly influenced by the Yuan blue-and-white willow pattern. This is evident in features such as the gnarled and aged trunks, textured bark with bumps and grooves, and the highly recognizable ‘人’ or ‘个’-shaped brushstrokes used for depicting willow branches and leaves.

However, due to the smaller size of early to mid-Ming official kiln vessels featuring willow patterns, the painting style became relatively more restrained.

During the early to mid-Ming period, the willow pattern was predominantly found in traditional, formulaic imperial porcelain design, such as scenes of children at play or poetic depictions of autumn evenings with court ladies. A few exceptions, like the Xuande blue-and-white cricket jar with egret and oriole motifs or the Chenghua *doucai* cup with scholar scenes, elevated the realistic or artistic paintings of the willow pattern to new heights, gradually establishing a fixed model for later imitation. For instance, the Chenghua *doucai* cup’s innovative ‘fine-thread willow branches and leaves’ broke away from the ‘人’- or ‘个’-shaped brushstrokes popular since the Song and Jin dynasties, setting a new trend for depicting the willow pattern in the Ming and Qing periods.

Since the Zhengtong, Jingtai, and Tianshun reigns, the rise of Jingdezhen’s folk kilns led to multiple innovations in willow-patterned painting. From the early to mid-Ming ‘rain-streak’ style of willow branches and leaves, to the extreme simplification of imperial kiln motifs in the mid-Ming, and finally to the late Ming’s absorption and refinement of imperial kiln innovations, various new techniques emerged. These included ‘withered branches sprouting new growth’, ‘more branches, fewer leaves’, and ‘branches with few leaves’, laying the groundwork for Qing-era styles such as ‘leafless willows’ and ‘flag-like willows’.⁷⁴

Conclusion

The plantation and utilisation of willows in China spans more than 1000-year history, with landscape architecture and pictorial arts standing as its most iconic manifestations. As a profoundly symbolic element in traditional Chinese life, the willow has evolved into an archetypal image embodying both physical landscapes and emotional resonance. This deep-rooted cultural significance has made willow patterns a vital decorative element on ceramics during the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties. The willow pattern on ceramics originated on Cizhou ware pillows with brown-and-black designs of the Northern Song (960–1127), later developing two primary compositional frameworks through Jin-Yuan-Ming Cizhou traditions: ‘flora-fauna landscapes’ and ‘narrative scene backdrops’. These dual paradigms were assimilated by Yuan Jingdezhen kilns, where advancements in blue-and-white technology and painting techniques elevated the motifs’ sophistication. Subsequently inherited and innovated by Ming imperial and private kilns, the willow pattern reached its zenith in early Ming porcelain before disseminating to Europe as quintessential elements of classical Oriental gardens on export wares. Tracing the evolution of willow patterns in Chinese ceramics illuminates the robust cultural continuity and aesthetic ingenuity embedded within China’s artistic heritage. Such scholarship not only showcases the profound legacy of Chinese tradition but also fosters cross-cultural dialogue in our globalized era underscoring the enduring relevance of studying willow patterns’ origins and transformations.

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'Sampling the tea'. Watercolour on Paper, c.1770.
Collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Making Willow Pattern Possible: Ways of Working in Sixteenth-century Jingdezhen

Anne Gerritsen

The Horsley-Minton Exchange

On Saturday, 1st January 1887, a bronze statue of Mr Colin Minton Campbell was unveiled in Stoke-upon-Trent. Placed outside Minton's pottery on the London Road and sculpted by Thomas Brock, the eight-feet tall statue stands on a nine-feet tall pedestal of Cornish granite. *The Times* reported the event on the following Monday, 3rd January, emphasizing both the importance of the individuals attending the unveiling (the Duchess of Sutherland and the Marquis of Lorne amongst them) and the size of the crowd ('9,000 or 10,000 persons'). The Marquis of Lorne spoke, describing the statue as a memorial of 'the great success which English manufacture had always achieved in the ceramic art', praising the fact that 'foreign nations', certainly in the ceramic art, 'never got the better of Stoke-upon-Trent'.¹

By Thursday 6th January 1887, *The Times* carried a letter to the editor, penned in response to this report by the painter J. C. Horsley (1817-1903). Horsley mocked the Marquis of Lorne's presumed ignorance of the fact that Minton's 'has been for years past and is now entirely in the hands of foreigners as far as the art of ceramic work is concerned', claiming that 'the foreign element permeates through the whole art system of Stoke-upon-Trent, with the result that every touch of national character in the potter's work ... is now utterly non-existent.'² Two days later, a man who styled himself 'Thos. Minton, Chairman of Minton's, replied to Horsley in another letter to the editor.³ Thomas Minton called Horsley's a 'rash attack', claiming that 'all our modellers are English', and that 140 out of 142 'of the best artists we have' are English.⁴ Several more increasingly bad-tempered letters were exchanged over the days that followed, with Horsley remaining convinced that 'the artwork at "Mintons' [sic] (Limited)" is guided and directed by foreign influence, teaching, and practice'.⁵

Thomas Minton, too, was undeterred from his position, explaining in a letter dated Monday 17th January, that what made English potters 'the best and most successful' was precisely their ability to embrace 'constant and continuous change' and their 'judicious introduction and assimilation of foreign element [sic]'. For Minton, it was the English potters' ability to adopt 'foreign processes' that made their work 'the highest example of the potters' art'.⁶ His main examples included the ware known as *pâte-sur-pâte*, which was 'invented by the Chinese several centuries ago', and the Willow Pattern, about which he wrote the following:

The 'Old Willow' pattern, which has probably had a larger sale and been adopted by more manufacturers than any other, and may be said to be a naturalized English pattern, was first copied and printed by my great grandfather, Thomas Minton (who was contemporary with Josiah Wedgwood) from an old Chinese hand-painted plate which was given to him for the purpose by a local collector.⁷

We will never know which 'old Chinese hand-painted plate' Thomas Minton referred to here. It is noteworthy, however, that the Victoria and Albert Museum collections include a small hand-painted plate made in China during latter years of Qianlong's reign (1736-1796) and decorated with a watery landscape in cobalt blue. The scene includes a fisherman on a boat in the foreground, a few pavilions near the water's edge, mountains visible in the background, and a group of pine trees. It is not the famous Willow Pattern as we know it, but the scene contains several of the elements that came to characterise that transfer-printed pattern on English ceramics in the late eighteenth century (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Blue and white porcelain plate, Jingdezhen, c.1785-1790; diameter: 24.1 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, 2010EA5602.

The detail provided by the Museum is rather minimal but includes the statement that the plate was '[g]iven by Mr. Herbert Minton, accessioned in 1858' and that '[t]he design came to be known in Europe as the "Willow Pattern"'.⁸

The Mr Herbert Minton who donated this plate to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1858 was born in 1793 in Stoke-upon-Trent. Herbert was the second son of the first Thomas Minton (1765-1836), copperplate engraver and founder of Thomas Minton & Sons in Stoke-upon-Trent, Staffordshire.⁹ It was Thomas who had worked with porcelain manufacturer Thomas Turner (bap. 1747, d. 1809) at the Caughley Porcelain Works in Shropshire, where the blue transfer print that became known as the 'Willow Pattern' was first developed, and it was Thomas who had developed the Willow Pattern further for Josiah Spode.¹⁰ In the early days of Minton's production, they produced 'underglaze blue-printed earthenwares' in 'willow' pattern 'of the type he engraved whilst he was at Caughley' (Fig. 2).¹¹

Herbert had taken over Minton's after his father death in 1836, substantially expanding the company's output and improving its reputation. In 1849, he appointed the Frenchman Léon Arnoux (1816-1902) as Art Director, whose coloured majolica designs for Minton's won an award at the Great Exhibition of 1851.¹² Upon Herbert's death in 1858, Minton's was passed on to Herbert's nephews, including the Colin Minton Campbell whose statue was unveiled in 1887. In the year of Herbert's death, the Victoria and Albert Museum received a quantity of objects from Herbert's estate, including the small plate in Fig. 1.

Thomas Minton, of the third generation of Minton descendants that came after the first Thomas and the man who engaged in the letter exchange with Horsley, called Willow Pattern a 'naturalized English pattern'. We can probably guess what he meant with the term 'naturalized': a pattern that perhaps contained elements that were 'foreign', or Chinese in this case, but had become part of what he considered English though the process he described as the 'judicious introduction and assimilation of foreign elements'. It is a process well known to scholars of global material culture, interested in considering the ways in which design elements circulated along with the movements of people, goods and ideas.¹³ The processes by which design elements travelled and were integrated into new material contexts have undoubtedly existed as long as objects have moved through time and space from their (composite) sites of production to their (multiple) sites of consumption. The intensity of these processes increased when goods were exchanged more frequently, for example with the emergence of the company trade between Asia and Europe from the seventeenth century onwards, but such processes, sometimes referred to as hybridization, assimilation or domestication, amongst other terms, were certainly not new or unique then or now.

To understand how a pattern could be naturalized, as Minton referred to it, we need to think not only about what Minton described as 'foreign', but what he called an 'element'. A design consists of distinct elements; the multiple patterns referred to as 'Willow Pattern' consist of elements, such as a pagoda, an island, a boat, a bridge, a fence, a willow tree, birds, and so on. The many versions of the Willow Pattern consist of a combination of some, or all these highly recognizable elements drawn from Chinese porcelain.¹⁴ After all, by the time the pattern known as willow first emerged in Britain in the late eighteenth century, Chinese porcelain had been coming into Britain in substantial quantities for nearly two centuries. Mostly arriving on the East India Company ships, Chinese porcelains circulated widely in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, gradually losing their status as rare luxuries for the elites, morphing into reasonably priced, mass-produced consumer goods for the non-elites.¹⁵ In the Netherlands, even municipal orphanages had Chinese porcelains for use by their largely very poor residents.¹⁶ The blue-



Fig. 2. Transfer-printed plate, Hermit/Chinoiserie Bridgeless pattern, attributed to Minton, c.1800–1810. Copyright © PicklePictures. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

and-white designs that graced so many of the imported ceramics from China would, thus, have been quite a familiar sight to most consumers of tableware in Britain.

Elements, Modules and Units

What those consumers might not have been immediately aware of is that these blue designs on white surfaces were also composite designs. The elements that made up these Chinese designs were less standardized than the nineteenth-century versions of composite designs would become in Britain, but that was because the Chinese mode of manufacturing porcelains relied on painting by hand, rather than printing using an engraved transfer.¹⁷ The ways in which Chinese ceramic designs were made up of different combinations of design elements has been illustrated very effectively by the German art historian Lothar Ledderose, using the ceramics found on the shipwreck of the Geldermalsen.¹⁸ The Geldermalsen was a ship of the Dutch East India Company, leaving the port of Canton in 1751, intending to sail via Batavia, the Dutch base in Asia, with a cargo of tea, porcelain and gold to the ship's final destination in the Netherlands. In early January 1752, the Geldermalsen was shipwrecked on a coral reef off Bintan Island.¹⁹ The loss for the Dutch East India Company was substantial; from the packing list we know that the cargo included 686,997 pounds of tea, textiles of various kinds, and over two hundred chests of porcelain, which held 171 complete sets of porcelain, as well as tea and coffee cups, tea pots, milk jugs, plates, saucers and spittoons. The ship also carried bars of gold with a value of 68,135 guilders.²⁰ Altogether, the goods on board were valued at 714,963 guilders, about 7.5 million British pounds in today's money.²¹ The wreck was salvaged by Captain Hatcher in 1986, and the lots of what became known as the Nanking Cargo were sold in Amsterdam, including 150,000 pieces of export porcelain of the Qianlong era.²² It is this immense quantity of items that allowed Lothar Ledderose to analyse the design elements and their evolution in their appearance on these pieces.²³ As Ledderose observes, the range of design elements used on these 150,000 pieces is 'extremely limited. It is made up almost completely of a few flowers and trees, and simple landscapes'.²⁴

Ledderose argues that the design on the Geldermalsen plates in its simplest form comprises of a few flower petals in the centre of the circular field that makes up the base of a cup or bowl (Fig. 3). By adding increasingly more detail, these petals develop into a landscape. A few strokes added to the petals create a stalk and place the flower in an upward orientation; a few more leaves turn the generic flower into a specific type, such as a chrysanthemum or a peony.

A second flower added to the first creates a fuller design; a third flower and some tufts of grass create a sense of space in which the flowers grow. The addition of a fence, a rock or a willow turns the undefined space into a garden (Fig. 4). As Ledderose demonstrates, the individual flowers and trees can be swapped: peony for chrysanthemum, willow for bamboo. Most of the flowers and plants have symbolic meanings, so the iconography changes, but the structure of the design remains unchanged. The garden scene could also easily be broadened out by changing the size and placement of the flowers and trees, creating a landscape that filled the available space on the porcelain surface (Fig. 5). By adding buildings such as small huts and temples, and elements such as islands and boats, and including human figures with a few simple brushstrokes, the landscape revealed its scale vis-à-vis its human inhabitants (Fig. 6).²⁵

Ledderose describes the process of painting blue decorations on porcelain surfaces as consisting of distinct motifs (pavilions, or boats, or peonies), which he calls modules. These modules, made up of a set of brush strokes and lines, are combined into a composition, which he calls a unit. The

painter has a lot of freedom in combining the modules to form the unit, but certain conventions govern their combination: a chrysanthemum is always depicted with a fence; bamboo with rock. This combination of flexibility and adaptability to the shape of the surface with conventions and expectations make it easy to create a coherent set of hundreds of pieces that immediately look like the pieces belong together. Makers could easily extend sets and consumers could easily be persuaded to buy more pieces.²⁶

Ways of Working: the Workshop Model

Ledderose's analysis of the Geldermalsen pieces is very helpful for understanding the way of working with modular design elements when the ceramics painters added decorative details using a cobalt-dipped brush to the unglazed white surfaces, but Ledderose's analysis says little about the context in which Jingdezhen's ceramic painters worked. For that, we need to consider the ways in which Jingdezhen's potters worked in separate workshops. We might begin with an eighteenth-century image to illustrate this. Fig. 7 shows a so-called fishbowl made in Jingdezhen for the export market, depicting the production of ceramics. Fishbowls (*yugang* 魚缸) are sometimes so named because of the presence of a decoration of fish, as we see on the inside of Fig. 7a. The word for fish (*yu* 魚) also served as a pun for the word for surplus or abundance (*yu* 餘), meaning fish decorations on any object also serve as expressions of a wish for a surplus of wealth for the owner.²⁷ More practically, such large bowls were said to be made for fire protection in the imperial palace: filled with water, fishbowls stood throughout the palace grounds to help douse out any outbreaks of fire with water. The large shape was not easy to make but did provide the painters with an extended surface for decorations, as we see in this bowl (Fig. 7b) from the Kunstmuseum in The Hague, with a diameter of more than 60 cm.

Looking closely at the decoration on the surface of the fishbowl, we see brown beams that surround the potters at work. They serve as markers of separate spaces and tasks, with individuals working on turning, shaping, glazing and painting pieces of porcelain. Other workers are busy transporting long planks with pieces for drying, stoking the kiln, or preparing the clay. Of course, we cannot take these schematic illustrations on a piece intended for export as realistic depictions of the workshop environment. At most, they serve as an indication of foreign interest in the production process of ceramics, not unlike what we see in the series of tea production images that graced other sets of export ceramics.²⁸

The presence of separate workshop spaces in Jingdezhen, however, has been testified by numerous visual and textual records. The manufacturing process in Jingdezhen involved separate steps, completed inside distinct and purpose-led spaces. Some of the steps happened outside Jingdezhen, such as digging for porcelain stone and kaolin and preparing these materials for work by pulverization and washing or sourcing and transporting firewood. Other steps happened inside specific workshops, such as the grinding of cobalt or the preparing of glaze. We also know that these tasks were performed by specific workers who gained experience and expertise in that task, perhaps even by as many as 72 separate workers.

The idea that the process involved '72 hands' originated with a seventeenth-century Chinese man called Song Yingxing, author of a book entitled *Tiangong kaiwu*, which translates as 'The works of heaven and the inception of things'.²⁹ The book has variously been interpreted as an overview of late Ming dynasty Chinese technology or as a work of philosophical knowledge, emphasizing the right way to execute tasks so that balance with nature and harmony between man and spirit are preserved in the universe.³⁰ It is here, in the illustrated discussion of the manufacture of ceramics (Fig. 8), that we find the statement that 'each piece of porcelain went through 72 hands (*guo*



Fig. 3. Porcelain dish from the shipwreck of the Geldermalsen, c.1750, with sticker of the Christie's auction in Amsterdam in 1986; diameter 8.6 cm. Groninger Museum, 1986.0727. Photo Arjan Verschoor.



Fig. 5. Porcelain plate from the shipwreck of the Geldermalsen, c.1750; diameter 39.5 cm. Groninger Museum, 1986.0737. Photo Arjan Verschoor.



Fig. 4. Porcelain plate, from the shipwreck of the Geldermalsen, c.1750; diameter 23 cm. Groninger Museum, 1986.0697. Photo Arjan Verschoor.



Fig. 6. Porcelain dish from the shipwreck of the Geldermalsen, c.1750; diameter 38.5 cm. Groninger Museum, 1986.0694.01. Photo Arjan Verschoor.



Figs. 7a & b. Porcelain fishbowl, famille rose, decorated outside with potters at work, China, 1740-1750; diameter 60.2 cm. Kunstmuseum Den Haag, 0558797.



Fig. 8. Four illustrations from Song Yingxing, *Tiangong kaiwu*, 1637. Public domain.

shou qishi'er 過手七十二'.³¹ As the historian of science Dagmar Schäfer points out, this does not clarify much; were there 72 different people involved, or 72 distinct steps in the process? For us, the issue is not so much whether 72 separate individuals were involved or not, but what the impact was of this separated way of working in the making of pots.

The idea of '72 hands' was widely repeated in historical texts, including early European writings about the manufacture of ceramics in Jingdezhen. Amongst the earliest Western observers of the manufacture of porcelain in China was the famous French Jesuit Francois Xavier D'Entrecolles (1664-1741), who spent time as a missionary in Jingdezhen, in part because of the difficult working conditions of the potters in the city, and in part, probably, because of the long-standing curiosity in Europe about Chinese ways of manufacturing porcelain.³² D'Entrecolles sent his first letter back to Europe from Raozhou (the prefecture in Jiangxi province in which Jingdezhen is located) in 1712, including the statement that 'a finished piece of porcelain has passed through the hands of seventy workers.'³³ Another French Jesuit, Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674-1743), included the letters from D'Entrecolles in a multi-volume compendium of letters and other writings about China entitled *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'Empire de Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise*, first published in 1735.³⁴ Du Halde's compendium was translated almost immediately into many languages and circulated in England under the short title of *The General History of China*.³⁵ The idea of 70 or 72 hands was picked up with alacrity by later European observers of China and porcelain enthusiasts alike. The French sinologist Jean-Baptiste Grosier (1743-1823), in his *General Description of China*, repeated the statement that 'a piece of porcelain, before it is finished, must pass through the hands of seventy persons'.³⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century, the British politician and porcelain connoisseur Joseph Marryat (1790-1876) described it as follows: 'Such is the division of labour, that a simple cup or saucer often passes through seventy-two hands before it is finished'.³⁷ In other words, the idea that a single piece of Chinese porcelain was made not by one individual potter but the result of an assembly-line style production with multiple workers was well known in Europe from the 1730s onwards.

How did those 72 hands work together to form a decorated piece of porcelain? Following Ledderose, we can see that the hand-painted decorations on the Chinese plates that flooded the European market were made in a workshop context, with individuals performing specific tasks only, rather than completing a single piece of porcelain from start to finish. The decoration in the centre of the plate would have been produced by a separate person, as would the decoration on the rim, the outside and the foot of the object. The calligraphy that often graced the base of ceramics would also have been executed by someone who did nothing other than adding calligraphy to the base of the objects made in Jingdezhen.

This way of working distinct workshops is also clear from visual depictions of the ceramics production process in Jingdezhen, such as the album leaf (Fig. 9) entitled 'Attaching footings and handles'.³⁸

As in the previous two images (Figs. 7 & 8), Fig. 9 shows the characteristic vertical beams with overhanging eaves that indicate separated, covered spaces dedicated to a specific task. Some of these depictions show an individual space with nearby walls, beams and rooves, suggesting the proximity of the workspaces. The album from which this illustration (Fig. 9) has been selected contains 28 leaves, each illustrating a distinct step in the process, from collecting kaolin and porcelain stone from the surrounding mountains, preparing these for use, shaping the bodies, sun-drying and polishing them, adding footings and handles, grinding cobalt, preparing



Fig. 9. 'Attaching footings and handles'. Gouache, from an album in the collection of Museum Het Princessehof in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. After Harrison, *Chinees porcelain*, p. 43.



Fig. 10. Porcelain terrine, depicting the manufacture and trade of porcelain, 1750-1775; width of full terrine: 35.50 cm, height 25 cm. Groninger Museum, 1988.0187. Photo Arjan Verschoor.

the glaze, making saggars and placing wares in saggars, stoking the fire in the kilns to the right temperature, and so on. Painting the cobalt on the raw porcelain bodies, thus, was only one of many steps, each of which required separate expertise.

The visual representations of the porcelain manufacture process that remain, both on paper or silk and on ceramics, largely date from the eighteenth century and later. See, for example, the tureen from the collection of the Groninger Museum, Fig. 10.

Descriptions of the precise steps, however, without being identified as precisely 72, are even older than Song Yingxing's text. We have, for example, a very detailed document that originates to the middle of the sixteenth century.³⁹ This text was added to repeatedly over the second half of the century, so it is difficult to date it precisely, but it served as a manual for those who managed the works carried out inside the various kiln workshops on behalf of the emperor. This text is one of the oldest manuals we have describing this way of working in distinct workshops. Again, in the same way that the visual materials depicting ceramics manufacture in Jingdezhen represented idealized visions, created for the purpose of meeting (foreign) consumer demands, this text presents the tasks that ideally should be executed in accordance with these instructions. To what extent the managers and supervisors who oversaw the production process followed these, we will never know. Even so, the guidelines are interesting for the idealized processes they describe.

We learn, for example, what all the distinct workshops are for. There is one for making bowls (*wanzuo* 碗作), one for small winecups (*jiuzhongzuo* 酒鍾作), one for small plates (*diezuo* 碟作), one for plates (*panzuo* 盤作), one for goblets (*zhongzuo* 鍾作), and so on. There are also different workshops for work with different tools: one for working with a stamp (*yinzuo* 印作) and another one for working with an awl (*zhuizuo* 錐作); and dedicated spaced for the different skills, such as painting, writing, colour work, carpentry, brick making. Specific materials are also prepared in distinct workshops, such as lacquer, bamboo, large planks, small planks, and so on.⁴⁰ Many of these workshops were obviously for the specific tasks required directly to produce, say, a ceramic bowl, but many workshops were also devoted to adjacent tasks and materials. All the equipment used in the kilns was made on site, such as the buckets, baskets, vats, planks and carrying poles required during the process that started with collecting the raw materials from the environs to packing and transporting the completed goods to merchants and eventually the consumer destinations.

All the materials used, especially those used in the production of ceramics destined for the imperial palace, had to be of the highest quality and supplies had to be carefully managed. For example, the text specified exactly how a shipment of ceramics had to be packaged before it could be sent to the palace in Beijing. One dragon vat, one of the largest vessels made in the kilns in Jingdezhen, was placed in a firwood box that had to be made to measure for the vat, complete with carrying poles, so that two carriers could transport the piece in places where water transport was not possible. Wadding was prepared from cotton and jute fibres to protect the piece on the inside of the box and on the outside, yellow paper was glued all over the surface of the box and metal locks were added. The detailed costs for making such a protective box were provided in the manual, including the price of the metal for the locks, the fish glue and the dyestuff for the paper.⁴¹ Smaller pieces were wrapped together. So, we learn: 'For each bowl and plate set, use a small piece of yellow paper. When you get to ten pieces, you wrap these with a medium size piece of paper. Each box is packed with 120 small items, so then you use middle and small sized pieces of paper, 72 sheets in total.'⁴² The detail provided in the manual is evidence of the care taken with

these pieces intended for the emperor, but it also testifies to the intense layers of administrative control exerted over the porcelain production. The specification that 72 pieces of paper in two sizes should be used for wrapping 120 pieces of porcelain is only one example; a specific quantity of clay was allocated for each differently sized bowl or dish; the weight of the firewood used for the firing of a kiln was specified, as was the amount of wood to be used for the making of each box and bucket, and so on.

Cobalt, probably the commodity with the highest value, was locked away in a special box and could only be released by a supervisor with the right responsibility. The risk of the cobalt disappearing in the pockets of the cobalt painters was apparently so high that the items painted by individual painters were supposed to be numbered and then checked against the results after the pieces came out of the kiln. If the quality of the fired blue was not up to imperial standards, the specific worker would be accused of having swapped the expensive cobalt intended for the imperial wares with the cheaper stuff used for local wares during the painting process.⁴³ The workers, drawn from Jingdezhen and its surroundings, were to be paid set amounts for their work, often in combination with an allowance for their accommodation and subsistence. Their pay depended on the level of skill they displayed; large vats or moulded vessels required more skill to make, so their makers received a higher level of pay. Workers who did tasks that required lower levels of skill, such as refining cobalt, received less pay, while those involved in the adjacent tasks, such as preparing the wadding for packing up vats were paid the lowest amount.⁴⁴

According to the handbook, none of these organizational details were to be left to the expertise of the potters themselves; it was the responsibility of the kiln managers to supervise and allocate pay to the workers, manage the resources and the storage and transport of the finished pieces, as well as keeping detailed records throughout.

Even if the daily practice looked very different from the idealized version presented in the handbook, this extensive documentation allows us to draw out a few distinct observations. One is the extent of the micro-management we see at work here, seeking to control every aspect of the production. Of course, as everyone knows who has ever set foot in a pottery workshop, not all the processes can ever be managed: the weather, the dust, the skill and temperature of the hands at work, the level of moisture in the air, the emotional state of the workers, and so on, all of these had an impact on production but were not easily prescribed and managed. Another is the extent of the creativity and freedom of the potters. The text expands a great deal on the skill levels of the workers and the difficulties of retaining highly experienced potters but remains silent on how creativity was fostered. It seems everything was geared towards the exclusion of creative freedom to guarantee the production of identical pieces that matched the demands of the emperor.

Du Halde and Staffordshire

How does all this relate to the production of ceramics in Staffordshire? For that, we need to return to Jean-Baptiste du Halde's *General History of China*. Du Halde's book, which included the letters of D'Entrecolles on the manufacture of ceramics, was widely read and referred to amongst those involved in the manufacture of ceramics in eighteenth-century Britain. William Cookworthy (1705-1780), for example, referred to Du Halde in 1745 in one of his letters discussing finds of both petuntse and kaolin, and was mentioned together with D'Entrecolles in another.⁴⁵ It was Cookworthy's discovery of kaolin deposits in Cornwall that inspired Thomas Minton to travel to Cornwall in 1798 and 1799, obtain the rights to mine for stone and clay and have these transported to Staffordshire.⁴⁶ Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820), President of

the Royal Society of London, had also read Du Halde and was keen to send a potter directly to Jingdezhen to learn the skill of potting there.⁴⁷ Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795), too, was interested in Du Halde's description of China, and used the description of the division of labour in Jingdezhen to shape the organization of labour at his Etruria factory.⁴⁸ According to Robert Finlay, the young Josiah copied the passage about the seventy hands into his own notebook as early as 1743, when he was only thirteen years old.⁴⁹

The economic historian Neil McKendrick has made extensive studies of Wedgwood's way of organizing the workers in his pottery workshops, first in the factory he named Etruria, but later also in other workshops.⁵⁰ Richard Olson, too, wrote extensively about the famed Wedgwood division of labour, which led to an assembly-line style of ceramics production, describing the Etruria factory as follows:

Within each assembly line, workers did not fabricate an entire object, going from one procedure to another, as in other potteries. Each perfected a single task. In fact, in the painting rooms, tasks were divided so that the border painters, the flower painters, and the fine figure painters were separated, with differential wage rates for different levels of skill.⁵¹

The similarity between this description of the Etruria factory and the information we have about the organization of work in the Jingdezhen workshops in the sixteenth century is striking: workers perfected single tasks, rather than completing an entire piece from start to finish, and those tasks require different levels of skill and gained similarly different levels of remuneration. The line of connections now becomes clear: from the anonymous manual for potters of the sixteenth century, prescribing how the separated tasks should be managed and rewarded, we go to Song Yingxing's seventeenth-century observations in *Tiangong kaiwu*, with illustrations that clearly demonstrate the distinct tasks and their spaces, and from there to D'Entrecolles early eighteenth-century descriptions of Jingdezhen. The inclusion of D'Entrecolles letters in Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's compendium, and their subsequent translation into English, where they circulated as part of the *General History of China*, meant that D'Entrecolles letters were read by many of the eighteenth-century industrialists involved in the establishment of the potteries in Britain. Cookworthy used the letters to confirm the presence of China clay in Cornwall using D'Entrecolles descriptions, and the tests done on D'Entrecolles materials by Réaumur; Wedgwood used the letters from D'Entrecolles to organize labour in his Staffordshire workshops into assembly-line ways of working; and Thomas Minton relied on the work done by Cookworthy to buy access to the Cornwall mines and secure access to both china clay and kaolin for his fellow Staffordshire potters.

Concluding Thoughts

The connections between a Chinese ceramics production management manual and the Staffordshire potteries could also be seen as a form of naturalization of foreign elements, as Thomas Minton referred to it in 1887. We could think of the Staffordshire introduction of Jingdezhen's separated steps in ceramics production as one example of the 'judicious introduction and assimilation of foreign elements', to use Thomas Minton's words. The potteries in Staffordshire benefited enormously from these 'foreign elements' and used them entirely to their own advantage, so much so that by the early nineteenth century Jingdezhen had lost out. The Chinese capital of ceramics production no longer produced something exceptional in the eyes of British merchants and consumers, and Chinese producers could no longer count on British consumers to purchase the large quantities of mass-produced ceramics they shipped to Europe in the centuries before. The momentum had definitively shifted from Asia to Europe.

By the time of the letter exchange between Thomas Minton and J.C. Horsley in the late 1880s, it was no longer clear that 'Europe' meant Britain; the 'foreign' hands that dominated the production at Minton's according to Horsley were almost all French. Horsley's explicit expressions of British nationalism and implied disdain for the French must be seen in the context of that specific late nineteenth-century moment, in which the French and the British vied for control over colonies and resources. For a man with nationalistic sentiments like Horsley, it mattered that British products were produced by British hands, using British designers and modelers. For Thomas Minton, on the other hand, it was clear that the design and manufacturing processes could not be separated on nationalist grounds. Chinese, French and British hands, materials, designs, and manufacturing methods were combined and assimilated in ways that created British superiority in a different way. For Minton, as we saw before, it was the English potters' ability to adopt 'foreign processes' that made their work 'the highest example of the potters' art'.⁵²

Of course, the exchange between Horsley and Minton has strong resonances with the discussions of about a century later, in the late twentieth century, when the manufactures of so-called 'quintessentially British' ceramics like Wedgwood and Spode's were moved to China.⁵³ Expressions of nationalist sentiments that echoed Horsley's abounded, then as now, suggesting that British goods should not be manufactured by East Asian hands, combined with expressions of concern over job losses in Staffordshire and the disappearance of skills and craftsmanship from the UK. Globalization is nothing new; the flows of knowledge and ideas, designs and materials are as old as the mobility of people across the spaces of the planet. The intensity of the waves of globalization has always fluctuated, with moments of intensification inevitably accompanied by critique and controversy. The appeal of cheaply priced goods has almost always won over the desire to support ethically sourced and/or locally crafted goods. The complexities and controversies associated with globalization and outsourcing will undoubtedly continue, but what this chapter has hopefully been able to demonstrate is that nationalist sentiments over what Britishness is or should be tempered by a better understanding of the long-standing flows of knowledge, design and ceramics manufacturing practices between China and Britain. The long history of these flows and exchanges between China and Britain demonstrates not only the impossibility of separating ceramics manufactures into distinct nationalist strands, but also their long-term benefits. Thomas William Minton already foreshadowed as much when he stated that for art and manufacture to flourish, they need the free circulation of ideas and unfettered flows of people and objects, regardless of national boundaries.

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Set of Kangxi blue-and-white covered jar and gu-shaped vase with landscape panels, circa 1700, Rijksmuseum Collection (Accession number: AK-RBK-16284-C).

The Porcelain Industry and Export Porcelain Production in Jingdezhen during the Eighteenth Century Seen from Historical Documents and Kiln Site Archaeology

Xianping Gao

From the early to late eighteenth century, Jingdezhen's privately-owned kilns entered another peak period following the first half of the seventeenth century (late Ming Dynasty). Historical records and archaeological discoveries indicate that during this time, the porcelain industry reached a massive scale - porcelain workshops were densely distributed along the Changjiang river, earning the area the name 'Taoyang Thirteen Li' (one Li is about 0.3107 mile). The number of people engaged in porcelain manufacturing was more than a hundred thousand. The technique was advanced, products were diverse, and overall quality was high. Excavations at the Luomajiang kiln site in Jingdezhen have revealed the technological and product developments across different periods, unearthing a large quantity of export porcelain. Among these are willow-pattern wares custom-made for the European market and Bencharong porcelain produced for the Thai royal family. The diversity and variety of these export porcelains reflect the widespread practice of processing based on supplied samples and on-demand customization during this period.

Changes in Porcelain Production and Export in the Seventeenth Century

The late Ming period (mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth century) marked the peak of Jingdezhen's private kilns. During this time, both porcelain production and export reached an unprecedented scale. However, the subsequent dynastic transition between the late Ming and early Qing, coupled with the Revolt of the Three Feudatories (1673–1681, during the Kangxi reign), dealt a severe blow to Jingdezhen's porcelain industry. According to the *Gazetteer of Fuliang County* published in the Kangxi era, between the eleventh and seventeenth years of the Shunzhi reign (1654–1661), local Jiangxi officials and officials from the Ministry of Works repeatedly failed to complete imperial commissions for large dragon jars and balustrades, ultimately abandoning the efforts.¹

Ye Mengzhu's *Yueshi Bian (Notes on the Ways of the World)*, written in the early Qing Dynasty, provides a clear record of changes in porcelain quality and prices from the Shunzhi to mid-Kangxi periods (1644–1688). From his account, we can derive some important key information:

顺治初，江右甫平，兵燹未息，磁器之丑，较甚于旧，而价逾十倍。最丑者四、五分一只，略光润着，动辄数倍之，而亦不能望嘉靖窑之后尘也。至康熙初，窑器忽然精美，佳者直胜靖窑，而价亦不甚贵，最上不过值银一钱一只而已。自（康熙）十三年甲寅之变（三藩之乱），江右盗贼蜂起，磁器复贵，较之昔年，价逾五倍，美者又不可得。大概移窑于近地，工巧与泥水，种种不同，匪但迁乎其地，而弗能为之良也。是时，民间复如顺治之初，富者用铜、锡，贫者用竹、木为制。然而所盛饌肴，不堪经宿，洗涤亦不能洁，远不如磁器之便。至（康熙）二十七年戊午，豫章底定，窑器复美，价亦渐平，几如初年矣。

At the beginning of the Shunzhi reign, although Jiangxi had just been pacified, the ravages of war had not yet subsided. The porcelain produced was far inferior to that of earlier times, yet its price increased tenfold.

The crudest pieces cost four or five *fen* of silver each, while slightly better ones cost several times more - but still could not compare with those from the Jiaping reign. By the early Kangxi reign, however, porcelain suddenly became exquisite again - finer even than that of the Jiaping reign - yet not overly expensive, with the best pieces costing no more than one *qian* of silver each.

Then came the 'Revolt of the Three Feudatories' in the 13th year of Kangxi (1674). Bandits rose throughout Jiangxi, and porcelain once again became expensive - five times the price of former years - and fine wares became unobtainable. Kilns were relocated, but differences in craftsmanship, clay, and water meant the decline of quality; it was not merely the change of site but also of skill that caused this. During this period, people reverted to the practices of early Shunzhi times: the wealthy used copper or tin vessels, the poor used bamboo or wooden ones. Yet these could not preserve food overnight, nor could they be easily cleaned - far less convenient than porcelain. By the 27th year of Kangxi (1688), after Jiangxi was pacified, porcelain regained its beauty, and prices gradually returned to normal, nearly matching those of earlier prosperous times.²

Period	Historical Context	Porcelain Quality and Price
Early Shunzhi Reign (c.1644–1650)	After the turmoil of dynastic transition	Porcelain quality was poor, yet prices were ten times higher than that of the late Ming. The cheapest pieces cost 4–5 <i>fen</i> each, while slightly better ones were several times more expensive.
Early Kangxi Reign (1662–1673)	Political stability restored	Porcelain suddenly became refined again, yet prices remained low — the finest pieces cost only about 1 <i>qian</i> (10 <i>fen</i>) each.
Kangxi 13th year onward (1674–1687)	The Revolt of the Three Feudatories	Porcelain prices rose sharply to more than five times their earlier levels, while high-quality wares became rare. wealthy households reverted to using copper or tin vessels, and poor families used bamboo or wooden one.
Kangxi 27th year and after (from 1688 onward)	Growing national prosperity	Porcelain once again became fine in quality, and prices stabilized, returning to levels similar to those of the early Kangxi reign.

Table 1. Changes in the Quality and Price of Jingdezhen Porcelain (1644–1688)
Compiled according to Ye Mengzhu's *Yueshi Bian*.

From these historical documents, it is clear that during the first forty years after the founding of the Qing dynasty, the porcelain production in Jingdezhen was far from stable. For the first thirty years, the country was recovering from war; later, it fell again into several years of unrest. The general trend was that the more turbulent society became, the poorer the overall quality of porcelain and the higher its price. This situation did not fundamentally change until the mid-Kangxi period.

In the early Qing Dynasty, porcelain exports were also severely hindered by reduced production and the implementation of the maritime prohibition policy.³ During this time, except for some smuggling, China's porcelain export effectively came to a halt. According to the archives of the Dutch East India Company, in 1644 the Company placed porcelain orders totaling 355,800 pieces via two merchants. However, by 1646, 'For Holland, Batavia, Coromandel, Surat and Persia no more could be gathered because of "that cancerous war" [in China] than 95,000 pieces of porcelain.' After 1657, porcelain trade between China and the Netherlands was temporarily suspended.⁴

In 1662 (the 16th year of the Yongli reign of the Southern Ming, the 1st year of Kangxi), Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), after his defeat against the Qing, retreated to Taiwan and expelled the Dutch, reclaiming the island after 38 years of the latter's occupation. As a result, the Netherlands lost a key trading hub in East Asia and was forced to shift its focus to trade porcelain with Japan and other countries.

