**Introduction: China and the British Romantic Imagination.**

*Peter J. Kitson\**

*School of Literature, Drama, and Creative Writing, University of East Anglia, UK.*

\*Email: P.Kitson@uea.ac.uk

The essays in this cluster engage with recent work on British cultural representations of, and exchanges with, Qing China, extending our existing but still provisional understanding of this complex and emerging area of study in new and interesting directions. Although Orientalism as a discursive field has extensively established in Romantic period critical writing for some time, studies of the cultural relationship between Britain and China are still relatively few. This is clearly a situation that is now rapidly changing. As evidence of this we note the 2013 NASSR supernumerary conference held at the University of Tokyo addressing *Romantic Connections* and featuring work on connections between European Romantic writers and Southeast Asia and vice versa. This cluster attempts to take forward this critical agenda. In the 1980s Romantic criticism experienced a famous “turn to history,” largely focused on British cultural responses to the French Revolution and the debate it created. With the increasing presence of the PRC on the global stage, imminently about to assume the status of the world’s largest economy, it might now be argued that in the second decade of the twenty-first century our critical focus might be attuned to China and Southeast Asia, and the crucial political and cultural events, among others, that will define this scholarly enquiry will be the first two British embassies to China (Macartney, 1793 and Amherst 1816), the end of the East India Company’s monopoly of the China trade in 1833, and the outbreak of hostilities leading to the first so-called “Opium War” of 1839-42, ushering in the period of China’s “century of humiliation” (*bǎinián guóchǐ*) from 1839-1949.

The essays in this clusterfurther the case that Qing China was an important, though highly problematic, referent in the literature and culture of what we know of as the British Romantic period, and that this crucial presence has not been sufficiently addressed. China, as Eric Hayot, David Porter, Chi-ming Yang, Eugenia Zurovski Jenkins, and Elizabeth Chang have reminded us was central to the making of modernity and the formation of the modern western self. A. O. Lovejoy, many years ago, put forward the then unusual thesis that one of the origins of Romanticism was located in a Chinese source, the preference for a form of wildness and irregularity in the eighteenth-century British landscape garden. Other scholars of British literature and culture in the long eighteenth century, such as Robert Markley and Ros Ballaster, have addressed such issues placing British cultural responses to China in the context of a dominant sinocentric global economy, up until around 1800. Such criticism has also demonstrated the sustained allure that Chinese commodities, tea, silk, porcelain, furniture, lacquerware, and Chinese designs in gardening and interior decoration held throughout the long eighteenth century. Yet this British desire for Chinese forms and products was always balanced by a strange ambivalence for what Porter has described as “an aesthetic monstrosity” underpinning this allure (3). The essays in this cluster argue that the Chinese contribution to the culture of the British Romantic period (and to European Romanticism more widely) was substantial and just as important as the later, more discussed, nineteenth-century influence of Chinese aesthetics on European Aestheticism and Modernism. We also argue that this was not simply a one-way process but an exchange of ideas and knowledge. Saree Makdisi has discussed the importance of the orientalist elements in English society in the nineteenth century and how a process of modernising Occidentalism or westernizing was deployed against them at home, before the orientalising project abroad could proceed. David Simpson has also discussed the importance of the “stranger syndrome” in Romantic period writing, analysing a range of discourses relating to xenophobia and cosmopolitanism. We seek to enlarge the purview of such exemplary criticism to take in China and its ambivalent contribution to the British domestic cultural sphere, focusing on Chinese flowers, Chinese visitors, the reception of Chinese subject in contemporary periodicals, and the role of other, others, such as Ireland in mediating Chinese subjects to Georgian Britain.

In the period, new perceptions and understandings of China deriving from the numerous accounts of the first two British embassies to China (Macartney and Amherst) and of East India Company personnel, missionaries, naturalists, and the odd independent traveller (Thomas Manning) were quickly mediated via a dynamic print and visual culture to a diverse range of poets, novelists, essayists, dramatists, and reviewers, including Jane Austen, S. T. Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey, Charles Lamb, Robert Southey, the Wordsworths, Sydney Owenson, John Wilson Croker, John Barrow, and others, and subsequently informed British understandings and imaginings of China on the eve of the first Opium War of 1839-42. References to China are everywhere in the writing of the period but have been overlooked, in the main, by earlier critics. Similarly, new English language translations appeared of Chinese literature, philosophy, and other subjects, which were reviewed, in the major periodicals.

