Porcelain | Hidden Sinocentrism in Early Modern China

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Introduction

The Hapsburgs, one of the most famous royal dynasties in history, had a particular relationship with the art of the "other"; the Far East. In their Schloss Schönbrunn sit the Millionenzimmer and Porzellanzimmer. Both are rooms covered in art of the East, however, with a twist; the images are not original but rather are edited versions created by the royal family themselves. The Millionenzimmer's walls are covered in intricate frames filled with collaged Mughal album paintings, and the Porzellanzimmer is filled with chinoiserie prints, copied from circulating albums. These rooms were not only created to display the wealth and taste of the royal family, but also to flaunt their ability of rearranging the "exotic" and "fanciful" images into a correct European system of spatial organization and perspective. In other words, engaging in imperial self-formation and self-perfection by visually conquering the "the other" and creating a power distance.[1] The Hapsburg case is only one example of the rampant ethnocentrism present in Europe in the early modern period. History is filled with examples of physical and cultural colonization, such as the British, Spanish, and French invasions of the Americas. However, what is written about less, is the relative image that the East had of the West, for to them, *Europe* was the other. How do we know that the images that made their way from China, to fall into albums used for the Porzellanzimmer, were not already edited and "watered down" for a European audience? Is it not possible that the rampant Eurocentrism would have not been faced with equal Sinocentrism? It is this decolonized and decentralized perspective of art circulation that I wish to discuss in the following paper, specifically, through the research of one type of art: porcelain.

This paper will aim to explore chinoiserie in the context of the 17th & 18th c. Dutch imitation of Ming/Qing Chinese porcelain, also known as Delftware. As stated, the overarching theme is to portray that Sinocentrism rivaled Eurocentrism during the period; China saw the West as the "other" and did not occupy

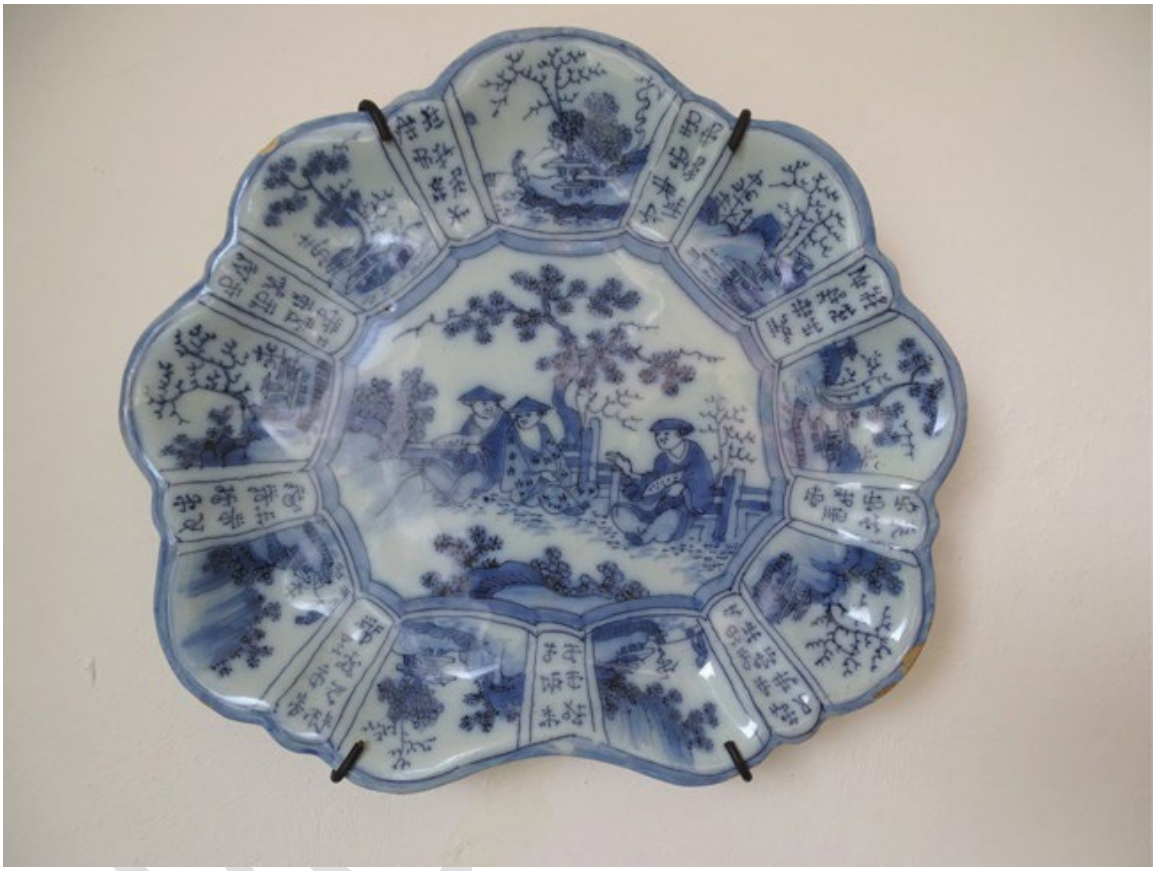
[1] Hyman, Aaron M, "The Habsburg Re-Making of the East at Schloss Schönbrunn, 'or Things Equally Absurd,'" *The Art Bulletin* 101, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 39–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2019.1602453.

a subordinate space described by European histories. This will be explored specifically through the study of Chinese export porcelain, as well as Delftware, whose decoration was substantially different from the Chinese originals, and for this reason, was devoid of its inherent visual importance native to Chinese culture. The images provided contrast Dutch still life paintings, including Delftware and export porcelain, against a Qing period vase depicting a popular romance story. Delftware, and to an extent export porcelain, became a simply exotic and aesthetic good, both because Europeans did not want to understand its deeper meaningfulness, and because China thought they *could* not understand.