In the 23rd year of Kangxi (1684), the emperor officially lifted the maritime prohibition.⁵ In the following year (1685), the Qing court established four maritime customs offices - Guangdong (Yue Customs), Fujian (Min Customs), Zhejiang (Zhe Customs), and Jiangnan (Jiang Customs) - collectively known in history as the 'Four Maritime Customs.'⁶ After that, merchants from various countries once again flocked to China.⁷ At this time, the porcelain industry of Jingdezhen—having endured dynastic transition and the turmoil of the Revolt of the Three Feudatories - finally recovered. It swiftly regained its position in the international porcelain market.

The Wanjiao No. 1 Shipwreck, salvaged from the waters off Pingtan, Fujian Province, dates to the mid- to late Kangxi period. Over 17,000 pieces of Jingdezhen porcelain were recovered from the site. In addition to blue-and-white ware, the cargo included underglaze red and blue wares, monochrome-glazed wares, wucai (polychrome) ware, and Batavia wares - characterized by a brown exterior glaze with blue-and-white decoration inside. The overall quality of these porcelains is exceptionally high (Fig. 1).⁸

Similarly, the Vŭng Tâu shipwreck off the coast of Vietnam yielded about 60,000 pieces (sets) of porcelain. Many of their shapes and decorative motifs closely resemble those from Wanjiao I. Among the recovered artifacts was an ink stick bearing the inscription 'Gengwu year [1690]', indicating that the shipwreck occurred not long after that date.⁹ Moreover, numerous museums abroad also house exquisite porcelains from this period, notable for their rich and intricate decorations and large vessel forms (see page 59).

These finds clearly demonstrate that by the mid-Kangxi period, Jingdezhen's private kilns had recovered rapidly and entered a phase of strong growth, with porcelain production and export becoming increasingly large-scale and systematized.

Porcelain Production and Export in the Eighteenth Century

After the recovery and development of the porcelain industry in the latter half of the seventeenth century, Jingdezhen once again entered a new golden age of production in the eighteenth century. During this period, the authorities implemented lenient ceramic administration measures,



Fig. 1. Blue-and-white porcelain from Jingdezhen, mid to late Kangxi period, recovered from the Wanjiao No. 1 shipwreck off Pingtan, Fujian.

which primarily included: the abolition of the corvée system for artisans in the later years of the Kangxi reign, granting craftsmen greater freedom in their labour and thereby boosting their productivity; after the fourth year of the Yongzheng reign, the expenses for imperial porcelain production were covered by customs revenue instead of the regular taxes of Jiangxi Province alone, thus avoiding the situation described by Wang Zongmu, the Provincial Judicial Commissioner of Jiangxi during the Ming Jiajing period, in which 'the entire province (Jiangxi) was exhausted to supply the imperial court';¹⁰ 'all labour costs, meals, clay, and glaze materials were procured at fair market prices without any burden of official impositions';¹¹ finally, the comprehensive implementation of the 'official-commissioned, civilian-fired' system, where substandard imperial porcelain pieces produced by civilian kilns were uniformly appraised and compensated, with no requirement for civilian households to make up for the losses. This demonstrates that the ceramic administration of the Qing Dynasty was significantly more advanced compared to that of the Ming Dynasty, and the relaxed environment fostered relatively harmonious development in both official and civilian porcelain production.¹²

Historical records describe an enormous scale of porcelain manufacturing during this time, with hundreds of thousands of people involved in the industry. In a letter dated 1st September 1712 (the 51st year of Kangxi), French Jesuit missionary Père d'Entrecolles (Chinese name: Yin Hongxu) wrote to Father Orry of the Jesuit Missions in China and India:

Jingdezhen has 18,000 households, and some wealthy merchants occupy spacious residences that employ large numbers of workers. It is said that the town's total population exceeds one million, consuming more than 10,000 *dan* of rice and over 1,000 pigs each day.¹³

Similarly, Shen Jiazhen, magistrate of Fuliang County (under which Jingdezhen was affiliated to) from 1728 to 1738 (Yongzheng 6th year – Qianlong 3rd year), recorded:

In Changnan Town [the ancient name of Jingdezhen], Porcelain is sold throughout the China and even overseas; tens of thousands of people are engaged in the ceramic trade.¹⁴

Tang Ying, the imperial porcelain supervisor during the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, also described the scale of production in his work *Tao Ye Tu Bian Ci* (*Compilation of Ceramic Illustrations*) in 1743 (the eighth year of Qianlong reign):

Jingdezhen stretches only over ten *li*, surrounded by mountains and rivers, secluded in one corner of the land. Traders from all directions come for ceramics. There are 200 to 300 private kilns, and no fewer than several hundred thousand craftsmen and labourers depend on the industry for their livelihood.¹⁵

Archaeological evidence supports these records. Excavations in the area of ancient Jingdezhen - the so-called 'Taoyang Thirteen Li', stretching from Guanyin Pavilion in the north to Xiaogangzui in the south, as described in the *Jingdezhen Taolu* - have revealed extensive Qing-dynasty kiln remains (Fig. 2).

Shen Jiazhen's poem *Ballad of the Kiln Workers* vividly captures this thriving scene, likening the workshops scattered along the riverbanks as dense as anthills, with kiln fires lighting up the night sky ("坏坊蚁垤多，陶火烛牛斗").¹⁶

The production centre of the entire town lay in the central and northern parts, roughly corresponding to today's Zhushan Middle Road and northward. With the full implementation of the imperial system of 'official wares fired in the private kilns' (*guan da min shao*) for supplying porcelain to the Qing court, the area surrounding the Imperial Kiln Factory (*Yuyaochang*) became the true core of porcelain manufacture.

This area has preserved the richest concentration of historical relics, including workshops, kilns, and red shops (porcelain decoration houses). Together, these remnants form today's unique ceramic landscape of Taoyangli, the living heart of Jingdezhen's porcelain heritage.

However, because Qing-dynasty strata lie relatively close to the modern ground surface, large-scale construction and earthmoving in recent times have caused severe disturbance and destruction to the archaeological layers. As a result, few original (undisturbed) deposits have been preserved, creating significant difficulties for archaeological excavation and research.

The Luomajiao kiln site is among the earliest private kiln sites in the area of ancient Jingdezhen that have been systematically excavated by archaeologists. Since 2012, excavations there have revealed a relatively continuous stratigraphic sequence spanning from the late eleventh century to the early twentieth century. Within an excavated area of 684 square meters, archaeologists uncovered abundant cultural features and unearthed tens of tons of kiln-related remains. Among these were over 300,000 fragments of porcelain from the Ming and Qing periods alone, including some export porcelain sherds.¹⁷

Detailed analysis of artifacts from each stratigraphic layer shows that eighteenth-century porcelain fragments are markedly more numerous than those from the late seventeenth century, with a greater diversity of vessel types and shapes.

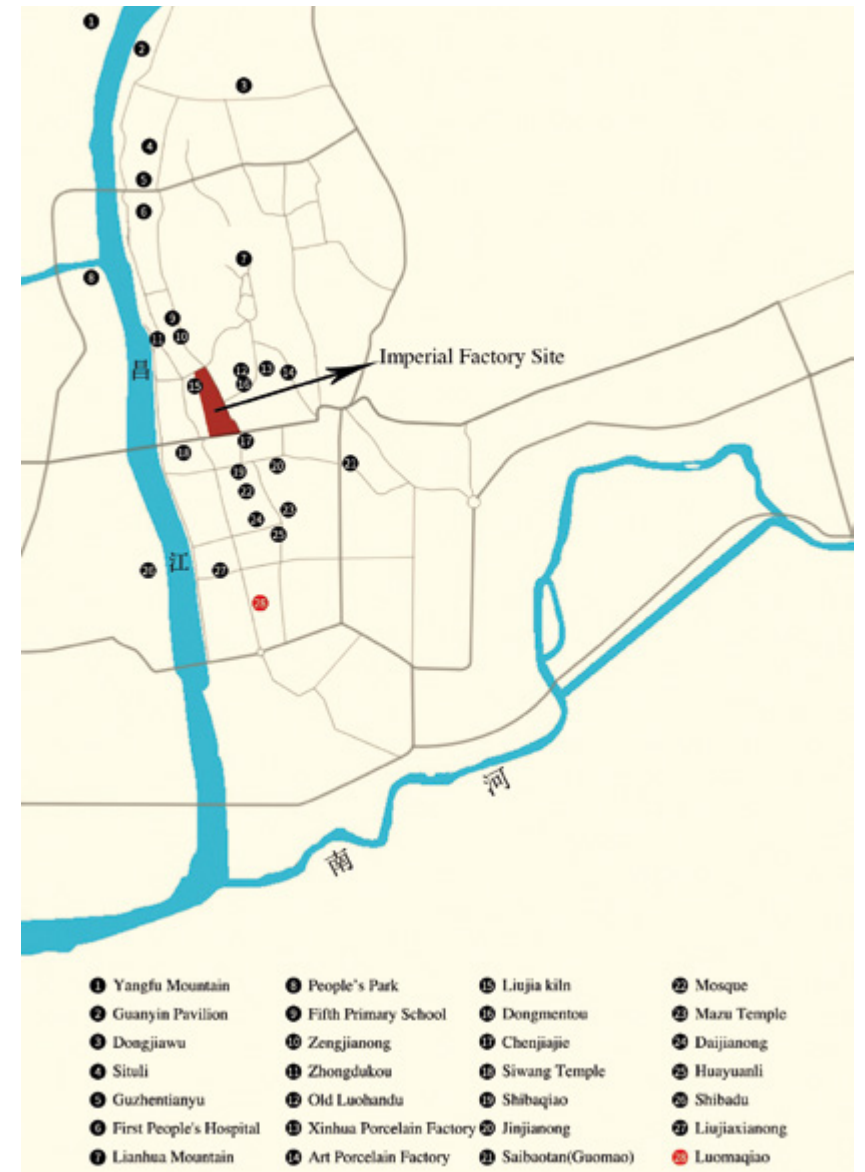


Fig. 2. Map of surveyed and excavated Ming-Qing private kiln sites in the urban area of Jingdezhen, drawn by the author and Li Hongyi.

In recent years, in conjunction with the construction of the Imperial Kiln National Archaeological Site Park and Jingdezhen's World Heritage nomination for its ancient porcelain industry, several additional kiln sites containing Qing-dynasty remains have been formally excavated. These include Mazu (Tianhou) Temple, Dongjialing Mosque, Siwang Temple, Old Luohandu, and Pengjia Shangnong, among others. These excavations have yielded substantial seventeenth-century kiln remains, providing valuable new data for studying Jingdezhen's private kiln production during the Qing dynasty - a subject that had previously received insufficient scholarly attention.

In the eighteenth century, the export of Jingdezhen porcelain developed steadily and eventually reached its peak following the implementation of the 'Canton System' (the One-Port Policy) in 1757 (the 22nd year of Qianlong), which elevated Guangzhou (Canton) to the central position in China's foreign trade.

Between 1685 and 1757, a total of 312 merchant ships from Europe and America sailed to China; from 1758 to 1838, the number of ships trading at the Guangzhou Maritime Customs (Yue Customs) soared to 5,107.¹⁸ The scale of porcelain trade during this era is vividly reflected in the massive quantities of ceramics recovered from shipwrecks dating to the same period.

In 1998, a shipwreck was discovered off the southern coast of Ca Mau Cape, Vietnam, yielding approximately 60,000 pieces of Chinese porcelain - predominantly fine-quality Jingdezhen wares of diverse types and forms. Among the finds were over 20 pieces bearing the marks 'Made during the Yongzheng Reign' or 'Made during the Yongzheng Reign of the Great Qing Dynasty', as well as items inscribed 'Zutangju', probably a workshop at Foshan Shiwan kiln in the South China. These discoveries suggest that the vessel was a merchant ship departing from Guangzhou during the Yongzheng reign (1723–1735), likely bound for Batavia (present-day Jakarta).¹⁹

In September 1745, the Swedish East Indiaman *Götheborg*, sailing from Guangzhou, sank just 900 metres from its destination, the castle of Nya Elfsborg in Gothenburg, Sweden. Beginning in November of that year, and continuing intermittently into the 1990s, portions of its cargo were salvaged. The ship is estimated to have carried around 100 tons of porcelain.²⁰

Another major find is the Geldermalsen (also known as the Nanking Cargo) - a Dutch East India Company ship that sank in 1752 near Indonesia. The vessel carried 203 chests containing over 140,000 pieces of porcelain. The salvaged cargo consisted almost entirely of blue-and-white wares, including a wide variety of dining sets, as well as tea, coffee, and hot chocolate wares (Fig. 3).²¹

Craft Techniques and Product Types

In the eighteenth century, the porcelain industry of Jingdezhen had a highly complete system, with meticulous division of labour and craftsmanship reaching its historical peak. *The Jingdezhen Tao Lu (Records of Jingdezhen Ceramics)*, written by Lan Pu of Jingdezhen in the late Qianlong reign of the Qing dynasty, is the most detailed ancient Chinese text or manual on making porcelain. As early as the nineteenth century, it had been translated into several languages including French, English, and Japanese. The book categorizes porcelain production into five groups - kilns (窑), households (户), workers (工), workshops (作), and families (家) - and provides detailed descriptions of the contents of each category.²²

The book also lists other industries related to porcelain production, such as those dealing with raw materials, fuel, equipment, tools, and packaging materials. In addition, it mentions various groups of people engaged in porcelain packaging, sales, and repair. In terms of sales, there were small-scale businessmen selling porcelain from stalls at Huangjiazhou, large porcelain shops lining the Porcelain Street, and itinerant vendors carrying large baskets to buy and sell wares. Together, these accounts present a complete picture of the porcelain industry's supply, production, and distribution network.

The technological achievements of porcelain production during this period were most notable in kiln-firing techniques. In the seventeenth century, Jingdezhen potters, building upon the traditional gourd-shaped kiln, invented a new type of kiln known as the 'Zhen kiln' (镇窑), also called the 'egg-shaped kiln' due to its oval form (Fig. 4).²³ This kind of kiln became the standard design in Jingdezhen from the eighteenth century onward. It was a semi-downdraft kiln characterized by a tall, wide front end that gradually narrowed toward the rear, ending in a separate chimney as high as the kiln's total length. The kiln body measured 15–20 metres long, with a capacity of 150–200 cubic metres. Each firing could hold 10–15 tons of daily-use porcelain. Because different sections of the kiln had different temperatures when firing, various wares could be fired simultaneously. The kiln typically contained over 40 rows of stacked saggars which were arranged in 24 kiln zones from top to bottom. In short, the egg-shaped kiln had the advantages of short firing time, high output, and low fuel consumption.²⁴ Building such a kiln required strong organizational capacity, refined stacking techniques, and precise control of firing temperature.



Fig. 3. Blue-and-white porcelain recovered from the Dutch East India Company ship Geldermalsen (Nanking Cargo), sunk in 1752.

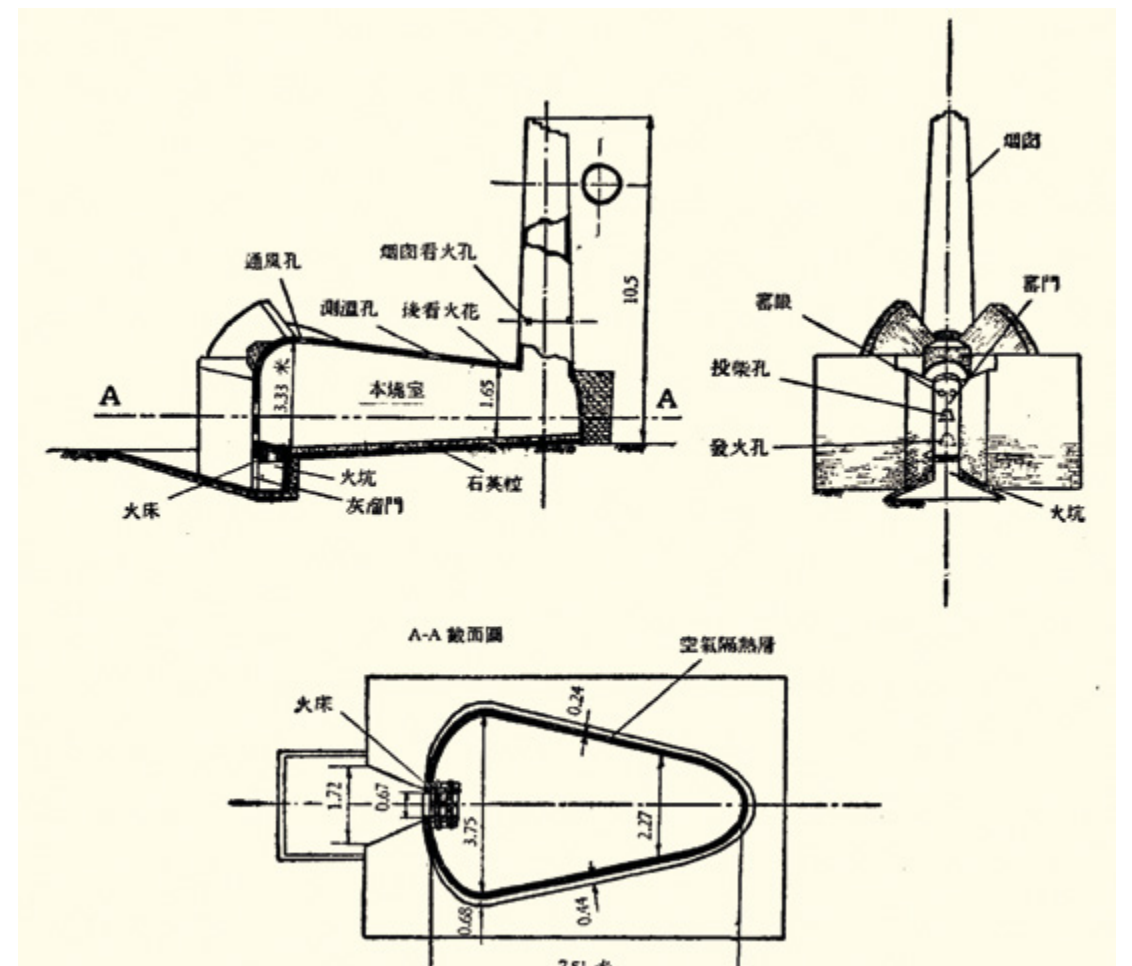


Fig. 4. Schematic diagram of the Zhen kiln (egg-shaped kiln) structure.

As the firing technology of private kilns was already so advanced at this time, capable of meeting the demands for firing all kinds of forms and decorated porcelains, from the early eighteenth century onward, the firing of imperial porcelains was largely entrusted to private kilns. By the Qianlong reign (1735 onward), no kilns were maintained within the Imperial Kiln Factory itself; firing was entirely handled by private workshops. Thus, in 1743 (the eighth year of Qianlong reign), Tang Ying wrote: 'After the porcelain bodies are formed, they are packed in saggars and sent to the kiln households for firing.'²⁵ On 21st November of the same year, in his memorial regarding the snuff bottles made by imperial order, Tang Ying specifically stated that they were 'fired in the coarse firewood-fuelled kilns of private households that produced coarse wares.'²⁶ During the Jiaqing reign, Zheng Tinggui's poem reads: 'Ever since all imperial porcelain was fired in private-operated Baoqing kilns, knowledge of the Lanhuang kiln (that fire colourful porcelain) within the Imperial Kiln Factory complex gradually faded from memory (一自包青充贡御, 无人知有燼横窑)'.²⁷ In this way, the Imperial Kiln Factory effectively became an institution for innovation and research, akin to a modern research institute.²⁸ This also narrowed the gap between the Imperial and private kilns, indirectly promoting the rapid growth of private kiln industries surrounding the Imperial Kiln Factory.

Product Types and Decorative Designs

In the eighteenth century, the types and decorative designs of export porcelains increased dramatically. In addition to blue-and-white wares, many kinds of overglaze-enamel porcelains appeared, including *wuca* (five-colour), *sancai* (three-colour), and *fencai* (famille rose) wares. There were also porcelains featuring complex decorative effects that combined multiple coloured glazes, such as *famille noire* (black-ground overglaze enamel), *famille jaune* (yellow-ground overglaze enamel), and powder blue glaze (Fig. 5).²⁹

Among 4,141 relics excavated from the representative stratum (T2 expansion 3b) at the Luomaqiao kiln site—dated to the Qianlong to Daoguang periods (1736–1850)—the majority were blue-and-white porcelains, totaling 3,754 sherds, or 90.6% of the assemblage. White-glazed porcelain accounted for 2.2%, celadon for 1.3%, and there were smaller quantities of brown-glazed, blue-glazed, and overglaze-polychrome fragments.

Among export porcelains, blue-and-white wares also made up the largest proportion. Compared with domestic wares, export ceramics included more pieces featuring brown glaze on the exterior with blue-and-white decoration on the interior (the so-called 'Batavia ware') as well as more overglaze polychrome wares. According to Berit Wästfelt *et al.*'s statistics on porcelains recovered from the Götheborg shipwreck, of the 2.5 tons of ceramics salvaged between 1986 and 1991 (including 101 complete pieces), blue-and-white porcelains accounted for 51.7%, Batavia wares for 22%, blue-and-white with overglaze enamels for 10.5%, with the remainder consisting of small amounts of other enamelled and coloured-glaze wares.³⁰

In terms of forms, porcelain relics from the eighteenth-century Luomaqiao kiln site are remarkably diverse. Taking blue-and-white wares as an example, there are 17 categories and 79 different forms, mainly consisting of everyday utensils such as bowls, plates, dishes, cups, and jars.

Among export porcelains, as Western enthusiasm for Chinese ceramics grew - and as the demand for dining and drinking utensils increased - a large number of custom-made tablewares began to appear. With the rising popularity in Europe of the three major beverages - tea, coffee, and chocolate - matching porcelain utensils were produced on a massive scale. From the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, Chinese potters initially made small bowls according to European models, but with the introduction of these new drinks, they shifted to produce tea cups, chocolate cups, and coffee cups.³¹



Fig. 5. Blue-splashed ground porcelain Duomu ewer with gilt decoration, 1700-1720. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden Collection (Inventory number: PO 8938).



Fig. 6. Blue and white porcelain saucer recovered from the Swedish East Indiaman Götheborg.

Fig. 7. Kraak porcelain plate recovered from the Wanli shipwreck, Malaysia.



Fig. 8. Blue and white porcelain recovered from the Dutch East India Company ship Geldermalsen (Nanking).

A typical tea or coffee service - comprising a pair of cups and saucers, a sugar bowl, and a tea pot - was called a 'cabaret set', becoming the standard set for enjoying these exotic new beverages.³² As for decorative designs, export porcelains of this period can be roughly divided into three main types: Porcelains entirely decorated with Chinese motifs, indistinguishable from those made for the domestic market (Fig. 6).³³ Porcelains that continue the styles of seventeenth-century export porcelain, such as Kraak ware (Fig. 7) and Transitional style, have persisted in production. This is evidenced by the some Kraak-style porcelain pieces with featuring cartouches or reserved frames recovered from the *Ca Mau* shipwreck off the coast of Vietnam.³⁴ Some vessel forms and decorative styles that continued were similar to those of the Kangxi reign, but the motifs and cobalt tones became finer and more elegant,³⁵ leading to entirely new designs and patterns (Fig. 8).³⁶

Export Customized Porcelain Unearthed from the Luomaqiao Kiln Site

The eighteenth century marked the golden age of European customized porcelain for the Jingdezhen ceramic industry. Although such commissioned wares accounted for only a small proportion of the overall export porcelain output, they were characterized by unique designs, high-quality craftsmanship, and considerable value, making them the most representative export porcelains of the mid-Qing period. The high cost of customized porcelain not only reflected the social status and identity of the individuals or organizations commissioning them, but also mirrored the profound transformations taking place in eighteenth-century Western society - changes that brought about diverse cultural values. The subjects depicted on these porcelains included commemorative themes related to trade, scientific and natural illustrations, Biblical and mythological scenes, as well as armorial and pseudo-armorial designs.³⁷ In addition, numerous countries across the Americas, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and even West Asia also commissioned porcelain from Jingdezhen.

The quantity of export customized porcelain unearthed through formal archaeological excavations at Jingdezhen kiln sites has been relatively limited. At the Luomaqiao kiln site, two notable examples of Qing customized wares are fragments of European export porcelain featuring Willow Pattern and Bencharong wares produced for Thailand.

Willow Pattern Porcelain Fragments

Only two Willow Pattern porcelain fragments were unearthed at the Luomaqiao kiln site: one blue-and-white round scalloped plate and one blue and white rectangular scalloped plate. The blue and white round scalloped plate (Fig. 9) has a round mouth, eight-lobed rim, angular edge, slightly straight wall, and recessed footring. The inner rim is outlined in underglaze blue, with a sheaf-like pattern along the angular edge. The central design depicts the Willow Pattern, including elements such as landscape, willow trees, houses, pavilions, figures, sailboat, and arched bridge. The painting style is rather rough, lacking detailed depiction, and differs somewhat from the standard willow-pattern design (Fig. 10). For example, the birds in the sky are rendered as a single line; buildings are outlined without details; rocks are shaded with blue wash but without texture strokes; the figures on the bridge are missing; and the border pattern has changed from a lozenge-and-cross motif to a grid pattern. Numerous Willow Pattern porcelain pieces were recovered from the wreck of the *Diana* (sunk near Malacca in 1817), whose border resembles that of the Luomaqiao specimen, though of slightly higher quality (Fig. 11). Therefore, the excavated fragment from the kiln site should date roughly to the same period. The blue and white rectangular scalloped plate survives only with the rim, but judging from its shape and border design, it is also likely also to be a willow-pattern piece. Similar to the previous fragment, its decoration is quite simple: the border is first outlined in a blue grid pattern and then filled in with washes. Its production date is approximately the same as the previous example.



Fig. 9. Blue-and-white Willow Pattern plate, circa 1810-1820, excavated from the Luomaqiao kiln site, Jingdezhen.



Fig. 10. Blue-and-white Willow Pattern reticulated basket and stand, c.1800. Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Archaeology and Art at Peking University (Accession number: 2004.0783a/b).



Fig. 11. Blue-and-white Willow Pattern reticulated basket and stand, recovered from the Diana Cargo, sunk in 1817. British Museum Collection (Accession number: 1995,0508.1. a-b).



Fig. 12. Bencharong polychrome covered jar, 1830-1870.
Victoria and Albert Museum Collection (Accession number: C.109&A-1957)



Fig. 13. Bencharong polychrome fragments, 19th century, excavated from the Luomaqiao kiln site, Jingdezhen.

Bencharong Porcelain Fragments

From the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, Siam (modern-day Thailand) commissioned a type of porcelain from China exclusively for royal court use, known as 'Bencharong'. Its origins trace back to the late Ayutthaya Kingdom or the reign of King Rama I in the eighteenth century. Bencharong porcelain is characterized by vibrant overglaze painting in red, yellow, white, black, and green. The vessel shapes resemble traditional Thai household utensils, including covered and uncovered bowls, lidded jars, teapots, teacups, and spoons. The decorative motifs are rich in traditional Thai totemic and religious elements, such as lotus-seated Buddhas, goddesses, dancers, winged figures, sphinx-like creatures, mythical beasts, lotus petals, floral sprays, continuous floral patterns, brocade designs, phoenixes, roosters, dogs, animals, and animal masks (Fig. 12).

The depiction of deities is the most distinctive feature of Bencharong, reflecting Thai beliefs rooted in Buddhism and Hindu mythology. *The phanom* (celestial beings) are the most common male divine figures: they are seated within a halo of lotus petals, with only their white torsos visible, hands pressed together in a gesture of reverence, fingertips pointing upward. They wear petal-shaped necklaces, elaborate jewellery, helmets adorned with floral decorations on both sides, and tiered pointed crowns. Garuda, the mount of the Hindu god Vishnu, was reserved as a royal emblem, depicted as a human-bodied, bird-winged figure exuding power and authority.³⁸

It was traditionally believed that Bencharong porcelain was first produced as plain white ware in China, then shipped to Thailand for painting and sent back to Jingdezhen for firing, and finally re-exported to Thailand. However, the scholar Geng Baochang suggested that if large orders were involved, not all pieces were necessarily painted by Thai artisans. Since overglaze enamels are easily damaged during bulk transport, it is likely that a considerable portion was painted directly in China based on Thai design samples.³⁹

In 2012, excavations at the Luomaqiao kiln site in Jingdezhen unearthed a group of Bencharong porcelain fragments, including bowls, plates, cups, and jar lids decorated with figures, lotuses, scrolling flowers, and floral motifs (Fig. 13). Significantly, both finished and semi-finished pieces were found - many deity faces were left blank, awaiting painting. This archaeological evidence confirms that these porcelains were indeed painted locally in Jingdezhen.⁴⁰ According to other scholars, similar porcelain fragments have also been discovered at sites along the Changjiang River in Jingdezhen.⁴¹

Conclusion

The eighteenth century was a period of vigorous development for Jingdezhen's porcelain industry, marked by an immense scale of production and a large workforce. Specialization and craftsmanship reached unprecedented levels in history. This era also coincided with the peak of maritime trade between China and foreign nations, with the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures profoundly reflected in porcelain ware. In terms of decorative varieties, while blue-and-white porcelain remained prominent, overglaze enamels, monochrome glazes, and more complex comprehensive decorative techniques began to be produced in greater quantities. The range of vessel shapes and patterns also became highly diverse, with a notable increase in the proportion of customized porcelain among export wares, leading to the creation of many entirely new porcelain styles. Overall, the simultaneous advancement in porcelain production - including ceramic administration, output, and quality - and export activities - encompassing trade policies and demand - ushered in the final golden age of ancient Jingdezhen's porcelain industry.

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Jingdezhen blue-and-white cups recovered from the Xiaobaijiao I shipwreck in Ningbo, China, sourced from "Xiaobaijiao I": Excavation Report of a Qing Dynasty Shipwreck Site, Plate VIII: 2.

The Challenge from Afar: Competition Between Chinese and European Porcelain in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century

Dashu Qin

The large-scale export of ancient Chinese porcelain as a commodity via sea routes to overseas markets began in the latter half of the eighth century.¹ Thereafter, the scale and scope of this trade continued to expand. By the fourteenth century, it was distributed widely across East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, reaching a considerable scale, while small quantities also began to reach Europe.² Following the onset of the Age of Discovery, a global trade system emerged, enabling Chinese porcelain to be exported to Europe on a much larger scale. It subsequently reached the Americas, Australia, and other places,³ establishing porcelain as a global commodity.

The First Two Phases of Competition Faced by Chinese Porcelain Exports

Chinese porcelain has long been admired worldwide. Under its influence ceramic production developed in various regions beyond China. At the same time, Chinese porcelain faced three major phases of competition in international markets from ceramics produced outside the country.

The first phase of competition, from the late fourteenth century to the end of the fifteenth century, arose as a result of the Ming government's maritime prohibition policy, which created opportunities for producers in Southeast Asia, particularly in Vietnam and Thailand.⁴ Dr. Roxanna Brown of Bangkok University compiled data on 167 shipwrecks in Southeast Asia from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Her research indicates that prior to 1325, Chinese porcelain held a near-total market share in the region. Between 1368 to 1424, this share declined to 30-40%, and between 1424 to 1487 it fell further to 1-5%, with the remainder occupied by Vietnamese and Thai producers.⁵ Vietnamese imitations of Longquan celadon and blue-and-white porcelain became especially prominent in regional trade in Southeast Asia by the mid-fifteenth century.⁶ With the rise of smuggling trade along China's coastal areas, Jingdezhen's porcelain production recovered from the destruction caused by the peasant uprisings at the end of the Yuan Dynasty. After 1435, Jingdezhen's folk kilns began producing blue-and-white porcelain and rapidly developed.⁷ The market share of maritime trade in Southeast Asia rebounded during the Hongzhi period (1488-1505) (Fig. 1), and by the first year of the Wanli era (1573), China ultimately reasserted its dominance.

In the second phase of competition, during the first half of the seventeenth century, China experienced the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties. In the early Qing period, strict maritime prohibitions and the 'Qinghai' policy were implemented (to besiege the Zheng family who occupied Taiwan, coastal residents were relocated 15-25 kilometers inland). These measures affected the production of porcelain, especially its export overseas.⁸ When the Dutch East India Company encountered difficulties in procuring porcelain from China during periods of civil unrest, it redirected its trade to Japan in order to maintain a stable supply of goods. In doing so, the Company actively encouraged Japanese producers to replicate Chinese wares, either by modelling forms and decorative styles on existing Chinese porcelain or by sending specific objects - such as plates and jars, for imitation.⁹ Japanese potters studied the craftsmanship and techniques of Chinese porcelain production, giving rise to wares such as 'Imari' porcelain,¹⁰ which encompassed both underglaze blue-and-white porcelain and the more richly enamelled polychrome style known as 'Kakiemon' (Fig. 2).

Japanese producers began large-scale porcelain exports in the mid-seventeenth century, which Europeans often mistook for Chinese wares.



Fig. 1. Jingdezhen blue-and-white porcelain recovered from the Lena Shoal shipwreck in the Philippines (late 15th century). Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, Peking University.



Fig. 2. Japanese Kakiemon-style blue and white plate with over-glaze decoration. Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, Peking University. Accession number 2022.0146.



Fig. 3. 'Chinese Imari' porcelain plate with overglazed flower-and-bird decoration, Jingdezhen. Kangxi Period of the Qing Dynasty (1662–1722). Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, Peking University. Accession number 2022.0146.



Fig. 4. 'Chinese Imari' porcelain plate with lotus pattern of blue and white and over-glaze decoration, Jingdezhen. Kangxi Period of the Qing Dynasty (1662–1722). Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University. Accession number 2022.0105.

The export of Chinese porcelain faced renewed competition from its former 'apprentice,' significantly reshaping the dynamics of the global porcelain trade.¹¹ In 1608, the Dutch secured permission to trade with Japan from the shogunate, and in 1609 established a trading post at Hirado. In the decades that followed, the British, Spanish, and Portuguese were expelled, enabling the Dutch to consolidate a monopoly on European trade with Japan. Maintained until 1854, this position made them the only European power able to directly procure Japanese lacquerware, silk, and porcelain.¹² From around 1650, the volume of porcelain exported from Japan through the Dutch East India Company increased steadily, reaching 56,700 pieces by 1659 and marking the transition to large-scale export. In stark contrast, Chinese porcelain exports declined sharply during the same period. In 1644, only two merchants ordered 355,800 pieces for shipment to the Netherlands, yet by 1648 the Company recorded no trade in Chinese porcelain. Although limited quantities continued to circulate in subsequent years, by 1657 the Sino-Dutch porcelain trade had temporarily ceased.¹³

In the twenty-third year of the Kangxi reign (1684), following the recovery of Taiwan, the Kangxi Emperor issued an edict reopening maritime trade in order to restore the livelihoods of coastal populations in Fujian and Guangdong.¹⁴ In the following year, customs offices were established in Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Jiangnan - collectively known as the Four Customs Offices¹⁵ - facilitating the renewed influx of foreign merchants.¹⁶ At this time, the porcelain industry in Jingdezhen, disrupted by dynastic transition and the 'Rebellion of the Three Feudatories', began to recover. As China re-entered international markets, it rapidly reasserted its presence in Southeast Asia.

However, in the Western market dominated by Europe, Japanese porcelain was not so easily displaced, as these finely crafted export wares were highly prized by the European nobility. Over time, these products moved beyond direct imitation of Chinese examples and developed distinct aesthetic characteristics of their own. In response to this shifting demand, Chinese producers began to emulate Japanese styles, resulting in a competitive exchange between Japanese Imari and what came to be known as 'Chinese Imari' (Figs. 3, 4). Due to the established technical advantages of Jingdezhen porcelain, the imitated 'Chinese Imari' not only featured more refined decoration and thinner bodies, but was also produced at a lower cost, resulting in higher sales. Records from the Dutch East India Company indicate that in 1729 alone, approximately 191,000 pieces of 'Chinese Imari' were shipped from Guangdong, significantly undermining the export market for Japanese porcelain. Although Japanese producers were aware of the underlying constraints - including comparatively less advanced firing techniques, limited development of raw material production, and reliance on Chinese cobalt imports - high production costs continued to keep prices elevated. Records of the Dutch East India Company frequently note dissatisfaction with these conditions, which at times resulted in financial losses. Consequently, the Company gradually reduced its imports of Japanese Imari porcelain and ultimately terminated its official trade with Japan in 1757. As a result, Japanese porcelain largely withdrew from international competition, allowing Chinese porcelain to re-establish its dominance in maritime trade.

The Competition Between Chinese and European Porcelain

Before the 'Age of Discovery', European countries had only a vague understanding of China. In 1514, the Portuguese made initial contact, establishing early maritime trade routes between China and Europe. These connections gradually intensified, and Chinese goods - including porcelain - were increasingly transported to European markets.¹⁷ Chinese porcelain, especially Jingdezhen's blue and white and polychrome wares, began to be officially exported in large quantities in the sixteenth century.



Fig. 5. Dutch Delftware imitating Chinese Ming dynasty blue-and-white porcelain. Collection of Koninklijke Porceleyne Fles, Delft.

These imports quickly attracted widespread admiration among European aristocracies, often including commissions from royal courts. However, due to China's maritime trade restrictions during this period, the volume of porcelain exported to Europe remained limited. At that time, Europeans could be said to have 'received all Chinese porcelain, regardless of type,' and although the quantity was small, it was highly cherished.¹⁸ In the seventeenth century, as exports of Chinese porcelain to Europe increased, the Dutch East India Company began to customize certain shapes and patterns to meet the needs of European daily life and dining habits. Such wares were produced to order in kilns at Jingdezhen, as well as in Fujian and Guangdong.¹⁹ Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, substantial volumes of Chinese porcelain were shipped to Europe;²⁰ estimates suggest that the Dutch East India Company alone imported at least 43 million pieces.²¹

European admiration for, and imitation of Chinese porcelain has a long history. As early as the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century, Dutch potters had attempted to replicate blue and white wares. In the early seventeenth century, as the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty and subsequent maritime restrictions disrupted Chinese exports, the flow of porcelain to Europe was significantly reduced. This created conditions for the rapid expansion of ceramic production centres such as Delft in the Netherlands. Although constrained by limited resources and technology, seventeenth century European workshops were unable to produce true porcelain; nevertheless, faience production reached a considerable scale. By around 1680, Delft alone was producing at least 300,000 pieces annually.²² However, these European imitations of Chinese porcelain achieved only superficial resemblance; in technical terms, they remained earthenware, largely due to a lack of understanding of the clay composition required for true porcelain (Fig. 5).

