

Porcelain, The Willow Pattern, and *Chinoiserie*

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The Chinese began the development of porcelain towards the end of the Later Han dynasty (25-222CE), and it was perfected during the Tang (618-907 CE) and Song (960-1279 CE). Porcelain is a ceramic made of the fine clay *kaolin*. When mixed with other materials and fired at high temperatures, *kaolin* produces a hard and durable ceramic ware. The Chinese produced masterpieces of the ceramic art in both form and glaze, as well as luxury wares and lesser quality items for everyday use and for export. By the eighth century CE large-scale export began, with Chinese porcelain traded to Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, India, Africa, and the Middle East. The methods of porcelain production, and the exact formulae for its composition, colors, and glazes, were kept secret from foreigners. Porcelain was one of the principal exports of the Empire, and a major source of its wealth. Our continued use of the word “china” to describe porcelain and even pottery tableware is a legacy of this important commerce.

In the thirteenth century cobalt imported from Iran was used to decorate porcelain as an underglaze, which produced a rich blue design when fired. This product is known as blue and white porcelain, or simply blue and white. Within the porcelain trade, blue and white became the best known in Europe and America. Often, in the early years of the China trade, the most readily available images of China were the painted designs on blue and white export porcelain. People in Europe and America formed their impressions of the land and its people from the paintings and patterns on Chinese porcelain.

Of all the items connected with the China trade, the most familiar to the West was the Willow Pattern. This design, the most popular image of China, continues to be produced today. It is used on porcelain and pottery, and can even be seen on paper and plastic, so ubiquitous is its appeal. The Willow Pattern is an image produced by British engravers in the late eighteenth century and derived from Chinese models. It is at best an imitation or distillation, at worst a distortion of Chinese culture. That it was (and at times still is) perceived as quintessentially Chinese reveals much about Western perceptions and

misconceptions of the East. Through the Willow Pattern and the stories associated with or inspired by it, we can see the effects of this fantasy image of China upon the West and to a certain extent upon China itself.

Trade in blue and white porcelain was a major element of commerce with Europe. The establishment of the imperial pottery kilns at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province under the Ming dynasty in the Yongle reign (1360-1424 CE) further developed and standardized blue and white manufacture for export. The Portuguese in the sixteenth century were the main European carriers of this trade from the port granted them at Macao in 1557, while the Chinese traded directly with the Spanish in the Philippines. Porcelain was ideal for the long journey to Europe by sea. It was not damaged by exposure to water in the hold of ships, and therefore could be used as a base upon which to place more perishable items of cargo (especially silk and tea). An additional advantage was its weight, which could act as ballast (Haddad, p. 57; Copeland, p. 1). During the Jiajing reign (1522-1567 CE) European market demands led to more diversified decoration such as the inclusion of human figures and landscapes in the decoration on blue and white. (Reischauer and Fairbank, I: p.110, 178, 216,226; Blunden, p. 136; Mudge, p28; Macintosh, p. 172-3, 188; Tippett, p.6-19, 27-30)

The seventeenth century saw the addition of other European countries to the China trade, coupled with an enormous expansion of commerce in blue and white. It has been estimated that over three million pieces of Chinese blue and white porcelain were imported to Northern Europe in the seventeenth century. This led to changes in European tableware, and a demand for more diverse forms and decorations (Le Corbeiller, p. 5-6). The Dutch in particular began to copy blue and white porcelain on cheaper tin-glazed earthenware, in particular at the pottery center of Delft. None of the European wares, however, had the beauty and durability of true porcelain. Attempts to produce porcelain in Europe began as early as the seventeenth century in Florence, but the first successful large-scale European production did not develop until the eighteenth century. In c. 1710 at Meissen in the German state of Saxony true or hard-paste porcelain was produced, and by 1721 was marketed with blue and white decoration imitating that of the Chinese

porcelain. The manufacturing process had spread to Italy, Austria, France and England by the latter half of the eighteenth century (Tippett, p. 19-30, 37, 50-55; Le Corbeiller, p.17, 34; Godden, Caughley p. 114).