The sections will first present some historical context: the porcelain industry within China (and with neighbours) concurrently with the growth of the VOC and the trade between them. It will then focus on the European appropriation of said porcelain, and finally focus on the content of the designs and everyday use of said porcelain and the discrepancy of its importance between the two cultures. Again, the aim is to show China as a rival power and not just a land to be exploited, since they were also exploiting the West.

Images

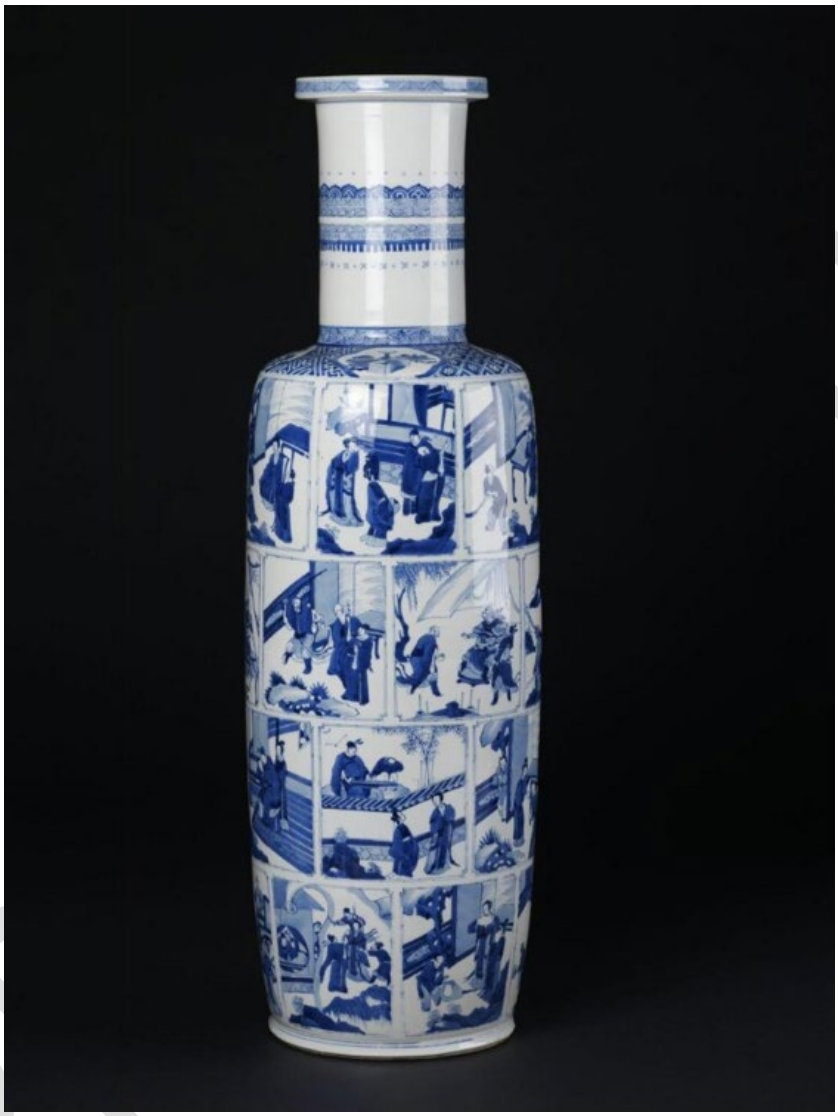
Figure 1: Lobed dish, tin-glazed earthenware with painted blue decorations and marked SVE 4, De Grieksche A Factory under Samuel van Eenhoorn, Delft, c.1680–1685, Height: 21 cm. Private collection, Bennekom.



Decorations contain a large image in the center and Chinese asymmetrical and naturalistic scenes that have been replicated and distributed over an even number of panels, with interspersed script.[2]

[2] Willemijn van Noord, "Between Script and Ornament: Delftware Decorated with Pseudo-Chinese Characters, 1680–1720," *Journal of Design History* 34, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 8, https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epaa049.

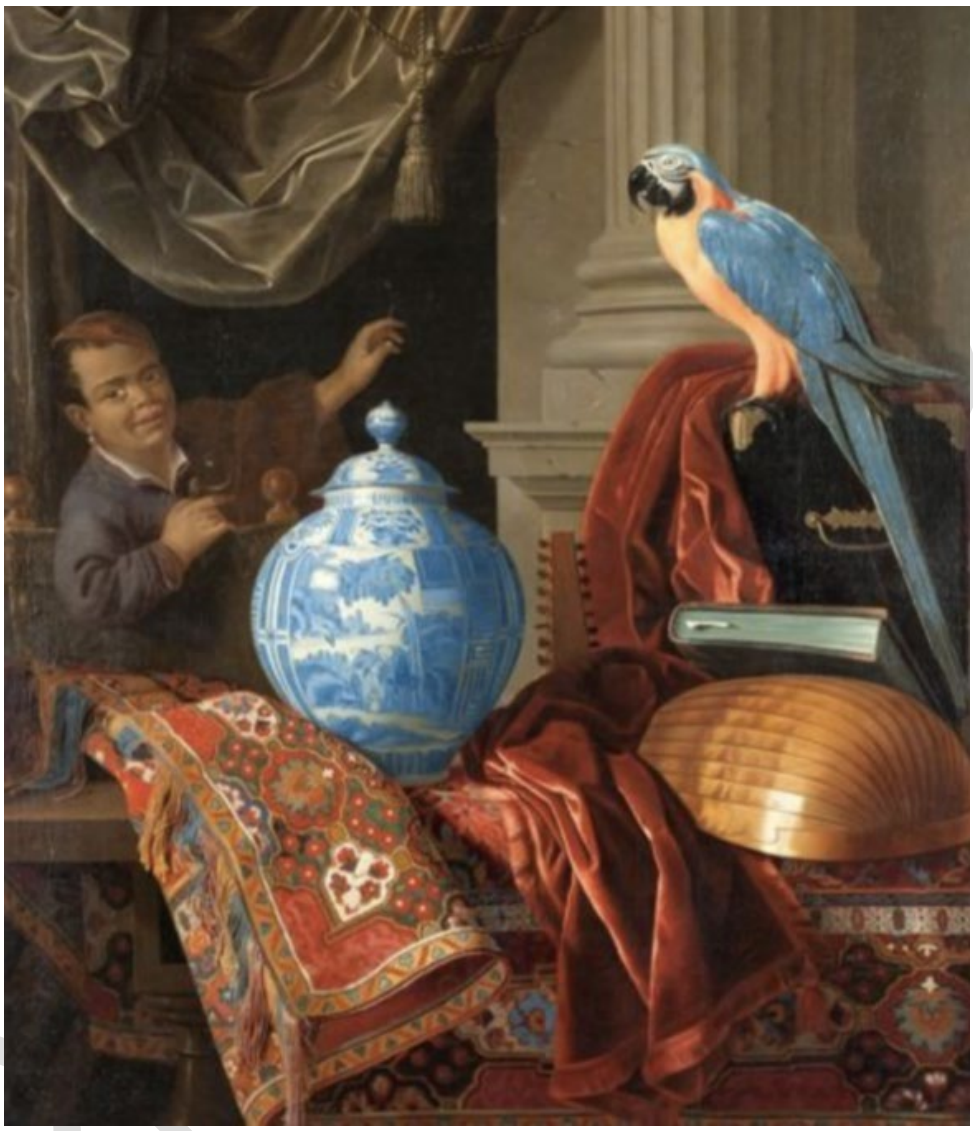
Figure 2: Vase, Unknown, Jingdezhen, c.1690-1700, Qing Dynasty, Height: 75cm, Diameter: 22.4cm.