Following a decade of experimentation, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (1651-1708) and his assistant Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682-1719) succeeded in developing a viable formula for porcelain in 1709, under the patronage of Augustus II Fryderyk Monchy. Soon after the Dresden laboratory began production, the first wares were sold at the Leipzig Easter Fair in 1710, marking the establishment of true hard-paste porcelain in Europe, known as Meissen porcelain²³ (Fig. 6). While it initially drew closely on Chinese models (Fig. 7), Meissen also developed distinctive forms and decorative styles of its own (Fig. 8), enabling it to gain a rapid foothold in the European market and challenge the long-standing dominance of Chinese porcelain.



Fig. 6. Meissen three-footed teapot (commonly known as the 'Strawberry Egg'), c.1725. Collection of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.



Fig. 7. Meissen Porcelain with celadon ground and famille rose reserved panel, c. 1730. Collection of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.



Fig. 8. Meissen porcelain from the first half of the 18th century. Collection of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.



Fig. 9. Porcelain produced by the Vienna Royal Porcelain Manufactory in the 18th century. Private collection, London.

Royal Patronage and the Emergence of European Porcelain Factories

As Europe's first royal porcelain manufactory, the Meissen Porcelain Factory not only pioneered the development of hard-paste porcelain but also influenced the establishment of similar royal manufactories across Europe, including in France, Italy, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Among the most notable were the Imperial Vienna Porcelain Manufactory in Austria (Fig. 9) and the Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory in France (Fig. 10). These institutions mastered new porcelain-making techniques, benefited from direct royal patronage, and produced a wide range of refined wares. Their stylistic approaches varied: some continued to emulate Chinese models, others followed Meissen prototypes, while many developed distinctive aesthetic identities of their own.

In a short time, many high-grade porcelain varieties continuously emerged from such European manufactories.²⁴ Royal patronage not only provided substantial financial support but also introduced more systematic modes of production. At the Meissen Porcelain Factory, for example, work was organised through an early form of division of labour resembling an assembly-line system, accompanied by meticulous archival practices. All experiments and technical innovations were carefully recorded, and the factory today preserves over ten thousand production records dating back to its foundation, documenting body and glaze compositions as well as vessel forms. This accumulated knowledge enabled subsequent production to build directly upon earlier experimentation and refinement. At the same time, long-established European traditions of sculpture and oil painting significantly influenced porcelain production. Following the development of hard-paste porcelain, figural and sculptural wares quickly emerged, while both blue and white and polychrome porcelains increasingly reflected painterly effects associated with oil painting (see Fig. 11). These aesthetic and technical adaptations enhanced the appeal of porcelain, contributing to its strong reception among European aristocratic and royal patrons.

In contrast, from the latter half of the seventeenth century, porcelain production in Jingdezhen underwent a pronounced division of labour, often regarded as an early form of industrialization.



Fig. 10. Blue-glazed gilt-painted lidded double-handled vase, Sèvres Manufactory, about 1765–1770. Inv: C270. The Wallace Collection, London.



Fig. 11. *The Rifleman's Meal*, 1891, after Bortholomeus van der Heist (Haarlem, 1613-1670) 36-tile painting, which was presented to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany in 1891 by Queen Regent Emma. Collection of Koninklijke Porceleynse Fles, Delft.



Fig. 12 Processed porcelain stone and Kaolin (petuntse) produced in Jingdezhen.

The Jingdezhen town area (comprising approximately 13 kiln sites) was primarily responsible for forming and firing processes, while raw materials were processed into 'dun' (Fig. 12) in Gaoling, located about 50 kilometres away. In addition, specialised timber yards situated upstream along the Changjiang River prepared fuel wood, which was then transported to the town via rafts.²⁵ However, production in the town area was still organized around individual small workshops. For example, during the Daoguang period (1821-1850), there were approximately 280 kilns operating in Jingdezhen.²⁶ The production in these workshops was generally based on the master-apprentice model. Although some technological innovations emerged in the eighteenth century, their development was relatively limited and gradual. In organisational and technological terms, Jingdezhen increasingly lagged behind European porcelain manufactories, particularly royal factories. Following the emergence of hard-paste porcelain production in Europe in the early eighteenth century, European manufactories expanded rapidly within a few decades, and domestic porcelain increasingly replaced imports, leading to a swift reconfiguration of the high-end market in Europe.

The Formation of Competition and China's Imitation

By the second half of the eighteenth century, Chinese export porcelain faced increasing competition from locally produced European wares and, in response, began to imitate European design. At this time, European porcelain remained relatively expensive, whereas Chinese export wares were more affordable and could be readily adapted to specific European requirements in form and decoration. Consequently, European markets continued to import substantial quantities of Chinese porcelain as a more affordable alternative. In the Netherlands, for example, the growing popularity of European-made porcelain in the latter half of the eighteenth century did not eliminate demand for Chinese exports. Although British demand had begun to decline, orders from China remained considerable; in 1780 alone, approximately 800,000 pieces of porcelain were still commissioned from China.²⁷

Starting in the 1840s, Chinese porcelain increasingly imitated the floral motifs and figural scene compositions popular in Meissen wares. This included not only the adoption of bouquet-style decoration developed at Meissen, known as 'Manierblumen', in terms of colour palette and arrangement, but also a shift in painting technique. Departing from the traditional Chinese method of outlining forms and filling broad colour areas, artisans instead employed fine, hard brushwork to render individual flowers with greater precision. The powder-blue Western figure scene cup and bouquet-pattern cup (Figs. 13, 14) in the collection of the Peking University Museum not only reproduce central motifs derived from early Meissen porcelain of the 1720s - particularly harbour and trade scenes, but also incorporate surrounding Baroque gilt



Fig. 13. Jingdezhen cup with European figure scene, early Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty (1736-1795). Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, Peking University. Accession number 2022.0158.



Fig. 14. Jingdezhen cup with 'Manierblumen' floral bouquet pattern, early Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty (1736-1795). Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, Peking University. Accession number 2004.0786.



Fig. 15. Jingdezhen blue-and-white teapot, Qianlong Period of Qing Dynasty. Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University. Accession number 2004.0792.

scrollwork known as the 'whirlpool vine pattern' (Laub und Bandelwerk), which was widely used in Meissen decoration between 1720 and 1740.²⁸ Another example features the Manierblumen bouquet motif developed by the Meissen Porcelain Factory.

In addition to decorative motifs, Chinese porcelain also began to imitate European vessel forms, including teapots and coffee pots associated with Meissen production. By the eighteenth century, tea consumption in England had become highly developed, giving rise to a wide range of refined porcelain tea wares and new vessel types. The Qianlong blue-and-white teapot in the collection of the Peking University Art Museum (Fig. 15) departs from the traditional spherical Chinese form, instead adopting features characteristic of British teapots, including a cylindrical body, leaf-shaped handle, and strawberry-shaped lid. Large-scale dining wares for European banquet use were also key objects of imitation in Chinese export porcelain during this period. Examples include the Qianlong blue and white openwork fruit basket (Fig. 16), and the meat platter (Fig. 17) both in the collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology at Peking University. A range of specialised domestic objects tailored to European habits were also produced, such as bidets - first developed in seventeenth century France and later widely used across Europe and parts Central and South America, as well as stationery boxes for pens, ink, and related writing materials.

It is worth noting that many of these forms were originally derived from European metalware, particularly silverware. However, unlike earlier periods of bespoke export production, Qianlong-period and later Chinese export porcelain increasingly sought to closely replicate European ceramic forms and decorative schemes. This shift was driven by the need to compete directly with European manufactories in a market that was becoming progressively more contested and, in some sectors, declining.²⁹ In addition, porcelain animal and figural sculptures formed an important category within European production, and during the Qianlong period Chinese export porcelain increasingly included figurines modelled after European examples.³⁰



Fig. 16. Blue-and-white hollowed-out fruit basket, Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty. Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, Peking University.



Fig. 17. Large blue-and-white octagonal plate with figure decoration, Qianlong Period of the Qing Dynasty. Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, Peking University.



Fig. 18. Small dish, porcelain, Man in Pavilion pattern. One of the earliest printed transfer designs produced by the Worcester porcelain, 1758-1760. The Holdway Collection.

The Technological Development and Production Scale Expansion of European Porcelain Factories

In Britain, the production of relatively inexpensive ceramics for the emerging middle class was concentrated in porcelain and earthenware manufactories, particularly in north Staffordshire, which underwent rapid industrialisation in the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1757, the Worcester porcelain manufactory developed transfer-printing techniques, enabling the efficient reproduction of underglaze blue-and-white designs (Fig. 18). This process was significantly more economical than hand-painting, strengthening the competitiveness of British wares against Chinese imports. By 1791, the British East India Company ceased importing Chinese porcelain, redirecting its commercial focus toward the more profitable tea trade. The resulting absence of affordable, high-quality Chinese export ware further facilitated the expansion and consolidation of north Staffordshire's ceramics industry.

In the 1790s, the Spode factory adapted the 'Willow Pattern' from Chinese export porcelain to create one of the most popular transfer-printed designs. Through mass production enabled by transfer-printing technology, the motif became widely accessible to Europe's middle class and ordinary households, thereby regaining and expanding its popularity. Numerous British manufactories subsequently reproduced Willow Pattern wares across a wide range of tableware forms, further diversifying its colour variations and applications. Technological innovation, market expansion, and the widespread circulation of these designs collectively drove the rapid development of the British ceramics industry, while transfer-printed patterns became increasingly varied and sophisticated. This shift in production and consumption contributed to the gradual decline of Chinese porcelain in the European market for everyday domestic wares.

Market Competition

In the eighteenth century, the European porcelain industry made significant advances in the application of new technologies and the development of recognisable branded products, whereas the Chinese porcelain industry continued to operate largely through traditional small-scale workshops, intermediaries, and merchant networks.³¹ As a result, it did not transition towards large-scale industrial production. The subsequent loss of European and American markets, combined with broader political and economic instability, increasingly undermined the competitiveness of Chinese export porcelain in the nineteenth century. Chinese wares steadily lost market share



Fig. 19. European sherds excavated from 18th and 19th-century occupation at the sites of Mambui and Malindi Old Town in Kenya by the Peking University archaeological team.

not only in Europe but also in other regions of global trade, where they were gradually replaced by inexpensive European transfer-printed ceramics.³²

Archaeological evidence from East African coastal sites indicates a marked decline in the proportion of Chinese ceramics after the mid-eighteenth century. In nineteenth century surface assemblages from coastal Kenya, as well as in stratified deposits excavated at Mambui and Malindi old town sites, European transfer-printed wares after the eighteenth century (Fig.19), become increasingly dominant, signalling the consolidation of European ceramics in the East African market. These findings reflect a broader shift in global trade. Chinese export porcelain, produced largely through small-scale workshop systems, was unable to compete with the efficiency of industrialised European production. Its remaining advantage lay primarily in price, yet this too was eroded following the development of transfer-printing techniques, which significantly reduced production costs and brought European wares closer to Chinese price levels. As a result, Chinese porcelain progressively lost both high-end and low-end markets in Europe, while also being displaced in parts of Africa and the Americas. Meanwhile, East Asian markets were increasingly supplied by the porcelain industries of the Korean Peninsula and Japan, particularly after Japan's adoption of modern industrial production techniques in the nineteenth century. Viewed in this context, China's position in global ceramic competition was substantially diminished.

Fortunately, while China lost significant market share in Europe and Africa, new opportunities emerged in regions such as the Americas and Australia alongside the expansion of global integration. As early as the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company had already introduced Chinese porcelain to the American continent, where it was also incorporated into broader commercial networks, including the tobacco trade.³³ Starting from the eighteenth century, Chinese porcelain circulated widely in early colonial port cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia through the trade networks of the British East India Company. At the same time, American consumers acquired wares indirectly via British factories and agents, or placed bespoke orders through intermediary channels connected to China. Following the independence of the United States in 1776, direct trade in porcelain between the United States and China was established and rapidly expanded.³⁴

However, by the late Qing dynasty, this trade had entered a phase of rapid decline. The return of the American merchant vessel *China Queen* from Guangzhou in 1784 marked the beginning of direct Sino-American trade,

which expanded quickly, with porcelain becoming one of the main imported goods in the United States. Charles Waln Morgan, a porcelain merchant from Philadelphia, wrote: 'Chinese goods (tea, porcelain, silk) have become a necessity in America, their importance almost equal to that of bread.'³⁵ By 1796, porcelain accounted for around 15% of American cargo imports from China, rising to 24% by 1818.³⁶ Demand remained strong, particularly for famille rose wares, while large quantities of utilitarian blue-and-white porcelain were shipped as ballast.³⁷ Yet this expansion was accompanied by a marked decline in quality. From body and glaze to painted decoration, standards deteriorated, and designs became increasingly simplified, producing what is often termed the 'Guangdong style.'³⁸ Archaeological finds from an 1828 building site in California closely correspond with contemporary shipping records, illustrating the typical character of Chinese export porcelain reaching the United States at this time.³⁹ Production networks themselves remained resilient: greenware produced in Jingdezhen, famille rose decoration executed in Guangzhou and surrounding areas, and the broader Jingdezhen - Guangdong trade system all continued to operate at scale.⁴⁰ Exports of Chinese porcelain to the United States reached a peak around 1820. Notably, the American merchant vessel *Caledonia* transported a substantial cargo of porcelain from Guangzhou in 1817–1818, from which the merchants Robert Waln, John C., and William H. Smith together purchased some 3,000 boxes.⁴¹

In the early nineteenth century, the British manufactory Spode - characterised by improved quality, reduced costs, and a wide range of styles - expanded its trade with the United States. In comparison, the declining quality of Chinese export porcelain became increasingly evident, weakening its competitiveness.⁴² Shipping records, for example, indicate a marked reduction in the number of vessels travelling between Guangzhou and California during the 1830s.

In the 1840s, the Opium Wars and the opening of additional treaty ports further transformed China's foreign trade patterns, allowing British goods to fill the space once occupied by Chinese exports. Contemporary shipping data illustrates this shift: in 1840, the vessel *Albert* brought to the United States only 60 sets of cup-and-saucer sets of 'painted Teas,' 121 sets of 'fancy chambers,' 504 sets of 'fancy painted bowls,' 240 sets of 'fancy qt. Bowls,' and 54 sets of 'painted pitchers,' - while the majority of its cargo consisted of British ceramics. The following year, Captain Henry Delano Fitch recorded purchasing just 18 Chinese cups for a total of \$3.75, underscoring the reduced presence and value of such goods. At the same time, domestically produced porcelain in the United States began to supply the local market, leading to a gradual decline in the porcelain trade between China and the United States. 'During the 1833 to 1834 trade quarter, only 4 to 5 out of 43 merchant ships returning to the United States from Guangzhou were carrying porcelain, totaling only 1,322 boxes. Most merchant ships no longer purchased Chinese porcelain to take back home.'⁴³ This evidence points to a clear decline in both the volume and popularity of Chinese exports. The downward trend in the porcelain trade is further illustrated by individual case studies. For instance, the collection inherited by José Andrés Sepúlveda from the San Capistrano Mission, comprising wares dating from approximately 1837 to 1864, reveals a marked imbalance: around 50% of the ceramics were of English origin, while only 3% were Chinese.⁴⁴ Following its expansion into the Americas, China also entered the Australian market. For a time, the development of these new markets helped to offset losses in Europe. However, they too were increasingly shaped by the growing presence of European porcelain, as competition in the ceramics trade extended to a truly global scale.

While Chinese porcelain steadily lost ground in the global markets, it retained a strong presence in Southeast Asia, where it continued to achieve substantial sales in the late Qing Dynasty. Exports to the region even increased in



Fig. 20. Chinese porcelain recovered from the Desaru shipwreck, c.1845. Collection of the Penang Ferry Museum, Malaysia.

volume, though they were increasingly dominated by lower-quality, utilitarian wares. Contemporary accounts note that 'Fujian and Guangdong merchants sent thousands of wooden sailing ships each year to major ports in Southeast Asia, and also traveled between various islands to conduct extensive inter-island trade. Coarse porcelain from Chinese folk kilns was an essential commodity.'⁴⁵

In 1821, the British House of Lords Special Committee mentioned the trade of Chinese junks in Indonesia in a report on foreign trade: 'The export goods from China mainly consisted of coarse ceramics, silk fabrics, tea, furniture, and other everyday items used by Chinese immigrants.'⁴⁶ A key development during this period was the accelerating decline of Jingdezhen's porcelain industry, particularly from the Xianfeng period (1851–1861) onward. Although Jingdezhen continued to produce low-end wares for export, an increasing number of kilns specialising in even cheaper ceramics emerged along the coastal regions of Fujian and Guangdong. These included the Dongxi and Dehua kilns in southern Fujian, the Shiqiao kilns in the Pearl River Delta, numerous blue and white porcelain kilns represented by the Dapu 'bowl kilns' in Hong Kong, and the Yixing kilns in Jiangsu, known for purple clay teapots. The large-scale production and export of these kilns have largely replaced Jingdezhen's position in the export market.

This shift is also evident in several shipwrecks from the period. The 'Desaru wreck,' discovered approximately two kilometres off the coast near the Southeast Fishermen's Museum in Johor, at the northern end of the Malay Peninsula, dates to 1845 and contained over 70,000 pieces of coarse ceramic wares (Fig. 20). These included around 50,000 porcelain spoons,⁴⁷ along with ceramic jars, basins, and chamber pots produced in Yixing and other regional centres, as well as an additional 200–300 relatively well-preserved Yixing purple clay teapots and a considerable number of purple clay fragments.

The Tek Sing shipwreck, which ran aground on the Belvidere Reef in

Indonesian waters, offers further evidence of this pattern. According to the East India Pilot by the Dutch navigator Hassberg, the vessel carried more than 2,000 migrants from Fujian's Minnan region en route to Southeast Asia. When it sank in 1822, during the second year of the Daoguang reign, the ship was transporting over one million ceramic objects, of which approximately 350,000 were later salvaged. The recovered cargo consisted predominantly of utilitarian wares, including large quantities of blue-and-white porcelain from the Dehua kilns (Figs. 21, 22) and Yixing purple clay teapots.⁴⁸

Further evidence is provided by a series of Qing-period shipwrecks. The Xiaobai Reef I wreck (see page 79), discovered in the waters of the Yushan Islands off Xiangshan County,⁴⁹ Ningbo, along with the Yangtze River Estuary II wreck,⁵⁰ and mid- to late-Qing shipwrecks in the Xisha Sea area - such as Yinyu VI, Beijiao I, Shankou I, Jinyu I, Langhua Reef II, and Nanshazhou I - have all yielded large quantities of ceramics. These assemblages are dominated by wares from Dehua, Dongxi, and Shiqiao kilns, as well as Yixing zisha objects, as well as some Jingdezhen porcelain.⁵¹ In Guangdong, a large number of blue-and-white porcelain kilns emerged, including those associated with the Tai Po bowl kilns in Hong Kong.⁵² These kilns are spread across the Chaozhou region in eastern Guangdong,⁵³ the Pearl River Delta, the Shaoguan region, and the Leizhou Peninsula, with over a hundred kilns known to date.⁵⁴ Their products mainly consist of coarse, simply formed blue-and-white wares. These porcelain pieces, in addition to being used by the local populace around the production areas, were primarily exported to Southeast Asia. Combined with the unusually prosperous production of the Shawan Kiln at this time, a pattern of exports centered around Guangzhou and Shantou in Guangdong was established.

In the late Qing dynasty, migration from Fujian and Guangdong to Southeast Asia intensified, giving rise to a sustained pattern of overseas settlement. The vessel *Taixing*, often referred to as the 'Chinese Titanic,' carried over 2,000 migrants and has come to symbolise this large-scale movement of people across the region. This migration contributed to the formation of extensive overseas Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia. These communities played a significant role in local economic development and became the primary consumers of the abundant lower-grade porcelain produced in Fujian and Guangdong. From the *Taixing* wreck, the Xiaobai Reef I shipwreck, and a series of late Qing shipwrecks in the Xisha Islands shows that cargoes frequently included stone and ceramic objects such as ancestral tablets, Buddhist and Taoist figures, and tombstones. These items were typically custom-ordered from migrants' places of origin, reflecting the continuation of traditional cultural and ritual practices within overseas Chinese communities.⁵⁵ The discovery of a chamber pot from the aforementioned Desaru shipwreck indicates that overseas Chinese communities also ordered a wide range of everyday necessities from their places of origin, suggesting that coarse porcelain produced in coastal kiln regions was widely used by Chinese residents in Southeast Asia. Across the region, Chinese clan temples frequently incorporated glazed architectural components produced in Shawan and Chaozhou. During this period, the Shawan kilns exported entire consignments of architectural ceramics and ancestral hall utensils, contributing to the construction of numerous family shrines and temples throughout Southeast Asia - many of which remain extant today.⁵⁶ Similarly, other daily-use utensils and items with distinct Lingnan characteristics were also extensively sold to Southeast Asia.⁵⁷ Although these wares were not always recorded in official trade statistics, they nevertheless played an important role in sustaining the large-scale circulation of Chinese ceramics during the late Qing period.

During this period, exported porcelain was characterised by a general decline in quality alongside a significant increase in production volume. It is important to note that export quantities in this phase in fact exceeded those of the Qianlong period. From the late nineteenth century onwards, particularly in its final decades, the expansion of international exchange also stimulated the early processes of modernisation within China's porcelain industry.



Figs. 21. Dehua blue-and-white saucers recovered from the *Tek Sing* shipwreck. Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, Peking University.



Figs. 22. Dehua blue-and-white saucers recovered from the *Tek Sing* shipwreck. Collection of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, Peking University.

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China in Staffordshire, or 'Willow' Pattern's English Roots

David Barker

Few Europeans visited China during the eighteenth century, and yet a fascination with this far-off land and its civilisation had a profound influence upon European art and manufacture. Those who did visit China were diplomats, missionaries or the merchants, captains and crews of ships of the European East India Companies¹ which had been trading with China since the beginning of the seventeenth century, and no traders ventured further inland than the port of Canton where trade with westerners was closely controlled by Chinese Imperial authorities.

East India Company employees doubtless had tales to tell, but it was the range of exotic goods brought into Europe by these companies which fuelled this fascination with China and all things Chinese. These included spices and tea, as well as textiles, lacquerware and porcelains, all lavishly decorated with exotic plants, trees, birds and animals, or with outlandish figures in strange costumes and carrying parasols in fantastic landscapes dominated by stretches of water, bridges and strange multi-storey buildings. These decorative subjects became a source both of fascination to the consumer, conjuring up a fantastical vision of the East, and of inspiration for the manufacturers of a range of goods, including ceramics.²

Porcelains first appeared in Europe in quantity during the seventeenth century but were initially expensive and hence exclusive. However, as greater quantities were brought into Europe during the early eighteenth century, both the price and status of porcelain changed. Greater availability resulted in lower prices, giving a wider section of society access to these imported wares. The expanding middling classes could contemplate the purchase of both tea and table wares for daily use, rather than for display, with porcelains in blue painted designs: these were the cheapest porcelains, mass-produced in China for the European export trade.³

The decoration of Chinese porcelain, whether blue-and-white or polychrome, provided a wealth of subjects which could be copied by European manufacturers. Manufacturers of tin-glazed earthenwares in both the Netherlands and Britain did just that, as well as developing their own interpretations of these patterns. Britain developed a significant tin-glaze industry based in major seaport towns, and manufacturers there were producing wares decorated in a Chinese style from the 1740s, coincidental with the first porcelain production in England. These tin-glazed earthenwares were, however, a poor substitute for the fine, translucent porcelains which continued to maintain their exclusivity and to command high prices.

The potential rewards for developing a porcelain body (a secret recipe closely guarded by the Chinese), inspired manufacturers in Europe to attempt to replicate this. Alongside the many failed attempts, there were successes and the manufacture of both true, hard-paste, porcelains and imitation, or soft-paste, porcelains was well under way by the early eighteenth century, first at the royal factories of Meissen and Vincennes (later Sèvres) where the reflected prestige to the monarch of producing porcelain outweighed the cost to his treasury of the heavy subsidies needed for success. Other European porcelain factories rapidly followed their lead, spreading the knowledge of porcelain making - and the awareness of Chinese-style designs - across the Continent. Porcelain manufacturers either copied the designs of imported Chinese porcelains in under-glaze blue or over-glaze polychrome, or adapted them to create 'chinoiserie' - the fanciful European interpretation of Chinese design. All of the key elements of the Chinese designs were retained, and yet their visual extravagance and charm were exaggerated in this new style to complement the contemporary European rococo style.



Fig. 1. Red stoneware teapot made by the Elers brothers, Newcastle-under-Lyme; slip-cast with mould-applied decoration; 1690–1697. Acquired with assistance from the V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Art Fund. NM1994.17. Brampton Museum & Art Gallery, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council.

Soft-paste porcelain was first successfully produced in England in the mid-1740s with the two most successful factories being based in London at Chelsea and Bow. The latter factory styled itself the 'New Canton' and included numerous direct copies of Chinese and Japanese porcelains amongst its products. While much of the decoration could be described as chinoiserie, many of the designs used were not adapted from decorated Chinese porcelains but were instead taken from printed sources - which were themselves fanciful interpretations of Chinese scenes and subjects. Porcelain production followed at Limehouse, Vauxhall and Isleworth in London, while in the provinces factories were established at Worcester, Bristol, Liverpool, Derby and Longton Hall in north Staffordshire.

North Staffordshire had a thriving pottery industry in the 1690s, benefitting from the ready availability of coal and a range of suitable clays. More than 60 manufacturers produced slipwares, mottled wares and other earthenwares which were widely distributed throughout the country, parts of Europe and the transatlantic colonies.⁴ These wares were 'traditional' products devoid of influence from Chinese porcelain imports. However, around 1690, John Philip and David Elers, silversmith brothers originally from the Netherlands but more recently from London, arrived in north Staffordshire at Bradwell, in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and commenced production of a range of very fine tea wares and mugs in an unglazed red stoneware (Fig. 1). These were closely based upon the Chinese Yixing red stonewares and the copies made in the Netherlands by Arij de Milde in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The quality of the Elers' wares was acknowledged at the time with teapots said to have cost between twelve and twenty-four shillings each.⁵ Unsurprisingly, a number of pieces survive today, most decorated with small applied reliefs after the manner of the Yixing and de Milde wares, many with impressed pseudo-Chinese seal marks, but they differ from the originals in the manner of their production. They were slip-cast, and almost certainly what drew the Elers to Bradwell was the local clay which has been shown to be suitable for slip-casting.⁶ For reasons unknown, production at Bradwell was short-lived and the brothers had left the area by 1698.⁷ The extent of their legacy - if any - is unclear, but it was another three decades or more before anything comparable was made in north Staffordshire.



Fig. 2. Glazed red earthenware teapot; 1720–1750. Image © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

The rapid expansion of the Staffordshire ceramics industry from c.1720 occurred largely as a result of the growing popularity of the new hot drinks, tea, coffee and chocolate, and the need for suitable and affordable vessels from which to consume them. Technical developments, such as the use of the great wheel, lathe turning, the twice firing of earthenwares, and the better preparation of clays and clay bodies, combined with the increased use of white-firing ball clays brought into the area from Dorset and Devon, transformed both the fortunes of the north Staffordshire industry and the appearance of its products. Within a few years, the standard potter's repertoire included a range of new forms: teapots (Fig. 2) and stands, coffee pots, chocolate pots, handle-less tea bowls, cups, saucers, slop bowls, sugar boxes, canisters, spoon trays, and all other items required for the preparation and consumption of these new beverages. Nevertheless, painted decoration of wares in a Chinese style, of the sort widely used on European tin-glazed wares and porcelains, was slow to take hold in Staffordshire.

Most Staffordshire manufacturers would have been well-aware of the appeal to their customers of forms and decoration which copied or 'reworked' Chinese originals, but initially they lacked the means, materials and technical skills to exploit the potential which they offered. The coloured-bodied earthenwares made from iron-rich local clays, which were amongst the Staffordshire industry's main products, were not suitable media for painted decoration. It was not until the mid-1740s that painted decoration came to be used on the other significant item of local production, white salt-glazed stoneware. Being made from white-firing ball clays and having a whitish appearance this ware was suitable for painted decoration over-glaze and Chinese style subjects, with figures and flowers, were amongst those commonly used.

Porcelain, by contrast, with its ability to successfully carry under-glaze patterns in blue copied from the Chinese, was not a major item of production in north Staffordshire in the mid-eighteenth century. Nevertheless, both the failed attempt to produce soft-paste porcelain in Newcastle-under-Lyme in c.1746, and the short-lived venture at Longton Hall (1751-1760) exploited the potential of the genre to the full with wares decorated with exotic flowers, landscapes and buildings in a Chinese style in both blue and, at Longton Hall, in polychrome over-glaze colours (Figs. 3, 4).



Fig. 3. Experimental porcelain mug with under-glaze painted Chinese-style landscape pattern, c.1746, excavated at the 'Pomona' site, Lower Street, Newcastle-under-Lyme. Image courtesy of Brampton Museum & Art Gallery, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council.



Fig. 4. Soft-paste porcelain mug with blue-painted decoration; Longton Hall, 1751–1760. Image courtesy of Bonhams.

These early attempts to produce porcelain in north Staffordshire are significant. The exploration of new clay bodies and firing requirements is testament to the skill and ingenuity of local manufacturers, but also a reminder of their engagement in, and involvement with, the wider field of ceramic production in the country. North Staffordshire may be almost 180 miles from London, but it was far from isolated. Potters moved around, worked in different factories, observed and learned from their experiences, and subsequently brought home new ideas, skills and techniques. Moreover, they knew where to locate the skills that were lacking. For example, there was no tradition of painting on ceramics in the north Staffordshire industry at the time that porcelain was first produced there, requiring the recruitment of painters who had learned and developed their skills elsewhere. This appears to have been achieved with relative ease.

While the early Staffordshire earthenwares and stonewares were not suitable vehicles for painted decoration, nonetheless Chinese-style designs could be accommodated in the relief decoration of vessels made by press-moulding or slip casting. A limited range of tea ware forms was produced by a small number of mostly anonymous manufacturers, but these were not copies of Chinese forms.

Rather the modellers' inspiration came from published European works, including the popular travel book *Embassy from the East-India Company ...* by Johan Nieuhof. This was first published in Dutch in 1665, with an English edition appearing in 1669.⁸ It contained more than a hundred engravings depicting the landscapes, cities, and buildings, the Old Viceroy of Kanton, the Young Viceroy of Kanton, ambassadors, various Chinese men and women, and a variety of plants and animals. A small number of these scenes feature in the moulded panels of slip-cast hexagonal teapots in glazed red earthenware and white salt-glazed stoneware (Figs. 5a, b). The maker or makers of these vessels are unknown, but at least three different blocks existed with decorative panels variously arranged, while handles, spouts and knops vary. These pieces are usually dated to c.1745, at which time similar slip-cast wares were being made by some Staffordshire manufacturers.⁹ The designs from Nieuhof's *Embassy* can in no way be described as 'chinoiserie', being more or less accurate representations of China and Chinese life as observed.

The *Embassy* also provided the designs for a number of later vessels. First, there are rectangular tea canisters whose main moulded panels depict, on one side, 'CIA or TE herb', and on the other 'Herb TENG' (Figs. 6a, b). They are known in white salt-glazed stoneware and cream-coloured earthenware with coloured glazes, although all appear to be from the same master mould. Consequently, they probably date to c.1755–1765, a decade or more later than the teapots. Also known are moulded creamware figures with tortoiseshell colouring of the 'Old Viceroy of Kanton'.

Vessels with moulded scenes from Nieuhof's *Embassy* are as rare as they are intriguing. What can be said of them, however, is that they reflect the technical limitations within the industry at the time of their manufacture; that they indicate an awareness of – and indeed a fascination in – China and subjects in a Chinese style by a small section of tea-drinking consumers; and that they are entirely atypical of the vast majority of production by Staffordshire manufacturers at this time.

Another published work used as a source of designs by Staffordshire manufacturers in the mid-eighteenth century was John Stalker and George Parker's *Treatise of Japaning [sic] and Varnishing*, published 1688.¹⁰ This work provided clear instructions for amateur decorators for whom 'japaning' – the decoration, colouring and varnishing of wooden objects such as tea-trays, powder boxes and items of furniture after the fashion of Oriental lacquer work – was a popular pastime, and included 24 pages of woodblock images of



Fig. 5a. White salt-glazed stoneware teapot, slip-cast, with designs from Nieuhof's *Embassy*; c.1745. The Victoria & Albert Museum.



Fig. 5b. 'The Ambassadors of Lammas' from Nieuhof's *Embassy* (detail). Image courtesy of Chiswick Auctions.

figures, birds, plants, buildings and landscapes which could be copied. These designs, which are quite amateurish in appearance, probably fall within the definition of chinoiserie despite the authors' claiming that they were copied from Chinese and Japanese sources; they admit, however, that alterations were made when the proportions of the designs were considered by them to be 'lame or defective.' Modellers working in the pottery industry adapted a number of these designs for use on a range of moulded vessels, as they – or others – did with Nieuhof's designs.



Fig. 6a. 'CIA or TE herbe', from Johan Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company...* (1669). Image courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library.



Fig. 7a. Plate 20 from *A Treatise of Japaning and Varnishing: Being a complete Discovery of those Arts*, George Parker and John Stalker (Oxford, 1688). Retrieved from <https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/treatisejapanin00stal>



Fig. 6b. Green-glazed earthenware canister, press-moulded, with design 'Cia or Herb Te' copied from Nieuhof's *Embassy*; c.1760–1765. Image courtesy of Bonhams.



Fig. 7b. White salt-glazed stoneware teapot, slip-cast, with moulded scenes from Stalker & Parker's *Treatise*; c.1745. Image courtesy of Manchester Art Gallery.



Fig. 8. White salt-glazed stoneware teapot, slip-cast, with moulded scenes from Stalker and Parker's *Treatise* and enamelled decoration; c.1745. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

Again, only a limited range of vessel forms is known to have used designs from the *Treatise*. The most common of these are slip-cast hexagonal teapots in glazed red earthenware¹¹ and white salt-glazed stoneware,¹² with panels containing buildings within rocky landscapes and figures copied directly from the *Treatise* (Figs. 7a, b). The decorative panels are arranged in a variety of combinations, indicating that several models were in use. An example of a block mould from which some of these teapots were made survives.¹³ One panel shows an ostrich which does not appear in Stalker and Parker's *Treatise* and several other subjects which are not from the *Treatise* are also used on these moulded wares: their sources are as yet unknown. Several moulded white salt-glazed stoneware teapots have all-over painted decoration, but it is unlikely that they were decorated locally (Fig. 8).

Stylistically the teapots with designs from the *Treatise* are very similar to those with designs from Nieuhof's *Embassy*, and the two are likely to be contemporary, dating probably to the 1740s. An early 1740s date is suggested by the excavation of slip-cast red earthenwares with designs from the *Treatise* on the site of the factory operated by Samuel Bell in Newcastle-under-Lyme between 1724 and 1744.¹⁴ These teapots are atypical of contemporary production and survive only in small numbers and yet, given the variety of decoration and bodies, Bell was certainly not the only one producing them. Unfortunately, other manufacturers have not yet been identified.

Designs from the *Treatise* also appear on a number of slip-cast camel-shaped teapots, where they form small panels within the camel's howdah. A number of different forms of these teapots survive, in both glazed red earthenware and white salt-glazed stoneware (Fig. 9), with a variety of designs in the howdahs, but not all from the *Treatise*.

Another moulded form with panels containing designs copied from the *Treatise* is a five-sided 'lighthouse shape' coffee pot, examples of which are also known in glazed red earthenware (Fig. 10) and white salt-glazed stoneware.



Fig. 9. White salt-glazed stoneware camel-shaped teapot, slip-cast, with moulded scenes from Stalker and Parker's *Treatise* on the howdah; c.1745. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

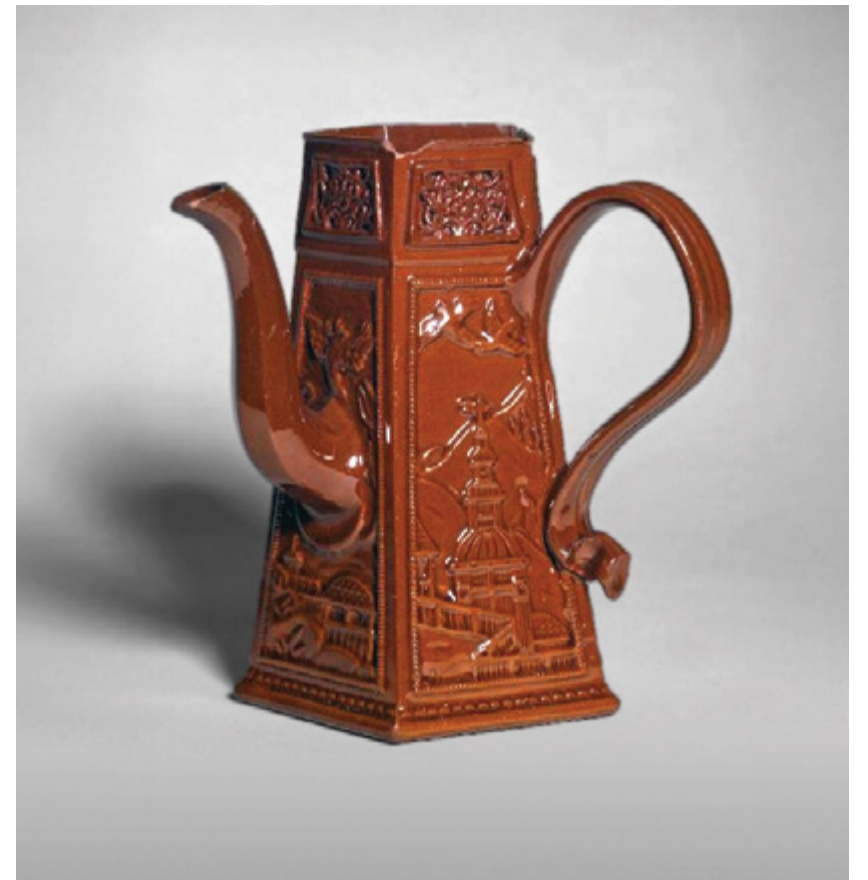


Fig. 10. Glazed red earthenware coffee pot, slip-cast, with moulded scenes from Stalker and Parker's *Treatise*; c.1745. The Fitzwilliam Museum. Image provided for non-commercial use under a Creative Commons License (BY-NC-ND).



Fig. 11a. Creamware teapot decorated with designs from Edwards and Darly's *A New Book of Chinese Designs*; c.1760–1770. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 11b. Plate 7 from Edwards and Darly's *A New Book of Chinese Designs*, c.1760–1770. Image courtesy YCBA.

It is intriguing to realise that manufacturers and their modellers in north Staffordshire had access to Nieuhof's *Embassy* and Stalker and Parker's *Treatise*, but the impact of these decorated wares on consumers and significance for manufacturers' output was limited. A further two sources of designs were, however, more influential.