Coupled with this import of Chinese porcelain was a fascination by the Europeans with China itself, seen largely through the designs on its products. From the time of the establishment of the Portuguese trading post at Macao in 1557 to the imposition of open ports after the Opium War in 1842, direct European and American experience of China was limited due to the difficulty of travel. Due to restrictions on travel decreed by the Chinese Empire few even among the foreign traders had a detailed knowledge of the country beyond the approved ports of Macao and Canton. This did not stop, indeed possibly encouraged, a fascination with things Chinese (and to a certain extent Japanese and Indian, though the main focus was China) on the part of Europeans. This resulted in a style that was largely a fantasy of what was imagined as Chinese, which played to the popular imagination of the exotic and unknown. This style came to be known as *chinoiserie*, and the popularity of this form of decoration swept Europe in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

While there was little information available, and even when available little concern with the actual China and more with fantasy, the style of *chinoiserie* based itself upon artifacts and trade items brought from the east. The most common of these were the ceramics of the late Ming and early Qing dynasty—including the fine porcelain vessels admired by the wealthy, but especially the blue and white wares produced by the Chinese in great quantities (and of varying quality) for foreign trade. The European elite assembled enormous collections of porcelain items imported from China. The middle class made do with the lesser quality porcelain items, or in many cases cheaper quality pottery made in imitation of porcelain—both Chinese originals and European copies derived from them. These offered models for the *chinoiserie* style. Indeed, no home with pretensions of style, however humble, would be without blue and white pottery from China or at least an imitation of it. In the 1780s an English visitor to the United States

wrote “There is not a single person to be found, who does not drink it [tea] out of China cups and saucers” (Davis, p. 114 cited in Haddad p. 56).

Chinoiserie was not concerned with the real China, but a fantasy image of it. It was “an enthusiasm drawn more to Chinese décor and design than to philosophy and government” (Spence, p. 134). It could reach extremes both of admiration and banality. Augustus II the Strong, Elector of Saxony (1694-1733) and King of Poland (from 1697) had a collection of ten thousand pieces of Chinese porcelain (Le Corbeiller, p.17). In 1762 an elaborate pagoda was erected at Kew Gardens near London, and similar “Oriental” decorations appeared on the grounds of English estates, and throughout Europe. An extreme example of this style is the Brighton pavilion, built by George IV, at the time Prince-Regent of England. Its exterior was a fantastic imitation of Indian architecture, while the interior was largely *chinoiserie* (the two styles being seen as exotic and Oriental, without any concern about differentiating Indian from Chinese) (Mayor, p. 113-114). With a breathtaking unconcern for Chinese culture, to say nothing of African, a German noble, the Landgraf of Hesse-Cassel, had “an imitation working model of a Chinese village, staffed by negro milkmaids for the exotic effect”. A Polish king even proposed stenciling his white cows with blue and white patterns, an idea also espoused by an English gentleman (Bawden, p. 648-649).

If blue and white porcelain was admired by the Europeans, and in particular the English, it also was in competition with local wares. The Chinese were not particularly interested in European products, and as a result there was an enormous trade deficit in particular on the part of the British. One solution adopted by the British was the opium trade, and when this was outlawed by the Chinese government the illegal smuggling of opium. Ultimately the Opium War (1839-1842) would force China to accept British imports of opium and open its ports to trade. In the eighteenth century, however, the Chinese Empire was too strong and the British too involved in colonial wars and expansion to pursue this route. Economic competition with Chinese wares was the immediate solution, but one with varying results.