"Vase made of porcelain, with cylindrical body and tall neck, painted with underglaze blue decoration. The body is entirely decorated with rectangular panels containing figurative scenes arranged in four large horizontal bands. The 24 scenes have been identified as being from The Story of the Western Chamber (Xixiang ji). Double-lined circle painted in underglaze blue on the base."[3]

[3] Victoria and Albert Museum, "Vase," accessed April 4, 2023, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O14496/vase-vase-unknown/

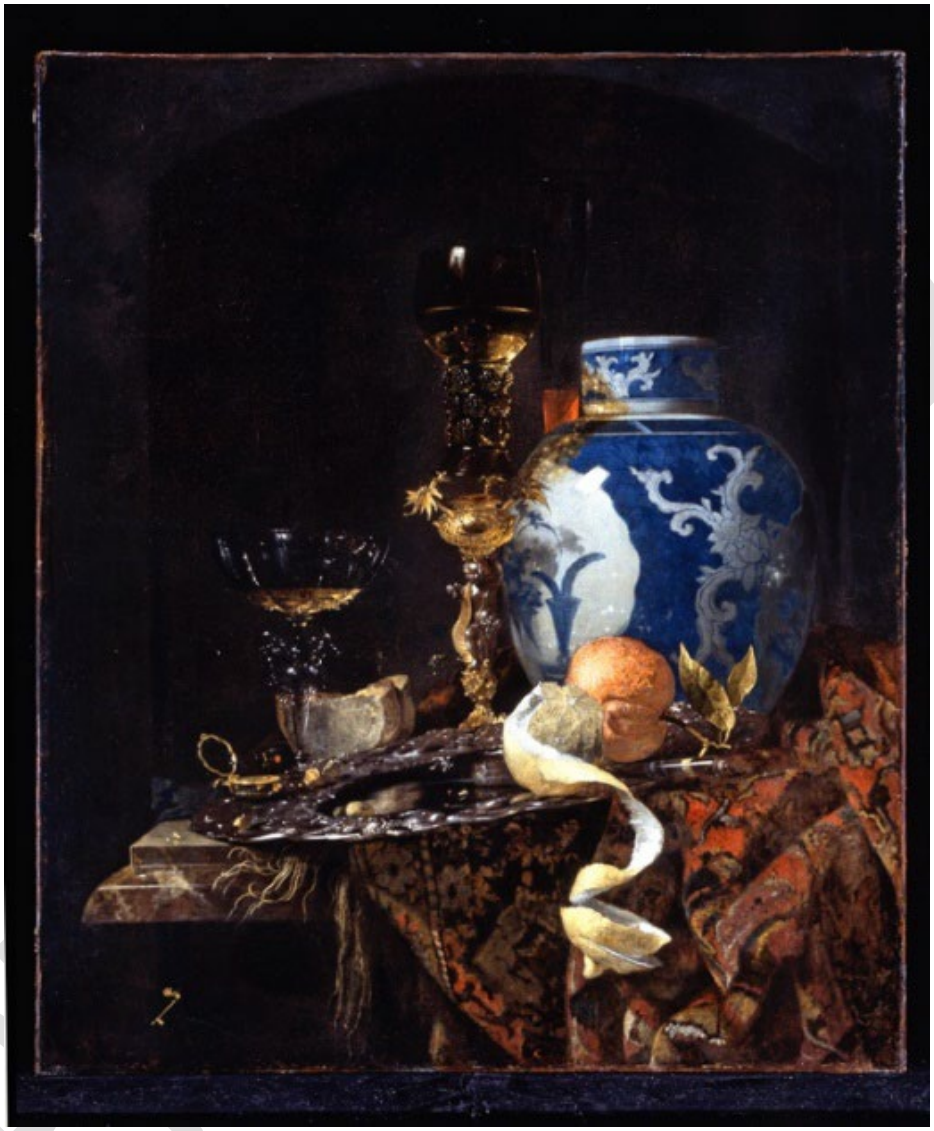
Figure 3: Still Life with a Delft Jar, Cornelis de Man (1621-1706), Delft.