The first of these, George Edwards and Matthias Darly's *A New Book of Chinese Designs* (calculated to Improve the present Taste – consisting of Figures, Buildings, & Furniture, Landskips, Birds, Beasts, Flow.rs and Ornaments, &c.), was published in 1754.¹⁵ This coincided with the expansion of porcelain production in England and the volume's 120 engraved plates of 'Chinese interiors, vases, figures, pagodas, bridges, animals, exotic birds, insects, etc.,'¹⁶ were used extensively both to be copied and for inspiration. A copy of this book is known to have been held at the Bow Porcelain factory and was a source for some of the decoration on this factory's wares.¹⁷

Edwards and Darly's work was clearly also available in north Staffordshire, for elements of several plates were used in the relief-moulded decoration of tea wares in red stoneware, white salt-glazed stoneware and the newly-introduced cream-coloured earthenware or creamware. The latter body was very different from other earthenwares made in Staffordshire at the time; like them it was twice-fired and covered with a liquid lead glaze, but the body was made from white-firing ball clay. The range of vessel forms with moulded designs taken from *A New Book of Chinese Designs* was still limited, with teapots and tea canisters predominating, but they were vastly superior in quality to the wares produced earlier. This is without question due to the superb modelling which, as a trade within the pottery industry, was being taken to new levels in the mid to late 1750s by modellers such as Aaron Wood.¹⁸

The most common teapot form is hexagonal; some have a moulded fretwork pattern and central pavilions on their shoulders, while others have scroll designs, and the covers' knobs include various floral types, dragons and gryphons. Sometimes the relief-moulded figures are on a plain background (Figs. 11a, 11b), while other have a square-patterned background (Fig. 12). Typically, the earthenware teapots have coloured glazes, with green, brown and yellow used together, although a creamware example with enamelled decoration and a reclining lion knob is also known.¹⁹ Canisters of a rectangular form are also found with the same range of subjects as the teapots; most are similarly coloured.

A number of block moulds for these vessels survive (Fig. 13) and while we cannot be certain who modelled them, for the first time we can identify the manufacturers of some of the vessels made from them. One of these was Thomas Whieldon, for amongst the material excavated on his factory in Fenton were sherds of cream-coloured hexagonal teapots with designs taken from *A New Book of Chinese Designs* (plate 21) on a square-patterned background. William Greatbatch, also of Fenton (working 1762–1782), was another. Sherds of moulded teapots in both creamware and red stoneware excavated on his factory's waster dump use elements of Edwards and Darly's plates 7, 22 and 32 on a plain background in their relief decoration.²⁰ Greatbatch was himself a skilled modeller, but it is not certain whether he modelled these teapots. Nevertheless, in January 1764 he invoiced Josiah Wedgwood for 10/- for '1 Chinese Teapot', which is clearly a block mould.²¹ There were doubtless others making these two moulded types, for several different handles and spouts have been noted on them.

A further design from Edwards and Darly was copied for use on moulded tea wares. Round-bodied creamware teapots and a milk jug have the figures from plate 116 – a lady offering a seated man a drink while pouring liquid from a jug into a large pot – on a square-patterned ground (Figs. 14a, b). The recovery of a single diagnostic sherd from the Whieldon site tentatively assigns this well-modelled type to Thomas Whieldon's production.



Fig. 12. Creamware teapot decorated with designs from Edwards and Darly's *A New Book of Chinese Designs*; c.1760–1770. Image courtesy of Bonhams.



Fig. 13. Teapot block with designs from Edwards and Darly's *A New Book of Chinese Designs*; c.1760–1770. The Victoria & Albert Museum.



Fig. 14a. Creamware teapot, press-moulded, with relief decoration copying plate 116 of Edwards and Darly's *A New Book of Chinese Designs*, c.1760–1770. The Victoria & Albert Museum.



Fig. 14b. Plate 116 of Edwards & Darly's *A New Book of Chinese Designs*. Image courtesy YCBA.



Fig. 15. Detail of plate 118 of Edwards & Darly's *A New Book of Chinese Designs*. Image courtesy YCBA.

Whieldon was in business between c.1747 and c.1780²² and the finds of moulded sherds from the Whieldon site do not help greatly with dating, although stylistically they suggest an early 1760s date. That this type was produced during the 1760s is, however, confirmed by finds on the Greatbatch site in contexts dated to 1762–1770.

Edwards and Darly may be the source of another much-used design. Plate 118 shows two figures in oriental dress, one holding a fan, standing behind a low fretwork fence and to one side of what appears to be a ruined pillar with abundant foliage (Fig. 15). However, this scene was copied and published in slightly modified form as plate 175 in the second influential collection of source material for manufacturers - Robert Sayer's *The Ladies Amusement or Whole Art of Japanning Made Easy*, whose two editions were published in 1758 and 1762.²³

This volume contained 'upwards of Fifteen-Hundred different Designs, on Two Hundred Copper Plates; consisting of Flowers, Shells, Figures, Birds, Insects, Landscapes, Shippings, Beasts, Vases, Borders, &c.', and was intended as a source of designs to be used by amateur artists and decorators. Nevertheless, the title page states that 'The above Work will be found extremely useful to the Porcelains, and other Manufacturers depending on Design.' *The Ladies Amusement* includes numerous designs by, amongst others, the London-based French painter and designer Jean-Baptiste Pillement, who made a speciality of chinoiserie subjects, and Robert Hancock who was an engraver at the Worcester Porcelain factory. This work features a wide variety of chinoiserie designs together with European subjects, flowers and rococo scrolls.



Fig. 16a, b. Red stoneware coffee pot and detail with sprigged figures copied from plate 175 of Robert Sayer's *The Ladies Amusement*; made by William Greatbatch, Fenton, c.1765–1770. Image courtesy of The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.



Fig. 17. Red stoneware teapot, press-moulded, with a design copied from Chinese Yixing vessels; c.1755–1770. Image courtesy of The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.

The two figures behind the fence group was used by several manufacturers, including William Greatbatch, in the form of moulded, sprigged reliefs on both creamwares, red stonewares (Figs. 16a, b) and black basalt.²⁴ They also feature as part of the moulded decoration of round creamware teapots with a square-patterned grounds by an unknown manufacturer in which the pillar has disappeared and has been replaced by a pot containing a small tree, while to their left is a figure holding a parasol above them. Whether Edwards and Darly or Sayer was the source for these is uncertain, but it seems probable that Greatbatch, at least, had access to a copy of *The Ladies Amusement*, for in addition to his adaptations of Edwards and Darly's designs, he copied a cluster of shells and seaweed which is included on plate 26.²⁵

The sources described so far were almost certainly not the only ones to be used by modellers and manufacturers. Several other moulded scenes and figures appear on mid-eighteenth-century ceramics for which no source has yet been identified, while a number of moulded forms in both red stoneware and glazed red earthenware have a relief-moulded decoration depicting a naked boy surrounded by peonies which was copied from Yixing originals (Fig. 17). Staffordshire-made octagonal teapots and milk jugs are known with this design and block moulds for a sauce boat and a round-bodied teapot survive.²⁶ Excavated material identifies Thomas Whieldon as one of, probably, several manufacturers of this moulded design.

So far, the emphasis has been upon the adaptation of designs for relief-moulded decoration on ceramics. However, painted decoration offered even greater, and more flexible, opportunities to explore the Chinese style, imitating and adapting it to suit the needs of both manufacturers and customers. Painted decoration featured extensively on the products of all British porcelain factories, both under-glaze in blue, and over-glaze in polychrome colours, and chinoiserie subjects were a feature of the production of most. They drew heavily upon *The Ladies Amusement* and other published sources.

Over-glaze painted decoration also began to appear on white salt-glazed stoneware made in Staffordshire during the 1750s and on creamware from the early 1760s, and unsurprisingly patterns in a Chinese style are well-represented in bold polychrome (Fig. 18). While many of these wares were probably decorated outside Staffordshire in, for example, London, the expansion of the Staffordshire industry inevitably drew in decorators from outside the area. Simeon Shaw states that enamellers came from Bristol, Chelsea, Worcester and Liverpool to work in the Potteries, while many other enamellers from outside the pottery industry commenced work within it, either as freelance decorators, or as employees.²⁷ Decorators from outside the area doubtless continued to work in the style with which they were familiar and, consequently, Staffordshire wares of this period often show the influence of contemporary porcelain decoration. The names of a number of decorators are known in the Potteries during the 1750s and 1760s. Shaw names a Mr Daniel of Cobridge as the first local craftsman to practice enamelling in the area, while William Greatbatch writes of sending wares to the nearby painting shop of a Mr Curzon in July 1763.²⁸

The practice of marking wares was not widespread before the 1780s and consequently it is difficult to identify the manufacturers of most of the over-glaze decorated stonewares and creamwares of this period. This is the case with a creamware mug illustrated by Loren Zeller²⁹ which has an over-glaze, bat-printed copy of Edwards and Darly's plate 32 with additional over-glaze painted detail. However, a number of creamware pieces can be attributed to manufacturers on the basis of archaeological evidence. One such is a teapot firmly attributable to William Greatbatch in the 1770s, which also has an over-glaze, bat-printed design with additional over-glaze painted decoration; here the scene is based upon Edwards and Darly's plate 21 (Fig. 19). Excavated evidence shows that by the time that this teapot was made, Greatbatch's over-glazed painted patterns were decorated in house by his own employees.

Staffordshire manufacturers were not the only ones decorating their creamwares with over-glaze chinoiserie subjects – manufacturers were doing so in most centres of production - but the market for these was not large. Over-glaze painted decoration increased the cost of piece significantly: the labour involved in the decoration was one factor in this, but even more significant was the fact that different colours required a number of separate firings at different temperatures to fix them to the surface of the pot. It is clear, therefore, that access to ceramics with good quality decoration of this kind would have been largely restricted to the wealthier elements of society.

Decoration under the glaze was a considerably cheaper process and the introduction of light-bodied creamware allowed manufacturers to produce wares with under-glaze patterns at a lower cost, thereby making them accessible to a wider customer base. Painting designs onto the biscuit body of a piece was a less complicated process than decorating over-glaze. The range of colours available was initially limited to blue, brown and a purplish-brown shade, but apart from a single low temperature hardening-on, no additional firing was needed and wares could be produced at a fraction of the cost of those with over-glaze decoration.³⁰ That said, creamware was not an ideal vehicle for blue painted decoration in a Chinese style. The off-white or cream colour of the glazed finish was quite unlike the colour of Chinese porcelain and the small number of creamwares with under-glaze blue painted Chinese-style designs made during the 1760s and 1770s fail, aesthetically, as imitations of Chinese porcelain. As it happened, this was not a significant impediment for there were new developments in the mid 1770s.

In 1775 Richard Champion's patent to make hard-paste porcelain was renewed, but with a revision which allowed all manufacturers to make use of kaolin and Grown stone (china clay and china stone) – key ingredients of Champion's porcelain - provided they did not make porcelain. China



Fig. 18. White salt-glazed stoneware with over-glaze painted decoration; c.1755–1760. The Victoria & Albert Museum.



Fig. 19. Creamware teapot with bat-printed and over-glaze painted design based on plate 21 of Edwards & Darly's *A New Book of Chinese Designs*; made by William Greatbatch, Fenton, c.1775–1782. Image courtesy of The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.

clay is free of the iron impurities present in ball clay, which contributed to creamware's cream colour, and its addition to the clay body mix allowed manufacturers to produce a white earthenware which, with its slightly blue-tinted glaze, was similar in appearance to porcelain, and which was well-suited to carry under-glaze painted decoration in blue. This was what is widely referred to today as 'pearlware', but in its day was known as 'China glaze'.³¹ China glaze was a deliberate attempt to copy Chinese porcelain, but at a considerably lower price. The blue painted patterns are predominantly in a Chinese style, sometimes copied directly from Chinese wares, reinterpreted in a distinctly European style, or pure inventions based upon a perception of what China was like – or, rather, what the customer expected China to be like. The wares feature a range of figure subjects, some pointing, others with parasols (Fig. 20), and floral arrangements, but the most common are landscapes with numerous variations of the distinctive 'tree-fence-house-fence-tree' design (Fig. 21). This style of decoration was adopted not only for tea and coffee wares, but also for table wares, toilet wares, mugs, punch bowls and many other forms. These wares were popular, widely used, and produced by manufacturers throughout the country. A wide range of forms, patterns and manufacturers has been documented, and many manufacturers can now be identified, as wares were more frequently marked by the late 1770s.³²

The exact date at which 'China glaze' was introduced is uncertain, but it seems likely that it followed immediately upon the revision of Champion's patent in 1775, although the construction in Cobridge in 1772 of a furnace to refine cobalt – the main ingredient of the blue colour used in under-glaze decoration – may well have anticipated the development of this new ware and the need for increased supplies of colour for its decoration.³³ A date of c.1775 is supported by evidence from William Greatbatch's factory waste dump, in which a deposit dated to c.1770–1782 contained a significant proportion of China glaze wares with a range of under-glaze blue painted designs.³⁴ Shaw also refers to blue painters and enamellers coming to Staffordshire and to many young women being taught the art at about this time,³⁵ while the China glaze wasters on the Greatbatch site show that these wares were decorated in-house, rather than in specialist workshops, and this was almost certainly the case in other factories. Many of Greatbatch's wasters illustrate the often haphazard attempts of trainee painters, many of whom were probably children or apprentices, to reproduce the factory's standard under-glaze blue 'tree-fence-house-fence-tree' patterns (Fig. 22), but more competent examples of both landscape and floral subjects were found alongside these.

China glaze rapidly became one of the dominant types of decorated earthenware. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century and early years of the nineteenth century it was produced by almost every industrial-scale manufacturer in the country. Probably first developed in Staffordshire, affordable China glaze can be said to have brought Chinese style decoration to a mass audience for the first time. Most designs, though quirky and charming, had little artistic merit, were often quite clumsy and formulaic, and most had moved far beyond the chinoiserie style of *The Ladies Amusement* and Pillement's much copied engravings.

While the appeal of China glaze's painted designs was considerable, they soon faced competition from – and were ultimately replaced by – Chinese-style patterns produced by transfer printing designs in blue under the glaze. The decoration of ware by transfer printing under the glaze was first introduced at Caughley by Thomas Turner where it was widely adopted for its porcelain wares. Shaw gives a detailed account of early printing, the introduction of the process into north Staffordshire, and improvements to the process made by Ralph Baddeley of Shelton who was potentially the first to use printed designs on biscuit earthenware.³⁶ While Josiah Spode of Stoke-upon-Trent is often credited with the introduction of transfer-printing into north Staffordshire, Shaw is clear that he introduced 'Blue Printed into Stoke



Fig. 20. China glaze with blue painted decoration; c.1780–1790. Image courtesy of The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.



Fig. 21. China glaze teapot; c.1780–1790. Historic Deerfield. Gift of Winifred Lefferts Arms (wife of Robert Arms, Class of 1927).



Fig. 22. Biscuit earthenware sherds with trainee painters' practice work on the 'tree-fence-house-fence-tree' design; excavated on the Greatbatch site, Fenton; c.1775–1782.

[-upon-Trent]; on the improved methods successfully adopted by Mr. Ralph Baddeley, of Shelton' in 'about 1784'.³⁷

This is not the place to describe the process of transfer-printing on earthenwares. This has been done many times,³⁸ but suffice to say that it revolutionised the decoration of ceramics and had a dramatic impact upon the appearance of wares in circulation from that time on. Significantly, transfer-printing made possible the mass production of identically-decorated wares in complex patterns on a range of forms, and it was rapidly adopted by many manufacturers. It was used predominantly to decorate those white earthenwares with a blue-tinted glaze which were described as 'China glaze' when bearing painted patterns, but which the manufacturers could now refer to simply as 'printed'. Again, it was the Chinese style which was favoured, and many of the designs copied from the Chinese had already been used by the Caughley factory and other porcelain manufacturers, and so had, in effect, been 'market-tested' before they were adopted by earthenware manufacturers.

The designs seen on the imported Chinese porcelains, now widely available throughout Britain, provided the inspiration for the manufacturers of the new blue printed earthenwares. A number of popular British designs are close copies of Chinese originals and have identifiable Chinese sources, such as the patterns now known as 'Two Figures' (Fig. 23) and 'Buffalo' (Fig. 24).³⁹ The Chinese wares were themselves made in numerous workshops and, consequently, many variations of a pattern were in circulation. This was often reflected in different versions of the patterns used by British manufacturers. This explosion of Chinese-style designs, both imitations and pure inventions, was the context in which the 'Willow' pattern was developed.

Some of the newly-introduced blue-printed designs have little or nothing in common with 'Willow', such as 'Buffalo', but others – both the British copies and the Chinese originals - contain elements which are present in the 'Willow' pattern, including temples, a fence, a stretch of water, a willow tree, a bridge (with or without figures on it), one or more boats, and more buildings and trees on a distant shore.

Two probable Chinese designs have been identified as the likely sources of the 'Willow' pattern. The first is the Chinese original that inspired the similar printed patterns 'Mandarin' and 'Willow Nankin' (Figs. 25, 26).⁴⁰ It seems to be one of these patterns to which Shaw is referring when crediting Thomas Turner of Caughley with the introduction of 'Willow' which, he states, was 'designed by him [William Underwood, a blue printer originally from Worcester] from two oriental plates still preserved and exhibited to the Author by Mr. W. Turner. The border remains, but the other parts are varied a little: the Cottage is altered in shape, and the Figures are less in the copy than in the original.'⁴¹ 'Mandarin' lacks the bridge with figures on it, which is the central feature of 'Willow', as well as the fence, and the three columns in front of the main building, but in other respects is very similar to 'Willow' in both its composition and its structure. Robert Copeland states that Spode was probably the second to copy this pattern from a Chinese original,⁴² while Shaw tells us that that Spode's early blue-printed patterns included, for table services, the 'Old Willow', with a border of a willow and a dagger.⁴³

The other likely Chinese source design, which was copied directly by British manufacturers to create the pattern known as 'Striped Temple', lacks the willow tree and the two birds, but has the other elements of 'Willow' missing from 'Mandarin', as well as the 'Willow' border pattern.⁴⁴ Together, 'Mandarin' and 'Striped' Temple' have all the elements of 'Willow' and Copeland thinks it likely that Spode was responsible for its introduction around 1790, with other versions following shortly afterwards.⁴⁵



Fig. 23. Earthenware plate with printed 'Two Figures' pattern from a Chinese original; c.1800.



Fig. 24. Earthenware plate with printed 'Buffalo' pattern from a Chinese original; possibly Spode; c.1800.



Fig. 25. Earthenware saucer with printed 'Mandarin' pattern; c.1790.
TCC Database of Patterns and Sources No. 10086.



Fig. 27. Earthenware plate with printed 'Forest Landscape II' pattern with no Chinese original;
c.1800-1810.



Fig. 26. Earthenware plate with printed 'Willow Nankin' pattern; c.1790.
TCC Database of Patterns and Sources No. 6307.



Fig. 28. Earthenware plate with printed 'Willow' pattern; c.1800-1810.

From the 1790s manufacturers began to move away from copying Chinese designs in their entirety, preferring instead to select different elements from the Chinese originals and to combine them with newly introduced features,⁴⁶ thereby creating imaginative scenes 'in the Chinese idiom'.⁴⁷ Numerous patterns could be cited which are not based on Chinese originals but were popular with customers (Fig. 27). These were often more exotic and, if anything, 'more Chinese' – at least to European eyes – than the patterns used on Chinese porcelain. 'Willow' seems to reflect this development, combining elements copied from more than one Chinese design to create a coherent new design (Fig. 28).

The creation of 'Willow' pattern was the culmination of decades of copying, adapting and inventing designs in a Chinese style by pottery manufacturers in north Staffordshire. It came about at a time when the Staffordshire industry was becoming a significant force in the global market for ceramics, expanding production, developing new processes and regularly introducing new wares. With its roots in the blue painted designs of Chinese porcelains, which by the late eighteenth century were found in many British households, 'Willow' must have felt reassuringly familiar at the time of its introduction, while also still hinting at something exotic and unfamiliar. The pattern has a crowded formality and stiffness which is not present on Chinese wares and is quite unlike the earlier chinoiserie patterns of *A New Book of Chinese Designs* and *The Ladies Amusement*, and yet it rapidly found favour with the consumer. By the first decade of the nineteenth century 'Willow' was the most popular of all printed patterns, exported in great quantities to Europe and North America.

At the end of the eighteenth century chinoiserie-style decoration found a new outlet. The East India Company's decision to stop importing Oriental porcelain into Britain coincided with the end of Richard Champion's patent for hard-paste porcelain. Several Staffordshire factories took advantage this and began to produce their own porcelains. While in 1798, Hollins, Warburton & Co. of New Hall, Shelton, were the only Staffordshire company to advertise as china manufacturers,⁴⁸ by 1805 twenty potters are listed as such.⁴⁹ All were decorating their wares over-glaze and chinoiserie designs were favoured. By this time, however, the blue-printed 'Willow' pattern was well-established and transfer-printed patterns were, largely, not influenced by the designs adopted for these new porcelains.

In the mid-eighteenth century, it was the middle classes who aspired to own blue-painted Chinese porcelain; by the end of the century the lower classes aspired to own blue-printed British earthenware. By this time, it was not the acquisition of expensive imported material that was important, but the visual impact of the wares.

'Willow' was used exclusively for table wares in earthenware until the twentieth century, while for tea wares the most popular pattern was – and remained – 'Broseley', or 'Two Temples', another temple landscape pattern first used at Caughley and copied from a Chinese original (Fig. 29).⁵⁰ 'Broseley' includes many of the elements present in 'Willow' – water, a bridge with figures, a fence, and a willow tree – but the large multi-storey temple building stands to the left of the bridge and it is printed in a very un-Chinese shade of pale blue. It was first used on bone china wares, but by the mid-nineteenth century was also widely used on poorer quality earthenwares.

Why did these two patterns become so overwhelmingly popular and so quickly, and why did their popularity endure? There were, after all, very many printed designs in a similar style which were popular in their day, but which did not survive changes in taste and fashion, as chinoiserie competed with the classical style at the top end of the market and, by the 1820s, gave way to ceramics decorated with romantic landscapes and floral designs.



Fig. 29. Bone china cup and saucer with printed 'Broseley' pattern; c.1820.

'Willow', at least, benefitted from a difference in price between it and other contemporary printed wares. Manufacturers' price lists show that most vessels decorated with 'Willow' were consistently cheaper than vessels with other printed patterns in the period from 1814 to 1855.⁵¹ Was this due to the ease with which the pattern could be applied, or to an economy of scale? Does the price distinction suggest that 'Willow' was never quite as exclusive as its blue printed competitors, and therefore able better to appeal to a wider audience because of its lower price? Certainly 'Willow' was to become a shorthand for acceptable chinoiserie for the mass market. As early as 1824 an order received by the Wedgwood company was for 'blue Willow in any pattern'.⁵² By the 1840s 'Willow' represented a class of ceramics which was, if dull and stereotypical, at least 'safe' and respectable. It was no longer aspirational, and yet it has become a defining item of nineteenth-century material culture and has remained in production for two centuries.

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- ² The fascination with China is summed by Flora Finching in Chapter 13 of Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit*: '... oh do tell me something about the Chinese ladies ... why do they stick little bells all over their bridges and temples and hats and things? ... what a country to live in ... and with so many lanterns and umbrellas too how very dark and wet the climate ought to be and no doubt actually is, and the sums of money that must be made by those two trades where everybody carries them and hangs them everywhere ...'
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- ¹² British Museum, accession number 1887.0210.164.
- ¹³ Mint Museum of Art, accession no. 1965.48.959.
- ¹⁴ Bemrose, P., *op. cit.*, plate 195b.
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- ²³ Introduction to the 1959 facsimile edition.
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- ²⁶ In the collections of the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery and the V&A Wedgwood Collection respectively.
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- ²⁸ Barker, D., *William Greatbatch, op. cit.*, p. 206. There were two Curzons in the area at this time, Henry and John, both of whom are described as painters.
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- ⁴² Copeland, R., *op. cit.*, p. 45.
- ⁴³ Shaw, S., *op. cit.*, p. 216.
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Illustration of 'The Peach Blossom Spring at Changshu'. (Montanus, A. and Olfert Dapper, ed., Atlas Chinensis: Being a Second Part of a Relation of Remarkable Passages in Two Embassies from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Vice-roy Singlamong and General Taising Lipovi and to Konchi, Emperor of China and East-Tartary, trans. by John Ogilby, (London: Printed by Tho. Johnson for the Author, 1671), pp. 570-571).

The Chinese Origin of Willow Pattern Stories

Tiejun Hou

The eighteenth century marked the golden age of ceramic cultural exchange between China and Britain. During this period, Britain not only imported vast quantities of Chinese porcelain, but British potters also appropriated elements such as figures, flowers, birds, landscapes, and pavilions from Chinese porcelain to design a wide array of Chinoiserie products. Of these, the most famous, popular, and enduring were the blue-and-white willow pattern wares.

The standard Willow Pattern features a willow tree in the centre of the design, with pavilions surrounded by trees on its right. In front of the buildings is a fenced-off lawn, connected by a winding path to a three-arched stone bridge on the left of the willow tree, where three figures are walking. Behind the willow tree, a man rows a small boat across the water, with houses nestled among trees in the upper left space. Above the willow tree, a pair of birds fly side by side in the upper central space.

As to the research related to the Willow Pattern, the origin of the story has drawn special scholarly attention. Research into its sources began as early as the nineteenth century in the U.K. Shortly after the story was released in *The Family Friend* magazine in 1849 (hereafter referred to as the 1849 story), a reader wrote to inquire: 'What is the tale illustrated by the Willow Pattern?'.¹ This question sparked a nearly two-century-long pursuit of its origin among ceramic experts, literary scholars, and cultural historians in both the East and the West.

To date, research on this topic can be divided into two camps: one strives to source 'its narrative origin in ancient Chinese legend',² while the other argues that the story has little to do with Chinese literature or culture, with some even asserting that it is 'a pure British invention'.³ The author of the 1849 story stated, the story is said to be to the Chinese, 'what our Jack the Giant Killer or Robinson Crusoe is to us'.⁴ This remark led many researchers to seek the origin of the story in China. The earliest known attempt to trace its source appeared in June 1867 in *Notes and Queries*, where a reader styled as 'J. P.' proposed that an illustration titled 'The Peach Blossom Spring at Changshu' (Fig. 1) from *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East India Company to the Emperor of China* resembled the Willow Pattern, declaring that 'the Willow Pattern illustrates a Chinese story'.⁵

However, a glimpse of the illustration was enough to reveal J. P.'s mistake: 1) the illustration contains no birds; 2) it depicts eleven characters, mostly Buddhist monks; 3) moreover, its accompanying note that devotees vow before Guanyin and are warned of hardships differs substantially from the Willow Pattern's tragic tale.⁶ See page 137.

In 1877, *Scribner's Monthly* published a letter from a reader who came from 'a family that had possessed Indian blue-and-white porcelain for 67 years.' She asserted that 'based on practical experience, she was qualified to comment on this issue' and stated, 'without a doubt', that the willow-pattern story was 'essentially a Chinese tale'. However, she provided no concrete evidence, merely noting empirically: 'I have collected many Indian blue-and-white plates of different styles, and many of their scenes represent concrete manifestations of this story'.⁷

The most recent attempt to trace the story's origins appears in *The Triad Society: The Hung Society or the Society of Heaven on Earth*, in which the author transformed academic inquiry into romantic speculation. Without substantial evidence, he claimed that 'these plates circulated among Hung brothers, and to encourage each other under Qing persecution, they devised

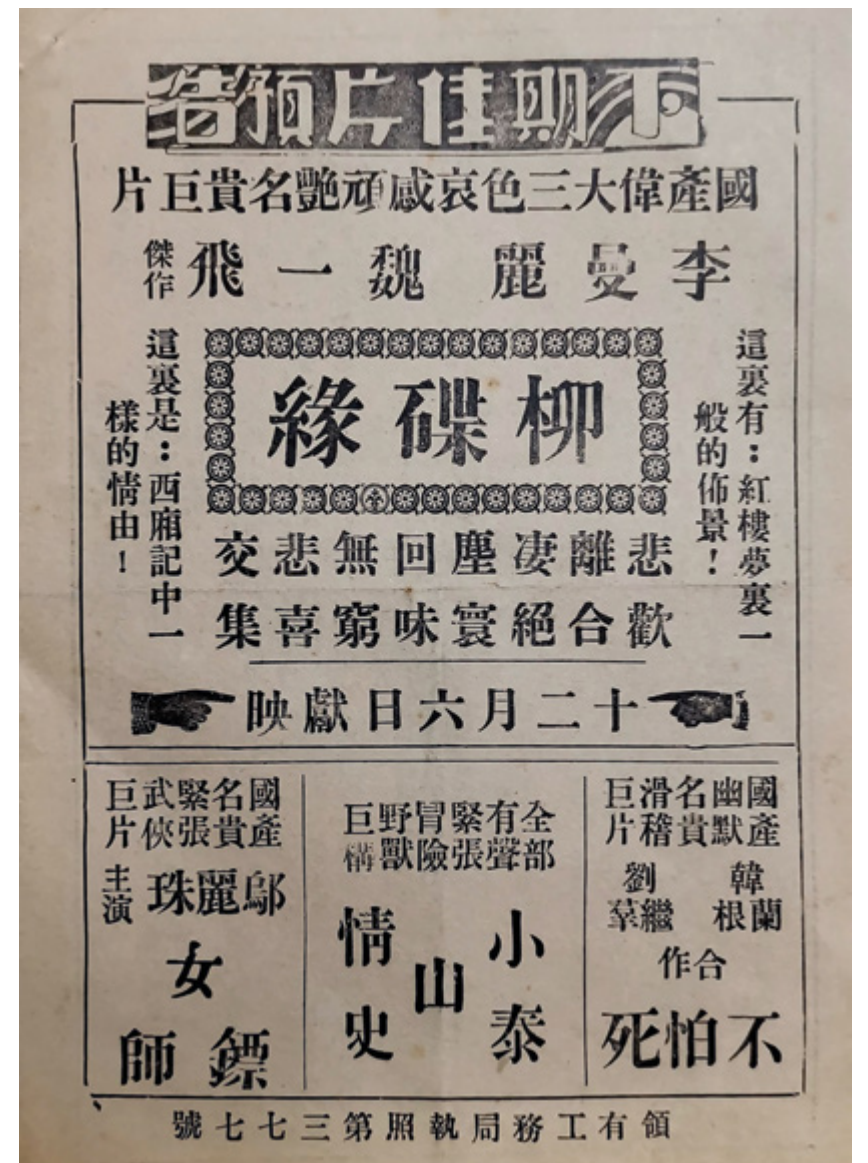


Fig. 1. A 1926 Chinese poster likening the movie 'The Legend of Willow Pattern Plate' to 'Romance of Western Chamber' and 'Dream of Red Mansion'. From *The Legend of Willow Pattern Plate*, Fei Xian Ying Wen [Venus Theatre, The Home of Capital Picture], Vol. 14, Issue 9, p. 3.

this seemingly harmless story.⁸ However, this explanation is highly conjectural and can be easily disproven by the fact that, up to now, neither Chinese nor foreign scholars have discovered any 'Chinese porcelain containing all the classic elements of the Willow Pattern'.⁹

Chinese scholars have also tried to identify the Chinese origins of this story from traditional Chinese literature (Fig. 1). A paper titled 'European Blue-and-White 'Willow Pattern' and Chinese Export Porcelain' argued that the willow-pattern legend was 'most likely created by Westerners piecing together, integrating and adapting the key plot elements from traditional Chinese love stories like *The Romance of the West Chamber* and *The Butterfly Lovers*, stories that reflected ancient China's ethical system.'¹⁰ However, since there is no evidence that either of these two stories had been translated into Western languages before 1849,¹¹ the argument is obviously unconvincing.

Contrary to the sporadic research seeking Chinese origins, mainstream Western academia largely regards this story as a British invention. As early as 1867, a reader named 'Sp.' in *Notes and Queries* remarked: 'I do not think anyone supposes the pattern to illustrate a Chinese story. F.C.H. is quite right - the story was written for the pattern.'¹²

Robert Mayo observed: 'The legend itself probably did not originate in the Orient but was simply an attempt to explain the figures on the well-known blue willow-ware plate.'¹³ Ben McClary contended that 'the Willow Pattern was not so much the direct product of the Oriental mind as it was the product of Western interest in the Orient', because 'the story was deduced from the plate, not the reverse.'¹⁴

Robert Copeland dismissed the story's authenticity from a manufacturer's perspective: 'The Willow Pattern has always been popular, but the romantic legend attached to it is fictitious.'¹⁵ Patricia O'Hara also challenged its Chineseness: 'traditional Chinese elements - small bridges, trees, boats, and birds - are incorporated as props into a distinctly Western narrative', while 'the Willow Pattern places familiar romance characters - tragic eloping lovers and a cruel father - within Chinese settings.'¹⁶ Similarly, Robert Fraser viewed it as containing 'romance's conventional subjects - angry parents, unsanctioned love, flight, metamorphosis, etc.', calling it 'fake chinoiserie'.¹⁷ Joseph Portanova further denied its Chinese origin by resorting to Chinese ethnics: 'A hero who helps a mandarin deceive the emperor wouldn't suit Chinese moral education, and no proper Chinese daughter would abandon her aged father', concluding it was merely 'a marketing device to enhance its popularity'.¹⁸

In summary, previous attempts to trace its Chinese origin have either hastily asserted its 'Chineseness' or fancied its intertextuality with Chinese literary works. Even scholars who claim it as a British invention have established that the sequence of its creation (the pattern came first, then the story was written for it) cannot deny the narrative's profound debt to Chinese cultural and literary traditions. In addition, the assertion that elopement constitutes a distinctly Western trope, or that 'no proper Chinese maiden would abandon her aged father', is perfunctory. As is well known, Chinese literature is not without examples of elopement stories - most notably the enduring legend *The Phoenix Seeks the Mate*, in which Zhuo Wenjun eloped with Sima Xiangru, which was introduced to British readers by John Francis Davis before the invention of the willow-pattern story. More importantly, Davis also authored *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants*,¹⁹ a key source of inspiration for the earliest two willow-pattern story writers. This connection not only refutes the bias that elopement is purely a Western narrative but also provides an important cue for researchers to investigate the direct influence of the Chinese literature and culture on the willow-pattern story.

The 1838 Willow Pattern Story

In 1838, volume III of *Bentley's Miscellany* published Mark Lemon's 'A True History of the Celebrated Wedgewood [sic] Hieroglyph, Commonly Called the Willow Pattern' (hereafter referred to as the 1838 story - Fig. 2) This story unfolds during the reign of Emperor 'Fo', when the great philosopher 'Fum' introduced the doctrine of metempsychosis (the transmigration of souls) to the populace.

Consequently, people no longer dreaded death. Instead, 'The fear was not that they must die, but that they might not. So anxious, indeed, were many for this transmigration, that, anticipating death, they insisted upon being something else'. For instance, the emperor's principal tenor 'Sing-Sing', having fallen from the roof of a dwelling, was transformed into a hummingbird. At the same time, the era's greatest dandy 'Ti-di' was reincarnated as a resplendently plumed cockatoo after his death. In this manner, each deceased individual was transformed into an animal that represented their best features. It is against this extraordinary backdrop that the story of the Willow Pattern unfolds.

The story goes that on the bank of the 'Flo-slo' River stood the villa of 'Chou-chou', a wealthy merchant who had made his fortune out of betel nuts.

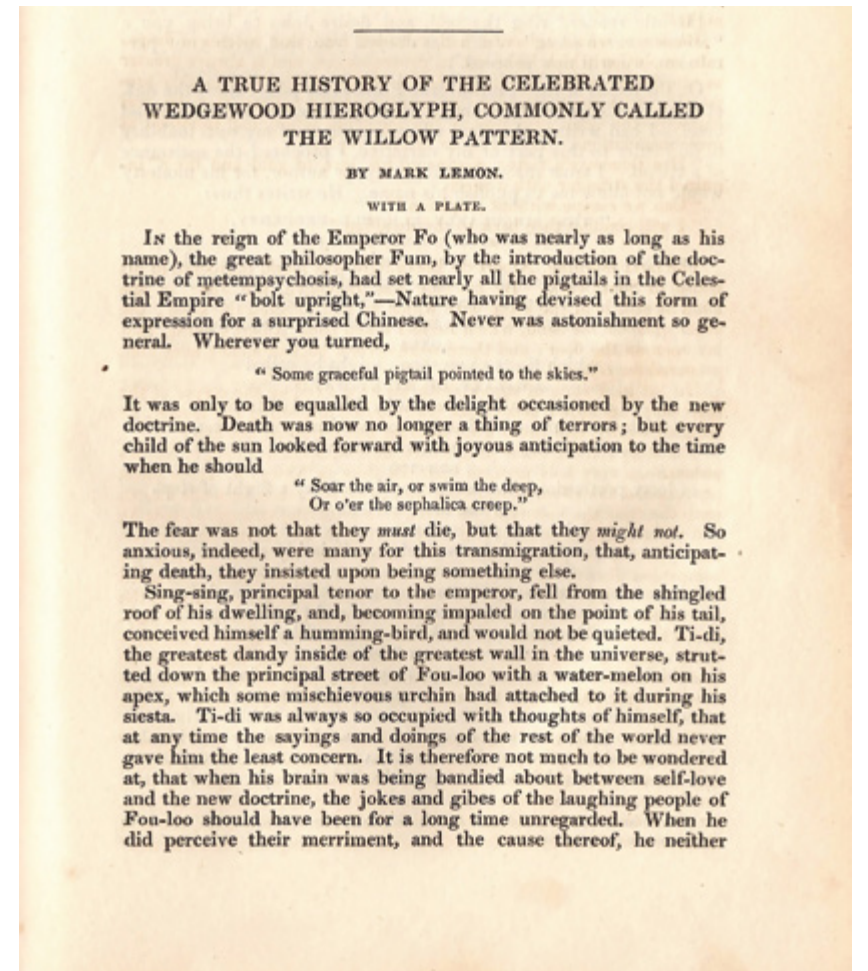


Fig. 2. 'A True History of the Celebrated Wedgewood [sic] Hieroglyph, Commonly Called the Willow Pattern', written by Mark Lemon. Published in *Bentley's Miscellany: Vol. III*, London: Richard Bentley, 1838, p. 61.

