Introduction: monstrous beauty

Take a stroll in any modern Chinese city with even a modest tourist trade and you will soon stumble upon street-side stalls offering for sale a cornucopia of antiquarian bric-a-brac. Corroded old coins, dusty ceramics, multi-limbed Buddhist figurines, and tattered scroll paintings jostle for space among vintage Mao Zedong alarm clocks, jade bracelets, sepia postcards, and foot-long opium pipes. Linger for more than a moment over this motley assortment and you will likely be offered a shoe. Not a leather shoe with which to prolong your stroll, but a delicately embroidered silk slipper to stroke, to admire, to cup in the palm of your hand as you struggle to imagine how it could ever have encompassed the foot of a full-grown woman. For you will, by now, have been assured, with a somber nod and a sigh, that this dazzling green or yellow or red piece of handiwork had once belonged to an elegant lady of the late Qing dynasty.

The price is negotiable, and once you have walked off with your prize, the quantity of equally ancient and equally immaculate silk slippers you will find offered for sale at markets, temples, and historical sites throughout the city will remind you that the supply of venerable "antiques" for the tourist trade is, in fact, inexhaustible, and that there are handsome profits to be made in the manufacture of historical relics. But their questionable pedigree notwithstanding, the ubiquitous silk slippers stand out among the jades, porcelains, coppers, and lacquerwares of the antique-dealer's stall. They are, by far, the most colorful and visually engaging objects in what is often otherwise a rather drab collection. They appeal to the touch as well, offering in their smooth surfaces and sensuous softness an alluring contrast to the cold metallic clamor of the copper coins in the neighboring bin. And inevitably, they conjure up a dim memory of a curiously cathected eroticism, dating from those dark pre-revolutionary days when the delights offered by her lotus-blossom feet topped every blazon of a beauty's charms.

Such a memory will prove an ambivalent one at best. With any scrutiny, after all, the scene of sensual pleasure quickly unravels into unspeakable childhood torments, aching legacies of blistered flesh and deformed bone. The gentlemanly relish of podial beauty appears, in retrospect, a perverse aesthetic irrevocably compromised by the inhumanity of the sacrifice it

required. The shudder of disgust it evokes in the modern viewer opens a chasm across which identification is impossible. At the same time, it transposes the physical monstrosity of the individual misshapen foot onto the spectacle of footbinding as cultural practice, so that the entire social system in which it was embedded is tainted with the stench of barbarism. It is precisely this stench, I would suggest, this perversely poignant evocation of cultural monstrosity, that ultimately accounts for why the antique merchants of Beijing and Shanghai sell so many delicately embroidered slippers. Every shudder of disgust, after all, is accompanied by the thrill of self-righteousness. To recognize the barbarism of Qing patriarchal norms is simultaneously to revel in the humanity and progressivism of our own values and practices. Both the modern Chinese and the Western tourist require the commonly received history of footbinding as a crucial point of orientation for affirming and demarcating their own enlightened modernity.[1] Just as the erotic beauty of a bound foot at once veiled and derived much of its power from the signs of physical suffering that lay beneath the wraps, so the market-tested appeal of mass-produced four-inch slippers at once conceals and re-appropriates the monstrosity of an underlying historical reality.

As far as we know, embroidered silk slippers did not appear among the luxuriously extravagant displays of Chinese wares that filled the hundreds of china shops in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London. The exotic imported goods these shops did offer, however, proved every bit as captivating to contemporary consumers. Chinese silks made up a large part of the trade, as did dozens of varieties of tea. The rapid emergence of tea drinking as a new national pastime required teawares, and these in turn demanded, in the well-appointed home, a fashionable complement of painted porcelain jars and vases and molded figurines. Fire screens, wallpapers, and lacquerware chests rounded out the inventory of better-stocked shops, offering the enchanting and often realized possibility of fitting out an entire room in the Chinese taste, especially once skilled European craftsmen began imitating and adapting Chinese motifs in the ceramics and furnishings that marked the advent of the chinoiserie style.