The painting contains a Delft jar with chinoiserie, amongst other exotic objects such as the carpet and fabric draped across the table and parrot sitting on the chair. Work also depicts an unknown figure on the left of the frame, seemingly not of Dutch origin.[4]

[4] Aranson Delftware, "Delftware in Seventeenth-Century Paintings – Aronson Antiquairs of Amsterdam | Delftware | Made in Holland," accessed April 4, 2023, https://www.aronson.com/delftware-in-seventeenth-century-paintings/.

Figure 4: Still life with a Chinese Porcelain Jar, Willem Kalf, Amsterdam,1669, oil painting on canvas, 78.1 cm × 66 cm.



An array of precious objects is presented in the painting, including imported items such as the Qing vase, lemon (spiraled peel), and venetian glass. Local Dutch items include the silver tray, wine glass, and gilded mount.[5]

[5] "Still Life with a Chinese Porcelain Jar," Indianapolis Museum of Art Online Collection, accessed April 4, 2023, http://collection.imamuseum.org/artwork/57562/.

Historical Context & Clarifying Positions

Chinese Domestic

This section will explore the status of the economy in Ming China, before contact with the VOC. Specifically, I will be looking at the key drivers of growth and production that directly relate to porcelain production. The aim is to provide context about Chinese domestic porcelain production; how it was made *for* China and for surrounding neighbours.

First, let us briefly examine the history and role of pottery in China. Pottery has consistently been an integral part of material culture in China for thousands of years.[6] Changing technology allowed for more advanced firing techniques, glazing, and consistent results. Taste was a powerful factor and was related to class; who dictated what was in style and therefore what was in production (and who could access it). Those in positions of power and influence controlled the dictates of taste, namely, the Chinese elite (imperial family, court, and literati). Over time, as more of the lower classes were able to access these esteemed goods, the influencers of style came to change their views so as to maintain class distance. This socio-cultural phenomenon was also manifest in other empires around the world. This not only affected the population within China, but also its neighbouring countries.

A case in point was *Temmoku* (*Tenmoku*) ware. This type of glaze was made in Japan to mimic Chinese *Jian* ware *(Chien);* Chinese originals (exports) were also named *temmoku*, although the naming conventions are not important to the current discussion. The Chinese originals reached a height in popularity during the Song dynasty and were characterized by the uniqueness of their design.[7] Due to varying kiln conditions and casual method of preparation, finished pieces were in a range of colours and with different designs. The colours ranged from tan, to brown, to black, and some designs (which were named by connoisseurs) included "hare's fur", "partridge feather", and "oil spot".[8] Their initial popularity related to

[6] James Marshall Plumer, "Introduction," in *Temmoku: A Study of the Ware of Chien*, Idemitsu Art Gallery Series, No. 7 (Tokyo: Idemitsu Art Gallery, 1972), 1-6.
[7] "Jian Ware," Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed April 8, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/art/Jian-ware-Chinese-stoneware.
[8] James Marshall Plumer, "The Saggar and the Bowl," in *Temmoku: A Study of the Ware of Chien*, Idemitsu Art Gallery Series, No. 7 (Tokyo: Idemitsu Art Gallery, 1972), 45-68.

tea drinking and its ceremony, where powdered whisked tea contrasted well with the dark bowls and the thickness of the material allowed heat-retention and therefore slow meditative drinking. However, tastes changed and powdered tea was replaced by infused tea, partially due to the Hongwu Emperor himself preferring it[9]. The tea ceremony also left China and became more important in Japan. Because this new way of brewing produced clearer tea, connoisseurs started to prefer lighter coloured porcelain (such as blue and white or celadon), since it complemented the tea better. It was even said that, at the time, whenever tea was served at court, *chien* ware was never used.[10] Here we already see how the dissemination of style occurred from the top down, whereby the emperor dictated what was in good taste. This also created a distance between China and Japan in terms of who was more refined. This was an early seed of ethnocentrism.

In addition to taste influencing what pottery was used, there were also the aspects of religion and symbolism. While Japanese monks valued the philosophical randomness of the pottery's designs[11], under China's Confucian rule, this would have been against their values. Confucian principles are built around a static patriarchal structure where the family unit or collective is emphasized, *not* the individual. Such non-uniform pottery could not have had philosophical merit in the Ming dynasty, and served yet again as a tool of creating an inferior projection of those who used it; the Japanese.

Important to this discussion, as well, was the blue and white porcelain and the Jingdezhen kilns. The creation of these products relates to the previous section on changing tastes, as the rampant production of this porcelain from the Song to Ming dynasty eliminated other pottery even faster.[12] During the Song and Yuan dynasties, kilns were scattered around Fuliang county, and Jingdezhen mainly served as a control point for the government. It was during the Ming dynasty that production was concentrated in Jingdezhen,

[9] Steven D Owyoung, "Emperor Ming Taizu & The Abolition of Caked Tea," *Global Tea Hut Magazine*, no. 63 (April 2017): pp. 53-61, https://doi.org/https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0311/7288/6667/files/2017-04.pdf?v=1673555929.
[10] James Marshall Plumer, "The Chien Potters Bow Out," in *Temmoku: A Study of the Ware of Chien*, Idemitsu Art Gallery Series, No. 7 (Tokyo: Idemitsu Art Gallery, 1972), 83-88.
[11] Andrew Juniper, "The Tea Ceremony," in *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence* (Tuttle Publishing, 2011), pp. 31-46.
[12] Ibid.

which not only improved the quality of the porcelain, but also transformed the town into a highly industrialized centre for which it gained its renown. The main factors of its transformation were the following: most prominently, the designation of Jingdezhen as an Imperial Porcelain depot, where court orders reached more than 100,000 in 1571; its geographic position, which allowed for a good supply of raw materials; highly specialized labour; efficient transport; and a decentralized management structure. Due to the flexibility of manufacturing of the potteries, production facilities could manage various order sizes and requirements, which helped to set the stage for the export trade. [13]

Export Porcelain

In this section, I will be exploring the transition from domestic production to export of Chinese porcelain. While multiple countries participated in this trade, the focus will be on The Netherlands as it relates to the chosen image. The trading entity discussed is the VOC (Verenigde Oost Indische Compagnie), or the Dutch East India Company.