Chou-chou had only one daughter, named 'Si-so', who had many suitors, but her heart belonged to 'Ting-a-ting', a poor local minstrel. One evening, during a secret rendezvous, the father discovered their affair and immediately began selecting a son-in-law from among the wealthiest suitors. Helpless, Ting-a-ting resorted to the teachings of 'Fum' and learned the doctrine of metempsychosis. Later, he managed to see his beloved and taught her the doctrine. On the wedding day arranged by her father, Si-so committed suicide by rushing to Ting-a-ting's pointed pig tale, and then later he also ended his own life with a dagger. Their bodies soon vanished, replaced by a pair of doves perched on the windowsill. Stunned, the father, groom, and wedding party fled in panic, scrambling across the bridge. In the end, the narrator assures readers that the doctrine of Fumism 'proved the divinity of its origin'—the birds on the windowsill were indeed the reincarnated forms of the devoted lovers.²⁰

Although some have speculated that earlier 'printed or oral' versions may have existed,²¹ no publicly circulated version predating this story has been discovered to date; thus, Lemon's story can be considered the earliest written version of the willow-pattern story. However, the fate of this story after publication differed markedly from the widespread popularity of the 1849 story. Not only did it merely earn for its author a meager 'three pounds and seven shillings' in royalties and attracted little attention,²² but later scholars have rarely taken it seriously or thought it 'absurd'.²³ Years later, when reflecting on this early literary attempt of his, Lemon himself dismissed it lightly: 'About thirty years ago, I wrote a trifle called "The True History of the

Celebrated Wedgewood Hieroglyph, Commonly Called the Willow Pattern". It appeared in Bentley's Miscellany, edited by Charles Dickens.' It is very likely that after its publication, Mark Lemon never revisited the story, even mistakenly believing that the 1849 story readers mentioned was 'reprint' of his tale.²⁴

However, this story was not as trivial as the author himself claimed. By incorporating elements such as star-crossed lovers, a despotic father, a rival suitor, as well as plots like suicide for love, transformation into birds, and desperate flight, Lemon became the first to weave the central motifs of the Willow Pattern into a tragic narrative. This marked the beginning of the willow-pattern narrative tradition in British culture, elevating it to be one of Britain's most significant contributions to global material culture. This legacy continues to exert profound influence to this day.

This story also helped clarify what standard willow ware was for contemporary audiences. Before the 1838 story, Britain's ceramic industry lacked consensus on its definition. As Connie Rogers noted, 'In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the word willow was used as a sort of generic term to describe any or all Chinese landscape patterns.'²⁵ Furthermore, the debate within the British ceramics' community regarding the first designer of the Willow Pattern is fundamentally connected to the question of how to define the Willow Pattern itself. For instance, Llewellynn Jewitt attributed the design to Thomas Turner precisely because his conception of the Willow Pattern 'most likely referred to what is now known as the Broseley or Mandarin Pattern.'²⁶

In this context, Mark Lemon's contribution also lies in clarifying the objective standard of willow ware. By asking readers to read the story with a willow ware in hand, he helped standardize the key features of the Willow Pattern. To British ceramic manufacturers, this practice represented 'the chief value of such tales',²⁷ as the narrative enhanced the commercial value of the design.

So where did the story originate? Through research, the author of this paper discovered that Lemon drew upon the latest British Sinology at the time - namely John Francis Davis's *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants* (1836, hereafter referred to as *The Chinese*) - when composing his tale (Fig. 3).

Published in 1836, Davis claimed that *The Chinese* had filled a century-long gap in 'comprehensive and systematic' Chinese studies in Britain since the English translation of Du Halde's compilations (*A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese Tartary*).²⁸ It aimed to make up for what Davis called the British public's 'almost total ignorance' of China.²⁹ The work proved immensely popular, with multiple reprints and translations into French (1837), German (1839), Dutch (1841), and Italian (1841), and a revised English edition appearing in 1857. Its significant influence on Britain and the Continent, as well as its publication date prior to the 1838 story, provides a background and logical foundation for our study of its impact.

The connection between the two works is most evident in the doctrine of metempsychosis - the core concept of Lemon's 1838 story. This doctrine has shaped the 1838 story's background, development, and climax, enabling the author to plausibly incorporate all significant elements of the Willow Pattern into a tragic narrative. A comparison of the terms, concepts, and examples related to metempsychosis in *The Chinese* and the 1838 story reveals Davis's influence on Lemon.

In the chapter on Buddhism in *The Chinese*, Davis notes: 'The religion of Fo, or, as it is pronounced at Canton, Fut'h, is that of Bud'h.' To explain the word 'Fo', he adds a footnote that: 'This has been constantly confounded with the name of the ancient emperor, Fo-hy.'³⁰ On the other hand, the 1838 story begins with: 'In the reign of the Emperor Fo (who was nearly as long as

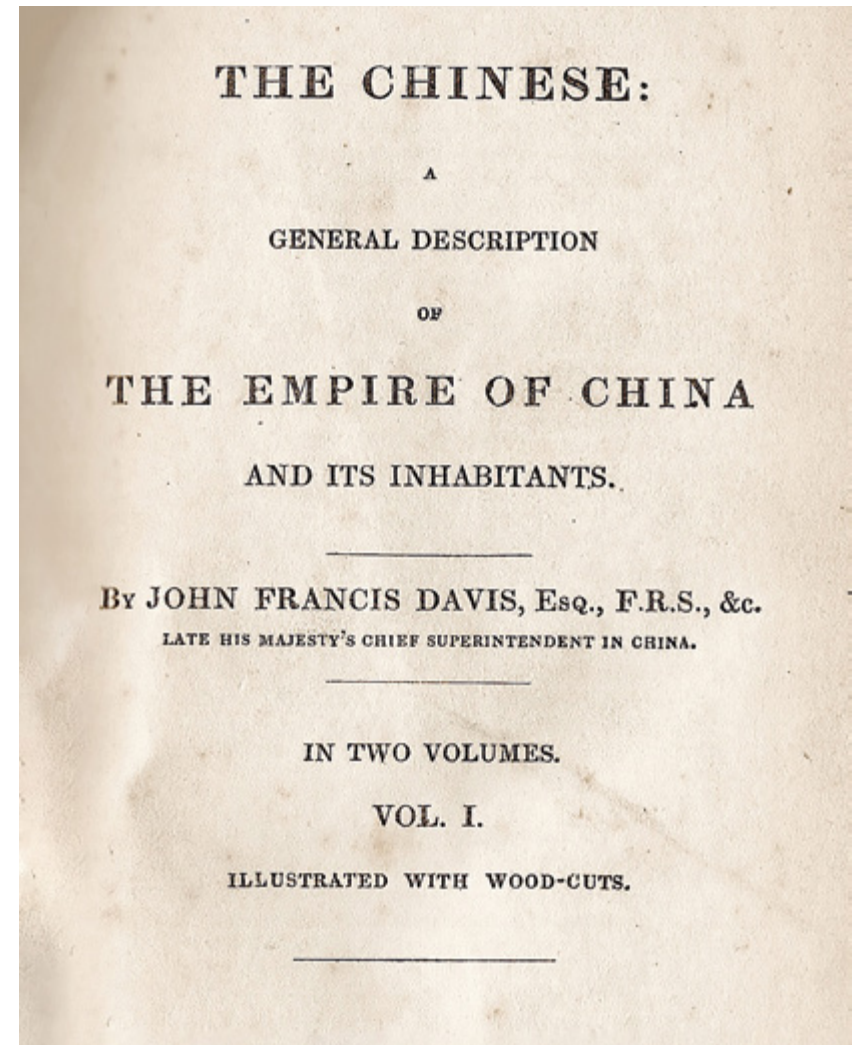


Fig. 3. John Francis Davis's, *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants*, Charles Knight, 1836.

his name), the great philosopher Fum, by the introduction of the doctrine of metempsychosis, had set nearly all the pigtailed in the Celestial Empire.³¹ The evident phonetic and graphic similarities between terms like 'Fö', 'Fo', and 'Fum' in the two texts, coupled with their shared reference to an emperor named 'Fo' and the emphasis on his ancient origins, clearly demonstrate the intertextuality of the two texts.

However, their intertextuality manifests more substantially in their content. When summarizing Confucian criticisms of Buddhist metempsychosis, Davis wrote that 'they unfit men for the business and duties of life, by fixing their speculations so entirely on another state of existence as to lead some fanatics to hang or drown themselves in order to anticipate futurity.'³² What Lemon wrote is almost a direct quotation from Davis's criticism: 'So anxious, indeed, were many for this transmigration, that, anticipating death, they insisted upon being something else.'³³ This comparison clearly shows that Lemon essentially transplanted Davis's writing into his 1838 story - not only reproducing the identical concepts but also using the same diction (e.g. 'anticipate').

Davis then supplemented Chinese objections to Buddhism with a shocking tragedy: 'Nay, two persons have been known to commit suicide together, to become man and wife in the next world.'³⁴ This case allows us to conclusively identify Davis's account as the direct source for the lovers' suicide in Lemon's 1838 story. It was from Davis's writing on Confucian criticism of Buddhist doctrine that Lemon derived the narrative framework for his story.



Fig. 4. *The Family Friend*, Vol. 1, Houlston and Stoneman, 1849, which contained 'The Story of the Common Willow-Pattern Plate' (J.B.L., p. 21).

Thus, the 1838 story begins by introducing the concept of transmigration, then uses a series of strange cases to lay the groundwork for the upcoming climax that the two lovers committed suicide under the spell of the doctrine, and reasonably concludes with their transformation into a pair of devoted doves with the help of metempsychosis: since they were deep in love in life and then transformed into the symbols of devoted love - two loving birds - after their death.

Mark Lemon even acknowledged in the 1838 story that he had benefited from someone when writing the story: 'I had written thus far, when, conscious of my inability to do justice to this part of my narrative, I procured the assistance of a friend. I trust the style will betray the author, for his modesty would not allow me to publish his name.'³⁵ Based on the evidence mentioned above, we can confidently conclude that the modest friend Mark Lemon referred to was, in fact, John Francis Davis.

When discussing Davis's literary contributions, scholars generally emphasize 'the significant role his translations played in drawing Western attention to Chinese drama.'³⁶ However, few have noted that his writings provided key inspiration for the Willow Pattern story - particularly in terms of diction, imagery, framework, and theme, much like how British ceramic designers borrowed and reappropriated motifs from Chinese export ceramics to create the willow-pattern ceramics.

The 1849 Story of the Willow Pattern Story

A decade after Mark Lemon's tale, the first volume of the 1849 *The Family Friend* magazine published 'The Story of the Common Willow-Pattern Plate' by an author self-styled as 'J.B.L.' (Fig. 4).

The story tells that an old mandarin (corrupt tax collector), who, amid growing resentment from merchants, took advantage of his wife's death to ask for leave from the office. With the emperor's permission to retire, the mandarin took his daughter, Koong-see, and his secretary, Chang, back to his house in the countryside. In the meantime, Chang and Koong-see secretly fell in love with each other. However, their happiness was short-lived. When the father discovered their affair, he confined Koong-see to the house and arranged for her to be betrothed to a wealthy man named Ta-jin. Although they could not see each other, they managed to keep in touch by boat. On the day of the pre-wedding ceremony, Ta-jin arrived with a chest of jewels. While the father and the groom-to-be were drinking and feasting, Chang sneaked into Koong-see's chamber in disguise and took her away with the jewels. While they were fleeing, the old mandarin spotted them and chased after them, but in vain.

With the help of her maid, they fled to an island to live a simple life - Chang tilling the fields, Koong-see weaving. Years later, as their lives improved, Chang resumed his studies. His fame grew after writing a book on agriculture, but this also revealed their whereabouts.

On hearing their news, the relentless Ta-jin tracked them down and killed Chang. In despair, Koong-see set fire to the house and was about to die for love. At this critical moment, a god intervened by cursing and transforming the tragic lovers into a pair of flying doves.³⁷

It is evident that the 1849 story largely retained the narrative framework of the 1838 story: the author asks the reader to take a Willow Pattern ware at hand while reading the tragic story of a cross-started lovers, a despotic father, a rival suitor, and the lovers' flight and eventual transformation into birds, incorporating all the pattern's decorative motifs into the plot more reasonably and coherently.

Moreover, both stories enthusiastically celebrated the booming British ceramic industry and its achievements: The 1838 story is proud of 'the celebrated Wedgewood' and 'the imperishable renown of the Staffordshire

potteries',³⁸ while the 1849 story claimed that 'our present manufacturers have far outstripped in beauty of material, the pottery of the old Chinese specimens,'³⁹ showcasing Britain's 'remarkable advancements in technology and marketing.'

Of course, the 1849 story saw new developments in characterization and plot. The father is transformed from a betel nut merchant into a corrupt tax official; the rival suitor evolved from a passive flat character into a more aggressive antagonist; the hero shifted from a wandering minstrel to a talented but impoverished scholar; and the heroine was reshaped from a 'plump woman' into a beauty of unyielding resolve.

Moreover, the 1849 story created entirely new plots - Koong-see and Chang's elopement, their refuge life on an island, and their tragic ending (Chang's death and Koong-see's attempt at self-immolation and their eventual transformation into doves by the gods) - which made the story far more dramatic and compelling than the 1838 story.

After its publication, the story was swiftly reprinted, abridged, and adapted by numerous journals and magazines. It also inspired many variations in different genres, including poems, verses, limericks, and cartoons, becoming the prototype of the standard Willow-Pattern story, which has been much-loved by ordinary people and studied by scholars and amateurs alike over the past 170 years.

However, several important questions remain unresolved: 1) Who was 'J.B.L.', the mysterious writer credited with the story?⁴⁰ The author of the 1849 story acknowledged quoting a poem translated by Sir William Jones, yet scholars have been unable to locate it in Jones's works.⁴¹ Then 2) who translated it? 3) Why did the author insist this was an 'ancient Chinese story', comparing its cultural significance to the Chinese to 'what our Jack the Giant-Killer or Robinson Crusoe is to us'?⁴²

As for the first question, it remains a mystery. The only clue the author of this paper has been able to uncover is Robert Copeland's speculation that 'J.B.L.' might refer to 'James Lindsay',⁴³ although he provides no evidence to support this hypothesis.

James Bowman Lindsay (1799–1862) was a Scottish mathematician and inventor recognized for his contributions to telegraphy and the development of the incandescent light bulb. While he published several works, such as *The Chrono-Astrolabe*, none had any discernible connection to ceramics. Thus, despite his initials (J.B.L.), the temporal proximity of his lifetime to the story's publication, and his writing ability, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that he was the author. The true identity behind 'J.B.L.' remains an enigma to this day.

Regarding the second question, the academic community has been misled by the author of the 1849 story. The resolution of this issue also provides crucial clues for addressing the third question. Based on the resolution of the last two questions, it can be argued that although this story did not originate from a specific Chinese tale, it is not purely a British invention either. Much like the writer of the 1838 story, that of the 1849 story was also influenced by John Francis Davis's works on China. Not only did he directly quote Davis's translation of the Chinese poem 'The Magpie's Nest' from the *Classic of Poetry* (《诗经·鹊巢》), but he also drew upon other content from *The Chinese* to further improve the plot of the 1838 story.

The clue to this argument first stems from the poem the author claimed to have quoted from Sir William Jones 'The Magpie's Nest'. However, although Jones did translate poems from the 'Shi' King' (*Classic of Poetry*), he only translated 'The River Ki', 'Ta' Hio', and 'Southern Mountain' (《卫风·淇奥》《周南·桃夭》《节南山》) (Fig. 5).⁴⁴ As he never translated 'The Magpie's Nest',

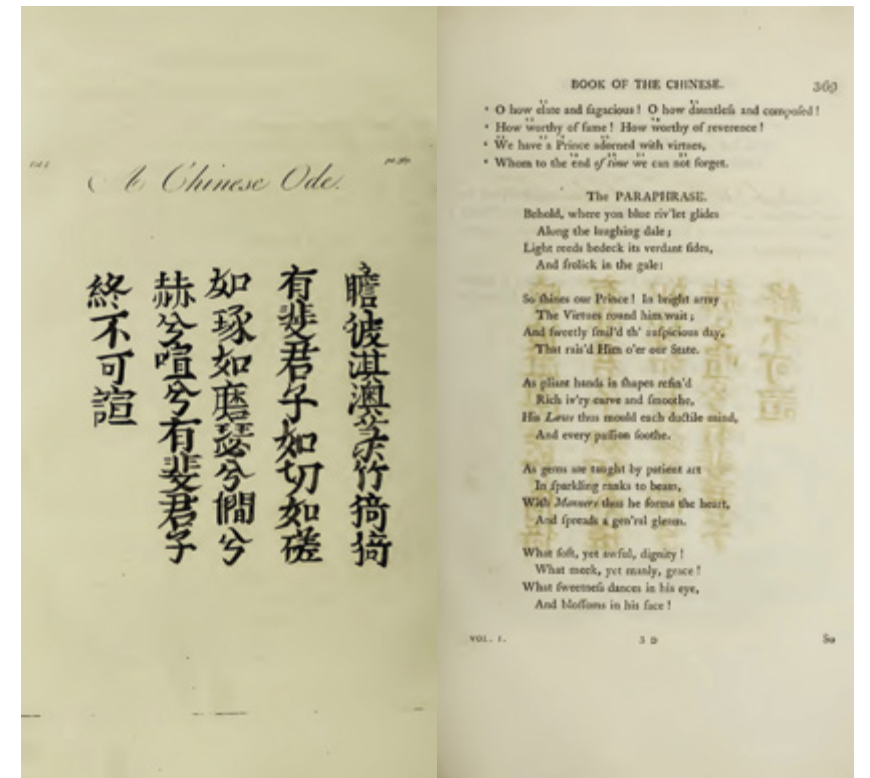


Fig. 5. William Jones' translation of 'The River Ki', included in his essay, 'On the Second Classical Book of the Chinese'. *Asiatick Researches: or Transactions of the Society*, Vol. 2, 1790, p.199.

why did the 1849 author include a footnote, 'Translated by Sir William Jones, in Asiatic Transactions', when he quoted the poem in the story?

This footnote originated from Davis's *The Chinese* (1836), which serves as the key evidence the author of this paper discovered regarding the 1849 story author's indebtedness to Davis. In the chapter 'Structure of Verse' in *The Chinese*, Davis quoted his own 1829 translation of 'The Magpie's Nest' (Sheeking-Quechao) from his paper 'Poeseos Sinensis Commentarii: On the Poetry of the Chinese', published in *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (Vol. 2). For this quotation, Davis added a footnote: 'See Sir William Jones's version of another piece from the same collection, vol. i., p 284.'⁴⁵

Today, it is difficult to pinpoint precisely why the author of the 1849 version of the story misinterpreted the worded and well-sourced annotation to be that the poem was 'translated by Sir William Jones, in the Asiatic Transactions'.⁴⁶ However, what is clear is that, when citing this poem, the 1849 story author not only failed to consult the original *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society* but also misread Davis's note, thus mistakenly believing Jones translated the poem.

Having traced the source of the 1849 story, let us examine how its author appropriated Davis's writings and translations about China for his tragic story. The author did not insert this poem merely to enhance the story's literary or romantic appeal. The poem plays a pivotal role in the narrative: its inclusion elevates the birds, which appeared only once at the end of the 1838 story, to the central motif in the 1849 story. This shift aligns perfectly with the prominence of the large birds positioned at the upper center of the willow-pattern design.

In addition, through this poem, the author also refined the plot and enriched the characters, using it to foreshadow the protagonists' fate. In the story, Koong-see is repeatedly likened to a bird. For instance, she was scared upon seeing peach tree buds but rejoiced when she saw birds build a nest outside

in the original, and explained at length in the commentary; according to which commentary, the ode has a reference to the success of a rich and powerful suitor, who carries off the bride that had already been contracted to a humbler rival. The *hieu*, or robber-bird, is constantly alluded to in modern writing, as the emblem of unjust appropriation.

之子于歸	維鵲有巢	之子于歸	維鵲有巢	之子于歸	維鵲有巢
百兩成之	維鳩盈之	百兩將之	維鳩方之	百兩御之	維鳩居之

"The nest you winged artist builds,
The robber-bird shall tear away:
—So yields her hopes th' affianced maid,
Some wealthy lord's reluctant prey.

"The anxious bird prepares a home,
In which the spoiler soon shall dwell:
—Forth goes the weeping bride, constrain'd,
A hundred cars the triumph swell.

"Mourn for the tiny architect,
A stronger bird hath ta'en its nest:
—Mourn for the hapless, stolen bride,
How vain the pomp to soothe her breast!"

The second and third parts of the ancient book of odes, called respectively *Tayo*, and *Seonyo*, are said to have been composed for the purpose of being sung or recited on state occasions: they treat of the great and virtuous actions of heroes and sages, or express their sentiments. The

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Fig. 6. Davis's translation of 'The Magpie's Nest', in 'Poeseos Sinensis Commentarii: On the Poetry of the Chinese', *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2. 1 (1829), p. 438.

her window, interpreting it as a favorable omen. It was while watching the birds construct their nest that she received Chang's letter, which contained Davis's translation of 'The Magpie's Nest'.

In the letter, Chang used this poem to compare himself to a magpie whose nest had been usurped by a robber bird, lamenting the bullying he had endured and expressing his helplessness in comforting his beloved. When Kong-see is informed by her father that the groom has come to perform a particular pre-wedding ceremony, all her hopes are shattered. She was 'like a bird caught in a net, watching helplessly as the trap tightens around her, powerless to escape'.⁴⁷ The imagery of the robber bird also makes the interloping Ta-jin appear more aggressive. Not only did he chase Chang and Kong-see after discovering their elopement, but he also relentlessly hunted them down for revenge years later, directly contributing to the tragedy. More importantly, this metaphor also makes the ending - where Kong-see and Zhang are transformed into birds after death - seem more justifiable.

This poem runs through the main plot of the 1849 story, playing a crucial role in the story's setup, development, and conclusion. Perhaps it was Davis's words that this is 'one of the most ancient pieces in the Book of Odes, the date of which may perhaps reach to three thousand years',⁴⁸ the author of the 1849 story declared this tale is a time-honored Chinese story whose importance to the Chinese is what 'Jack the Giant Killer or Robinson Crusoe' is to the English.

Apart from this poem, the author also borrowed many other materials and viewpoints from *The Chinese*. For example, in the story, the father arranged that Kong-see's 'wedding was to take place at the fortunate age of the moon, when the peach tree should blossom in the spring.'⁴⁹ In contrast, in the chapter on marriage in *The Chinese*, Davis wrote: 'The most appropriate and felicitous time for marriage is considered to be in spring, and the first moon of the Chinese year (February) is preferred. It is in this month that the peach-tree blossoms in China, and hence there are constant allusions to it in connexion with marriage.'⁵⁰ The concept and phrasing of the two are nearly identical.

The author's attitude toward Chinese technology and art in the 1849 story was also influenced by Davis. At the very beginning of the story, the author stated: 'To this country it is probable that we are indebted for many other articles in daily use; and it is certain that the Chinese were acquainted with the use of spectacles and magnifying glasses, gunpower, and cast-iron, long before the light of civilization - which arose like the sun in the east, and now culminates in the west - had reached our shores. Our present manufacturers have far outstripped the beauty of material of the old Chinese specimens, but fashion still gives a preference to Chinese patterns and forms. A remarkable instance of this preference is to be found in the fact that the sale of the common blue plate, known as the "willow-pattern", exceeds that of all the others put together.'⁵¹ Similarly, Davis, when discussing Chinese art and inventions, remarked: 'There appear to be reasonable grounds for the belief that what are justly considered in Europe as three of the most important inventions or discoveries of modern times, the art of printing, the composition of gunpowder, and the magnetic compass, had their first origin in China. However much we may have outstripped them in the use and application of these instruments or agents, the Chinese can claim priority of possession that is sufficient to convince any impartial person. It seems fair to conclude that the knowledge or tradition of these contrivances travelled slowly westward through the channels of oriental commerce, and were obscurely derived, by those who first imported them to Europe, by the way of Asia Minor or the Red Sea.'⁵² The two share significant similarities in ideas (such as acknowledging China's inventions and the westward transmission of civilization) and even diction (e.g. 'outstripped').

Additionally, other details in the story - such as the father being widowed with only one daughter, the emperor signing with vermilion brush, the mandarin being carried in a palanquin befitting his status (similar to a viceroy), the gods cursing the mandarin with childlessness, Kong-See setting fire to the house in despair, and even the surnames 'Koong' and 'Chang' - can all find their prototypes in *The Chinese*.

As noted earlier in this paper, the elopement plot in the 1849 story has been regarded by some researchers as key evidence supporting its British origin. However, before the publication of the story, the story of Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun's elopement in 'The Phoenix Seeks the Mate' (Feng Qiu Huang) had been introduced to Britain multiple times by John Francis Davis. Firstly, in the preface to Davis's translation *Hān Koong Tsew, or The Sorrows of Han*, he provided a reading list for British learners aspiring to study Chinese, believing that they 'may perhaps be useful to students of the language.' This list included 32 Chinese plays from the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, among which was '*Foong kew Hwong* (2781. 6287. 4380)... 16 volumes.' (p. vii) *The Phoenix Seeks the Mate*. Regarding *Foong kew Hwong, or The Phoenix Seeks the Mate*, listed by Davis, a scholar contended:

Foong kew Hwong, listed in the bibliography, might be the work of Yuchan Chen (also known as the Recluse of Tranquil Sage) from the late Ming or early Qing Dynasty. However, this play is relatively obscure, and the listed version has 16 volumes, which is significantly different from the extant two-volume edition. I believe that this play might not be the traditional play

but rather a Tanci (a form of narrative singing) script, which would better account for its lengthy 16 volumes. Given that it bears the title *Foong kew Hwong*, it undoubtedly recounts the romantic tale of Xiangru Sima and Wenjun Zhuo. For British readers, this story represented a key allusion of Chinese love and marriage in Chinese literature, which may explain its inclusion in the recommended reading list.⁵³

Davis also mentioned Wenjun Zhuo's name in his translation of *The Fortunate Union* (Hao Qiu Zhuan). When the male protagonist, Tiehchungyu, compares the heroine, Shueypingsin, to the ancient beauties 'Setsze and Wunkeun', Davis provided a note that Wunkeun (or Wenjun in modern Chinese Pinyin-romanization) 'has been mistaken, in France, for a man's name, by construing the characters that compose it, and styled the 'prince of letters'.

Davis's most significant introduction to *The Phoenix Seeks the Mate* (Feng Qiu Huang) appeared, however, in *Poeseos Sinensis Commentarii: On the Poetry of the Chinese*. This thesis is regarded as 'the first comprehensive and systematic English-language monograph on classical Chinese poetry in the history of British Sinology'⁵⁴ and gained considerable influence upon its publication, with a standalone edition released the same year. In this text, Davis offered a detailed introduction to the play:

There exist a great number of figurative allusions, which contain a particular reference to some event in history or romance; and as the facts, or fables, at which these only hint, cannot sometimes be discovered without the assistance of a well-informed native, this circumstance constitutes a considerable obstacle, in the present state of our knowledge, to the successful study of Chinese poetry, anywhere but in the country itself. The following are examples of such allusions:— 'The heart that responds to the lute' means yielding to seductive arts, and refers to the story of a young damsel named Wun keun, who, being beloved by a youth called Sze ma, was serenaded by him on the lute, with a song called Foong kew hwang, 鳳求凰 or 'the bird foong in search of its mate.' The story says that Ke sin toong, 其心動, 'her heart was moved', and she eloped with her admirer towards morning, leaving the traces of her flight along the dewy pathway.⁵⁵

Here, Davis explicitly elaborated on Wenjun and Xiangru's elopement, which can refute the bias that such a plot is 'a distinctly Western narrative trope.' At the same time, his account leaves room for scholarly inquiry into whether *The Phoenix Seeks the Mate* might have influenced the elopement motif in the 1849 story.

Given the significant influence of *Poeseos Sinensis Commentarii* in shaping British people's understanding of Chinese literature and considering the 1849 story writer's frequent borrowings from Davis's works, it is plausible that this writer might have read Davis's introduction to *The Phoenix Seeks the Mate* and subsequently incorporated this iconic Chinese romantic plot of elopement into the story.

More interestingly, 'J.B.L.' is also very familiar with John Francis Davis's other translations of Chinese literature. The scene in the 1849 story where Chang sends a love letter through a little cocoa-nut shell boat to Koong-see could have been inspired is very similar with a scene in Davis's translation of *Ho Ying Lou: The Shadow in the Water* (1822) in which the two lovers, separated by a wall, pass love letters through a water-lily boat. The name Koong-see could also have been inspired by *Hān Koong Tsew, or The Sorrows of Hān*, a Chinese Yuan-dynasty tragedy translated by John Francis Davis (Fig. 8). Koong-Tsew not only resembles Koong-see in form, but also means sorrow, a mood that could best reflect the heroine's feelings in the 1849 story.

Of course, regarding these conjectures, we need more substantial evidence, such as the real identity of 'J.B.L.' and, if any, his relationship with John Francis

HĀN KOONG TSEW,

OR

THE SORROWS OF HĀN:

A CHINESE TRAGEDY.

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL, WITH NOTES.

By JOHN FRANCIS DAVIS, F.R.S.

MEMBER OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY, AND OF THE
ORIENTAL TRANSLATION COMMITTEE, &c.

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1829.



Fig. 7. *Hān Koong Tsew, or The Sorrows of Hān*.

Davis, which awaits scholars' future research. But it can be concluded with certainty that the earliest willow stories, like the willow pattern itself, are chinoiserie products by making creative use of Chinese cultural elements, making it one of the most famous stories, which not only helped promote the marketing of British industrial ceramic products but also invented a narrative tradition for British popular culture.

Note: The paper was adapted from 'The China on Chinaware: The Chinese Origin of Willow Pattern Story and Its Early Evolution in 19th Century British Literature', published in *Foreign Literature Review* (2020, Volume 3).

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China on 'china': Orientalism in Nineteenth-century British Willow Pattern Literature and Painting

Tiejun Hou

The previous article, 'The Chinese Origin of the Willow Pattern Stories', examines the two earliest willow-pattern stories (respectively published in 1838 and 1849). Even in these early narratives, traces of negative representations of China and Chinese people are evident. Along with unpleasant caricatures (such as corrupt tax collectors, flattering officials, and greedy lawyers), the early two stories feature characters with superficial, peculiar onomatopoeic names (e.g., Fo, Fum, Chou-chou, Si-so, Ting-ating, So-slo, Tri-tri, and Nic-nic), uncivilized appearance, and near-mythical behaviours. For example, the queue is described as a 'long pig tail' that can point upwards when angry. The stories also depict superstitious Buddhist ideas, such as encouraging suicide in hopes of a better afterlife, and a tyrannical patriarchal system that separates lovers and causes tragedy. This derogatory and negative attitude reflects British views of China both before and after the First Opium War.¹

An article entitled 'Panorama of Canton' published in *The Spectator Magazine* in 1838 declared: 'We hear so much of China, and know so little, that our curiosity is proportionably increased. As for the country, we have no other ideas of it than are furnished by the grotesque landscapes on punch-bowls, or those puzzles of perspective that decorate the 'willow-pattern' crockery-ware.'² Leigh Hunt wrote in 1840 that Chinese are:

a people all toddling, little-eyed, little-footed, little-bearded, little-minded, quaint, overweening, pig-tailed, bald-headed, cone-capped or pagoda-hatted, having childish houses and temples with bells at every corner and story, and shuffling about in blue landscapes, over 'nine-inch bridges,' with little mysteries of bell-hung whips in their hands,—a boat, or a house, or a tree made of a pattern, being over their heads or underneath them (as the case may happen), and a bird as large as the boat, always having a circular white space to fly in. Such are the Chinese of the tea-cups and the grocers' windows, and partly of their own novels too, in which everything seems as little as their eyes, little odes, little wine-parties, and a series of little satisfactions.³

Obviously, these two writers blurred the boundary between fiction and reality as fictional images depicted on willow-pattern china plates were frequently equated with real-life conditions in China.

Building on these foundations established in literature during the first half of the nineteenth century, such imagery became increasingly widespread in British magazines and books during the latter half of the century. Writers and artists used Willow Pattern stories and designs as frameworks for plays, poems, stories and illustrations infused with Orientalist discourse and racial prejudices which construct China as a corrupted, superstitious, pre-modern, tyrannical, and backward Other, in stark contrast to the moral, civilized, modern, democratic, and progressive British Self.

The 1851 Great Exhibition in the Willow Pattern Play

During the 1851 Christmas season, a play titled *The Mandarin's Daughter! Being the Simple Story of the Willow-pattern Plate* (hereafter referred to as the 1851 play) was staged at the Strand Theatre in London. The play was clearly influenced by the 1838 and 1849 stories, retaining their main characters, plot developments, and specific phrases, such as 'the house that Jack built.' However, it differed from the two stories in its treatment of Chinese origin. Unlike its predecessors, which carefully cultivated a Chinese atmosphere and repeatedly affirmed the story's Chinese roots, the 1851 play

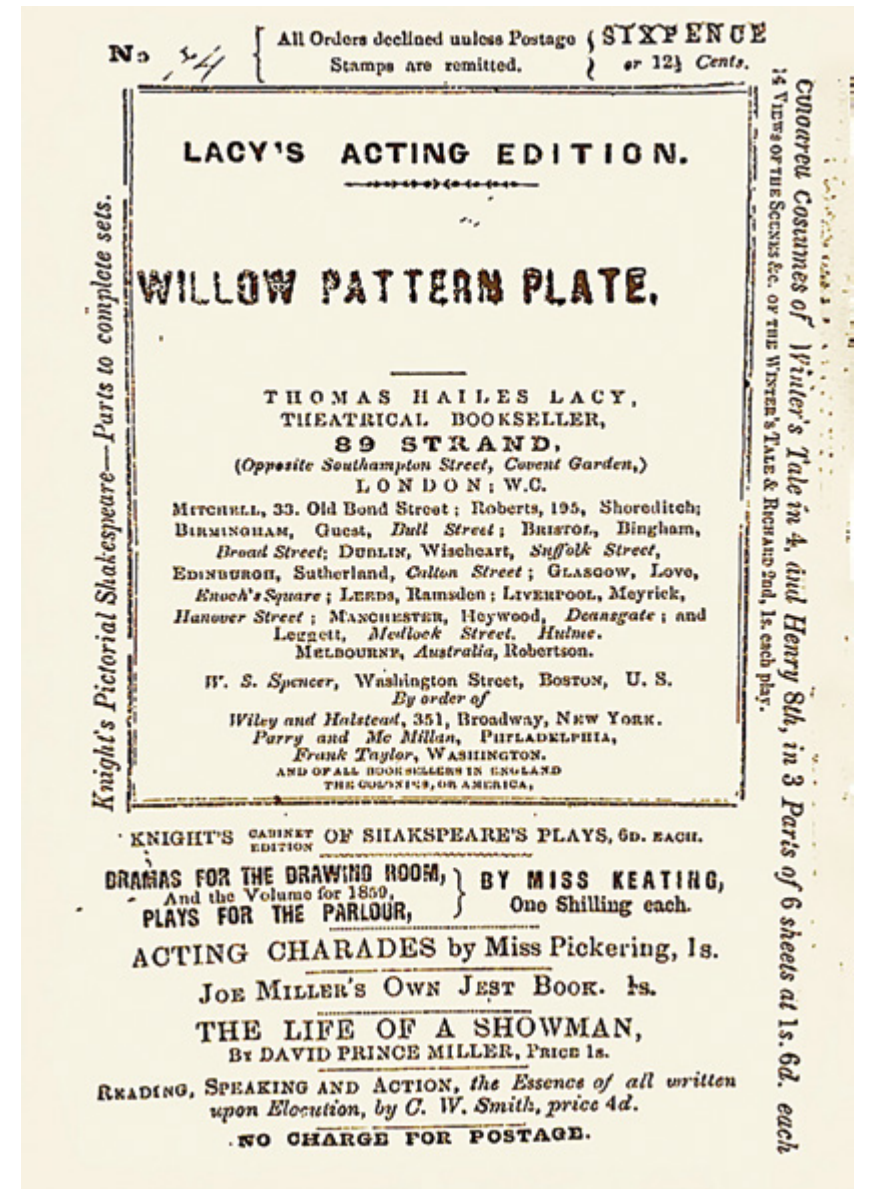


Fig.1. Francis Talfourd's, *The Mandarin's Daughter! Being the Simple Story of the Willow-pattern Plate*, London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, p. 4.

explicitly denied the pattern's Chinese origin from the outset. Before the curtain rose, a Chinese wizard named Chim-Pan-See ('chimpanzee'), who also served as narrator, confessed to the audience that - upon hearing the news of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations - he had ridden a dragon from China to visit the show. At the Crystal Palace, he found various exhibits of willow-patterned tableware which he initially assumed depicted illustrations 'of an olden love story, well known in my nation.' Yet, when he observed how remarkably the British cherished this Chinese story while remaining unaware that the story came from which 'all the picture had grown', they retorted, 'You be blowed - that's the old Willow Pattern of Copeland and Spode!' (Fig. 1).⁴

In a departure from the 1838 and 1849 stories, which drew primarily on Chinese literature and themes, the 1851 play introduced numerous British literary references and sensibilities, marking a turning point in the narrative's evolution. Francis Talfourd and William Palmer Hale, the playwrights, not only included quotes from *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth* - such as 'frailty, thy name is woman' and 'a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage' - but also directly inserted the names of Shakespeare



Fig. 2. 'The Willow Pattern Puzzle'. *Family Friend Magazine*, London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1850, p. 254.

and Romeo. Most notably, the plot mirrored the Romeo and Juliet marriage paradigm: a Christian priest officiated Kong-See and Chang's nuptials. When confronted by Kong-See's father, Chang produced a marriage certificate - a quintessentially Western legal contract - and, having obtained it through an 'act of will', declared himself her lawful husband and protector. Coercing the father to 'grin and bear it', it shifts focus to Western values of equality and free will over Eastern patriarchal norms. The father ultimately concedes, 'Since all appears correct in form and date, too, to end your matrimonio segreto, I give accord - so bless you both.'¹⁵ In earlier stories - including the allegory presented by an 1850 *Family Friend* magazine puzzle (Fig. 2) - the lovers were faced with a tragic forced suicide or murder, but, by invoking Western 'equality and liberty', the 1851 play offered another path wherein the once-helpless couple were able to break free from fate's trap, achieve earthly happiness, and step into a bright future as human beings rather than as symbolic animals who were transmogrified after death. These contrasting approaches highlight the evolving function of willow-pattern narratives in advocating the western cultural, matrimonial, and legal superiority.