Almost from the beginning of large porcelain production in England in the mid-eighteenth century, British potters imitated Chinese blue and white ware and its designs. In the factory at Worcester known as the “Worcester Tonquin Manufacture”, founded in c. 1751, seventy percent of its total output was blue and white ware (Tippett, p.54). Although the market was flooded with British imitations, the competition from Chinese imports remained fierce. Even the invention of transfer printing, in which inked tissue taken from an engraved plate could be used to decorate quantities of china with detailed designs at a fraction of the labor and expense of hand-painting, did not entirely supersede the Chinese wares. Thanks to the Chinese factories’ division of labor in painting porcelain, and enormous production, the hand-painted Chinese ware usually undersold the imitations. When certain patterns proved popular in Europe, the Chinese imitated European designs, often themselves *chinoiserie* versions that imitated Chinese designs (Simpson, p.21; Godden, Caughley, p. 14-15; Haddad, p.58). Even the intricate transferware patterns were laboriously copied by hand by the Chinese, who believed they had been hand-painted and referred to them as *gui gong* (“devil’s work”) (Macintosh, p. 188). Only the imposition of high protective duties by the British, raised to 150% in 1790, led to the end of serious competition from Chinese wares (Macintosh, p.189).

The British *chinoiserie* decoration of blue and white led to the development of what is perhaps the best known china design, the Willow Pattern. There is still uncertainty as to its origins, but it is usually attributed to either Thomas Turner at the Caughley factory (a competitor of the Worcester factory) or Thomas Minton while employed as an apprentice engraver at Caughley in c. 1780-1790. The lack of patent protection of designs, the practice of potters lending engravings to each other, and the copying of designs from company to company makes exact attribution difficult. The Caughley factory is generally accepted as the origin of the Willow Pattern, which quickly spread to other factories (Simpson, p. 21; Copeland, p.1; Miller, p. 273; Haddad, p. 63). There are a number of prototypes and variations of the design, so many in fact that “Willow” has come to refer to a series of blue and white illustrations related to the Willow Pattern, to related transferware designs with names such as “Pagoda” and at times to any blue and white

decoration with a landscape (Rogers, p. 4; Copeland, p. 3; Tippet, p. 59; Watney, p. 119, 121; Godden, Caughley, plates 10,14-15, 20 101, 115, 195).

The major elements of the Willow Pattern can be described as follows: In a landscape imitating the Chinese style, there is a willow tree at the center of the composition. A large building is in the right foreground with an ornate roof, with a smaller building to the left and a variety of trees to the right. In the foreground is usually a zigzag fence. A bridge is located below the willow, over which three figures are walking towards a small pavilion: the first holds a staff, the second a long rectangular object usually identified as a box, and the third what is usually described as a whip. Above the bridge can be seen a boatman poling his vessel towards the right, while behind him is an island with one or two houses and sometimes other islands in the background. Often there are two doves flying at the center of the composition (Neale, p. 74; Haddad, p. 63). Variations can include a moored boat near the tree, a fuel carrier on the bridge, and other details (Mudge, p.162).

Whether this is a European composition is not in doubt, though it is difficult to decide to what extent this was derived from a Chinese original. Chinese plates already had landscape designs painted on them known as *shan sui* (“hills and streams”), which contained many of the elements of the Willow Pattern (boats, trees, birds, pagodas, houses, and pavilions). On the other hand, an exact model for the entire Willow Pattern has not yet been identified—probably because the British engravers took their design from a variety of Chinese sources, and possibly combined elements of their own transferware designs as well (Watney, p. 121, 137). Other suggestions have included Chinese prints of river scenes, depictions of immortals, and Chinese versions of Jesuit prints of Chinese scenes (Simpson, p. 21; Copeland, p.1; Miller, p.273; International Willow Collectors; Transferware Collectors Club Database; Macintosh, p. 172). Given the style of the design, I might also suggest that part of the inspiration may have been Chinese textiles (the treatment of mountains and clouds on a Song dynasty tapestry is similar to that on the Willow Pattern), or even lacquerware . These might also explain the flatness of the design (Hearn, p. 43 and p. 99 illustrates some of these). The Willow

Pattern is a combination of various Chinese design elements, interpreted by British engravers.