Founded in 1602, the VOC was created by a merger of various companies; the VOC was split into "chambers", all of which were delegated responsibilities based on their status in the organization. The chambers were represented by directors, who then elected a board which oversaw decisions. The company was given special sovereignty from the Crown to raise forces, build forts, and make political agreements; all these factors gave them a considerable amount of trading power.[14] At its height, the VOC had 40,000 employees from Europe and Asia, a fleet of over 100 vessels, and over 600 stations across its whole charter area. Not only did the company conduct trade from Asia to Amsterdam, but also within Asia, which allowed them to barter for goods with other Asian goods, rather than with Dutch resources;[15] Batavia (Indonesia) was their central seat of government in Asia.[16]

[13] Michael Dillon, "Jingdezhen As A Ming Industrial Center," in *Chinese Economic History up to 1949* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008), 283–90, https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9781905246526.i-676.78.
[14] C. J. A. Jörg, "The China Trade of the Dutch East India Company," in *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 15–34.
[15] Martine Gosselink, "The Dutch East India Company in Asia," in *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age*, ed. Karina Corrigan et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 21–31.
[16] C. J. A. Jörg, "The China Trade of the Dutch East India Company," in *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade.*

In terms of trade with China specifically, no direct trade was possible until later into the 17th century due to the policies of the Empire. Although the VOC first waged war with China to force trade, it was unsuccessful owing to the strength of the Chinese navy (which also ousted them from the island of Pehoe, which was to be used as a trade centre).[17] To briefly touch on this maritime prowess, it originated in the millennium-old Chinese tributary system. This was a China-centered trade network that included the east and southeast regions of Asia and was defined as "an application to foreign affairs of the Confucian doctrines by which Chinese rulers gained an ethical sanction for their exercise of political authority".[18] Although this system was both perfected and fell during the Ming dynasty, its impact still left China as an impenetrable trade centre.[19] This was yet another point of establishing China as an equal power to Europe, as it could deter physical colonization and actually 'police' the West. Negotiation was the only way forward, and Dutch envoys played a submissive role; in order to see the Emperor even briefly, they would have to travel long distances, wait many days, and offer tribute. Even with all of this, they were refused direct trade with China.[20] The way around this issue for the VOC was to form a colony on Formosa (Taiwan), an island not yet part of China at the time. Chinese junk mongers would sail to the island and trade would be conducted by proxy. Formosa rapidly developed, but the fall of the Ming dynasty created political issues and new agreements had to be made. Eventually, Formosa fell to the loyalist Coxinga group and the VOC sent multiple embassies to China to request free trade, all of which were denied. The key factors that turned the tables were both an improved political situation in China and the trade in tea. The English East India company had direct trade through Canton for tea. It was through the pervasive penetration of this market that the VOC established their own direct trade in Canton, which then opened the way for other goods.[21]

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[17] Ibid., C. J. A. Jörg.
[18] Geoffrey C. Gunn, "Geographic Imaginaries from the Chinese Tradition," in *Imagined Geographies: The Maritime Silk Roads in World History, 100-1800* (HK, CHINA: Hong Kong University Press, 2022), 86, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcmu/detail.action?docID=6841350.
[19] Ibid., 85-112.
[20] Martine Gosselink, "The Dutch East India Company in Asia," in *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age*, ed. Karina Corrigan et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 21–31.
[21] C. J. A. Jörg, "The China Trade of the Dutch East India Company," in *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 15–34.

Looking at the porcelain itself, I pursue my point of sinocentrism through examining the Dutch 'requirements' of their imports. The "Requirements for Return Shipments" were instructions on what type of porcelain should be bought, its decoration, and in what amounts.[22] In this way, the instructions were directly tied to Dutch (and European) tastes and therefore followed trend patterns. While I will explore the designs and their meaning in more detail later, it is important to mention some examples such as the use of the initials V, N, O, C, (United Dutch East India Company, in Dutch) on an order that would have been used for company employees or dinners, or an order requesting a decoration called "With the Pagoda" that was actually a chinoiserie applied by Chinese painters.[23] It may seem that the Dutch were dictating standards, but there was, in fact, a clear subversion taking place. As we can see with the pagoda design, the export porcelain was mainly aestheticized by the Europeans who had no knowledge of the importance of the decoration. In addition, not all porcelains were made the same, with some being extremely ornamented and others, more utilitarian (but whose sales supported the creation of the higher-grade porcelain) to accommodate different price points.[24] Here the Chinese were simply using the Dutch to make a profit, indulging their 'requirements', which amounted to an oversimplification of Chinese culture.

European Domestic

Porcelain was clearly an extremely coveted commodity, not just due to its exoticism, but also because it could not be replicated in Europe. Even with the copious amount of porcelain being imported by the Dutch, it remained costly and therefore imitation was a practical consideration. Attempts were made to create porcelain from local materials, or by importing Chinese materials. For example, in 1682 the French imported over one hundred tons of these materials from Rome (which likely got it from Egyptian traders). Both replication attempts were unsuccessful and produced only "hard" and "soft" paste porcelain. A breakthrough came only in 1718, when a Jesuit missionary in China befriended some potters, learned of the

[22] C. J. A. Jörg, "The Porcelain Trade of the Dutch East India Company," in *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 91-140.
[23] C. J. A. Jörg, "The Porcelain," in *Porcelain and the Dutch China Trade* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 148-161.
[24] Suzanne L. Marchand, "Reinventing the Recipe:," in *Porcelain : A History from the Heart of Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 8–59, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691201986-005.