However, the play did not end there, for this bright path had only been half traversed. The anxious lovers who had fled from the Yangtze River to the seas, though now joyous under the light of equality and freedom, have not reached the shores of 'civilization'. Therefore, when Kong-See proposes a honeymoon, Chang suggests the 'bright idea' of 'taking a Junk to London'. As they celebrate their British trip with music and dance, Chim-Pan-See - the Chinese wizard - abruptly intervenes, stopping the festivities and addressing the audience with patriarchal authority. He cautions, 'Young blood set at liberty's prone to run riot/ So these bits of old China forget that my power/ Has allowed them to fret on the stage their short hour/ So for fear their disorder of mind should be chronic/ And to prove their attachments are

wholly platonic/ Once more in their hardware repose be they set.' Yet Kong-See - having experienced freedom - refuses to submit. She appeals directly to the audience for their help: 'For hours of future freedom from our bands/ We ask the kindly help of your good hands/ For if your favour now accorded be/ Each night shall your indulgence set us free.' In return, she promises, 'on your entertainment will we will wait/ To serve this trifle on our Willow Plate.' This audience interaction highlights how the play blends fiction and reality, a theme that is consistent across nineteenth century interpretations of the Willow Pattern.⁶

At this point in the narrative, as the playwrights transition the characters from the shores of the Yangtze to the Thames, they bridge both geographical and temporal divides. The play's direct address to the audience blends reality with fiction while continuing the underlying advocacy of Western superiority. When contextualized within its historical background - such as the father's acceptance of a Western marriage contract and the couple's celebration of freedom in London - this episode can be read as a literary metaphor for the perceived benefits extended to China by Britain following the Treaty of Nanjing (1842). Such rhetorical interpretations align with articles from the era, including *The Illustrated London News* (3rd December 1842), which suggested that thanks to 'the treaty of peace', 'a large family of the human race, which for centuries has been isolated from the rest, is now about to enter with them into mutual intercourse. Vast hordes of population, breaking through the ignorance and superstition which has for ages enveloped them, will now come out into the open days, and enjoy the freedom of a more expanded civilization, and enter upon prospects immeasurably grander.'¹⁷ Thus, the willow-pattern narrative both reflected and shaped Victorian perceptions of China, reinforcing a self-congratulatory British worldview.

However, it bears reminding that - just as the friar-witnessed union of Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's play ends not in marital happiness but tragic death - the Western-style marriage forced upon the bride's father in the 1851 play grants no true liberty to the couple. Even as the 'favor' and 'indulgence' of the London audience allow the couple to escape the magical control of the tyrannical Oriental wizard Chim-Pan-See, now that they are in the 'good hands' of their Western benefactors, they merely exchange one form of bondage for another. In 1852, only a year after the play's debut, Charles Dickens remarks in his *A Plated Article* that willow wares defied 'every known law of perspective, adorned millions of our family ever since the days of platters' and 'Copeland's patterns of beautiful design, in faultless perspective' were 'causing the ugly old willow to wither out of public.'¹⁸ So, what assurance remains to Kong-See and Chang that London's audience will continue their indulgent patronage? And, who can guarantee the characters of the Willow Pattern story would not 'once more in their hardware repose be they set'?'⁹

While championing Western freedom, equality, and indulgence, the playwright is also celebrating the industrial achievements of the nineteenth century British Empire. At the beginning of the play, when the wizard Chim-Pan-See visited the Great Exhibition, the dizzy display of 'earthenware, china, stone-hardware, and delft' with the Willow Pattern 'drawn longways and shortways, drawn outside and in'¹⁰ which he saw served as tangible proof of that era's flourishing British ceramic industry. Other products of the British Empire are also highlighted throughout the narrative. For instance, where previous stories vaguely refer to the gifts prepared by Tar-gin for Kong-See as a box of jewellery, they are now specified as diamond bracelets, a jewel necklace, and pearl brooches made by renowned British jewellers such as Hunt, Roskell, and Hope.

In the 1851 play, the junk that Chang and Kong See take to London¹¹ is of particular significance. Rather than a fictional creation, it refers to the Keying, a Chinese junk anchored off the Thames during the Great Exhibition.



Fig. 3. 'The Chinese Junk in the East India Docks'. *Illustrated London News*, May 20th 1848, Vol. 12 Iss. 317, p.12.

Purchased secretly by British merchants in Canton in August 1846, the vessel set sail that December and reached London in April 1848. The 160-foot-long, 33-foot-wide boat with a capacity of 700-800 tons of cargo instantly sparked immense public interest upon its arrival. As one noted, 'as many as 7000 to 8000 persons daily went on board'¹² (Fig. 3). Even Queen Victoria herself boarded the junk with keen interest. A contemporary news report on the junk stated that 'she proved herself an excellent sea-boat; and her powers of weathering a storm equal, if not surpass, those of vessels of British build.'¹³

However, even such a remarkable Chinese vessel was belittled. In his essay 'The Great Exhibition and the Little One', after contrasting Britain's great exhibits with China's little ones, Dickens turned his gaze to the Keying: 'There are some stupendous anchors lying in the outer part of the Great Exhibition. Their enormous size and weight naturally suggest the presence advanced state of naval architecture in England... Compare these with the models of junks and boats in the Chinese Exhibition. Compare the junk itself, lying in the Thames hard by the Temple-stairs. As a bamboo palanquin is beside a Railway-train, so is an English or American ship beside this ridiculous abortion.' After such comparisons, Dickens concluded that this reflects the disparity between 'Stoppage and Progress' - the former resulting from China's

self-imposed isolation or 'internal communication', while the latter from Britain's 'external communication and commerce trade with the whole world.'¹⁴

But, contrary to the fictionalized plot of the 1851 play, the so-called Chinese exhibits, including the Keying Junk, were not brought by the Chinese themselves. Due to the tense Sino-British relations at the time, the Qing government did not send any official delegation or exhibits to the Exhibition. Yet this hardly mattered, because, as Dickens himself declared in 'The Great Exhibition and the Little One', 'the true Tory spirit would have made a China of England.'¹⁵ To ensure that the 1851 Exhibition truly lived up to its name as a Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, British curators, guided by this very Tory spirit, unilaterally gathered Chinese artifacts and displayed them in the designated Chinese section. This move filled a crucial gap, allowing the British public to cast a condescending gaze from China to Peru. But how could such a 'China of England' truly represent China? For the imperial public, epitomized by Dickens, however, there was no need for introspection or exploration of the discrepancy between representation and reality. They arrogantly employed the image of the Other they had themselves constructed to elevate their self-image. This was the eternal logic of imperial discourse: rendering the 'Other' little to reflect the greatness of the 'Self'.

Referred to as Chou-chou in the 1838 story and unnamed in the 1849 story, the 1851 play renames Kong-See's father to He-sing. This He-sing was not merely fictional; he had a real-life counterpart who became a sensational figure at the 1851 London Exhibition. On the day of the opening ceremony, this mysterious man, dressed in the satins of a Chinese mandarin and appearing seemingly out of nowhere, not only stood among Britain's dignitaries but, after shaking hands with the Duke of Wellington, proceeded to the throne, where he bowed repeatedly to Queen Victoria.¹⁶ His behaviours, in a way, fulfilled a long-held aspiration of Lord Macartney when he was asked to perform the ceremony of 'the San-kewei Kew-kow, thrice kneeling and nine times beating the head against the ground.'¹⁷ 'The English ambassador, Lord Macartney, appears to have understood correctly the meaning of the ceremony, and proposed the only condition which could enable him to perform it, viz., a Chinese of equal rank performing it to the King of England's picture; or perhaps a promise from the Chinese court that, should an ambassador ever go from thence to England, he would perform it in the king's presence, might have enabled him to do it.'¹⁸

To summarize, by taking advantage of literary imagination, the playwright transformed the boat which the couple flees on into the famous Keying Junk, and by drawing upon the kind of Tory spirit Dickens referred to, he not only transported the official from the story to the 1851 Great Exhibition but also recast him as a 'Chinese Macartney' famous for having paid tribute to the British queen. In doing so, the author elevated a Chinese tragedy into a British comedy, while simultaneously converting what was initially a chinoiserie tale written for British plates into a British tale that extolled the empire's grandeur.

The Gold Rush in Willow Pattern Comics

In 1853, a letter titled 'A Family Epistle, from a Chinese Emigrant to His Wife' was published in the British magazine *Comic Almanack*. The narrator, a Chinese gold digger in California, apologizes to his beloved wife, Tee-Tee, for sneaking abroad without notice. He claimed to have joined the Great Chinese Emigration movement to the world of the barbarians. Then, his tone changes to defend the actions of him and his companions, and he states that far from being driven by the vulgar pursuit of gold, they actually went abroad with the goal of 'civilizing the whiskered and shirt-collared heathen' with 'the light of wisdom'.

Perhaps because the narrator found this rhetoric too lofty, he then added, 'Thou mayst remark it was odd we never thought of civilizing them till we

heard of their finding gold, but it was because the barbarians had found this gold they stood in need of our assistance more than ever.' These people, are 'such a set of fools' that '[could they actually] be expected to know the use of wealth?'

If the letter itself appeared to satirize Western civilizations, then the accompanying willow-pattern illustration by British cartoonist George Cruikshank - titled 'An Extraordinary Movement on China - or an Alteration in the 'Willow Pattern' at last' - laid bare the author's true intentions (Fig. 4). In this cartoon, Cruikshank depicted a sea of Chinese emigrants, laden with luggage and tools, advancing in lockstep toward Australia and California by boat or on foot. Yet these emigrants were far from the civilized figures the letter's narrator claimed to represent. Instead, they were portrayed as a mindless teapot-headed army, driven forward by a maniacal emperor with outstretched arms and a skyward-pointing queue. It seems that this endless tide of arrivals brought with them not wisdom, but the dread of the 'Yellow Peril'.¹⁹

The images and text above reflect the historical gold rushes of America and Australia, which began in 1848 when gold was discovered in California's Sierra Nevada mountains. The news spread rapidly. Tens of thousands of prospectors flocked to California, including roughly 30,000 from China's coastal provinces, such as Fujian and Guangdong. While seeking gold, these emigrants also played a crucial role in driving population growth, facilitating railroad construction, and contributing to urban development in the American West. News of California's gold rush soon reached Australia by way of those Australians who had dug for gold in California. Soon thereafter, gold was also discovered in New South Wales and Melbourne. This sparked the Australian gold rush of 1851. By 1852, immigrants from around the world, including a substantial number from Guangdong or Canton, China, began arriving in Australia in search of fortune.

The arrival of Chinese workers initially addressed local labour shortages. However, due to differences in language, culture, and customs, as well as the illiteracy of some immigrants and fierce competition with other emigrants, they also created numerous social problems. Compounded by discrimination and oppression from earlier émigrés to both the United States and Australia, conflicts - and at times violent confrontations - emerged between the two sides. The illustration and text referenced above offer a glimpse into the prevailing American attitudes toward Chinese emigrants at the time. This sentiment was further reinforced by 'John Chinaman', a widely circulated piece of doggerel published in *California Singer* in 1855, which bears striking intertextual parallels with the content of the 1853 *Comic Almanack*. The background of this poem is set during the early days of the Gold Rush, when Americans welcomed the arrival of foreign labourers. In April 1851, when a ship carrying Chinese labourers arrived in California, it was greeted by San Francisco's mayor and other officials who believed these 'Celestials' would turn out to be outstanding citizens.²⁰ However, only a few years later, significant cultural and lifestyle differences among Americans, combined with limited knowledge of Chinese customs, led to intense resentment.

In the poem, are vented grievances against Chinamen, accusing them of theft, lies, false oaths, eating non-food animals, being barbaric and repulsive, and pursuing wealth through ruthless and immoral means. This accusation aligned with the denigration of the Chinese by Westerners in the nineteenth century. As summarized by Medhurst, the British Consul in Shanghai at the time: 'it will be found that the prominent idea with regard to a Chinaman is that he is a quaint but stolid besotted creature, who smokes opium perpetually, and drowns his daughters as fast as they appear; whose every-day food consists of puppies, kittens, rats and such like garbage; whose notions of honour, honesty, and courage, are of the loosest; and to whom cruelty is a pastime'.²¹



Fig. 4. 'An Extraordinary Movement on China - or an Alteration in the "Willow Pattern" at last'. *The Comic Almanack*, London: Chatto & Winduspp, 1884, p. 408.

John Chinaman, John Chinaman,
Five fleeting years have passed since then,
When I greeted your arrival from Canton,
Now regret gnaws deep within my ken.

I once deemed you meek and mild,
With no great skill or art to show,
Yet now you thrive with actions wild,
Like any citizen, your presence doth glow.

I hoped you'd open ports so wide,
Letting merchants roam with trade,
Bartering silk, tin, tea, and wood's soft pride,
In a way of barter, both strong and long.

I dreamed you'd shear your pagan queue,
Don Yankee garb with grace so fine,
High collars veiling necks so black,
Leaving the old ways far behind.

Your vows were sweet, your words so true,
I trusted, with a heart sincere,
But lies and theft,
both you pursue.

Rats and puppies, fed till full,
When dusk descends and dinners call,
They find their flesh a banquet's pull,
In a cruel feast, both great and small.

This thieving tribe, with tricks so sly
Whose word I took as gold,
Now clutch our coins with greedy claws-
For lucre, honor sold.

²¹'John Chinaman', Guinn J. M., Appleton, D. E., et al. (eds.), *Songs From A California Songster*, Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California, 1907, p. 211.



Fig. 5. 'The Great Barbarian Dragon that will up 'The Brothers of the Moon'. *Punch*, Vol. 25, September 10th, 1853, pp. 98-99.



JOHN CHINAMAN WEeping OVER HIS TAIL.

Fig. 6. 'John Chinaman Weeping over His Tail', *Punch*, Vol. 25, September 10th, 1853, p.112.

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement in the Willow Pattern

While Chinese labourers in the United States and Australia were engaged in an extraordinary movement, another extraordinary movement, known as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement, was taking place in China. Initially perceived by the British as progressive, this movement's leaders claimed to be Christians and sought to overthrow the Qing dynasty, aiming to establish a heavenly kingdom on earth. Militarily, their forces captured cities and fortresses, launching offensives on multiple fronts. Culturally, they implemented symbolic reforms, such as mandating the cutting of pigtails as a clear gesture of defiance against the Manchu regime.

In 1853, the 25th volume of *Punch* magazine published a series of satirical cartoons. The illustration titled 'The Great Barbarian Dragon that will up "The Brothers of the Moon"' depicts a scene set against a willow-patterned backdrop (Fig. 5). A Manchu official flanked by soldiers standing before a winged steam locomotive. And the locomotive extends a mechanical arm, wielding a pair of scissors to sever the queue of a fleeing Chinese man. Clearly, the Manchu rulers and their troops symbolize the Qing dynasty's Manchu rulers, fully armed and poised in battle formation, ready to thwart the progress represented by the train - a metaphor for the 'progressive' Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's movement. However, in the following illustrations and articles of the same volume, while the queue-wearing mandarin is portrayed as a person of 'narrow-mindedness and villainous detestable obstinacy, in adhering pertinaciously to obsolete usages and fashions', (Fig. 6) the queue-cutting Taiping rebel is equally portrayed as a ferocious-looking, dishevelled savage (see page 155).

In the poem 'Mr. Punch in China', Mr. Punch claimed he came to China via a 'steam locomotive' or 'witch's chariot'. While traveling around the country, he observed Chinese people and society and witnessed the Taiping Movement firsthand. He not only found the Chinese held 'rats, mice and snake' dear, but also saw the people's movement as a riot with 'Confucius creeds worse confounded' with Christian teachings. He even predicted that the Chinese would not be able to rid themselves of the foreign suppression and would be conquered again and again:

If you think that this triumph your labour will terminate;
 When the Mantchews have vanished, there still must be banished
 Many faults which for ages you've suffered to germinate.
 Your own gross inhumanity, cunning, and vanity,
 which still are so great that I cannot ignore'em
 Helped the Mantchews, who know yo right well, to subdue you,
 as the Mongols and Khalkas had oft done before'em.
 You have broken your chains of today with small pains;
 But hereafter, if courage and honesty you lack, you
 Will be conquered once more--like your fathers of yore,
 By the might of some yet to come Kublai or Hulakhu.²²

In the author's view, the vicious circle of 'conquest - rebellion - conquest' was destined to repeat itself endlessly in this willow-patterned land because Chinese people were gross, inhuman, vain, cunning, dishonest, and cowardly.

This type of denigration of the Chinese people frequently appeared in issues of *Punch* magazine during this period. The 10th April 1858 issue of *Punch* magazine featured an illustration with a Willow Pattern backdrop (Fig. 7). The image depicted an obese Chinese official strutting pompously with a parasol in one hand and a broadsword in the other, followed by a servant subserviently holding the official's queue. Through this kind of visual satire, the Willow Pattern became a microcosm of Canton and, by extension, Chinese society at large, catering to and reinforcing Western audiences' contemptuous

A CHANSON FOR CANTON.

JOHN CHINAMAN a rogue is born,
 The laws of truth he holds in scorn ;
 About as great a brute as can
 Encumber the Earth is JOHN CHINAMAN.
 Sing YEH, my cruel JOHN CHINAMAN,
 Sing Yeo, my stubborn JOHN CHINAMAN ;
 Not COBDEN himself can take off the ban
 By humanity laid on JOHN CHINAMAN.

With their little pig-eyes and their large pig-tails,
 And their diet of rats, dogs, slugs, and snails,
 All seems to be game in the frying-pan
 Of that nasty feeder, JOHN CHINAMAN.
 Sing lie-tea, my sly JOHN CHINAMAN,
 No lightee, my coward JOHN CHINAMAN :
 JOHN BULL has a chance—let him, if he can,
 Somewhat open the eyes of JOHN CHINAMAN.



stereotypes of China and the Chinese people. That is, 'the Chinese were on the whole an uninteresting, grotesque, and uncivilized "pig-eyed" people, whom one run no risk in laughing at; an "umbrella race," "long-tailed celestial," at once conceited, ignorant, and almost unimprovable.'²³

The satirical poem 'A Chanson for Canton' accompanying this illustration stealthily shifted its denigration from the barbaric official Chinaman to the Chinese people at large, mocking their roguery, brutality, stubbornness, and cowardice. The poet placed the Chinese people in opposition to 'humanity', dramatizing the contempt of the 'civilizational West' for the 'barbaric Chinese'.

The so-called 'John Chinaman' was a pejorative term used by nineteenth-century British and Americans to refer to Chinese people. The poet also complains that China's failure to open its ports at the time made it difficult for American merchants to trade. However, he never would admit the fact that a sovereign nation's decision to open or close its ports was naturally based on its own sovereignty, will, and national interests. But, if the criticism in the poem 'John Chinaman' was merely complaining, then the poem 'A Chanson for Canton' was openly clamouring for harsh lessons upon the Chinese, using war to open the eyes of the cruel, stubborn, savage, and cowardly John Chinaman. This also reflects the prevailing mindset of British society following the Arrow War. As stated in the poem, even Richard Cobden, who advocated a moderate stance towards China, could not prevent this trend. These attitudes eventually led to the outbreak of the Second Opium War.

The Second Opium War in the Willow Pattern Tea Party

The 4th September 1858 issue of *Punch* magazine featured an illustration titled 'A Little Tea Party' (Fig. 8), which recreated China's vicious cycle of 'conquest – rebellion – conquest' on a willow-patterned tea battlefield. This time, however, the conquerors were the Western powers of Britain and France. In the drawing, Britannia, representing Britain, and Marianne, representing France, sat at a willow-pattern table for tea with a Mandarin who represented China. Britannia, clad in battle armour and a helmet, stands on the left, holding a cannon-shaped teapot in her left hand. Its spout is pointed menacingly at a fat Mandarin with an upturned moustache and queue, his hands clasped in a pleading gesture. Meanwhile, Marianne, sipping tea from a cup, looks at him with predatory intent. Below the illustration, there is a caption of dialogue: Britannia taunted, 'A little more gunpowder, Mr. China?' The terrified Mandarin replied in broken pidgin English: 'O-No-Tan-Ke-Mum!'

While the now impoverished nation of China lost vast amounts of sovereignty and wealth and sank deeper into its semi-colonial and semi-feudal abyss, this seemingly innocuous 'tea party' allowed Britain and France to extract immense benefits from China once again. Against this backdrop, China's global image and that of its people became increasingly distorted and denigrated. As noted by French scholar Muriel Détrie, 'Since 1840, a flood of literary works about China has emerged, creating the impression of an endless reckoning with past literary works. These texts, whether consciously or unconsciously, constructed a new image of the Chinese that stood in stark contrast to the idealized portrayals crafted by Jesuit missionaries and Enlightenment philosophers. Attitudes toward things Chinese shifted from admiration to abomination, reverence to condemnation, and curiosity to contempt.' This phenomenon manifested starkly in another variant of the Willow Pattern story of that era.²⁴

Fig. 7. The illustration and poem 'A Chanson for Canton'. *Punch*, Vol. 34, April 10th, 1858, p. 166

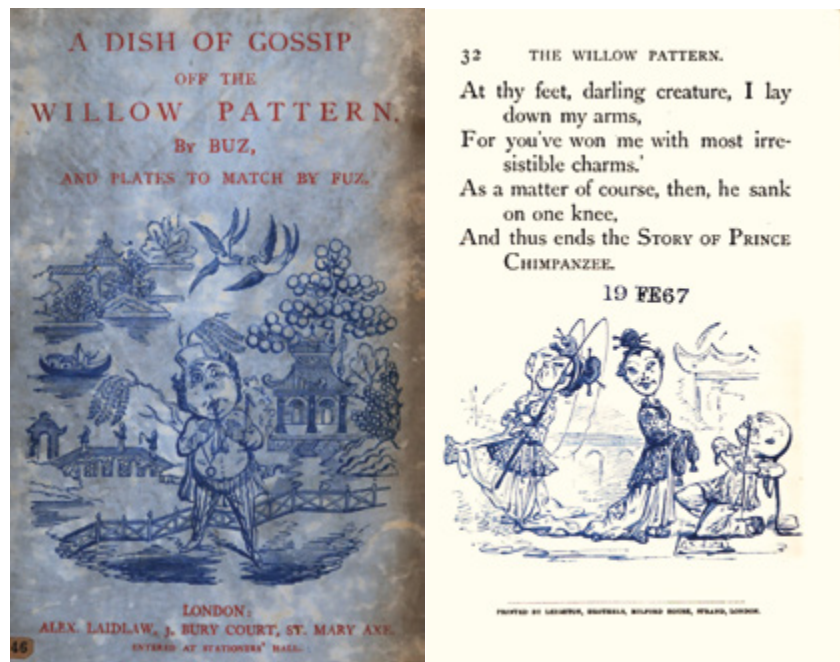


A LITTLE TEA PARTY.

BRITANNIA. "A LITTLE MORE GUNPOWDER, MR. CHINA?"

CHINA. "O-NO-TAN-KE-MUM."

Fig. 8. 'A Little Tea Party'. *Punch*, Vol. 35, September 4th, 1858, p. 97.



Figs. 9, 10. 'A Dish of Gossip off the Willow Pattern', Buz, Alex Lailaw, 1867.

In *A Dish of Gossip off the Willow Pattern*, a poetic tale published in 1867, the story unfolds around a wealthy English bachelor (Fig. 9). Puffing on opium as he contemplates the Willow Pattern plates on his dining table, he was swept into a melancholy reverie. He lamented the hardships of his past life and his current solitude - rich yet aging without companionship. Sighing with melancholy, his eyes grew heavy, and gradually he drifted into slumber. In his dream, he soared through mist-clad skies and crossed vast oceans, arriving in faraway China. There, he lingered in a serene azure-hued valley, observing the willow-patterned world before him.

In this enchanted realm, he overheard the birds of the sky, which were revealing the 'true story' of the Willow Pattern tale. Below them was the kingdom of Emperor Fum, who had three daughters. Though coddled in luxury and privilege, they languished in isolation and sentimentality. Their dreary existence was interrupted by the arrival of Prince Chim-Pan-See, who moved here and settled down in a house on the right side of the pattern. He spent his days idly fishing from a boat, much to the princesses' delight. When the emperor departed for a military campaign, the spinster sisters vied fiercely for the prince's favour. Yet their ardent passion met only with his aloof indifference. His coldness only fuelled their obsession, so they spared no effort to vie for his attention, leaving him restless and impatient. Desperate, the prince penned a letter, proposing a fishing competition on the bridge, promising that whoever could hook his most cherished possession would win his affection.

Thus, the three princesses competed fiercely against each other for victory in the contest. Princess Fe stepped forward first. With a flick of her rod, she reeled in a Périgord pie - a delicacy beloved by the hedonistic Epicurean school. Her choice was a veiled suggestion to the prince that life was fleeting and should be savoured with indulgence, but Chim-Pan-See was totally unmoved. Next came the shrewd Princess Fi, who triumphantly hooked a gleaming mirror, declaring that the prince's greatest love was none but himself. Instead of praising her cleverness, he dismissed her as presumptuous with her effort wide of the mark. Lastly, Princess Fo cast her line with unshakable confidence. Moments later, she hauled up a purse brimming with gold coins. Overjoyed, the prince fell to his knees in adoration and proposed to tie the knot with this hunchbacked and ugly-looking princess.²⁵

As noted by J. J. Clark in his *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*, the Orient 'is Europe's collective day-dream.'²⁶ Through the catalyst of opium and dream, the narrator of this tale journeyed to the distant, mystical Orient - a device reminiscent of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. However, unlike Coleridge's era, when the British were mainly fascinated by the romantic and outlandish East, the publication of this Willow Pattern story coincided with a fundamental shift in British views of China. Consequently, its characters were rendered as grotesque, vicious, and ugly, brimming with absurdity and eccentricity. The author, echoing the earlier play *The Mandarin's Daughter*, named the male protagonist Chim-Pan-See. As his name implied, he occupied an ambiguous space 'between civilization and barbarism'²⁷ - a semi-savage figure who cloaked his venal greed beneath a leisurely nonchalance. However, a mere purse of gold coins would reveal his true colour, driving him to wed a woman of hideous appearance without hesitation.

Meanwhile, the story was set in an empire without an emperor who was away for military affairs. This could be a historical allusion to the Xianfeng Emperor's flight in the wake of the Second Opium War. Lacking male heirs, the emperor had only three daughters to carry on the hereditary rule of his dynasty. With the monstrous-looking daughter taking the hands of the greedy Chim-Pan-See, one could only imagine the bleak future awaiting this azure willow-patterned realm should their offspring inherit the throne.

The Self-Strengthening Movement in the Willow Pattern Plate

The 1st October 1887 issue of *Punch* magazine featured another willow-patterned illustration titled 'American China' (Fig. 11). However, its core elements—from the central pavilions, pedestrians on bridges, and flying birds to the geometric, floral, and animal motifs on the borders - were imbued with distinctly American elements. For instance, the traditional Chinese pavilions were adorned with signs like 'International Amalgamated Bank', 'Telephone Exchange', 'Railway Station', 'Store', and 'Bar'. Fences and trees bore banners proclaiming 'Almighty Dollars', 'One Million Taels', 'Loan Million', 'Buy Buy Buy', 'Cold Silver', and 'Buy Snacks & Gums'. The three figures crossing the bridge were transformed into top-hatted, suit-clad American businessmen. The serene riverboat vanished, supplanted by a smoke-belching steamship, while the once-harmonious doves or turtledoves became vultures and double-headed eagles fighting against each other. The inner and outer borders were decorated with U. S. banknotes, coins, the Stars and Stripes, while the outermost rim of the border were filled with the names of nineteenth-century American magnates of railroad, telegraph, and business, including Eugene Stanislaw Kostka de Mitkiewicz (1849–1901), Jay Gould (1836–1892), and John William Mackay (1831–1920).²⁸

At the back of the illustration was a story titled 'The Willow Pattern Plate of the Future', recounting how Li Zhi and Chang (the reincarnated counterparts of the classic Willow Pattern story, Kong-See and Chang) were granted a temporary reprieve from their ancient curse. Restored briefly to human form, they returned to their willow-pattern homeland, only to find this future world, as depicted in the illustration, has undergone a cataclysmic transformation. Everywhere they looked, they found 'telegraph poles, telephone exchanges, river steamers, banks, and blazing posters.' Even the willow leaves reeked of the smell of 'base £ s. d.' Stunned by this unrecognizable world, Chang's temper flared as he listened to his wife's lament for the vanished Arcadia of the Willow Pattern. He blamed all this on Li Hung Chang, 'the dragon's claw of the throne, the amber pillar of imperial power.'²⁹

Chang's accusation reveals the important reasons behind this dramatic transformation of willow-patterned China into the 'American China'. Battered successively by the Opium Wars and the Taiping Movement, the mid-nineteenth-century Qing government faced intense internal and external

AMERICAN CHINA.



"The Mandarin had an only daughter, named LI-CHI, who fell in love with CHANG, a young man who lived in the island-home represented at the top of the pattern, and who had been her father's secretary. The father overheard them one day making vows of love under the orange-tree, and sternly forbade the unequal match; but the lovers contrived to elope, lay concealed for awhile in the gardener's cottage, and thence made their escape in a boat to the island-home of the young lover. The enraged Mandarin pursued them with a whip, and would have beaten them to death, had not the gods rewarded their fidelity by changing them both into turtle-doves. The picture is called the Willow-Pattern, not only because it is a tale of disastrous love, but because the elopement occurred 'when the willow begins to shed its leaves.'"—*Legend of the Willow-Pattern.*

SCENE—that of the tradition. Season, willow-fall. Hour, sundown.

Li-Chi (sings)—

The poor soul sat sighing by a rum-looking tree,
Sing, once a green willow;
But now all its leaves smell of base £ s. d.;
Sing willow, willow, willow!

The old stream runs by her, not with the old tones,
Sing willow, willow, willow!
But, churned by coarse paddles, it plashes and groans;
Sing willow, willow, willow!

Chang." Ah, yellow and irradiant sunflower of my soul's secret shrine, sing not thus dolefully, I entreat thee. What avails the permission to escape awhile our old ornithological metamorphosis, and revisit once again the glimpses of the Mandarin's country seat, the pavilion, the peach and the orange-tree, the elegant wooden fence, the bridge, the boat, and, above all, the willow, only to sing songs whose spirit-cleaving cadences sting thy CHANG more than ever did the angry Mandarin's whip-lash?

Li-Chi (mournfully). What, indeed? But O, sublimated saffron-bag of my spirit's idolatry, who can help weeping at sight of this?

Chang (reading). "National and International Amalgamated Bank!" O, mighty but much-too-free-with-the-whip-hand-of-parental-authority Mandarin of the Middle Kingdom, what would you have thought of this transformation?

crises. Against this backdrop, reform-minded scholars and officials like Wei Yuan, Feng Guifen, and Lin Zexu championed progressive ideologies such as 'learn the advanced skills of foreigners to resist them' and 'Chinese learning for the essence, Western learning for practical use', advocating for the use of Western technology to achieve national prosperity and military strength. Inspired by these ideas, prominent statesmen, including Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang (Li Hung Chang), Zuo Zongtang, and Chang Chih-tung, emerged as key proponents of modernization. They aggressively imported Western industrial technologies, establishing a modern military system and developing civilian industries in shipping, railways, telegraphy, postal services, mining, and textiles. They also sent students abroad for advanced training to cultivate new-generation talents. All of their efforts were historically known as the Self-Strengthening Movement.

By the 1870s, Li Hung Chang - then serving as the Viceroy of Zhili and Minister of Commerce in the North China region - had become a leading figure in the Self-Strengthening Movement. However, as he pushed forward numerous construction and reform initiatives, Li found that financial problems, such as a lack of funding, were becoming increasingly critical. In 1885, with the support of Prince Chun Yixuan, Li proposed to Empress Dowager Cixi the establishment of a state-run bank. This proposal was strongly opposed by conservative officials and thus failed to materialize. Undeterred, Li adopted a more low-key approach, engaging in discussions with foreign merchants before reporting back to the court once the business negotiations were settled.

In 1886, Li Hung Chang entrusted Chang Yinheng, the then-Qing envoy to the United States, to secure funding in America. The latter subsequently introduced the aforementioned American businessman Mitkiewicz to Viceroy Li. By April 1887, Mitkiewicz arrived in China to negotiate with Li's trusted associates—Ma Jianzhong, Zhou Fu, and Sheng Xuanhuai - regarding the establishment of the Sino-American Bank. The two parties formalized an agreement in July of that year, stipulating that 'American investors would raise ten million dollars to establish the Sino-American Bank in China's treaty ports', which would provide loans for 'major infrastructure projects including construction of railways, mining factories and textile industries.' In return, Mitkiewicz secured exclusive privileges to operate telephone services in China. It was inspired by these historical incidents that the willow-pattern illustration and its accompanying tale came into being.

However, the illustration published in *Punch* not only documented the historical 'close cooperation' between China and the United States at the time but also reflected British dissatisfaction with Americans in monopolizing the development of China. Hence, it is a manifestation of the 'competition between British and American corporate capital.'³⁰ As scholars like Tan Xiao have noted, this Sino-American collaboration involved 'exclusive rights' to develop China. Had such privileges been formalized, companies from other nations would have faced significant legal barriers when operating related businesses in China. Consequently, it sparked unified opposition from interest groups in Britain, Germany, and France. 'British financial consortia even filed formal protests to British Foreign Office, demanding that the government intervene in the Sino-US deal.'³¹

In the ensuing narrative, the author dampened the American ambitions to 'run' the Celestial Empire or 'exploit' the 'Flowery Kingdom', dismissing such prospects as 'dim', arguing that the American fowl (representing America) and two-headed eagle (symbolizing Russia) - the two antagonists of the British empire - engagement in fierce combat over the pavilions 'do not quite fit into the Mongolian Arcadia of the willow-pattern plate.' He also condemned officials like Li Hung Chang for leading China into 'sordid, subversive and skeptical times' for their own selfish interests. 'When millions of taels move

Fig.11. 'American China'. *Punch*, Vol. 93, October 1st, 1887, p. 146.

our Mandarins to Modernism, when Silver Rings and Syndicates, can set up a Pary of Progress in the Realm of the Immutable, and when doubters have been thrown by shallow scribes upon the existence of the Great Wall of China itself.' The ultimate consequence, the tale warned, would 'threatens - perchance prematurely - to fix for all time this preposterously Western and barbaric picture as the Willow Pattern of the future!.'

In the latter half of this tale, the author continued the Orientalist discourse by labelling China with stereotypical descriptors like 'bureaucratic', 'stagnant', and 'filthy' - condemning the Chinese for relying on foreign forces to achieve 'modern transformation' and 'progress', criticizing its blind worship of Western ideals, and scoffing at its preference for 'fifty years of Europe' to 'a cycle of Cathay'.

The saying 'Better Fifty Years of Europe than A Cycle of Cathay' came from a cartoon entitled 'A Cycle of Cathay' published in *Punch* (August 6th 1887). It plays with the pun 'cycle' by drawing a pig-tailed Chinese mandarin treading an Starley-style tricycle backward (Fig. 12), hinting the endless and repetitive destiny of Cathay, the Chinese empire. While the article 'The Bicyclists of England' with an illustration published in *Punch* (October 1st 1887 - Fig. 13), depicts English soldiers riding 'safety bicycle' forward, boasting the wheels of 'Britania' which are sweep, fast, cheap and strong, and British cyclists can 'floor foes from each shore' and 'lick the world by long', and 'to our brave wheel-warriors, our song and glass shall flow'.

Eventually, for characters Li Zhi and Chang, the author prescribed an antidote of self-anesthetizing so that they were to remain trapped in the eternal cycle of self-delusion by turning 'back into turtle-doves at once and coo ourselves into truly Celestial obviousness of this colossal Yankee coup.'

Intriguingly, as the British competed with the Americans for developing China, they labelled American commercial and political manoeuvres as 'Western and barbaric',³² ignoring their own equally barbaric acts of peddling opium and waging wars in China. They obviously forgot the British Empire was also a part and parcel of the 'preposterously Western and barbaric picture' that had crafted for China the seemingly civilized yet inherently 'barbaric' willow-pattern picture. From this we could see that the Willow Pattern not only depicts the Sino-UK conflicts, but also those of the Western powers are also evidently shown through this classic design.

Shortly after the article's publication, news leaked that Li Hung Chang had secretly signed a treaty with American merchants, which faced vehement opposition from conservative officials led by Weng Tonghe. Empress Dowager Cixi ultimately ordered the pact nullified, rendering the British-feared vision of 'America China' - that so-called 'Western and barbaric' picture - a fleeting mirage.

The Visit of Li Hung Chang in the Willow Pattern Legend

The 8th August 1896 issue of *Punch* employed a similar approach in publishing a tale and illustration that showed the conflicts between China and the Western powers as well as those among themselves (Fig. 14). At the centre of this design, a Western man clutching official documents is depicted frantically fleeing from a pavilion, while adjacent trees are artfully shaped to resemble the American Stars and Stripes. Three soldiers stride across a triple-arched bridge, moneybags in their hands, while in the distance, a black-clad man stands on a small boat with his arms raised for help. Behind this vessel lies a small island that resembles Buckingham Palace, and in the sky, there were two large birds adorned with French and German flags. The four central panels of the inner circle are labelled Europe, Asia, Africa, and America.

The doggerel accompanying this illustration is titled 'The Wanderings of Li Hung Chang: Or, The Latest Legend of the Willow Pattern Plate', and



Fig. 12. 'A Cycle of Cathay'. *Punch*, Vol. 93, August 6th, 1887, p. 50.

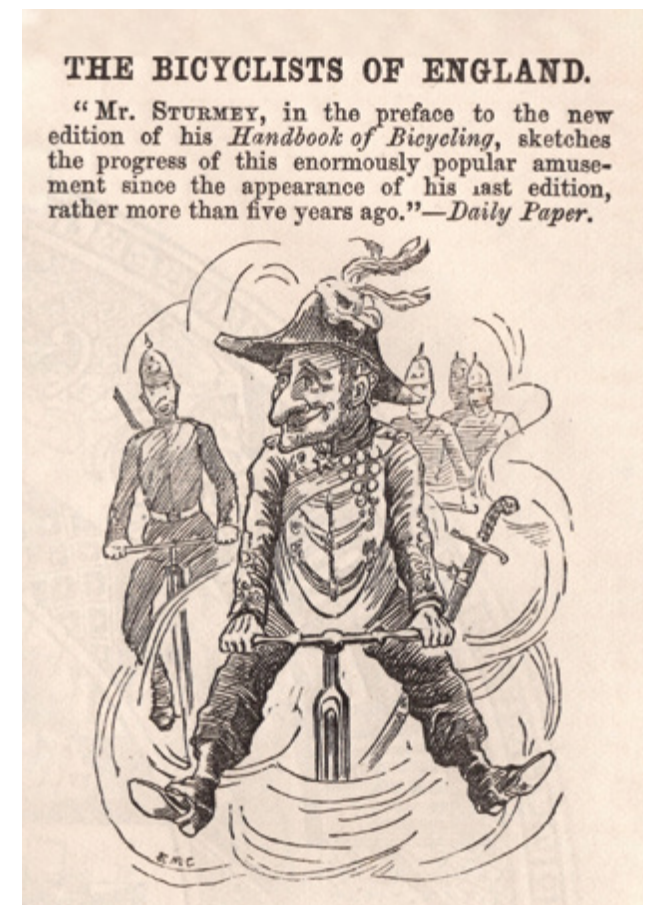


Fig. 13. 'The Bicyclists of England'. *Punch*, Vol. 93, October 1st, 1887, p. 145.