We thus see ourselves as cognate with this larger project to restore Qing China both as a topos and a geographical place to its global presence in our understandings of the culture and literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and to speculate about the kind of cultural landscape this assertion presents and what difference it makes to our present understandings.

The first essay in this cluster, Elizabeth Chang’s “Chinese Flowers and the Idea of Cultivation in Early-Nineteenth Century British Word and Image,” reminds us that “culture” is a verb as well as a noun and proposes that we should consider flowers as fictions, to be read critically. It shifts the focus of our cultural enquiry to the domestic areas of gardening and horticulture, in ways cognate to the criticism of Makdisi and Simpson. Chang argues that we have been too preoccupied in recent years with traditional readings of chinoiserie or the “Chinese Taste” that see the style as simply unfashionable at the close of the eighteenth century. Chang shows how this narrative is not applicable to Chinese flowering plants, which were avidly sought in greater and greater numbers as the century progressed. Chang takes the example of the Chinese tree peony and looks at its cultivation and textual reproduction in the period. In so doing, she directs our attention away from the prevalent high culture discourse of the eighteenth-century landscape garden to consider discussion of individual plant specimens and the discursive and material contexts of which they were a part. The Chinese tree peony was a cultivated object but also a cultivated fiction deeply imbricated in the global flows of trade and knowledge between Qing China and Georgian Britain. It was “imaginatively experienced” alongside and part of the new British garden. Chang’s essay focuses on the life on the peony not just as a flowering plant, but also as an object reproduced verbally and visually by new printing technologies in a variety of forms, in petal, porcelain, print and fabric. Most importantly, the early nineteenth century saw the development of a periodical press devoted to horticulture. These pressures and forces led to an altered understanding of a cultivated nature that “was multimedia in form, global in scope, and destabilizing in effect,” uncoupling the native from the natural as the century progressed. In particular, Chang’s essay looks at the work of John Loudon, the century’s most important garden writer and the periodicals, the *Gardener’s Magazine*, the *Horticultural Register*, *The Botanical Magazine,* and *The Floricultural Cabinet*.

The concern with the wider understanding of China and matters Chinese as expressed not simply through the writings of the major literary writers of the period, but through the wider periodical press is the subject of William Christie’s essay. Christie shows that periodical coverage of works relating to the rest of the world was substantial at this time, pointing out that the role of the periodical in mediating current knowledge about the globe has been substantially overlooked. Like Chang, he looks at the broader understanding of China by surveying the representation of the Macartney embassy in a series of periodicals other than the *Quarterly* and *Edinburgh* that have so far dominated our critical purview. In some ways, we are gradually emerging from the shadow of John Barrow, comptroller of the Macartney embassy, second secretary of the Admiralty, and the period’s most respected British “China expert.” Barrow’s “corrosive” (as Christie describes it), view of China was promulgated in a series of extensive review essays for the *Quarterly* as well as his own, influential, *Travels in China* of 1804. Southey, Wordsworth, and, probably Coleridge, all read his work and he remained the most influential writer on China until John Francis Davis’s major synthesis of early nineteenth-century thinking on the empire, *The Chinese: A General Description* (1836). Christie concentrates on reviews of Sir George Staunton’s official *Authentic Account* of the embassy of 1797 and the spectrum of viewpoints it produced. Christie demonstrates the fluidity and ambivalence of periodical responses to China and the embassy and concludes that it would be wrong to assume that by the end of the eighteenth-century, the ideological debate was settled.

