Christopher M.S. Johns

China and the Church: Chinoiserie in Global Context. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. Pp. 206. Hb, \$49.95.

The story of the Jesuits in China is well known and often told. The warm reception accorded several new biographies of Matteo Ricci marking the four-hundredth anniversary of his death in 1610 reminds us of the continuing salience of his legacy at a moment when the urgency of efforts in the West to come to terms with China and all it represents seems more pressing than ever before. Echoes of seventeenth-century Jesuit accommodationism can be heard in modern academic debates over whether certain tenets of neo-Confucianism might conceive of the relation between the individual and the state in a manner commensurate with modern human rights theory; modern counterparts to the Rites Controversy, which took up, with considerable vigor, questions concerning the theological status of Chinese terms like *tian* (sky/heavens) can be found in lively debates over the philosophical status of classical Chinese writings on ethics, governance, and man's place in the natural world, which are very rarely taught in US departments of philosophy.

The shifting fortunes in Europe of the Chinese-inspired stylistic trend known as *chinoiserie* likewise form a familiar narrative. The fascination with porcelains, garden buildings, and furnishings in the Chinese taste took root among elites in the later seventeenth century, spread to the middling sort by the mid-eighteenth century, and had largely fallen out of fashion by the time of the Macartney embassy from the British to the Qing court in 1793. Studies of the phenomenon variously intended for audiences of scholars and collectors have taken up questions of the style's relationship to the baroque, rococo, and gothic, the origins of its characteristic visual motifs, its implication in the rise of consumer culture, and its contemporary gender associations.

Rarely, however, have these religious and art-historical components of the early modern encounter between China and Europe been considered in tandem. In part, the persistent separation of these stories surely results from a long-standing disciplinary divide between textually inclined scholars most fully at home in a world of abstractions, and material culture specialists who seek out compelling meanings in things and in their interactions with the people who create and admire them. Whatever the origins of this divide, Christopher Johns bridges it most productively in *China and the Church: Chinoiserie in Global Context*. Based on a series of seminars presented at the University of Kansas, this engaging and sumptuously illustrated study sets out to address an intriguing historical question that most likely would never have

occurred to a scholar working solely in one traditional discipline or another: namely, how might the shifting registers of aesthetic responses to China in eighteenth-century Europe be understood in relation to contemporary controversies over the nature of Chinese spiritual life?

Johns's provocative answer emerges through three interlocking arguments concerning the importance of the Jesuit missions to artistic developments in Europe, the conspicuous emergence of whimsy as the characteristic hallmark of chinoiserie, and the significance of the style's progressive feminization of male Chinese bodies in its visual repertoire. In a nutshell, Johns finds that the failure of the early Jesuit accommodationists to persuade Rome of the theological congruity of Confucianism and Catholicism precipitated a shift in general attitudes towards Chinese civilization from admiration to resentment and disdain which was reflected, in turn, in stylistic conventions that robbed China of any basis for respect or serious regard and negated its seeming challenge to Europe and the Catholic church as a legitimate rival claimant to civilizational laurels. While Johns draws extensively on existing scholarship in developing certain components of this account, his emphasis on the close interconnections between the course of seemingly arcane theological debates and the contemporaneous evolution of visual motifs is original and deeply revealing.

The cornerstone of the book's argument is laid in its opening chapter, which presents a clear and concise history of the Jesuit mission in China distinctive for both its carefully chosen and well-integrated illustrations—an early Qing portrait of a married couple, for example, showing an ancestral altar in the background, buttresses the claim that many non-Jesuits in Europe found the ancestor rites disturbing—and its insistence that the failure of the mission had profound and lasting effects in Europe well beyond the church establishment with respect to China's reputation in European consciousness. The following chapter likewise offers a fresh perspective on familiar historical terrain in a history of Chinese import art and the chinoiserie style that emphasizes the active role played by representatives of the church in the procurement and distribution in Europe of Chinese art wares. Johns's finding that Catholic missionaries were deeply involved in the earliest stages of the porcelain trade with Europe, even serving as translators for British East India Company ships, helpfully unsettles lingering assumptions concerning the separation of conversion and commerce in the Chinese context. And the archival evidence he unearths for connoisseurship in the Chinese arts on the part of no less eminent a figure than Pope Benedict likewise reminds us that the many strands of Europe's engagement with China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were thoroughly intertwined.

The final third of the book develops its boldest causal argument: that a broad resentment towards China born of its resistance to proselytization contributed to the popularity of visual conventions that reduced China's once-vaunted cultural achievements to a purely whimsical spectacle of exotic fantasy and emasculation. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given its continuity with descriptions dating back to the eighteenth century, the author's characterization of the chinoiserie style as superficial, trivializing, and unnatural stands on firmer ground than the explanation he proposes, which would be all but impossible to prove definitively. The circumstantial evidence he offers is both abundant and suggestive, and surely will provoke further investigation. One might have wished, though, for a fuller recognition of the variety of factors that surely contributed to the stylistic trends in question, as well as of the complexity of responses to Chinese culture among Europe's intelligentsia, which is inadequately conveyed by a paradigm focused as insistently as this one is on the church's response to its own failure and therefore bound to underestimate the significance of China's role in the development of (largely anti-clerical) strands of Enlightenment thought.

Such occasional misgivings notwithstanding, *China and the Church* offers a fresh and richly informed perspective on a transcultural encounter that remains every bit as fraught and perplexing today as it surely was to the contemporaries of Pope Benedict and Voltaire. It is much to the author's credit that the book is at once, in its clear, conversational style, accessible enough to engage a broad audience and sufficiently adept and daring in its deployment of an abundant archive to move the scholarly conversation forward in promising directions.

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