Chinese and Chinese-styled goods were so familiar, so thoroughly naturalized within the eighteenth-century English interior, that an aging Charles Lamb, speaking through his narrator Elia as he reflected dreamily in 1823 on the origins of a lifelong passion for old china, could not recall a time when porcelains had not been daily before his eye. Though the London shops where Elia would have acquired it surely provided a more luxurious setting than their modern Beijing counterparts, his infatuation with musty Chinese bric-a-brac suggests more than a glancing resemblance to that of

the modern tourist. At once quaint and exotic, redolent of a storied history and unfailingly fashionable, Chinese objects then as now captivated the imagination with their novel forms and surface splendor. But a peculiar note of ambivalence that intrudes upon Elia's porcelain-induced reveries offers a more compelling parallel. "I had no repugnance then – why should I now have? – to those little, lawless, azure-tinctured grotesques, that under the notion of men and women, float about, uncircumscribed by any element, in that world before perspective – a china tea-cup."[2] While old china clearly owes much of its charm for Elia to such departures from familiar visual conventions, its grotesque figures and absurd deformations of the perspectival frame are also sufficiently unsettling to require a defensive denial of their repugnance.

The structure of this ambivalence in the aesthetic monstrosity underpinning the allure of Chinese wares functions for Elia, moreover, in much the same way as it does for his globe-trotting twenty-first-century successor. If Elia has difficulty in conjuring up an interior space before the appearance of old china, he has no trouble imagining a visual space prior to the invention of single-point perspective, for this is the lawless, uncircumscribed, visual world that old china makes available. This pre-perspectival lawlessness leads to absurdity: figures floating up in the air, a courtly mandarin handing tea to a lady who appears to be two miles away, another lady stepping into a boat "moored on the hither side of this calm garden river, with a dainty mincing foot, which in a right angle of incidence (as angles go in our world) must infallibly land her in the midst of a flowery mead – a furlong off on the other side of the same strange stream."

These "*speciosa miracula*" are delightful in themselves, in a playful, fairy-tale way, and Elia expresses his gratitude that the prosperity he and his cousin have recently enjoyed has made it possible for them "to please the eye sometimes with trifles of this sort."[3] But such goods are, finally, merely trifles, and the speaker surely finds pleasure also in the condescension that they invite. That the art of the Chinese reflects a world before perspective allows him to ask (if only rhetorically) "if far or near can be predicated of their world," and to posit for that world a non-Euclidean geometry in which angles shape space according to strange and unfamiliar rules, if they follow any rules at all. Accompanying such reflections, as lighthearted as they may be, is the comforting assurance that our own thoroughly rationalized, post-Renaissance visual world has advanced to the next level, and that we can recognize ourselves in this difference. The fantasies of monstrous beauty embodied by Elia's teacup and the modern tourist's embroidered slipper are cut of the same cloth. Quaint and charmingly lawless porcelain grotesques

conjure for Elia a comfortingly pre-perspectival China in much the same way that equally quaint and enticingly barbaric silken artifacts evoke for his successors a reassuringly feudal Chinese past that both delimits and guarantees the privileged space of European modernity.

This book explores the role of the Chinese taste in the making of this modernity. Eighteenth-century consumers in England were, as Lamb suggests, infatuated with Chinese and Chinese-styled goods, even as they were amused, perplexed, or troubled by the alien aesthetic sensibility these goods embodied. This ambivalence, I will argue, figures centrally in the period's experience of Chinese exoticism and foregrounds the importance of the two questions, or sets of questions, I will set out to address in seeking to understand this experience. The first, quite simply, is how a foreign aesthetic that was so often depicted in negative terms – strange, monstrous, grotesque, repugnant, trifling – came to be so thoroughly and successfully assimilated within its host culture. What were the sources of an appeal that transformed curious emblems of otherness, in the space of little more than a century, into paradigmatic emblems of Englishness, and how did this transformation take place? The second set of questions concerns the significance of this appeal for the art, literature, and collective imagination of eighteenth-century England. How did the popularity of the Chinese taste inflect other important stylistic trends, such as classicism, Gothicism, and romanticism? What new meanings and values did Chinese objects make available to English consumers? What specific functions did these objects take on within the material and visual culture of the time? My working hypothesis here is that the thorough-going domestication of the alien Chinese aesthetic involved not merely a superficial shift in British taste or a passing fad, but rather a profound transformation of underlying constructs of gender, nation, and desire. It is well known that eighteenth-century consumers admired, collected, displayed, satirized, and roundly condemned Chinese wares; my purpose here is to ask how these seemingly trivial goods in turn acted upon the culture in which they were consumed.