processes to produce porcelain. and was given some specimens of material. He wrote of his findings, indicating two types of earth needed, *peitunze* and *kaolin. Peitunze* was a very fine and bright white paste, and *kaolin* was a mined material that gave the porcelain its firmness. Soon thereafter, the first porcelain factory opened in Meissen (Germany). Although the recipe remained a closely guarded secret, it eventually slipped out, and more producers opened in France and Germany, all competing for local sources of material. Eventually, the secret of producing fine China spread across Europe and then throughout the world.[25]

In the Netherlands, specifically, the imitation porcelain created was called Delftware and is the ceramic pictured in the painting under discussion. Since kaolin was not widely available, the Dutch used a tin glaze (an opaque white glaze) to replicate the original porcelain; the glaze came from the Middle East through Italy and Antwerp. Although there were many places that manufactured, Delft (from which the name derives), was the most well-known. The process of making Delftware involved first firing a clay that turned yellow, then submerging it in the glaze which turned it white after firing. However, the glaze did not fully fuse with the clay meaning that through regular use, the glaze could chip, revealing the yellow clay beneath.[26] There were two reasons the earthenware industry developed in Delft. First, were the advanced techniques in Delft that improved the quality of the earthenware to make it as close to porcelain as possible. Secondly, was a fortuitous economic environment; Delft was strategically positioned on the Schie river which not only contained clay materials, but connected Delft to major Dutch trading centers, and therefore international markets. In addition, the VOC had a branch in Delft that made Chinese porcelain accessible to the public. At the height of production, Delft contained 34 workshops that produced millions of products a year, however, Chinese porcelain became steadily cheaper and European competition eventually weakened the Dutch market share. [27]

[25] N. J. G. Pounds, "The Discovery of China Clay," *The Economic History Review* 1, no. 1 (1948): 20–33, https://doi.org/10.2307/2590001.
[26] Delfts Aardewerk, "What Is Delftware?," Dutch Delftware, accessed April 5, 2023, https://delftsaardewerk.nl/en/discover/what-is-delftware.
[27] Delfts Aardewerk, "How Did Delftware Develop?," Dutch Delftware, accessed April 5, 2023, https://delftsaardewerk.nl/en/discover/how-did-delftware-develop.

Function and Meaning

Utility and Decoration

Now having some historical background on the production and flow of porcelain between the Netherlands and China and their political-economic positions, we can turn to the representation of porcelain in terms of both its everyday functionality and visual meaning in art. In contrast to the more material power used in the previous sections to show Sinocentrism, the discussion here will focus on discrepancies in cultural importance. In other words, how did China use, decorate, and represent porcelain differently than the Dutch (and Europe), in a way that emphasized their cultural superiority.

Porcelain, as with any type of ceramic or earthenware, served a utilitarian purpose. In both China and the Netherlands, it was used as food storage or tableware, such as vessels for liquid, fruit bowls, or flower vases. The last two were functions in the Netherlands and are related to Dutch still life painting, which will be discussed later. We can also assume that Delftware, being a cheaper alternative, would have been used for the same purposes. However, in China, porcelain served wider functions such as roof tiles for religious/imperial architecture, burial goods, tribute goods, altar/ritual vessels, and calligraphy accessories. The largest consumer was the Ming court; a reason as to why records even exist. Imperial porcelain featured reign marks in addition to marks that denoted location or function such as "tearoom" or "meal room". Examining imperial tombs in further detail reveals several different porcelains, like blue and white plum vases, pear shaped bottles, and stem cups. Ordinary porcelains were also discovered, indicating that they may have had simple functional value separate from the highly embellished artifacts. In addition, the examination of tombs across the Ming period uncovers a consistent ceramic selection indicating a highly regulated imperial burial process.[28] The European elite use of porcelain is quite narrow compared to this, mostly being relegated to collections or displays. Several European courts have records of porcelain collections; one example includes Cosimo I (a doge of Venice), who had a collection of 400 pieces. In Italy, specifically, there was a sentiment of porcelain being desirable not because of any inherent value, but for

[28] Stacey Pierson, "Porcelain in Ming China," in *From Object to Concept : Global Consumption and the Transformation of Ming Porcelain* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 5–30.

its beauty. This sentiment can arguably be expanded to the rest of Europe, including the Netherlands, who engaged in chinoiserie. In general, in the period of direct trade between China and Europe, the three groups of porcelain types imported were pieces to be displayed, custom works, and standardized mass-produced pieces.[29]

Circling back to the Chinese porcelain that was used in China at court, one major characteristic was decoration. All imperial porcelain was decorated which assumes that undecorated porcelain was undesirable, and that the Chinese also saw the value of porcelain in its beauty.[30] This may seem like both cultures only saw value in porcelain due to its aesthetic, however, there was a major difference. Europeans enjoyed the beauty in that it was exotic and oriental, on the other hand, the Chinese recognized and understood where those designs came from, and their socio-political-cultural meaning. This is wherein the Sinocentrism lies; knowing that the porcelain being exported either has no cultural meaning or a meaning that would not be understood by a western audience, and producing it, anyway, to make a profit. This also fits neatly into the Confucian mindset at the time of a closed circuit, patriarchal system, that looks down upon those who do not follow its tenets.