Chinese imitations of the British Willow Pattern on porcelain exported to Europe helped spread the idea that it was an ancient Chinese design. This in turn led to the creation of a “traditional Chinese” legend to accompany the Willow Pattern, a marketing tool that further increased its popularity and which appeared in its final form in 1849 but may go back to the eighteenth century (Macintosh, p. 189; O’Hara p. 423-4; Watney, p.121; Haddad, p. 64; Copeland, p. 1; Miller, p. 274). The legend is as follows, with indications of where the story is allegedly illustrated on the plate noted in parentheses: A powerful and rich mandarin lived in a sumptuous mansion (house at center of plate) and worked for the emperor as a customs officer. He had a hardworking bookkeeper named Chang, who did the drudgery while the mandarin took bribes from merchants (in another version, the mandarin fears exposure and has Chang prepare the books so that he will not be convicted of bribery, then dismisses Chang). Chang had already fallen in love with the mandarin’s daughter, Koong-See, who returned his love and met him among the orange-trees (trees near the mansion). The mandarin found out, and built a fence (fence in foreground of plate) to separate the lovers and a separate apartment (smaller house to left of central house on plate) to seclude his daughter. He betrothed her to a wealthy and elderly friend, Ta-Jin, who was a duke. The lovers arranged to meet and elope (in some versions via a message sent by Chang on a boat made from a coconut). They fled the house with a box of jewels (in some versions the mandarin’s, in others Koong-See’s or the duke’s) across a bridge, pursued by the mandarin (three figures on the bridge in the plate: Koong-see carrying a distaff as symbol of virginity, followed by Chang carrying the box of jewels, and finally the mandarin carrying a whip). In other versions of the story they fled with the duke’s jewels while the duke and mandarin were asleep after a feast. The lovers escaped by boat with the help of a fisherman to a distant island (boat and boatman, island with house in background of plate) where they settled down happily (in some versions they buy the island with the jewels). Duke Ta-Jin sent soldiers to attack the island who killed Chang (in another version, they fail to do this and the lovers flee to another island where Chang gains a reputation by writing a book about

gardening—which leads to his discovery by the soldiers). Koong-See set the house on fire and died in the flames (in some versions both lovers are killed when soldiers set fire to the house, and in some Willow Pattern plates flames are shown coming from the island house). The gods transformed the two lovers into immortal doves who remained united forever (birds at top center of Willow Pattern design) (O’Hara, p. 424; Neale, p. 74-75; Haddad, p.65).

The story is neither Chinese nor the origin of the Willow Pattern, but made up later in England. There are also shorter versions of the legend in rhyme, some learned by young children in Staffordshire where the porcelain factories were (Neale, p. 73). In the design, the Willow Pattern does not appear to indicate any great haste in the figures on the bridge, and it is just as likely that they are proceeding in a leisurely manner to a pavilion. The central figure’s “jewel box” could just as easily be a musical instrument, and the “whip” has also been described as a fishing line. Versions of the Willow Pattern also exist without the birds, or the fence, or the bridge—central elements of the story (and a few even omit the willow) (Rogers, p.4; Godden, Caughley, p.16-20, p. 158, Pl. 14, 15, 20,23,101,115,195; Macintosh, p. 172-3; Copeland, p. 1).

If not actually created as a marketing tool by the porcelain factories, the legend certainly functioned as one. The appeal of the legend sold Willow Pattern porcelain, while mass production of the porcelain increased the appeal of the legend (Watney, p.121; Mudge, p. 162; Copeland, p.1). The idea that the hero of the legend assisted the mandarin in defrauding the emperor is hardly a suitable moral lesson for Chinese children. Also, “no true Chinese maiden would have been so lacking in filial piety as to abandon her aged father” (Macintosh, p. 189). The legend is more appropriate for European Romance. Its popularity in America and England is in part due to its subversive nature: the humble bookkeeper loves the nobleman’s daughter, and the oppressed daughter defies both her father and a patriarchal society’s conventions (Haddad, p. 65-66). Haddad has proposed that part of the appeal of Chinese ceramics was that they offered women an escape from their household spheres through their imagination, enabling them “to accomplish something that women were barred from doing in real

life—participate in the manly spirit of international commerce and exploration...to enjoy an encounter with the largest of all Asian countries, China, without leaving the safe confines of their homes” (Haddad, p.53-54).