In asking these questions, I hope to push back against three interpretive paradigms that habitually condition, in often unhelpful ways, our understandings of intercultural exchange in the early modern period. The most pervasive of these is the model of European diffusionism, which takes "modernity" in all of its guises to be a distinctly European phenomenon, and conceives the global history of the past several centuries as one in which major developments – capitalism, liberal democracy, the public sphere, Enlightenment rationality, industrialization, the novel, the modern subject – emerge initially in Western Europe and spread gradually outward across the

globe. According to J. M. Blaut, diffusionism first emerged as a historical paradigm in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, became a fully formed scientific theory in the nineteenth, and experienced a resurgence in the work of post-World War II scholars and policy makers concerned with problems of modernization in the Third World.[4] While it has been subjected to increasing scrutiny in the past two decades, diffusionism underpins the implicit Eurocentrism that continues to condition much historical scholarship. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in *Provincializing Europe*, "Europe remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories" and the "silent referent in historical knowledge."[5]

Within the field of Chinese studies, the theory of diffusionism has guaranteed the dominance of a historical model that tends to regard developments in China from the seventeenth century onward, but most especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as mere responses to the Western impact in the realms of painting, politics, economics, mathematics, technology, education, literature, and the like. According to Paul Cohen, modern Western understandings of recent Chinese history have been based on the problematic assumptions that "the confrontation with the West was the most significant influence on events in China" and that "it was the West that played the truly *active* role in this period of Chinese history." One consequence of the persistence of such assumptions, I would suggest, is an anachronistic tendency to project this image of Western dominance back onto earlier periods. We are left to imagine, in the absence of compelling narratives to the contrary, that Western cultures were always already uniquely and self-sufficiently proto-modern, while China waited in a state of perpetual dormancy (Marx compared China to a "mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin") for the Western spark that would ignite the traumatic transformations of the past hundred years, leading to "the making over of Chinese culture in the Western image" that many a naïve China watcher still awaits, expectantly, today.[6]

While the present book has very little to say about Chinese history *per se*, part of my purpose in framing its central questions as I have is to complicate received narratives of early modernity in England by calling attention to the extraordinarily far-reaching cultural impact in the eighteenth century of the rising imperial power at the other end of the Eurasian land mass. If cultural diffusion was taking place between England and China, or more broadly between East Asia and Western Europe during this period, its dominant flows were clearly not in the direction we are accustomed to imagining. As Kenneth Pomeranz, Bin Wong, Andre Gunder Frank, and other revisionist historians have recently argued, England, when viewed from within a

global macroeconomic perspective, occupied a rather peripheral position in what, until 1800 or so, was a largely Sinocentric world trade system.[7] To take seriously the question of the impact that Chinese aesthetics had on eighteenth-century England is then to extend this revisionist critique into the cultural sphere, and to open the door to exploring the material and imaginative ramifications of a less rigidly Eurocentric model of modernity.

A second barrier to fresh interpretations of the phenomenon of the Chinese taste in England is the tendency, especially pronounced within eighteenth-century studies, to read references to exotic luxuries in literary and artistic works as tropes reflecting and often celebrating Britain's rising imperial power. Students of the period take their cue from Addison, Lillo, Hogarth, and other contemporaries whose manifest pride in the expanding reach of Britain's trade networks is unmistakable, and there is no doubt that a consciousness of their nation's rising place in the world inflects their perception of the spoils of overseas trade that increasingly crowded London warehouses and fashionable shops. There is some danger, though, of reading too much of the Victorian era's imperial triumphalism back into the Stuart or early Georgian periods. As Gerald MacLean argues in his study of early modern English writing about the Ottoman empire, the emergence of British imperial pride was preceded by a considerably less swashbuckling era of imperial envy, a structure of feeling with respect to the material products and cultural achievements of an advanced and powerful Eastern civilization that was characterized by awe, admiration, and desire. While these responses were coupled with predictable anxiety and resentment, there was no question of the proto-colonialist condescension more familiar in later periods: "During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, English writers never forgot that they were dealing with an empire that controlled a great deal of Eastern Europe and a third of the known world, not a backward, vulnerable and somehow 'orientalized' space waiting to be conquered and controlled."[8]

Robert Markley finds a similar dynamic at work in English writing about China in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The frustrating awareness of the economic supremacy of the Far East and of Europe's marginalization in a Sinocentric global economy led to the emergence, according to Markley, of compensatory strategies for managing and concealing in narrative the profound anxieties generated by all-too-regular reminders of England's national abjection in the arenas of world trade. China's function as "the locus for dreams of attaining a golden age of prosperity and abundance," Markley suggests, posed for contemporary readers

"a crucial set of challenges to Eurocentric conceptions of culture, personal and national identity" that we continue to grapple with even today.[9]