To reinforce this point, I want to now compare the two ceramics in my selected images, the Qing vase and Delftware plate. The decoration on the Ming vase depicts a story called "The West Chamber". A paper by Craig Clunas describes this drama (in Chinese, *Xi Xiang Ji*) as one of the most well-known dramas in China during the early modern period and is referenced in literature as well as porcelain decoration. It follows the story of a poor scholar, Zhang, who has a secret romance with Cui Yinying, a relationship that her mother forbids. When her mother, Madame Zheng, learns of this, the scholar is sent to the capital, where he pursues literary success and finally returns to Cui to marry her. The play takes the form of a "miscellany"; a long ballad with instrumental accompaniment. On the vase, the story is shown in succeeding panels. Clunas also discusses how the chosen illustrations would be anticlimactic for a Western viewer. Chinese

[29] Stacey Pierson, "Ming Porcelain in the World," in *From Object to Concept : Global Consumption and the Transformation of Ming Porcelain* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 31-56.
[30] Stacey Pierson, "Porcelain in Ming China," in *From Object to Concept.*

literature is known for static climaxes, and in this story, it would be the scene where Zhang sits in the night playing his *qin,* and through his passionate playing, touches the heart of his lover, Cui. For a western audience, the climax would be the consummation of the affair, a scene that is rarely illustrated and was considered morally vulgar. In Chinese society, especially in the Ming/Qing dynasties, the story of the "West Chamber" saw constant censure as it was undesirable among polite/elite society. However, some parts of society did indulge in it, creating new forms of theatre to allow actresses to perform in the company of men.[31] The point here is that such a decoration, and the medium upon which it appeared, had deep and complicated cultural significance. "The West Chamber" story was widely recognized and not simply an aesthetic choice.

Comparing the vase to the Delftware plate, a striking cultural difference becomes apparent. The piece was made at the same time as Transitional porcelain in China; the transitional period between Ming and Qing. Imperial porcelain production had declined, and subject matter shifted to literati tastes; landscapes, and narrative scenes with accompanying text. The surplus of this domestic market was exported to Europe and served as another wave of inspiration. On the Delftware plate, the original design is cut up to serve a European symmetrical structure, with alternating images and text. In this way, the text no longer serves its original purpose but is turned into decoration. In addition, the Chinese characters sometimes had no meaning, either due to their poor imitation or because of the illustrations they were placed beside. These "pseudo-Chinese" characters occurred because the Dutch painters never attempted to closely replicate meaningful text.[32] It seems apparent that this kind of Delftware, and Delftware in general, was made for the sole purpose of aesthetic value. The Qing vase and original inspirations for the Delft piece had cultural relevance in Chinese society in addition to their artistic beauty. A Western audience could not and was not interested in understanding this relevance, placing it in an intellectually inferior position to China.

[31] Craig Clunas, "The West Chamber: A Literary Theme in Chinese Porcelain Decoration," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 46 (1981/1982): 69–86.
[32] Willemijn van Noord, "Between Script and Ornament: Delftware Decorated with Pseudo-Chinese Characters, 1680–1720," *Journal of Design History* 34, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epaa049.

Viewing Images and Art

The decoration and depiction of porcelain may not only be discussed at face value, but must also be situated in each society's structure of viewing images and creating art. For the Dutch, although porcelain was used frequently as a material good, it was used just as much for cultural production in still life paintings. Labeled "vanitas" painting, this form of genre painting is used in the paintings of William Kalf and Cornelis de Man that are under examination here. "Vanitas" painting also aimed to portray the tradition of "memento mori"; reminding of death and mortality through the symbolic value of objects depicted. This concept was widespread in 17th century Dutch art and was already being used in the baroque era to emphasize Christian teachings. The word "vanitas" in Latin means arrogance/vanity, directly invoking the Christian sin, and therefore the paintings warn against it. The objects themselves (skulls, empty glasses, flowers, valuables, etc.) had a moral content in that they represent the transience of life; beauty should be enjoyed modestly. However, a paradox occurs with the paintings when considering the wealth needed to purchase them and the ownership of the valuable objects portrayed. The richly decorated scenes show the wealth and tastes of the bourgeoisie, who would have also hung them in their homes. In this way, "vanitas" painting warns against what it represents but also represents what it condemns.[33] How this related to porcelain was that it fell under the same category as objects symbolizing "memento mori": the porcelain was seen as beautiful yet fragile and dainty, liable to be broken by the slightest breeze. At the same time, it was seen as an extreme luxury and its depiction indicated the wealth of its owner.

At the same time, in China, different theories of painting defined the late Ming/Early Qing dynasties. Due to political unrest, the Ming government had little interest in cultural control and so many different schools of thought emerged. For landscape painting, a northern vs southern Zen theory emerged, resulting in a vague style of painting. Figural and "birds and flowers" painting did not experience a polarizing change, but their artists were able to experiment more with style and even incorporated western

[33] Ozgenc Erdogdu, Neslihan. "Vanitas Images In 17th Dutch Painting Art." Ulakbilge Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi 6, no. 21 (2018): 143-159. https://doi.org/10.7816/ulakbilge-06-21-02.

styles into their work (e.g., linear perspective). In the transition to the Qing dynasty, no major changes took place and the traditions of previous dynasties held fast. However, some developments did take place, such as policies prohibiting innovative thought, which therefore suppressed all kinds of artists and literati. In this environment, the work of four major artists known as the "Four Wangs" was quite influential: it focused on brushwork (harkening back to Yuan dynasty masters), while achieving a "restrained expression of beauty". After political stabilization, the Qing dynasty entered its high period, and creativity flourished, supported by imperial patronage.[34]

A broader discussion of images and visuality in China is also needed, as it underlies both the painting theories mentioned and the materiality of porcelain. Painting had a privileged status in the Ming (and later Qing) period. It was informed by classical Chinese aesthetic theory which dictated that the manner of representing was more important than the thing represented: "likeness of the form" was not to be celebrated. The brushstrokes of the art were on display to emphasize the labour it took to create, which differed from Western oil painting that could conceal labour through layers.[35] The content of paintings, and images in general in China, operated through fluid "iconic circuits". These were visual tropes whose mere depiction alluded to greater theories and values, with multiple layers of referentiality. This was especially true of physical objects, like porcelain, which contained pictures *on* pictures. The circuits were fluid and were the mechanism by which images circulated, as opposed to the European mechanism of public vs private spaces. Concurrently, there was a decline in narrational visual culture occurring at the elite level. In addition, an abundance of images was circulated specifically through gift-giving; appropriate gifts (e.g., Scrolls) for a life event or time of year were presented in lacquer boxes, all of which symbolized the existing physical relationship between giver and receiver.[36]

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[34] Luc Tuymans et al., "Five Hundred Years of Chinese Painting," in *The Forbidden Empire: Visions of the World by Chinese and Flemish Masters* (Brussels: Bozar Books, 2007), 119–66.
[35] Craig Clunas, "Introduction," in *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*, Picturing History (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 9–24.
[36] Craig Clunas, "Positions of the Pictorial," in *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*, Picturing History (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 25-76.