It has also been suggested that the Willow Pattern “legend” presents an image of China and its government in keeping with British (as well as European, American, and Japanese) economic and imperialist aims. In the 1849 version of the Willow Pattern “legend” the mandarin, an excise or customs officer, represents the corrupt officials that the British were forced to deal with at Canton. The Chinese legal code is seen as hopelessly “unyielding and rigid” (and thus a justification of British demands for extraterritoriality for its citizens and agents, which placed them above the ‘barbaric’ Chinese code in 1844). Finally, the transformation of the lovers predicts the victory of the West (perhaps the “daughter” of the East). The “free right to the little island” described in the 1849 version of the legend could refer to the grant of Hong Kong to the British in 1842 after the Opium War (O’Hara, p. 425-6).

The legend, then, is a British fabrication. More recently, there has been another attempt to give a “genuine” Chinese character to the Willow Pattern story. Since the story is offered without citation (and appears in no scholarly work on Willow Pattern porcelain that I am aware of) it is included here as an example of the continuing appeal of the story, as well as efforts to legitimize it as Chinese. Here the plates are seen as a pictorial and subversive defiance of the Qing dynasty by secret societies. The Shaolin monastery, burned by Qing troops, is memorialized as the slain monks sail to the islands of the immortals. The three figures on the bridge are three Buddhas waiting to escort them to the City of Willows or Buddhist Heaven, and the birds represent the souls of the monks. The Chinese originals of the design do not survive because the Willow Pattern plates were confiscated and destroyed by the Qing dynasty rulers. Problems with this theory, in addition to the lack of evidence to support it, are contained in its narration. It has been argued that the burning of the Shaolin temple itself is a fabricated story, part of the mythology surrounding the secret society T’ien-ti-hui (“Heaven and Earth Society”) (Suleski, p. 420). More importantly, if the plate was so subversive that the Qing emperors

sought to destroy all examples, why would they authorize its mass-production through copies of English versions of the design?

The appeal of the Willow Pattern is shown through its use by others, unconnected with the porcelain trade, to present an image of China that is as inaccurate as *chinoiserie*. The European idea of China as a land refusing to consider change or progress, as described by Adam Smith, or as part of an early and obsolete stage of history as suggested by Hegel (Spence, p.134) is at times expressed by other writers through the Willow Pattern. In George Meredith's novel *The Egoist* the character Sir Willoughby Patterne (his name an obvious allusion to the Willow Pattern) takes the part of both the mandarin and duke in the story, and as O'Hara has pointed out, in the novel "the oriental is associated with the primitive" (O'Hara p. 431-2; Mayo p. 71-78).

The Willow Pattern also was used as a symbol of Chinese civilization. In a 1914 review of a history of China, William Churchill wrote: "The willow pattern plate exhibits in its single disk the whole difference between Orient and Occident. To Chinese taste that design tells clearly and perfectly a simple and pleasing tale; to us the story is almost indecipherable because it lacks the particular quality of perspective which we have learned to expect and which we, quite forgetting that its acquisition is a matter of but the most recent centuries of our art life, have come to regard as an immutable datum [given] of nature" (Churchill, p. 61). Churchill mistakes a *chinoiserie* pattern for a typical example of the Oriental mind, which apparently is still at the pre-perspective age of art and thus goes against one of the recognized (at least by the West) principles of nature.

Ultimately, *chinoiserie* itself could be seen as something unnatural, effeminate, and dangerous. