CHAPTER SEVEN

PATTERN AND VARIATION: INDIGENISATION

Matteo Ricci made the following observation about the Chinese dining table in the late sixteenth century:

It is customary with the Chinese, more so than with other people who use this polish, not to spread their dining table with a cloth when they sit down to eat. If the table loses any of its lustres or becomes soiled by particles of food falling upon it, the gloss can be readily restored by washing with water and polishing with a cloth, because this thin but hard finish prevents any permanent stains. The export of this product of this particular tree might well be the beginning of a profitable enterprise, but up to the present it seems that no one has given any thought to such a possibility.1

George Staunton made the same kind of observation two hundred years later, in the late eighteenth century:

Their tables, which the varnish always laid upon them prevents from imbibing moisture, or being injured by dust, are not covered with cloth. They spread no sheets upon their beds. They have not adopted the use of linen; and white cotton is applied by most of them to a very few purposes only.… It is likely that the general use of linen, to which Europe is supposed to be indebted for its present exemption from leprous affections, will be adopted by the Chinese, in the course of their increased commerce and connection with Europeans.… The article of soap will, probably, soon follow that of linen, as a necessary appendage.2

Although the observation of George Staunton was partial and he did not mention “Nankeen” at all, his prediction about table cloth and soap turned out to be accurate. The growing consumption of foreign goods was part of a long historical process that began in the latter half of the Ming and continues today, as China catches up with the West.

Europeans appeared in the maritime theatre of China a century after Zheng He’s voyages, but the significance of their arrival would not make itself felt until the mid-Qing, when the population exploded.

1 Ricci, China in the Sixteenth Century, pp. 17–18.
This is a most important intersection, where endogenous and exogenous forces met to shape the course of history. The rising popularity and increasing availability of foreign goods beginning in the early Qing led in turn to commercial specialisation, which can be seen from the emergence by the mid-Qing of businesses, shops and streets that were dedicated to the import, retail and marketing of foreign products. They gave birth to a foreign urban mosaic; they not only encouraged but also grew consumption. This can be seen in the ways in which people dressed themselves, ate, drank, smoked and entertained; it can also be seen from where people lived and how they moved around, hence the Chinese categories of clothing, food, housing and transportation. Foreign goods were changing the mentality of the Chinese and shaping a new, sometimes hybrid, urban landscape and consumer behaviour.

This chapter focuses on the consumption of a few foreign goods to highlight the complex process of localisation. Focusing on how the demand for foreign products was generated and the ways in which these goods were used, this chapter probes the circumstances under which they naturalised and casts light on why some products indigenized quickly and thrived while others caught on slowly or even disappeared. In doing so, it lays bare the pattern and variations in the process of sinicisation which will enhance our understanding of Qing culture and society. The story of foreign chrysanthemums and peaches can be a good start. Zheng Banqiao (1693–1765), an early Qing artist who was famous for his paintings of nature, knew them very well:

Fashionable among the super rich to grow flowers
They brag about foreign chrysanthemums and peaches
Freshly delivered from Jiaozhou last night
A red pot of stunning and exuberant jewellery.

The cult of cultivating exotic flowers had its origin in the “garden mania” of the late Ming and raged into the mid-Qing, as many literati and scholar-officials competed with each other to grow not just the most beautiful but, more significantly, the most exotic plants. This

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