To return to painting in Ming China, there existed a predisposition towards artisans as unnecessary members of society. This sentiment derived from 5-6th century Chinese thinkers, who classified the state between "roots" (*ben*) and "branches" (*mo*); The *ben* were farmers and officers who contributed to the critical operations of society, and *mo* were the artisans and merchants who leached off the farmers' labour. Ming China did revise its attitude in acknowledging the discoveries of artisans and merchants that did help farmers, and their main concern was with excess and consumption (which were rampant at the court level). This distinctive attitude gave rise to numerous sumptuary laws, most notably *Eight Discourses on the Art of Living* and *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, all of which acted as manuals of style and taste.[37] If we now compare this with the Dutch still life painting (*Memento Mori*) movement, it seems that both cultures had warnings against excess in their visual culture. Additionally, both had a paradoxical relationship in which the art depicting the visual warning was owned by elites who lived in excess. It may seem that both phenomena behave in the same way, but a key difference in the understanding of images comes to the surface. In China, the aversion to excess was embedded in cultural norms, and therefore in a porcelain object, while in Amsterdam, the warning had to be didactically detailed in images. A Chinese court official knew from simply the presence of certain objects that overconsumption was being signaled. A member of the Dutch elite, on the other hand, needed a narrative image to be hung and visible in order to understand it.

Intersection: Tea as Case Study

As a last look at the cultural power balance between the East and West, I would like to examine a ritual that sits at the intersection of object, utility, and high art: tea. As stated briefly in the section on export porcelain, the increasing consumption of tea in Europe allowed for direct trade to be established with China. China itself also has a long history of tea consumption and ceremony, which bears comparing to European consumption.

[37] Craig Clunas, "Anxieties About Things," in *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*, Paperback ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 141–65.

Beginning with China, the Ming period saw a strong link between tea and Buddhism which informed the cultural production of the literati. This meant that tea-related scenes were incorporated into paintings, songs, plays, and poetry. In addition, the physical wares that held tea, like porcelain, were given high aesthetic value and attention. As mentioned earlier, during this period powdered tea was replaced by infused or loose tea, creating a demand for high-quality grown leaves. From this, the practice of tea connoisseurship (or *qin*) was formed, which involved tasting, selection, grading, and evaluation of tea varieties. Ming connoisseurs wrote extensively about tea during the 16th-17th centuries and conflated the study with Buddhist monastic life. The consumption and preparation of tea evoked a solitary and reflective atmosphere and therefore a contemplative life that achieved transcendence.[38]

In Amsterdam, and Europe as a whole, porcelain and tea were first only available to the elite owing to their price. However, with the creation of Delftware and increasingly cheaper export porcelains, it spread and was used widely by the Dutch middle and working classes. After-death inventories, studied by McCants, show that several lower-income households and orphanage residents had owned some sort of teaware. Not only this, but that those individuals did not pawn these ceramics for money. Evidence shows that 72% of households had a porcelain object that was chipped or partly broken, but that was still retained.[39] All these facts point to utility and function being the primary purpose of porcelain for a vast majority of the Dutch population. As for the elite, we know that porcelain, even for tea, was only used to exhibit wealth and aesthetic/exotic taste. These functions are in complete opposition to the ones mentioned about China, linking ritual tea consumption to a higher moral attitude. Indirectly, this relationship between tea, its function, and materiality, once again created a disparity in perceived cultural intellect from the perspective of the Chinese.

[38] James A. Benn, "Religion and Culture in the Tea Economy of Late Imperial China," in *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), 172–97, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824853983.

[39] Anne E. C. McCants, "Porcelain for the Poor: The Material Culture of Tea and Coffee Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam," in *Early Modern Things*, ed. Paula Findlen, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2021), 388–411.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, the historical attitudes and behaviours of China towards its neighbours and foreign trade were discussed. It was shown that China was ethnocentric in its relationship with Japan through the status of *tenmoku* ware, and with Europe through Chinese controlled foreign trade and maritime space. The adherence to porcelain "requirements" and the understanding of decoration were also discussed as a subverted portrayal of intellectual superiority and economic exploitation. The example of tea highlighted the complexity of cultural understanding and its translation to Europe.

The question I wish to raise is whether these attitudes and behaviours still exist today. We know that owing to globalization and more open foreign trade policies China has become an economic and political superpower. The West condemns China as a communist and politically corrupt country, yet the manufacture of fashion items and other goods is heavily outsourced to China due to lower labour costs. In looking at the art world, The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2015 exhibition "China through the Looking Glass" explored the impact of Chinese aesthetics on Western fashion, which shows that China's cultural influence is still felt strongly in the modern world.

However, it is important to note that the historical attitudes and behaviours of China are not unique to the country. Many countries have a complex history of cultural identity and trade relationships with other nations. By understanding these histories, we can better appreciate cultural differences and work towards building more cooperative and respectful relationships between countries. As the world continues to become more interconnected, it is essential to approach these relationships with a nuanced understanding of the past and present in all spheres of human activity and productivity. It is also vital to acknowledge that these relationships are not static and will continue to evolve over time. Through cross-cultural exchange and scholarly discourse, we can provide more informed insights about occidentality and orientality, about art and societies, and the culture artifact as both contribution and commodity.

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