Prevailing attitudes in England towards China began to shift noticeably in the eighteenth century, as the generally admiring accounts of Jesuit missionaries and their followers gave way before considerably more hostile discourses of trade and diplomacy. Chinese imports and the imitations they spawned may have helped to catalyze this shift, by providing a material and visual context through which the vast, even overwhelming power and history of the Chinese empire could be re-imagined as fragile, superficial, and faintly absurd.[10] But at the same time, these objects and the storied civilization they evoked continued to remind their viewers, often uncomfortably, of England's cultural backwardness, material dependency, and relatively late arrival on the world stage. As in previous centuries, then, the East and its cherished luxuries evoked a complex range of responses best characterized, perhaps, as profound ambivalence. Only an awareness of this ambivalence, of the potential status of Chinese objects as a site of both imperial envy and imperial pride, can enable us to recognize the semiotic fluidity and transformative potency of these seemingly ephemeral objects in the English imagination.

This brings us to the third paradigm I hope to contest in the following pages. An air of ephemerality attaches itself all too readily to a Chinese teacup. Porcelain is a fragile material, and one whose decorative conventions in our period favor lightness and delicacy. Cobalt-blue figures float about in a shimmering glow of ethereal white, apparently beholden, as Lamb's Elia gleefully notes, to laws of neither gravity nor perspective. Regardless of the quality of its craftsmanship and artistry, the porcelain vessel (and its near cousins in lacquerware, textiles, printed wallpapers, and furniture) was consigned in the eighteenth century and remains consigned today to the domain of the merely decorative. Art was an evolving category in the eighteenth century, but however it was understood, Chinese imports did not qualify. Grand history paintings commanded the greatest respect in the art world, followed by portraiture, landscape painting, and still life; the decorative arts groveled down near the bottom of the ladder along with painted shop signs and rough woodblock prints.

While a lively culture of collecting and connoisseurship has sustained scholarship on decorative wares, modern museum curators and art historians readily confirm that we have inherited from the eighteenth century scales of artistic value that make it difficult to regard decorative objects seriously as agents and instruments of culture, if we can be troubled to regard them at all. As a result, few scholars ask the questions of, say, an imported

Chinese jar that they might ask of the painted portrait or volume of Dryden's poetry that once shared a room with it in an English country house. The decorative arts, like female-authored fiction for an earlier generation, serve as merely ornamental accoutrements to the true work of culture manifest in the heroic couplet or neoclassical pile. To consider such objects seriously as cultural artifacts requires not only an acknowledgment that, in the lingo of material culture studies, "things matter," but that merely decorative things may command special attention by virtue of that very "mereness," that potent combination of ubiquity, transparency, and utter irrelevance that enables them to perform the work of culture under the leisured, luxurious pretence that there is no work to be done.

So how, in particular, do Chinese things matter? Lamb's essay opens up a number of rich veins through which the question might be usefully explored and promising alternatives to outmoded paradigms pursued. The memorable confession that begins the essay – "I have an almost feminine partiality for old china" – reminds us that the meaning and appeal of Chinese-styled porcelains had long been understood in gendered terms.[11] How did this slightly embarrassing "partiality" first come to be coded as distinctly "feminine," and how did its meanings function and evolve over the course of a century noted for its obsessive concern with reshaping the unsettling contours of female desire? As static and clichéd as the association between eighteenth-century women and their tea-wares may seem to us today, I will argue that for the contemporary imagination it proved an endlessly dynamic, versatile, and productive one that not only reflected changes in the representation of gender positions but also contributed to shaping them. The "feminine" and the "Chinese," I hope to show, were reciprocally constituting categories throughout much of the century, collectively evoking otherness and extravagance while dialectically combining the tantalizing allure of superficial beauty with the troubling specter of transgressive monstrosity.

A partiality for old china on the part of a man requires an apology not only for the inversion of gender norms that it implies, but also for its defiance of established hierarchies among the arts. "When I go to see any great house," Lamb continues, "I inquire for the china-closet, and next for the picture gallery."[12] The narrator defends his indefensible preference on the grounds of idiosyncratic personal taste. But as the remainder of his narration amply demonstrates, he might have defended it more convincingly on the grounds that the insignificance of the ephemeral "trifles" he finds in the china-closet is itself a merely ephemeral signification, reproducing a scale of aesthetic value that serves particular purposes within a culture. Among

these purposes is that of masking the role that mundane objects can play in constituting identities and other forms of meaning. In the following chapters, I will explore a number of ways in which the seemingly trifling objects of the china-closet can be seen to function alongside more privileged forms of expression (the Great Masters on the walls of the picture gallery, the canonical poets on the shelves) in both the formation and reformation of established structures of meaning and social practice. At the same time, I will suggest that the history of their trivialization casts light on the contemporary consolidation of hierarchies of gender, aesthetic value, and national identity.