The third and fourth essays in this cluster view exchanges with China in the context of a long-standing discourse of civic rationality and cosmopolitan universalism. Robert Markley has demonstrated that the discourse of civility was frequently associated with China in the period and that sympathy and civility was used to “override linguistic and cultural differences” (“Ceremony, Civility, and Desire” 62). Nicola Lloyd when discussing the fascinating case of Ireland and China shows how this discourse continues into the nineteenth century. Lloyd’s essay is concerned with the relationship between China and Ireland in Sydney Owenson’s *Florence Macarthy* (1818). Whereas *The Missionary* (1811) has been extensively discussed in numerous accounts of Romantic Orientalism, the Chinese elements of *Florence Macarthy* have so far escaped analysis. Lloyd directs our attention to this interaction within the wider context of Enlightenment formations of sympathy, suggesting that Owenson’s depiction of China is closely linked to the aesthetic of sensibility and its implied model of an emergent cosmopolitanism based on cross-cultural sympathetic identification. In doing so, it positions the novel within a body of writing about China and Ireland that includes John Wilson Croker’s *An Intercepted Letter from J– T–, Esq. Writer at Canton* (1804), surprisingly exposing a number of shared concerns in the rival writings of Owenson and Croker. Reading discourses of Sino-Irish cultural exchange in terms of Enlightenment models of sympathy reveals how depictions of China were central components in the articulation and formation of British identity in the Romantic period, problematising established models of international cultural assimilation. In particular, Lloyd argues that the association of the land agent class (the Crawley family) with the Qing dynasty simultaneously parodies the contemporary political discourse of international sympathy and assimilation while at the same time stigmatizing the ascendancy class as an insidious other that threatens Irish culture from within.

My essay deals with the presence of Chinese visitors in London from the 1750s onwards. Its focus is on the discourses of hospitality, cosmopolitianism, gift-exchange, and the linguistic interaction involved in these important, but oddly seldom discussed, encounters between Britons and Chinese. The essay argues that we should cast our net more widely in evaluating the nature of such encounters with these “strangers” from the east. While the dominant and paradigmatic textual encounter with Southeast Asian people in the period remains the much discussed meeting (real or imagined) of Thomas De Quincey with his uncanny Malay at Grasmere, this is not, or should not be regarded as *the primal encounter* that informs later discussions, an *ur-text* that taps into the deep psychology of Romanticism in the lead up to the violent global realignments of the first Opium War. The encounters I discuss are varied and differently nuanced. The essay deals chiefly with a number of “elite” Chinese visitors to London, known in the period by the names (often with many variant spellings) Loum Kiqua, Chitqua, Whang at Tong, Yong Sam-Tak, Ahui, and an unnamed merchant. It describes the ways in which they were, for the most part, welcomed and even feted by late eighteenth-century polite society according to the rituals of rational civility and cosmopolitan open-ness. These cultural interactions involved not De Quincey’s gift exchange of opium and incomprehensibility, but linguistic exchange (China Coast pidgin and standard English), music, works of art, botanical, medical and scientific knowledge, and even poetry. Tensions were certainly also present, especially when missionary zeal became involved, yet on the whole and at an individual level xenophobia and mistrust was not yet the order of the day.

**References**

Chang, Elizabeth Hope. *Britain’s Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in*

*Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013. Print.

Hayot, Eric. *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain.*

Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.

Jenkins, Eugenia Zuroski. *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory*

*of Orientalism:* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

Keevak, Michael, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking.* Princeton:

Princeton UP. 2011. Print

Kitson, Peter J. *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange 1760- 1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Print.

Lovejoy, A. O. “The Chinese Origin of A Romanticism,” in *Essays in the History of*

*Ideas* New York: George Braziller, 1948: 99-135. Print.

Markley, Robert. *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600-1730*. Oxford:

Oxford UP, 2006. Print.

----------. "Civility, Ceremony, and Desire at Beijing: Sensibility and the

European Quest for 'Free Trade' with China in the Late Seventeenth

Century." *Sensibility, Sex, and Madness*. Ed. Anne Mellor and Maximilian

Novak. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2000. Print.

Makdisi, Saree. *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Print.

Porter, David *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge:

Cambridge UP, 2010. Print.

Simpson, David. *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013. Print.

Yang, Chi-ming. *Performing China, Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in*

*Eighteenth-century England 1660-1760.* Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2010. Print.