THE WANDERINGS OF LI HUNG CHANG;

OR, THE LATEST LEGEND OF THE WILLOW-PATTERN PLATE.

(See p. 63.)

offered an explicit interpretation of its symbolism. The poet believed that the seemingly familiar Willow Pattern had become unrecognizable because 'modernisation has touched even that plate', and trees behind the pavilion bear neither apples nor oranges, but ammunition from Germany's Krupp Arsenal. A German man flees the pavilion in frenzy, for 'orders for hundred-ton guns he can't get' from Li Hung Chang, nor 'profits he hoped to have made out of the increase of commerce and trade.' Soaring above the tree were two 'a-hungered and lank' turtle-doves, which represented Germany and France, and 'neither one content wholly with his share.' The black-clad figure in the junk was Li Hung Chang, 'bidding orders go hang' as he passed the 'Bridge of War'. Below, three 'conquering' Japanese soldiers with moneybags in their hands had crossed the 'diplomat fence' under the 'Treaty Trees' and were returning 'to their far eastern home with delight immense.' On the upper left of the illustration was a 'Britishers' tight little isle' where a lion 'quietly [waits] for the wily wanderer from far Cathay.'³³

It is obvious that the illustration was a parody of Li Hung Chang's tour of eight European and American nations from March to October 1896. The historical context was that, aiming to court Russia as an ally against Japan, the Qing government dispatched Li Hung Chang to Russia following China's devastating defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Upon learning of Li's Russian mission, Western powers, fearing exclusive Russian advantages, extended invitations to the statesman. Li subsequently accepted them with multiple purposes: deepening the Sino-Western relationship, investigating Western development in terms of society, politics, military, and industry, and negotiating import tariffs with these countries to alleviate the burden of war reparations.

The Japanese clutching moneybags in the illustration emerged as the greatest beneficiaries of the First Sino-Japanese War. Passing through the 'diplomat fence' under the 'Treaty Trees', they reaped immense financial and territorial gains. The 'Krupp shots' densely hanging from the tree, as mentioned in the poem, symbolized China's massive procurement of German weapons since the beginning of the Self-Strengthening Movement. Li Hung Chang himself was particularly in favour of weaponry from Germany's Krupp Arsenal, vigorously advocating for the adoption of German munitions to modernize the Chinese military and safeguard the Qing regime.

However, the First Sino-Japanese War dealt a catastrophic blow to the Chinese navy that had already consumed astronomical investments from the Qing court. The colossal war indemnity not only bankrupted the Qing government's capacity for further arms procurement but also compelled Li Hung Chang to plead for an increase in import duties from Europe and America - a desperate move, since the corrupt regime had already pledged China's customs revenue as collateral, forfeiting its sovereignty to autonomously set tariffs. This resulted in import duties being perpetually fixed at 5%, flooding the Chinese market with foreign goods that stifled domestic industrial development and crippled fiscal revenue growth. This historical context explained the Germans' frenzy in the story: even with increased Sino-German trade, profit would remain unchanged if the import duties were to be raised. Observing Japan's windfall of territorial and financial gains from defeating China, Germany, and France, itching with envy and hoping for a share of the profit, joined forces with Russia to pressure Japan into returning the Liaodong Peninsula to China. Meanwhile, the lion, which symbolized Britain, serenely reclined on its island, waiting with nonchalance for the arrival of the 'wily tourist' from the East - a metaphor of Britain's calculated schemes to sabotage Chinese tariff autonomy through diplomatic traps.

It is evident that this British willow-pattern story and illustration depicted China's plight during a time when it was besieged, coerced, and occupied by global powers (Fig. 15). By then, China had become a nation carved up by the



Fig. 15. 'En Chine - Le gâteau des Rois et... des Empereurs' ('China - The Cake of Kings and... of Emperors'), published in *Le Petit Journal* on January 16th, 1898.

world. Li Hung Chang, representing China, was 'warily wandering' between the two shores of the Atlantic, and desperately hoping or pleading for the powers to show mercy or lend a hand. Yet what awaited him was 'no western flam will take in the Mandarin Li Hung Chang.'³⁴ This could be proved by the fact that the British Queen only met him for a few minutes and the Parliament showed few interest to his visit.

The willow-pattern stories and illustrations created by the British in the nineteenth century, along with their variations such as poetry, drama, and paintings, did not involve any actual Chinese participation. From design, compilation to performance, it was a purely chinoiserie form of 'absent presence'. However, the British writers and artists took advantage of the 'Tory spirit of making a China of England' to integrate the narrative and pictorial of the Willow Pattern with significant historical events in China at the time, such as overseas gold rushes, the Opium Wars, the Taiping Heavenly Movement, the Self-Strengthening Movement, and the First Sino-Japanese War, creating chinoiserie 'China' stories on willow-pattern 'china' plate. Through appropriation, denial, and denigration of Chinese people and culture, they constructed a corrupted, superstitious, pre-modern, tyrannical, and backward 'Other' China, thereby contrasting it with the moral, civilized, modern, democratic, and progressive British 'Self'. They reflect the fierce contradictions and conflicts between China and Britain and even the western powers themselves in the nineteenth century in terms of ideology, military,

diplomacy, and commerce. Eventually, these provided legitimate discourse of justifications for the British Empire and western powers' aggression, expansion, and exploitation in China in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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Legacy and Continuity, Neil Brownsword, 2025.
Microscopic image of Spode early nineteenth century chinoiserie pattern copper plate engraving

'Every Picture Tells a Story': China, Britain, and the Politics of the Willow Pattern

Ashley Thorpe

Every picture tells a story,
Like the Willow Pattern Plate,
Where two lovers dwelt in glory,
And defied paternal hate.

B. L. Bowers, *The Willow Pattern*¹

'China-ware', wrote the French Jesuit historian Jean Baptiste Du Halde (1674-1743), 'which is the most common Furniture that the Chinese have, and is the chief Ornament of their Houses, has been so much esteem'd in Europe, and still is so great a part of Trade, that it will not be amiss to give an exact Description of the making of it'.² Du Halde's forty-six-page assessment of Chinese ceramics, included in the second volume of his *La Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*, was first published in France in 1735, and translated into English by Richard Brooks in 1737. The Brooks translation was closely scrutinised by, amongst others, Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795), who made copious notes to comprehend the sophisticated nature of Chinese ceramic production.³ As the craze for chinoiserie intensified during the eighteenth century, it became a market necessity for European manufacturers to compete with imported Chinese porcelain, the so-called 'white gold' of the East. And so, the mid-eighteenth century bore witness to the well-documented chain of events that led from the close analysis of Du Halde's description of porcelain production in China to the commercial development of Europe's own porcelain mixes.⁴ Over the next 100 years, such advances would give British ceramic factories, especially in Staffordshire, the competitive edge over their Chinese counterparts, who produced ever whiter and more translucent porcelain.

Of all the chinoiserie produced in Britain, it was the Willow Pattern, developed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, that became the most iconic and globally recognised design. A broad imitation of Chinese motifs, the Willow Pattern varied considerably but usually included at least one of the following elements: a willow tree beside a lake, a pagoda connected to the bank of a lake by a bridge across which three figures walk, a boat, and two doves. This motif was mythologised as a fraught love story, where the daughter of a mandarin refused an arranged marriage, being in love with her father's secretary. They eloped but were subsequently captured and sentenced to death, upon which they metamorphosed into the two doves at the top of the pattern. This rather theatrical narrative first surfaced in an article by the writer and editor Mark Lemon (1809-1870) in an 1838 edition of the literary magazine *Bentley's Miscellany*.⁵ Such fantastical imagining of Chinese culture, and the surrounding literature explaining the story and its relevance to the symbolism of the Willow Pattern, is perhaps the most widespread example of British imperialist fantasy.

The Imperial Self and the Chinese Other

Although mainland China (rather than Hong Kong) was never formally part of the British Empire, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the Opium Wars of 1840-42 and 1856-60, and the Treaty of Nanjing (which first ceded Hong Kong to Britain) signalled British imperial dominance over China. As Robert Bickers has argued, 'relations between Chinese society, economy and polity often demonstrated all the themes discernible in the processes of incorporation of African and Asian states into the European empires',⁶ and although the Chinese mainland did not fully capitulate, 'China has been shown to have been fully integrated into the narratives and visions of empire

that the British evolved in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'.⁷ It is impossible, therefore, to separate the design and circulation of the Willow Pattern from the influential post-colonial critique of Orientalism proposed by Edward Said (1935-2003) in his 1977 monograph of the same name. Said argued that Orientalism was both a discipline (the academic study of the 'Orient') and the exertion of colonial power. Thus, Orientalism:

is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do). Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world.⁸

As a post-colonial politic, Orientalism exposed how the European construction of the 'Self' was emboldened by a contrasting construction of the 'Other' over which it could assert dominance. Consequently, the Willow Pattern, developed during the ascendancy of the British Empire, falls neatly within the Saidian critique; it expresses the mythical exoticism of the Chinese Other as a foil to the rational and scientific prowess of the European Self.

But is that all there is to the Willow Pattern? In the remainder of this essay, I propose an additional significance. Although the Willow Pattern can be appraised through the lens of Orientalism, I also argue that it reveals as much about the machinations of Britain as it does about Chinese ceramic design, if not more so. This line of enquiry is rooted to the concept of performance and a consideration of the domestic narrative that the Willow Pattern performed in the eighteenth century, as well as its symbolic meaning today. Indeed, as a researcher in Theatre Studies, I am concerned with the performance of material culture; objects reveal the transmission of ideology – which I conceive of as a kind of social performance – to audiences in a specific historical and geographical context. What might the Willow Pattern encapsulate and how does it relate to the manufacturing history that produced it?

I begin with what might seem tangential analysis. In my previous study *Performing China on the London Stage: Chinese Opera and Global Power, 1759-2008* (published in 2016), I analysed two seventeenth-century European engravings of Chinese actors. Although the lengthy discussion that follows is concerned with early European depictions of Chinese drama, its significance to the current argument is twofold. Firstly, it positions the Willow Pattern as part of a wider visual tradition across the arts – and one that began earlier than the chinoiserie craze – of constructing China according to European aesthetic principles. Secondly, it explores the Europeanisation of the Chinese landscape, first by the Dutch (for it was the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or Dutch East India Company that predominated in trade with China in the seventeenth century), and its subsequent modification when the volume was translated into English:

Johannes Nieuwhof (1618-1672) was a Dutch traveller who, in 1654, was appointed as a steward to participate in an embassy to Peking to convince the newly established Qing dynasty to terminate Portuguese trading monopoly rights with China from its base in Macau. [...] Nieuwhof's resulting publication was accompanied by a wealth of illustrations, supposedly 'from life' ('*na het leven*'). As [the art historian] Sun Jing argues, whilst the illustrations may have been undertaken by Nieuwhof as he travelled, they were also structured according to the aesthetics of European picture-making and engraving.⁹ In the engraving (Fig. 1) three actors – two female and one male – are depicted.



Fig. 1. An engraving of 'Chinese Comedians' in Nieuhof's *Embassy*, 1665.



Fig. 2. An engraving of 'Chinese Comedians' by Wenceslaus Hollar from the English translation of Nieuhof's *Embassy*, 1673.

The background of the engraving shows a stage, set up in open ground outside of the city walls, where a fight scene is being performed. Yet, despite the allusions to geographical context, there is a noticeable interplay between Chinese and European motifs in the illustration. The coat worn by the two female actors has sleeves reminiscent of the long water sleeves (*shuixiu*) that appeared in the Ming dynasty, and its length in relation to the skirt (*qunzi*) is in accordance with theatre costumes used today. The central figure is also wearing a collar, reminiscent of the *yunjian*, which appeared in the Sui dynasty (581-618). The male character is wearing a coat, possibly a *jianyi*, which communicates that the character is a military officer. His beard is in three parts (*sanran*), and he carries a spear (*kaimenqiang*) as well as a sword. These elements seem plausible as referents to theatrical costume. Yet, the hairstyles of the female actors seem more akin to the European fontages, with curls to the side of the head, rather than the Chinese style. The trees in the background also appear denaturalised, as stylised chinoiserie rather than a realistic depiction of a Chinese landscape.

This engraving did not appear in the English edition in its original form, however. For the purposes of printing, copies from the Dutch edition were made by the engraver Václav Hollar (1607-1677), better known as Wenceslaus Hollar, who travelled from Bohemia to settle in England in 1637. In his version of the plate (Fig. 2), the European features of the image are augmented. The physiognomies of the actors are unmistakably European, hairstyles seem even closer to the European fontage, and the trees in the background could be from any field in England. Thus, the image seems even more contradictory, expressing familiarity and exoticism, the West and East, the self and other. To the modern eye, the image exudes pretence, not only in its depiction of actors as a subject, but also in its implicit stylization of Europeans dressed as Chinese actors. It confirms Markley's observation that writers such as Nieuhof 'find in their images of China an idealized reflection of the values – cultural, social and political – that they bring with them'.¹⁰ The engravings that accompanied Nieuhof's writings render the mechanism of the mirror – a mirror that reflects the self *through* the other – explicit.¹¹

The engravings were designed to illustrate differences between Chinese and European dramatic traditions, yet the landscape and the styling of the actors produced a paradoxical familiarity that undermined juxtaposition.

As my study went on to show, such paradoxes were in fact a feature of British theatre performances relating to China from the middle of the eighteenth century right up until the middle of the twentieth century, after which China increasingly represented itself on stage.¹² Despite a handful of exceptions in the first half of the twentieth century, it was the norm for white Britons to depict Chinese characters on stage – a practice known as 'yellowface' which, like 'blackface', relied on costume, hair, make-up, scenography and the narrative of plays to produce a stereotypical racial impersonation. Although such impersonation was construed as mimetic within the narrative of the play, it was nevertheless acknowledged as pretence, a product of the actor's skill.

In this regard, yellowface corresponds with what the post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha described in his seminal 1994 study, *The Location of Culture*, as 'colonial mimicry'. In the context of imperialism, Bhabha suggested that:

colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.¹³

The Willow Pattern.

Written by
BASIL HOOD.

Composed by
CECIL COOK.

Nº 1. OPENING CHORUS and SOLOS. (Fee-Fi, Fo-Fum and Wee-Ping.)

Moderato.

Piano.

21.466. Copyright, MCMII, by Chappell & Co

Fig. 3. First page of the score for *The Willow Pattern*, 1901, written by Basil Hood and composed by Cecil Cook.

In other words, for us to recognise yellowface as 'mimicry' and not a genuine mode of representation, the audience needs to be aware of the inauthenticity of the image. Mimicry produces a visual paradox, of being both 'what it is' and 'what it is not' at the same time.

Performing the Willow Pattern on Stage

Interestingly, the Willow Pattern story was regularly adapted for the theatre. The English literature scholar Ross Forman, for instance, has identified six productions between 1851 and 1901 as being based on the Willow Pattern, the earliest being *The Mandarin's Daughter! Being the Simple Story of the Willow Pattern Plate* (1851) where, upon seeing examples of British Willow Pattern porcelain in London, a visiting mandarin apparently authenticated them as being 'well known in my nation'.¹⁴ Whilst such assertions sought to validate British porcelain above its Chinese progenitor, *The Willow Pattern: A Comic Operetta in Two Episodes* written by Basil Hood (1864-1917) (who had worked with Arthur Sullivan, 1842-1900, in the last years of the nineteenth century), with music by Cecil Cook, affords a more ambivalent narrative (Fig. 3). It was first performed in 1901 as a curtain raiser – a shorter piece performed before the main programme of the evening – for sixteen performances from 14th to 29th November 1901 at the Savoy (alongside another opera by Hood, *It and Little Christina*, which was based on the Hans Christian Anderson, 1805-1875, tale of the same name). It was performed again a week later for a revival of W. S. Gilbert (1836-1911) and Arthur Sullivan's *Iolanthe*, this time in a revised and shorter format, for a further ninety-four performances between 9th December 1901 and 29th March 1902.

The operetta opens with the maiden Ah-Mee explaining how she cannot wed her true love, Hi-Ho, because her miserly father, So-Hi, will not allow her to marry a pauper. Meanwhile, the rich lady Wee-Ping finds herself in a similar but contrasting predicament; she is wealthy but cannot marry her true love, the pauper Ping-Pong, for fear of social inference that he only married for her money. To honour the God of Love, Wee-Ping had promised to drown herself in the lake if Ping-Pong had not earned his fortune in twenty years, a period that comes to an end that evening. Ping-Pong returns penniless, but to prevent Wee-Ping's suicide, he devises a ruse to steal money from Ah-Mee's father, So-Hi. He puts on a disguise to break into So-Hi's house, but as he is about to enter, he is spotted by both Ah-Mee and Hi-Ho. Thinking quickly, Ping-Pong pretends that he is the God of Love and promises to echo the story of the Willow Pattern by turning both Ah-Mee and Hi-Ho into doves so that they might flee and live in happiness. He explains that he needs five minutes to complete the task, but that they should flee now before So-Hi returns. Ah-Mee and Ho-Hi decide that they have nothing to lose and will elope, but they are suspicious as to whether they are really addressing the God of Love. Before they set off in their boat for the middle of the lake, Ah-Mee moves her father's money from its hiding place outside and locks it in the house for safety, whilst Ho-Hi ties Ping-Pong up to ensure he does not burgle the house. Just after they depart, So-Hi returns and finds Ping-Pong, still in disguise, tied up outside his front door. Ping-Pong now claims he is the God of Money-Making and was once owned by Hi-Ho. He explains that Hi-Ho wanted to steal So-Hi's money, but as he made his getaway, he could not carry both the heavy bags of money and the God of Money-Making, so he left the God behind. As revenge, the God foiled Hi-Ho's plan, magically returning the money, even placing it inside the house for safe keeping. So-Hi finds that money has been moved into the house and believes that Ping-Pong is telling the truth. He decides to keep the God so that he can become even richer. However, the God declares that Hi-Ho would only gift him to So-Hi in exchange for his daughter's hand in marriage. So-Hi agrees to the terms just as his daughter returns, angry that she and Hi-Ho have not transformed into doves. The operetta concludes with So-Hi granting permission for Hi-Ho and Ah-Mee to marry, and Ping-Pong intimating that he will steal So-Hi's money later that night and then marry Wee-Ping.

The plot of *The Willow Pattern* is certainly more complex than the 1838 original story. Such adaptation highlights how the Willow Pattern story, like the design itself, was palimpsestic, subject to re-interpretation and re-inscription as the years progressed and the contexts of production shifted. Indeed, when Chinese blue and white import wares became unfashionable in the nineteenth century, they were redecorated with brightly coloured enamels to make them more desirable to contemporary buyers.¹⁵ Thus, the re-inscription of the Willow Pattern myth for the early twentieth century British stage mirrored the re-working of British chinoiserie design motifs in the early nineteenth century. Both sought to make themselves as appealing as possible to a fee-paying public.

In fact, the Willow Pattern story changed again when it was turned into a short silent film in 1914, directed by George Lessey (1879-1941), and released in the USA. In the film, the daughter is named Li Chi, and is locked in a room by her father, Ching Ho, until she agrees to an arranged marriage. Li Chi sends a note to her lover, Chang, so that he can come and rescue her. He frees her and they elope to an island, but Ching Ho pursues them and, deciding none will have his daughter except the husband he has arranged, sets fire to their house. The two lovers die in the flames. Yet, two doves are seen to emerge from the house. The gods have transformed them into love birds so that they can always be together. The film was made less than ten years after production of the Willow Pattern began in the US. The Buffalo Pottery in New York first manufactured their version of the Willow Pattern in 1905, and by the 1920s it was a popular design across the nation (even if it was soon to be eclipsed by Danish modernist pottery). The film can thus be understood as a twentieth-century version of Mark Lemon's 1838 article for *Bentley's Miscellany*; it provided a mythical context for the comprehension and appreciation of an increasingly popular design motif.

Although the 1901 operetta was set in China, the opera was not about China at all; rather it used China as a foil to critique British society. This was, in fact, a well-trodden path at the Savoy Theatre, where the 'topsy-turvey' approach of Gilbert and Sullivan frequently utilised fantasy to satirise British ethics, morals and behaviours. *The Mikado* (1885), for instance, was set in Japan, but the opera was really concerned with questioning the morality of the British aristocracy and how a fear of admonishment by society limited the options for romantic attachment. As E. P. Lawrence observed, in *The Mikado*, "'queer'" and "'quaint'" describe the Japanese effects in the opera and reflect the popular British conception of Japanese culture. In the topsy-turvey design of the opera [however] it is the "real" world of British society to which these adjectives are supposed to apply'.¹⁶ *The Mikado* satirized Britain via Japan as a means to elide censorship.

Although *The Mikado* is ultimately concerned with Britain, this does not mean that the late-nineteenth-century craze for Japonisme that was designed into the 1885 production was deemed inoffensive. Some Japanese audiences reported that they were very offended by their portrayal on stage, and *The Mikado* was even censored from 6th May to 17th June 1907 by the Lord Chamberlain's Office because of the state visit by Prince Fushimi Sadanaru (1858-1923) from the Japanese Imperial family.¹⁷ Yet the national censorship of *The Mikado* for six weeks only served to highlight the political rather than moral machinations of the Lord Chamberlain's Office,¹⁸ and the bumbling way in which the ban was rationalised could easily have come from one of the characters in *The Mikado*. Yet, like the Willow Pattern story, *The Mikado* was revised and altered in subsequent revivals. Notably, Jonathan Miller's 1986 staging for the English National Opera dispensed with many references to Japan, with scenic and costume design clearly setting the play in Britain. Sections of the libretto were also adapted for the purposes of contemporary satire, a tradition that has remained in place with subsequent revivals of the

staging (the last production in 2015 referred to the then Prime Minister David Cameron).

In its construction of China as a foil for British social critique, *The Willow Pattern* operetta follows *The Mikado* quite closely. In particular, the addition of the character Ping-Pong to the original mythical tale gives the narrative a greater complexity that teases out the morality and ethics of the opera, namely that the acquisition of capital has no place in affairs of the heart. In a clever theatrical turn, the audience are made aware that the God of Love and God of Money-Making are not real gods, but the pauper Ping-Pong in disguise, part of his ruse to find a means for the two couples to marry. Of course, it could be argued that this follows the Orientalist critique by mocking Chinese religion as the antithesis of Christian solemnity. Yet, it also highlights how an obsession with wealth undermines love, heralding misery and even the possibility of suicide. True love requires belief in the conquering of adversity, something Ping-Pong achieves through his shrewdness. Such criticism of wealth as the primary driver in marital relationships seems remarkably modern for the period. Yet, it is not without irony that the design of a mass-produced transfer print on ceramics should spawn an anti-materialist yarn. In fact, I propose that such a performative camouflaging of ideology is in fact repeated in the design itself.

Performing the Landscape through the Willow Pattern Plate

The colonial mimicry documented in the Nieuhof and Hollar engravings, and the yellowface performances of *The Willow Pattern* operetta has obvious parallels with the hybridic Chinese/European performative symbology of the Willow Pattern. After all, the Willow Pattern was itself a collage of different motifs that had been found on imported porcelain. Differentiation soon emerged in Willow Pattern design through the rearrangement of key motifs – such as the pagoda, bridge, and willow tree, as well as the ornate decorative border on plates, teapots, jugs and cups. As early as the 1790s, for instance, John Harrison of Stoke was using a printed pattern known today as 'Palladian Pagoda' or 'Temple with Panel',¹⁹ which jarringly juxtaposed Palladian architecture with pagodas in a landscape of both Chinese and European stylised depictions of bushes. Mid-eighteenth-Staffordshire chinoiserie wares included moulded teapots, where the application of colour appeared almost haphazard, an untidiness that would not have been permissible in the Jingdezhen factories in China. Such alterations served to differentiate domestically produced chinoiserie from Chinese import ware.

It must also be observed, however, that such alterations were not peculiar to Britain. In China, Jingdezhen potteries readily produced 'export' wares that included copies of Western European shapes and motifs from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards. By the seventeenth century, such wares even included coats of arms, which were commissioned for inclusion on pottery by wealthy patrons, who passed on copies of the designs to the Chinese factories via merchants. Interestingly, such export ware sometimes included errors, specifically the alteration of colours invalidating or confusing the coat of arms, or the substitution of lions for Chinese kylins.²⁰ Copying was, therefore, simply a part of the stock in trade of commercial enterprise, producing in Jingdezhen a Chinese British hybridity that is afforded considerably less critical attention than British designs such as the Willow Pattern. After all, if Chinese makers were imitating European designs to order, it seems conceivable that the British copying of Chinese designs was regarded as an unproblematic and commercial necessity. It was only as the decades wore on, and British imperialist engagements with China strengthened, that British chinoiserie can be read more as a symbol of global power and colonial dominance.

For Bhabha, such ambivalence produced what he called a 'double articulation', 'a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which

'appropriates' the Other as it visualises power'.²¹ The stories published – in print, on stage, and later, film – served to convince the public that the Willow Pattern was the depiction of a genuine Chinese myth, and this did indeed reform, regulate and appropriate China as a means of asserting power – both cultural and economic. Yet, I propose that the Willow Pattern is not a double articulation but, in fact, a triple articulation. The Willow Pattern certainly is performative of colonial power and of British national identity wedded to Empire, but it is also an image of the British Industrial Revolution, mass manufacturing, and factory ownership by the capitalist class.

The interpretative basis for this claim lies in a recontextualization of Bhabha's argument. Bhabha typifies the ambivalence of colonial power as justifying itself via the promise of Christian salvation for the colonised even as it inflicts violence in the pursuit of its goals. Thus, the coloniser is both 'the father and the oppressor; just and unjust; moderate and rapacious; vigorous and despotic: these instances of contradictory belief, doubly inscribed in the deferred address of colonial discourse, raise questions about the space of colonial authority'.²² Whilst the hybridisation of Chinese and British design motifs from the earliest chinoiserie onwards can be interpreted as a distortive, even violent, act of design appropriation, I propose that such contradictions also applied domestically, in particular to the socio-political and economic hegemony of the Industrial Revolution. As Moira Vincentelli has observed:

The mass production of ceramics was stimulated by an expanding market for tableware, especially to cater for the new habits of coffee and tea drinking, but also in response to the fashionable tastes in domestic display admirably fulfilled by decorated ceramics. The transfer print meant that the middle class could now have access to exciting surface decoration for a fraction of the price of hand-painted porcelain.²³

Factory-produced wares could meet such mass demand and create middle class wealth through employment, but they also sustained a capitalist class who owned the modes of production (the factories), and who had sufficient disposable income to purchase objects that were clearly marked emblems of ownership, such as expensive imported ceramics from China. As the critic Kenneth Coutts-Smith argued in his 1976 paper 'Some general observations on the problems of cultural Colonialism':

It is interesting to observe, over a period of time, the changing social attitudes of the European and North American middle class towards the fine arts. The process is perhaps due less to the fact that financial profit was possible in both production and speculation than to the supposition that painting (and sculpture to a lesser extent) was the art form that best objectified bourgeois ideals, since the picture could become property in the absolute sense, since it could uniquely embody both the status and the aspiration of its owner in a manner that was obviously denied to the poem, the novel, the play, or the opera.²⁴

The Willow Pattern enabled the middle classes to participate in this economy of object ownership, if to different degrees according to their level of disposable income. If the new middle classes wished to accumulate status symbols of their new-found wealth, luxury objects had to be priced within their means. As a mass-produced ceramic made in Britain, the Willow Pattern could be strategically priced at the highest level that the middle classes could afford, ensuring that high numbers of sales did not diminish its desirability as an object denoting social status. Naturally, it was the factory owners who benefitted most from the consumption of such mass-produced wares which, in turn, might enable them to buy the most expensive import wares from China that they could own in the 'absolute sense'. In ideological terms, therefore, the mass-produced wares purchased by the middle classes allowed them to own status symbols, but such ownership was contingent upon implicit consent

to a capitalist system that legitimised bourgeois ownership of factories, absolute ownership of individual art objects by the bourgeoisie, and growing class inequalities. It is in this sense that the Willow Pattern was a triple articulation, for it performed both domestic and colonial consumption, the illusion of social progression, but it also reified class relations, legitimising the ideological and economic interests of the bourgeoisie.

Indeed, Coutts-Smith has further argued that colonialism and class politics were 'interrelated and interdependent'.²⁵ The domestic shift in relations of labour, from a feudal society (that locked workers to the land) towards industrialised labour that sent them to work in towns and cities, also changed the nature of artistic practice. Painting became a trans-historical activity that tapped into the metaphorical questions of existence, moving away from the real towards the ideal. As Coutts-Smith observed of fine art:

Since its subject-matter was not realist in the feudal sense, that is to say, one not reflecting the existent and, internally to that society, self-evidently timeless and eternal values subscribed to by that society, but rather, was idealist (in that its motive was to project the poetic and the conditional, to project metaphorical allusions to a universe that did not yet exist but which might possibly be brought into being through the powers of the imagination) then, clearly, it was constrained to look outside of the general body of symbols and concepts that made up the common heritage of the society.²⁶

The Willow Pattern – both the design and the operetta described earlier – became part of this wider ideological and visual turn towards the metaphor of the Romantic 'ideal' where the exotic evoked the transcendental. In the case of *The Willow Pattern* operetta, this idealism was expressed in the belief that true love should trump economic and social class, even though, as described above, the Willow Pattern story upon which it was based was a myth to legitimise a mass-produced object that generated wealth for factory owners.

In design terms, the Willow Pattern also romanticised the landscape in a manner that perhaps has parallels with the abstracted landscapes of Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), John Constable (1776-1837) and J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851). As Vincentelli observed, during the eighteenth century there was a 'passion for travel and the picturesque landscape. This subject matter in a fantastical form is reproduced on cups and plates just as it is in the landscapes that became such a popular genre of painting'.²⁷ If, as Coutts-Smith claimed, 'capitalism, rather than the technological exigencies of the modern world, [...] required our present almost total alienation from natural phenomenon',²⁸ then the Willow Pattern utilised the exotic to camouflage and romanticise these changing interactions with the British landscape, irrevocably altered as they were by industrialisation. That this was achieved through industrial modes of production is even more shrewd than Ping-Pong's impersonation of the God of Money-Making. In the Willow Pattern, primitivism afforded a visualisation of the pre-industrial landscape, even a nostalgic eighteenth-century re-imagining of the *sharawadgi* 'Chinese-inspired' garden designs that emphasised asymmetry, which were derived from the writings of Sir William Temple (1628-1699), an important part of the first wave of chinoiserie in the seventeenth century. The Willow Pattern transfer print thus facilitated the idealistic and Romantic appreciation of nature via its industrialised abstraction to abstract the exigencies of industrialisation. In other words, the Willow Pattern used China to disguise through exoticisation the fact that British labourers were themselves increasingly separated from the British landscape.

Making Place through the Willow Pattern

That the Willow Pattern unites two locales – Britain and China, specifically Staffordshire and Jingdezhen – is also significant. The connections between these places not only produced the Willow Pattern, but also, in

fact, Staffordshire as a global centre for ceramic manufacturing. Certainly, Staffordshire was a producer of ceramics because of the availability of raw materials and connections to transport infrastructure that enabled other raw materials (such as cobalt, used for the blue colouring on the Willow Pattern, from nearby mines in Cheshire) to be brought in, as well as the pottery to be shipped out to the nation through a network of rivers and canals, and then, by ship, across the globe. Yet, it is these connections with other places (Cheshire, Britain, Europe, Asia, and North America) that played a key part in establishing Staffordshire as a *location*. As the Geographer Doreen Massey has argued:

what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus. If one moves in from the satellite towards the globe, holding all those networks of social relations and movements and communications in one's head, then each 'place' can be seen as a particular, unique, point of their intersection. It is, indeed, a *meeting* place. Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.²⁹

Staffordshire was a place to produce pottery only because of its bespoke intersections with other places regionally, nationally, and internationally. For as Massey concludes, 'a sense of place, an understanding of 'its character', [...] can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond'.³⁰ Ultimately, therefore, the Willow Pattern design is not really about China at all; rather, it is a specific mapping of the unique networks that constituted Staffordshire, both historically and in the contemporary, as a global centre in the production of ceramics. This is not to deny that colonialism was a systemic power dynamic driving ceramic production in Staffordshire; it was. Yet, it must also be said that the contemporary relevance of colonialism is hard to evidence in Staffordshire following the collapse of ceramics manufacturing in Stoke-on-Trent. The suppression of East Asia may have underpinned the expansion and intensification of ceramic manufacture in Staffordshire from the eighteenth century onwards, but as manufacture was outsourced to Asia in the latter half of the twentieth century,³¹ it has since played a significant role in its decline. The economics of pottery production in Staffordshire is indeed totally imbricated with the global.

The conception of 'Self' and 'Other' as geographically co-constitutional raises problems for the simplistic application of Said's Orientalist critique, which suspends them in a separated binary opposition. Indeed, even in response to his critics, Said insisted upon the fact that:

the line *separating* [author's emphasis throughout] Occident from Orient, [...] is less a fact of nature than it is a fact of human production, which I have called imaginary geography. This is, however, neither to say that the *division* between Orient and Occident is unchanging nor is it to say that it is simply fictional. It is to say – emphatically – that [...] the world of nations, the Orient and the Occident are facts produced by human beings, and as such must be studied as *integral* components of the social, and not divine or natural world.³²

The problem with the above passage is that Said asserts the centrality of separation without explaining the mechanics of integration beyond the

assertion of power. In contrast, Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry offers an elegant dissolution of the boundary between Occident and Orient, creating an ambivalence that identifies the Self *within* the Other, but which still accounts for inequities of power and self-representation. Integration is echoed further in Massey's conceptualisation of place as produced through the particularity of its relationships with other places. By drawing these perspectives together, it becomes possible to conclude that the Willow Pattern is primarily about Britain and its global relationships; it is particularly about Staffordshire, and especially about the structuring of modes (factories) and means (workers) of production in ceramics manufacturing, the reification of social class and bourgeois object ownership. This is not to deny that China was Staffordshire's 'silent Other',³³ but that this was only one part of the capitalist-colonial ecology that sustained production of the design. For, paradoxically, and herein lies the real ambivalence of the Willow Pattern, the rationalising effect of advanced scientific understanding of the production of porcelain during the Industrial Revolution produced a myth, firstly of China through the Willow Pattern, but just as importantly, of relationships with the British landscape via an invocation of the Romantic. Such Romanticism became a national, and soon after, international success story.

Critically Creative Engagements

Today, the Willow Pattern has become so familiar that its significance is somewhat overlooked. As Paul Vincent has observed, 'a traditional Willow Pattern plate elicits no response whatsoever other than a bland acknowledgement. Over-familiarity breeds contempt'.³⁴ Yet such indifference is, rather perversely, in keeping with the capitalist and colonial project that produced it; for the more the Willow Pattern is scorned for being a mass-produced object, so greater emphasis is placed upon bourgeois ideologies of absolute ownership. The Willow Pattern, therefore, needs to be explored not only as an exotic pastiche and callous deconstruction of Chinese design, but also as a significant enterprise in the camouflaging of bourgeoisie ideals that enabled limited participation in object ownership, maintained delineations of class, powered capitalism, and concomitantly, the colonial project.

To critically and creatively engage with the Willow Pattern, as British ceramic artists such as Neil Brownsword (Fig. 4), Robert Dawson, and Paul Scott have done, is to confront the original processes of its production – technical, economic, and ideological. As Paul Vincent observed of Robert Dawson:

The principle of 'sampling' (or stealing) tiny, but recognisable sections of previous recordings, and using these as the building blocks for new compositions has become a standard production method in contemporary pop. The use of photography, the photocopier and/or the computer not to invent, but to reproduce, distort and rearrange digital information, whether visual or aural, is not confined to any one discipline.³⁵

I would go further by arguing that this approach is not confined to the late twentieth-century, for the sampling and stealing of motifs in the service of a new composition was the process for the design of the Willow Pattern in the eighteenth century. To sample from the Willow Pattern is, therefore, to connect the past with the present, affording a confrontation with the class politics and factory labour that made colonialism possible. The literal re-sampling of chinoiserie in the work of both Dawson (who has produced plates that focus on details of the Willow Pattern, or manipulate the image to defamiliarize it) and Scott (who cuts, reassembles, or adds additional transfers to antique Willow Pattern ceramics to critique imperialism and the exercise of absolute power) become an extension of the original techniques that produced it, whilst adding an additional layer of commentary that draws attention to its problematics. In this sense they respond to Said's call for 'a much sharpened sense of the intellectual's role both in the defining



Fig. 4. *Legacy and Continuity*, Neil Brownsword, 2025. Microscopic image of mid-19th-century Willow Pattern copper plate engraving.

of a context and in changing it, for without that, I believe, the critique of Orientalism is simply an ephemeral positive'.³⁶ Artists, especially ones as historically and critically informed as Brownsword, have an important role to play in defining such contexts, evaluating them, and changing them.

But to do so requires a shift in emphasis away from the reductionist Self/Other binary that decries any engagement with chinoiserie as an automatic appropriation of the Other, towards a comprehension of the peculiarities of Staffordshire's engagement with capitalism and colonialism; in other words, to understand how and why Staffordshire as a place was formed through its interactions with the rest of the world. For the Willow Pattern is a record of British object ownership, mass production, and class relations from the Industrial Revolution to the present day. It has mutated according to time of production and factory of manufacture, an itinerancy that is echoed in the palimpsestic nature of the Willow Pattern myth and its remediation in popular literature, theatre and film. The rise and fall of the Willow Pattern writes the rise and fall of the nation (in the post-colonial sense of Homi Bhabha) as a colonial, scientific and manufacturing powerhouse which, in an ironic twist of fate, has since seen industrial ceramic production leave Britain and move to China as the British Empire has waned. Such narration is, I contend, as important as the discriminatory and imperialist exoticism that produced it. The Willow Pattern may be overly familiar, but its ubiquity is what makes it emblematic of how Britain narrated, and continues to narrate, itself to itself. Every picture does indeed tell a story.

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Willow Pattern plate, porcelain, Johnson Brothers - made in China, c. 2000s.