A personal taste, Lamb's narrator goes on to explain, is often "of too ancient a date to admit of our remembering distinctly that it was an acquired one." The motif of memory and forgetting he introduces here will blossom into the extended reflection on the pleasing distortions of nostalgia and the ephemerality of dreams that occupies the bulk of the essay. Elia's comments on a set of blue and white tea-wares precipitate his companion's rhapsody on the simplicity of a youth yet unencumbered by wealth and unsullied by complacency. "I wish the good old times would come again," she begins, "when we were not so rich." After indulging her rambling laments, Elia gently reminds his cousin that those good old times are but dreams now, and calls her attention back to the image on his teacup: "And now do just look at that merry little Chinese waiter holding an umbrella, big enough for a bed-tester, over the head of that pretty, insipid, half Madonna-ish chit of a lady in that very blue summerhouse."[13]

There is a delightful irony in the circular structure of the essay, as Elia's effort to bring his cousin back from a fanciful, ungrounded reverie evoked by fanciful, ungrounded scenes painted on a piece of china requires engaging her with yet another, equally fanciful scene. At the same time, this structure begins to suggest an answer to the central question I raised earlier concerning the taming of the exotic, the process by which the visually alien is transformed into the familiar and quotidian. The process begins, Lamb's essay suggests, with a notable "partiality," an abiding fascination with the strangeness of the other that borders on infatuation. There follows an equal and opposite reaction of repudiation, of reaching wistfully back for the innocence of a taste yet unsullied by foreign luxury. The final moment of equilibrium achieves a synthesis of these two responses in the image of the domesticated other, the "merry little Chinese waiter" that marks the naturalization of the alien within a familiar framework and the re-ordering of strangeness under the sign of imperial ambition and cultural nationalism. The process captured so eloquently by Lamb reflects, as we will see, a pattern that repeats itself with striking regularity throughout the eighteenth

century in the work of prominent writers and artists who shared with Elia a partiality for things Chinese that proved every bit as unsettling and potentially transformative as Europe's broader encounter with China in the early modern period. The understanding of "Englishness" that emerged through this encounter is neither pure nor hybrid in any straightforward sense, but rather is constituted paradoxically through a simultaneous appropriation and denial of "Chineseness" and an instrumental amnesia with respect to some of the decidedly non-English origins of British aesthetic culture.

The paradoxical structure of this process of assimilation is one of several discordant pairings suggested by Lamb's essay and evoked as well, I hope, by the "monstrous beauty" of this introduction's title. Chinese objects and aesthetic ideas are, for Lamb – as for many of his eighteenth-century predecessors – at once alluring and repulsive, charming and grotesque, strange and strangely familiar. Depending on the circumstances, they evoke delight or contempt, and stand as emblems of either highly cultivated taste or the nadir of tastelessness. By turns utterly foreign and paradigmatically English, they live a double life in the imagination of the period, leaving a tangle of tracks and traces abundant in interpretive possibilities.

The structure of the rest of the book reflects this doubleness. The eight chapters explore the problems and thematics briefly outlined above from two distinct methodological vantage points. Four of the chapters offer detailed case studies of prominent eighteenth-century figures whose intense and yet deeply ambivalent relationships with China and the chinoiserie style suggest both the range of responses they provoked and the potential of an alien aesthetic to transform the expressive outlook of its host culture. As I have suggested, I am less interested here in the obvious ways in which the Chinese taste "influenced" those arts in England that self-consciously adopted the characteristic techniques or visual hallmarks of the style than in the more subtle means by which the very gesture of accommodation or repudiation may in itself have generated unexpected literary insights and repositionings.

The first of these case studies, on Sir William Chambers, argues that the architect's firsthand exposure to Chinese design as a young man both complicated his relationship to the neoclassical tradition he famously promulgated and infused his rather fantastical writings on Chinese gardening with an emancipatory aesthetic vision modeled on the psychological response to cultural alienation. The second offers a feminist reading of William Hogarth and his seemingly vexed response to Chinese exoticism, suggesting that Hogarth's outward repudiation of the Chinese taste as an emblem of aesthetic and moral depravity, in both his writings and his art,