The Indefatigable Willow Pattern: From Local to Global Connections

Neil Ewins

The precise origins of the fabled printed Willow Pattern have been the subject of considerable debate and discussion, attracting the attention of even the earliest ceramic historians (Figs. 1, 2). To begin with, Simeon Shaw, in his *History of the Staffordshire Potteries* of 1829 states:

The Pattern Mr. Turner used was the *willow*, designed by him from two oriental Plates, still preserved, and exhibited to the Author by Mr. W. Turner.¹

As this quote suggests, Shaw had the advantage of being acquainted with members of the Turner family. Turner was an artist at the Worcester Porcelain works who moved to the Caughley Porcelain works in Shropshire and, apparently, 'completed the *first Blue Printed Table Service* made in England' in 1780.² Another chinoiserie design, known as the Broseley pattern, for printed tea-wares, was produced in 1782. As far as Shaw was concerned, 'About 1784, he [Josiah Spode] introduced *Blue Printed* to Stoke... The Patterns were - for Table Services what is now called the *Old Willow*, with a border of a willow and a dagger; and for tea Services the Broseley, from the Pattern used at Caughley'.³ In essence, Shaw's account was widely accepted by other emerging British and American nineteenth-century historians.⁴

Although Simeon Shaw mentions how Turner was assisted by apprentice engravers, such as Thomas Minton and Thomas Lucas, only twentieth-century ceramic historians became more inclined to consider their contribution in creating the Willow design. Sydney B. Williams proposes that it was Thomas Minton who actually created the Willow Pattern. In 1785, when Thomas Minton left Caughley, he was in a position to sell his copper-plate engravings to Spode, Wedgwood, Adams, Davenport and others, explaining the rapid spread of versions of the Willow design.⁵ In fact, Josiah Spode employed both Thomas Lucas and Thomas Minton, coinciding with the view that this firm became a pioneer of producing transfer-printed earthenware in Staffordshire.⁶ Subsequently, Minton became a significant ceramic manufacturer in his own right in Stoke.

One crucial point raised by Robert Copeland (a member of the Spode firm) was that without a precise definition of the Willow Pattern, to claim ownership of this design is problematic. As far as Copeland was concerned, the key features of a printed Willow Pattern *should* be the inclusion of a bridge being crossed by three people, a willow tree, a boat, a tea house, two birds, and a fence placed in the foreground. These features may be seen in Fig. 1. While blue-printed chinoiserie designs were certainly produced at Caughley, the opinion has gradually been that these were not necessarily a fully-fledged version of the Willow design. Therefore, Copeland suggested that it was more likely that Josiah Spode of Stoke originated the Willow Pattern.⁷ In the 1990s, Spode reproduced a version of the Willow Pattern which included all of the main features described by Robert Copeland. The date of the design was attributed to c.1790 (Fig. 2). Clearly, attitudes as to the actual origins of the Willow Pattern have changed, it being claimed as having either Shropshire or Staffordshire origins. It is unlikely that a definitive answer will ever be found.

But it is interesting how the sheer ubiquity of the Willow Pattern stimulated speculation and discussion, as to its roots. In one instance, a Victorian periodical called *Notes and Queries* published a letter written in 1867 entitled 'The Willow Pattern'. The letter is quoted in full, since it made a number of important observations relevant to the theme of international distribution.



Fig. 1. Plate, earthenware, blue-printed Willow Pattern, Spode, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, c.1995. ©Neil Ewins 2025



Fig. 2. Backstamp on Fig. 1, indicating that this Spode version of the Willow Pattern originated in c.1790. The backstamp indicates, 'Made in England'. ©Neil Ewins 2025.

It has often been asked if this celebrated plate is of Chinese origin, or a European imitation of 'Celestial' art. The following particulars may therefore be interesting: if they can be borne out by facts, they will settle the question.

Last year, in Florence, I met an artist named Meyer or Mayor – a designer of pottery and porcelain patterns. The willow-pattern crockery having of late years been introduced extensively in Italy and Switzerland and other parts of the continent, our conversation one day turned upon it. I asked Mr M. whether it was really of Chinese origin? He informed me that it was, and that in or about the year 1776 it was introduced at Hanley by his grandfather, who had obtained a Chinese plate from the captain of a trading vessel. That plate was the design from which the first English Willow Patterns were made. Mr M said the plate was still in his possession at his house in Germany. He said that the design varied considerably from the modern patterns, and that between 1776 and the present time there had been many deviations, particularly in the borders. Mr Meyer said that his family were originally of Hanley, and that he was well known there as a 'designer'. Perhaps some correspondent at Hanley can throw a little light on the above statements. I saw recently a modern willow-pattern plate made at a Tuscan pottery, in which the two birds (doves?) were changed into flying-fish. Mr M. has left Florence, or I should have inquired whether there was any ancient authority for the change? I never in England saw a plate with the flying-fish, Mr Meyer is a most respectable man, and therefore I am induced to credit what he told me.

J. H. Dixon, Florence.⁸

This letter generated many replies to *Notes and Queries*. One letter redirected J. H. Dixon of Florence to William Chaffers's *Marks and Monograms on Pottery and Porcelain* of 1863 for references to Turner (and his association with the Willow design), and how the Hanley manufacturer was actually Elijah Mayer, a contemporary of Josiah Wedgwood.⁹

Regardless of the accuracy of yet another origin theory, the letter hints at how the Willow Pattern had infiltrated aspects of European consumption. It had even spread beyond Continental Europe. One correspondent recalled how, when in Pekin in 1861, they had seen, 'willow-pattern plates (which probably cost 2d. in England) offered as a *curiosity* in ceramic ware and design, by a dealer in the former locality, for a half a dollar.'¹⁰ It was added by this correspondent, that the border-design on a typical Willow Pattern was, in their opinion, decidedly non-Chinese. Anecdotally, as far back as the 1840s, an account of a visit to a bazaar held in Constantinople (as it was then) mentions seeing large quantities of English crockery in the Willow Pattern.¹¹ Furthermore, an account of a visit to Mexico recalled how, 'the table service and crockery generally was from Staffordshire, of the universal Willow Pattern.'¹²

Just as there has been much speculation as to the origins of the printed Willow Pattern, it has been subjected to various forms of re-interpretation, such as, for example, the Italian potters allegedly misunderstanding the symbolism of the two doves and portraying them as fish. The general consensus is that the birds were supposed to be symbolic of two immortal doves.¹³ In a more contemporary example, the pattern known as 'After Willow' was manufactured by Wedgwood in 2004. Here the designer, Robert Dawson, playfully magnified parts of an original design. Dawson's re-imagined version was produced in bone china and derived from an example of a Willow Pattern dated 1806, as found in Wedgwood's archives.¹⁴

The Universal Willow Pattern

From the outset, the Willow Pattern was widely advertised. A public auction held at Charleston, South Carolina, offered a hogshead of 'Earthenware

(willow pattern) containing one elegant desert set, Cups, Saucers &c' in 1801.¹⁵ An advertisement headed, 'Blue Printed Ware of the Willow Pattern', included vessels in the forms of sauce boats, tureens, bakers, covered dishes and ladles, and appeared in the *Savannah Daily Gazette* during 1820. Demand for the pattern was seemingly widespread. Not surprisingly, the Willow Pattern appears in an archaeological context, although an investigation of sites at Middletown, Connecticut, estimated that other printed designs depicting castles, or stately homes, were probably more popular.¹⁶ This would coincide with advertisements of the 1820s which typically focused on promoting various other printed designs, but included the Willow Pattern. For instance, Francis Wilby & Co., of Boston offered 'blue printed Dinning ware of British Scenery, Colledge, Oxford, India and Willow Patterns.'¹⁷

The Willow Pattern simply moved down the hierarchy of what was available in terms of other printed designs. An 1817 price list, drawn up by Staffordshire manufacturers in an attempt to regulate unfair competition, priced a 10-inch Willow Pattern plate at 4 shillings, whereas plates in any 'other printed' pattern, were valued at 5 shillings.¹⁸ This parallels ways in which the Willow Pattern was gradually advertised. When a Somerset crockery dealer declared that he sold Spode's China and Earthenware, it was added that, 'short sets' of table services in Blue Willow Pattern were £2.2.0., whereas 'full sets' were priced at £4.4.0.¹⁹ The same dealer offered a short set of Spode's 'newest pattern' at £3.18.0., and a 'full set' for £7.12.0. There was a clear distinction between what was perceived as an older or newer design, impacting on the prices. Evidently, the value of the Willow Pattern declined, but an unusual characteristic of this pattern was that it remained available. Even in Barbados, a crockery dealer offered tableware printed in blue, green and brown, as well as blue Willow Pattern, in the 1840s.²⁰

Taste

For those who professed to know about good design and taste, views toward the Willow Pattern became decidedly hostile, during the nineteenth century. In 1844, the *Art Union* published a serialized review of Staffordshire production. Apart from recognizing the importance of Josiah Wedgwood, it was suggested how, 'Their very best patterns were wretched imitations of the grotesque and unmeaning scenes represented on the porcelain of China'. The *Art Union* continued by stating:

...and, such is the perverse tenacity with which men cling to familiar ugliness, that one of these outrageous caricatures of nature, "the Willow Pattern," still holds its place in the market, and perpetuates bad taste in a large proportion of the community. This permanence of pattern, once established, arises from the multitude of orders that are given to complete sets; the middle classes, who are the largest consumers of earthenware, naturally listen to the suggestions of economy; and, if they have inherited or picked up some pieces of detestable "willow," they will, of course, prefer completing their stock by getting pieces to match what they possess, to ordering an entirely new set. But this perpetuation of ugliness points to a practical moral: it shows how desirable it is that good patterns and forms should be introduced, for they, in time, will acquire permanence, and enjoy the popularity now possessed almost exclusively by sheer absurdity.²¹

As this article perceptively realized, most middle-class households were not in a position to simply venture out and purchase new crockery as their existing wares became damaged and broken. The compromise was to seek replacements. Rather than an issue of taste, the demand for the Willow Pattern continued, and its survival was, in part, related to economic constraints. Whilst invoices and price-fixing agreements demonstrate that the cheapest tableware available was undecorated cream-coloured, or green and

blue edged ware, the Willow Pattern became the lowest priced decorated transfer-printed pottery which was available. In the following month, the *Art Union* added:

In our last number we noticed the notorious Willow Pattern, which has perpetuated its ugliness for three generations, and diffused itself more extensively than any design ever produced by the highest exertions of artistic genius and skill.²²

In this extract, there are hints of how the Willow Pattern had already been around for a significant amount of time, allowing it to become firmly entrenched in British society. This would potentially increase the demand for replacements. Only in the 1850s were there signs that the Willow Pattern was declining in vogue – or at least this was what critics hoped. An article entitled ‘The Dinner-Table and Its Accessories’ in the *Illustrated London News*, stated:

Our table now being prepared, and the cloth laid over it, we proceed to what is usually laid upon that. And, first, the article of plates and dishes. For how many years, we wonder, did that abominable Willow Pattern rule it with a despotic sway over breakfast and dinner services? For how many years did people puzzle themselves over those inevitable joss-houses, that eternal bridge, with its eternal three passengers, bearing three eternal burdens on their backs? How long did that Noah’s ark-like boat sleep upon that painted ocean, with its solitary fishermen bending over the bow? ... For how many cycles, indeed, was that prosperous gem of Chinese art – that effable climax of no meaning, no judgement, no taste, and no sense -associated with the roast beef, the boiled mutton, and the plum pudding of old England. The Willow Pattern was inevitable – unavoidable.²³

The article continued, believing that, ‘Happily, the spell is now burst and the Willow Pattern is departing to the limbo of all humbugs.’²⁴ This idea of a decline was reinforced by additional comment in an article entitled ‘Art in the Byeways’, which appeared towards the end of 1851, whereby:

The reference to the willow-pattern recalls to mind the great onward step it represents; and it is reasonable to hope that we are now approaching the time when another step will be made throughout the country, that will reduce this graceless old design to a curiosity for museums, where it will remain side by side, with clumsy earthenware of our ancestors, a record of the art which decorated the crockery of the great mass of English-men throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁵

Even Eliza Meteyard (who had written the *Life of Josiah Wedgwood* in 1865-66) was drawn into the debate of what was good taste. Commenting in an article entitled ‘Our Plates and Dishes’, she observed how in London and the provinces, people were ‘giving up’ on their ‘century of hideous predilection for willow-pattern earthenware’. In Meteyard’s opinion, believing that this error in judgement had now been widely recognized by the public, it was just a question of time until there would be an improvement in taste.²⁶

Manufacturing and British Demand

Why English critics became so hostile to the Willow Pattern is never made clear. The evidence, such as it is, points towards an entirely different turn of events for the development of the Willow Pattern. As an example, Cork & Edge of the New Wharf Potteries, Burslem, was established in the 1840s, becoming known as Cork, Edge & Malkin by the 1860s, and Edge, Malkin & Co. from 1871. Unlike the larger, prestigious firms such as Wedgwood, Minton, or Spode, this firm only employed 133 men, 94 women, 66 boys and 32 girls in 1861. The large proportion of female and child employment was typical of the British ceramic industry of that period, as was the total number employed by Cork, Edge & Malkin – calculated as some 325 persons. The firm represents

an example of a typical medium-sized, earthenware manufacturer of the Potteries. There were around 200 potteries in the Stoke-on-Trent region alone in the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁷

In the 1860s, Cork, Edge & Malkin employed a traveller, or agent, to visit parts of south Wales and western England and acquire orders from provincial dealers. Orders were sent to Burslem, and in due course, goods were dispatched in crates to the customers, often by train. On 29th November 1866, the traveller sent an order from John Vile, a glass and china dealer of Taunton, Somerset, to Burslem as follows:

13 doz[en] Plates	10	3	Willow
	8	10	inches [10 dozen at 8 inches; 3 dozen at 10 inches]
80 doz dishes	12	12	12
	7	8	11
	12	14	16
	16	16	[12 dozen at 7 inches, 12 dozen at 8 inches etc]
4 doz gravys [sic]			do
1 doz salts			do
1 doz sauce tureen compts [sic]			[compotes] do
½ doz tureen ladles			do
1 doz sauce stands			do
¾ doz soup ladles			do
1 doz covered dishes	6		[inch?] do
1 doz covered dishes	10		[inch?] do

At the end of the order, the traveller remarked, ‘This wanted at once & further order to follow.’²⁸ Whilst a certain amount of demand may be accounted for because of the continuous need for replacements, the Taunton dealer, alone, ordered well-over one thousand ceramic items in the Willow Pattern. There was still huge demand for this design in tableware, in an array of vessel types. The rest of the order consisted of jugs, printed toilet ware (ewers and basons), and pudding basons.

In the case of Mrs. R. Dufall of Dorchester, Dorset, an order was placed for a selection of printed tableware, which included 50 dozen, 6-, 7-, and 10-inch Willow plates. The traveller noted that the, ‘Remains of order badly wanted’, and that she had, ‘only one Willow 10 in. plate in Stock.’²⁹ Interestingly, Rhoda Dufall was listed as a crockery dealer in her own right, and she originally came from Staffordshire.³⁰ It seems as if the unabated demand for the Willow Pattern continued because people were still keen to purchase the design and, in turn, it provided a steady, profitable line of production for manufacturers such as Cork, Edge & Malkin. It fulfilled a certain niche in the market during the nineteenth century. From Bristol, the Cork, Edge & Malkin’s traveller wrote of how one dealer:

R. Hill finds great difficulty in getting rid of the Seconds, with so little flat in the crate- Could you please pack him a/c – at once in crate, as nearly as you can to such herewith order any patterns, Pheasants, Cottage or Willow, but not higher...³¹

In short, printed patterns such as Asiatic Pheasants, Rose Cottage and Willow continued to be in demand from consumers who perhaps had limited means, and who lived in the provincial parts of England.

Export Markets

Connected by canals and railways, and located approximately fifty miles from the great shipping port of Liverpool, the Staffordshire Potteries benefitted from a rising global trade. Cork, Edge & Malkin had a range of international customers, and there is other evidence of this firm sending the Willow Pattern abroad. For example, in July 1863, Willow ware was dispatched to Antonio Pattey [or Patty] of Naples.³² From Amsterdam, J. Van Hees, described as a dealer in porcelain and English earthenware, ordered 9½-inch blue Willow plates on 8th January 1867.³³ Whether Cork, Edge & Malkin received orders

from European, or from British dealers, the archival evidence shows that in the 1860s tea ware was not produced in the Willow Pattern. Instead, tea ware was produced in a variety of printed designs, including the well-known Broseley pattern. This was to change for Staffordshire manufacturers by the end of the nineteenth century.

The most important export market for the Staffordshire Potteries was the United States. Due to large quantities of American cotton being imported to the Lancashire textile mills, via the port of Liverpool, the cost of shipping English manufactured goods in return to the Eastern seaboard became low. The Staffordshire Potteries benefitted from its proximity to Liverpool, and the United States consistently became the largest export market after the mid-1820s and 1830s.³⁴

As advertisements rarely provided the name of the actual manufacturer of the goods, surviving invoices in archives can enhance the knowledge of which Staffordshire manufacturers supplied the Willow Pattern to the American market. John Pearson of Burslem sold covered dishes and 3-inch muffin plates, described as Willow, to S. & J. Tams of Philadelphia in September 1833.³⁵ The same Philadelphian importers purchased what were described as pink and purple Willow plates from Yates & May of Shelton on 20th May 1836.³⁶ The usual preference for blue printed was a legacy of how cobalt could withstand the high temperatures required for firing Chinese hard-paste porcelain. Whilst the use of blue has remained a stylistic legacy of the impact of Chinese porcelain on the west, English manufacturers clearly explored the possibilities of using a variety of other colours for the Willow Pattern.

In his *Marks and Monograms on Pottery and Porcelain*, published in 1876, William Chaffers stated that the Willow Pattern was still 'in great demand.'³⁷ However, it was not as straightforward as this; demand for the Willow Pattern was not necessarily continuous. The American market dramatically moved away from consuming decorated wares and printed patterns from around the 1850s. Their growing preference shifted towards a demand for an undecorated earthenware, known as white ironstone, or white granite. Writers of the time were aware of these changes, but in the case of the American market an interesting irony emerges. An article entitled 'About Breakfast Tables: The morning meal Here and Abroad: American and English Breakfast Tables – a British service Described – coffee-pots, egg-cups, and muffin-plates - breakfast parties' was published in *The New York Times* in 1882. Apparently written by an American, it initially alludes to the preference for white wares:

...as the average American is not highly cultivated in art principles, in spite of tremendous efforts upon the part of lectures and decorative agents he is apt to buy the cup, saucer, or milk-jug which will stand the most wear and tear, or which commands itself to his individual taste. The result is a prevalence of white china for ordinary use unequaled [sic] except in France and Germany.

The article then continued:

...we might pass reflection upon the extraordinary persistence with which white dishes appear upon the scenes at boarding-houses and smaller hotels. How ugly they are! The blue and white delf [sic] ware of England, be it only in the humble "Humphrey clock" or Willow Pattern is a thousand times better. Who in the length or breadth of the British Isles would have a white dinner service?³⁸

As indicated here, given the changes that were taking place in American ceramic demand, even the Willow Pattern was considered more preferable, when for the most part, it seems to have been utterly dismissed by English writers and critics when discussing ceramic taste. The additional mention of 'Humphrey clock' patterns refers to English manufacturers producing printed wares inspired by the series of short stories written by Charles Dickens which

had appeared in the periodical *Master Humphrey's Clock*, published in the 1840s.

On closer analysis, demand for the Willow Pattern was far from continuous, or not necessarily always universal. It varied from market to market, and demand occurred in different waves. The demand for printed wares, as well as the Willow Pattern, only re-emerged in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. But once again it was not necessarily as it had existed before.

Adaptation and Production

In 1876, William Chaffers, the British ceramic historian, believed that there were two patterns which, 'remained universal favourites for many years: the *Willow Pattern* for dinner services, and the *Broseley* for tea and breakfast sets; they were indispensable in all domestic establishments for ordinary use, and remained almost exclusively for nearly half a century.'³⁹ However, the Willow Pattern underwent a transformation in the second half of the nineteenth century. Manufacturers transplanted the design onto tea wares, where it had apparently not readily existed before. Essentially, the Willow Pattern was re-purposed. In the 1880s, a seller based at Warrington (then a part of Lancashire) sold a 40-piece Willow Pattern tea set for 12s 6d, adding that, 'this pattern is at present very fashionable.'⁴⁰ Even Tiffany & Co. of New York advertised, 'For the Country House', 'Willow Pattern tea ware' in 1898.⁴¹ By the twentieth century, and on both sides of the Atlantic, Willow Pattern toilet sets had become available.

In addition, new ways were found by those involved in sales to invigorate interest in the pattern. Rather than being mundane or mediocre, it was transformed into something more homely and charming. By the 1900s, it was reassuringly familiar of a bygone age, rather than mundane. The Willow Pattern had somehow transcended any pretensions of being fashionable and had moved into the strange zone of being timeless. As one mid-west American retailer expressed it:

Blue Willow Ware. "GRANDMOTHER'S blue willow dishes" never go out of style. No-body knows just why the pattern pleases so many, but everybody knows that it does. So it is being made everywhere, well made sometimes, but often smudged and poor.

Last August we placed an order with an English pottery for a lot of the good kind of Blue Willow Ware – wanted it before the holidays, but it has just arrived. We price it low to move it quick at this dull time for crockery stores...⁴²

Their stock of blue Willow cups and saucers was priced at only 10 cents each.

If the Willow Pattern dates from at least the mid-1780s and 1790s, and some believe that a standardized version of it was adopted by manufacturers in the 1830s,⁴³ other changes were still to occur to the ceramic bodies and the firing techniques used. Many examples of Willow Pattern wares are devoid of a maker's backstamp, but they can still be dated. Early Willow wares are in pearlware – an earthenware body with a distinctive lead-glaze, mixed with cobalt blue, used from the 1790s. Early manufactured plates were without, or with only a single foot rim.⁴⁴ From the 1840s, a thicker, whiter ceramic body was adopted. In the twentieth century, the larger Staffordshire firms, such as Johnson Brothers of Hanley, invested in gas and electric tunnel kilns.⁴⁵ Tea wares printed with the Willow Pattern, manufactured by Johnson Brothers in the post-war period, show no evidence of the typical triangular stilt-marks found on the backs (and even on the fronts) of vessels fired in traditional bottle ovens. Awareness of these changes may seem superfluous to a discussion of the Willow Pattern, but they become more relevant to further changes which occurred in production in more recent years.

Heritage

British ceramic manufacturers were normally family-run firms. Some would remain in the same family for generations, accumulating skills and knowledge, all clustered around the nucleus of the main factory. The Johnson Brothers of Hanley is an example of this model. Established by four brothers who came from rural Staffordshire, their mother, Sarah Meakin, was from an existing dynasty of ceramic manufacturers. Her family connection enabled the sons - Henry James, Robert Lewis, Frederick George and Alfred Johnson - to gain a foothold in the industry, initially being employed by various members of the Meakin family. The brothers learnt their trade and then formed their own partnership in 1883. In 1931, when Henry James Johnson died, the firm was already considered to be the largest in the Staffordshire Potteries, employing over 5,000 workers.⁴⁶

However, the British ceramic industry would change dramatically. Family firms moved from being private firms to becoming conglomerates. In the case of the Johnson Bros., Hanley, it became part of the Wedgwood Ltd group in 1968. In the £3.6 million deal, the Chairman, F. Shephard Johnson, joined the board of Wedgwood Ltd, and at this stage there was no question of any redundancies.⁴⁷ In fact, despite the changes in the business-structures and amalgamations, heritage was increasingly emphasized in marketing techniques.

When previously, critics of the nineteenth century had found various ways to ridicule the content and meaning of the Willow Pattern, bordering on the xenophobic, attitudes were to significantly change. In one instance, a promotional competition was run by Dairy Crest – a manufacturer of a brand of butter called, appropriately 'Willow' – offering a prize of a 30-piece set of Willow earthenware, manufactured by Johnson Brothers. Interestingly, the phrase used in this marketing campaign was, 'Among the favourite designs on chinaware must surely be the Willow Pattern with its Chinese-style building, bridge, trees and birds.'⁴⁸ Designs with connotations of the Far East, were now becoming rediscovered as something attractive and charming.

Backstamps were far more likely to indicate that the item was manufactured in the Potteries, while marking in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was somewhat arbitrary. Wares manufactured by Johnson Bros. celebrated how they were made in England and how this firm had now acquired the status of by Royal appointment (Figs. 3, 4). Elaborated backstamps were even used on Willow Pattern wares manufactured by the Johnson Bros. in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, the use of backstamps which identified the place of production and incorporated the starting dates of these family firms reached something of a zenith in the marketing of the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁹

Nostalgia

The demand for the Willow Pattern had in part derived from its omnipresence. However, there was still a degree of rebranding during the 1990s, which aided this incarnation. Certain Staffordshire firms were content to revisit designs from their archives, and the Willow Pattern was selected as a suitable product for an historic revival. A firm called Past Times sold an array of new products, but these were all stylistically borrowed from the various historical periods. In one instance, their catalogue offered reproductions of printed patterns taken from Spode's 'Blue Room'. As it was declared in the catalogue, 'Now, in the original factory in the historic Staffordshire Potteries, Spode have made this collection of six different plates exclusively for Past Times'. Based on an included publicity image, this included plates in Spode's Willow Pattern.

Thus, the visual appearance of the Willow Pattern (which has practically remained the same over all this time) shifted in meaning. As shown above, nineteenth-century writers were often critical of the Willow Pattern because of its foreign, eastern roots. However, the marketing of Past Times described



Fig. 3. Plate, earthenware, blue printed Willow Pattern, Johnson Brothers, Hanley, Staffordshire, c. late 1970–1980s. ©Neil Ewins 2025.



Fig. 4. Backstamp on Fig. 3, indicating that the firm was operating under Royal Appointment to Her Majesty the Queen, and to Elizabeth the Queen Mother.

Spode's designs as 'Quintessentially English.'⁵⁰ What was, unquestionably, a cross-cultural design had become part of the fabric of British society. Examples of the reproduced Willow Pattern, from Spode's Blue Collection, claimed on the backstamp that the design originated in c.1790. This version included all of the features described by Robert Copeland (a member of the Spode firm) when he defined the Willow Pattern in 1980.⁵¹

Globalization

Faced with competitively priced ceramic imports, and mindful of shareholders' profits, outsourcing became a possibility for manufacturing groups. It was estimated by *The Sentinel* that the outsourcing 'sluice-gates' were initially opened in the 1980s.⁵² Outsourcing was initially explored by a few, and then by the many. The isolated cases of outsourcing production were soon to become a widespread trend. As it increased, it took on a variety of forms, such as decorating imported white ware or outsourcing production. Either way, it radically shifted how Staffordshire firms conducted their businesses.

The rise of outsourcing prompted an article which appeared in *Tableware International* entitled 'Sourcing for the Home Market'. The article raised the question of how consumers might respond to outsourcing. The view of Wedgwood's marketing director Robin Ritchie was quoted as:

If you ask a customer, they would prefer it to be made in England, but it's not an important part of the purchase. We have done considerable research to check this. The reassurance of the Wedgwood name is good enough for the consumer.⁵³

Johnson Brothers outsourced 15% of production, rising to 40% to the Far East, especially to China, by 2002.⁵⁴ By 2003, the entire production of the Johnson Brothers brand was moved to the Far East.⁵⁵ The jobs and skills lost were replaced by roles that were inconsequential and worthless. The magnificent Victorian factories were abandoned and ultimately demolished. Such was the fate of the Johnson Brothers' Imperial Pottery which closed in 1995.⁵⁶ It was as if tearing down old factories would somehow erase the past, enabling the memories of those who preferred to forget that a ceramic industry had ever happened (Figs. 5, 6).

In spite of all of these changes, the Willow Pattern survived. The products of Johnson Bros. were manufactured at Handan, Hebei Province, in China, until this brand was completely discontinued. Whilst Eastern manufacturers have proved themselves more than capable of producing ceramics in a range of Johnson Bros.' designs – they have, after all, been refining their craft of making pottery for well over a millennium – there remains a set of fundamental problems yet to be resolved. What, in the west, do we do with all those thousands of people once employed in the Staffordshire Potteries who have been displaced by the impact of globalization? What becomes of those areas where there was once such a remarkable concentration of specialised skills?

Marketing Strategy

Nevertheless, it remained possible to continue to consume Johnson Brothers' designs, including their Willow Pattern, but with some significant changes. Products made in China for Johnson Brothers were now manufactured in hard paste porcelain, instead of the earthenware body typically used in the Staffordshire Potteries. Historically, hard-paste porcelain is far more associated with Far Eastern production, and this represents a more recent step in the evolution of the printed version of the Willow Pattern. Alongside the backstamp declaring 'Johnson Bros. England 1883' there would now be a detachable label informing consumers where the product was actually made (Fig. 7). One straightforward impact of outsourcing was that information regarding the actual origin might be spread across detachable labels or



Fig. 5. Johnson Brothers' Imperial Pottery, Hanley, Staffordshire, 1999. ©Neil Ewins 2025.



Fig. 6. Area of Johnson Brothers' Imperial Pottery, Hanley, 2001. ©Neil Ewins 2025.



Fig. 7. Backstamp declaring, 'Johnson Bros. England 1883', with a detachable label indicating that it was manufactured in China. ©Neil Ewins 2025.

packaging, while for most of the twentieth century the backstamp would provide the company name, and the place of manufacture. As the detachable label would soon be removed by the consumer, the printed backstamp would remain making links to the company's heritage in 'England' and, in this instance, the start-date of the firm in '1883'. Certainly, globalization did not mean veering towards a global image when it came to the marketing of Johnson Brothers. It became something that was far more deceptive, the detachable label being a marketing approach adopted by a number of Staffordshire brands when outsourcing to the Far East. It was more unusual for Staffordshire brands in the 2000s to permanently print 'Made in China' alongside the name of the company. This was, however, the route followed by Royal Doulton (formerly of Burslem). But in the main, the detachable label, and then the use of the printed backstamp word 'England', rather than 'Made in England', was the result of marketing practices that became increasingly nefarious. In terms of the Johnson Brothers' use of the Willow Pattern, the situation existed whereby the design was drawn from Chinese culture, the wares were now manufactured in China, and yet it was marketed as English!

In the meantime, country-of-origin effects (CO or COO), or product-country image (PCI), became a recognised area of research, especially by those concerned with marketing. Instead of interest in COO declining due to heightened globalization, it was suggested that an impact on perceptions could remain. Some products still referred to where they had

been manufactured, and there were other wider implications of outsourcing on areas, such as tourism.⁵⁷ As indicated, in the case of the British ceramic industry, including the place production on the backstamp became a strong tendency, and this remains the case with Staffordshire firms that still exist today.

Retail

As established above, Spode's 'Blue Room' collection was introduced around 1995 and initially promoted by the *Past Times* catalogue. Other retailers also advertised the 'Spode Blue Room Collection' in the mid-1990s, such as James Pirie of St. Andrews, Scotland.⁵⁸ This company had been a ceramic and glass retailer in St. Andrews since 1890. Since the vast majority of printed surface patterns manufactured in Staffordshire have been a mixture of cultural styles, does it make any difference to sales as to where ceramics were manufactured? As outsourcing is a more contemporary issue, it is possible to shift from written, to oral evidence.

The Managing Director of James Pirie, when interviewed in 2010, was able to outline how tastes in ceramic consumption had inevitably changed. Whilst it is hard to specifically indicate how consumers reacted to designs, such as Willow Pattern (being manufactured in the Far East rather than in Staffordshire), there was in general a response to the impacts of outsourcing. Spode, one of the alleged originators of the Willow Pattern, also began outsourcing production. When asked whether customers ever voiced a concern as to where Staffordshire ceramics were actually produced, as outsourcing was introduced, the response was:

Initially they were horrified, for something like Spode 'Blue Italian' to suddenly be made in China or India. Some people, I would say, would have put that back, but with time, in order to make up a set, if they have broken a tea cup, they bought a replacement, even though it is a slightly darker transfer, and a slightly different shape, they would still buy it to make their set up. They almost had to accept it, but initially they didn't like.⁵⁹

There were instances of consumers not buying what previously had been a British-manufactured brand because it was outsourced. A unique aspect of the Spode firm was how their pottery was manufactured on the same factory site, as established by Josiah Spode in the eighteenth century. Other firms, such as Wedgwood, had moved locations during their illustrious history.

Spode's 'Blue Italian' range has complex stylistic origins, but in the manner of the Willow Pattern the designs have become associated with Englishness. Apparently, there was a certain resistance to buying a Staffordshire brand when Spode began manufacturing abroad.⁶⁰ This was a significantly different point of view from that of the marketing director of Wedgwood who suggested in the 1990s that place of production was no longer relevant.

Outsourcing enabled Staffordshire firms to utilize cheap labour from different parts of the globe. However, whether this approach enabled Staffordshire ceramic brands to then be lowered in price for the consumer was doubtful. In fact, it was believed by the Managing Director of James Pirie of St. Andrews, that:

No, it did not, and this was our biggest complaint to the manufacturers. Not only did we have to accept that some items were no longer being made in Britain, and also accept the shape was going to change, because of new modern machines making the ceramics (which would give us grief, without a doubt, if we are carrying old stock and new stock), and yet, the price is to stay exactly the same! Some things were actually more expensive. And that did cause a lot of complaints from us, and the customers alike.⁶¹

The difficult issue became what exactly did consumers believe they were acquiring from a Staffordshire brand, in comparison to Far Eastern ceramics sold in supermarkets for a couple of pounds?

Well, we often wondered that. You know, you are getting cheaper labour, cheaper materials, and you are putting your name on it, and you are still commanding a price when it was made in Britain!

We had to accept that they couldn't keep the factories open in this country, due to rising costs, and that they were moving all the machines and everything abroad. We thought that stock would then come in cheaper ... No, this didn't happen – the new Far Eastern stock came in at the same high price.⁶²

But the view of this retailer was that, 'the new Far Eastern stock came in at the same high price.' Indeed, it was even noted how:

In our minds, and I don't think it is just the ceramic industry, I think it is to the everyday customer. If we see something that is produced abroad, in China, in India, we expect it to be cheaper, don't we?⁶³

Based on the evidence of this retailer, selling ceramics made abroad, at prices which were equivalent to those manufactured in the Potteries, created a major conundrum for high-end Staffordshire brands. The empirical evidence reveals just how complicated the perception of English ceramics can be. How, consumers can still take note of where things were made, even if the surface-patterns were blatantly cosmopolitan. After Spode collapsed, it is interesting to note that Portmeirion (another Stoke manufacturer) acquired some of its designs and then brought some of its production back to the Potteries. It began to be recognised by certain manufacturers that where it was made could have a value to the consumer.⁶⁴ Outsourcing production did not result in the price reduction of well-known English brands, and so for all those job-losses in the Staffordshire Potteries, what did consumers actually gain?

Tradition

Not all Staffordshire manufacturers have outsourced production. Some have steadfastly maintained production in the Potteries. In addition, instead of adopting automated printing machines the firm of Burgess & Leigh (Burleigh) of Longport, near Burslem, have continued to use the earlier methods of transfer-printing, as first developed and employed in the eighteenth century. The result is a rather unique product, and it is interesting to note that of the patterns selected to convey this message of traditional manufacturing in the Potteries they have selected the Willow Pattern. Along with other transfer-printed designs which include the Asiatic Pheasants, a version of the Willow Pattern is produced in table and tea ware. Their website outlines 'The Blue Willow Story' and how the version manufactured dates from the 1920s. In an added layer of authenticity, Burgess & Leigh utilize Victorian factory buildings, known as the Middleport Pottery, adjacent to the Trent & Mersey Canal. The preservation of this heritage site goes seamlessly hand-in-hand with their approach to production and the actual patterns produced.

Whatever the view of outsourcing, the actual origin of Staffordshire brands became increasingly ambiguous. For those they have maintained production in the Potteries, it had to be made abundantly clear to the consumer that it was definitely made in the city of Stoke-on-Trent. In the case of Burgess & Leigh, their printed backstamps state that their products are 'Made in England', and a detachable label declares, 'Our Home is in the Mother Town of Burslem in Stoke-on-Trent, where the UK Pottery Industry was Born'. Burgess & Leigh is something of a beacon of hope in the battle for survival of the Staffordshire industry. Interestingly, though, the Willow Pattern - with all its Eastern roots - has become enlisted as a design used to instantaneously communicate to the potential consumer notions of continuity and tradition.

For a so-called industrial product, the skills involved in cutting and then positioning the paper transfers onto a biscuit vessel are deceptively labour-intensive. The making of ceramics can be a craft within an industrial setting and, given the skills involved, buying into an ethos of tradition now comes at a high price. What once passed as affordable table or tea-ware in the nineteenth century has now become rather specialised, and high-end. The Willow Pattern is far from superficial, since it has now acquired yet another layer of meaning and symbolism. But perhaps in its new-found status it may begin to make consumers consider the real issues of modern-day consumption - not the over-consumption to which we have become so accustomed, but something that is far more measured, with an eye on sustainability. The manufacturer, retailer and consumer all take an ethical responsibility for their behaviour and actions.

Does the place of production really make a difference to what appeals to the modern consumer? Denby (famous for its production of tableware in stoneware in Derbyshire) acquired Burgess & Leigh and was of the belief that this aspect of their business portfolio constituted one of their 'heritage giftware brands'. The irony of the situation is that Burgess & Leigh became significant exporters of their wares. Exports have continued to provide an important source of income for the Staffordshire Potteries, just as they had historically. Instead of the American market, the East Eastern markets of Japan and Korea have proved to be of growing significance and increasingly strong as their economies have grown in scale. It even began to be speculated that selling English ceramic brands abroad was somewhat invigorated by the fact that the product was still being manufactured in England.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Admired or derided (apparently in equal measure), the Willow Pattern has remained indefatigable. The Willow Pattern has been a significant part of English ceramic production and consumption for well over two hundred years. The factors involved in its survival and longevity are varied and complex. It would appear that the pattern has proved to be endlessly versatile, although the design itself has rarely changed. It is what manufacturers, retailers, and finally consumers, have brought to the Willow Pattern that has given it endless possibilities and nuanced meaning. It does not change, but our attitudes to this pattern do. In its early days of production, the attraction probably stemmed from how it represented a western fascination with the exotic. Printed earthenware was more affordable than the originally imported Chinese porcelain. Once popularized, it became even more affordable, and one broken plate was easily replaced with another. Conveniently, being so widely manufactured, the retailer or consumer did not even have to rely on the same manufacturer for replacements. In more recent times, it has apparently become part of the British psyche, being thoroughly absorbed into the landscape of Englishness. In an age of intense globalization and outsourcing, there has remained an interest in the authenticity of ceramics. In this respect, what was supposed to be a shot in the arm for the industry was more akin to a shot in the foot. If anything, outsourcing served to be the undoing of the industry, with those that have maintained production in Potteries continuing to be responsive to changes in ceramic taste. Shifting production abroad meant that there has been a problem in remaining agile, when history has consistently shown that even the demand for the commonplace Willow Pattern has fluctuated over time, and been subject to regional variations. Remarkably, the 'humble' Willow Pattern shows all signs of surviving the 21st century, and hopefully beyond.

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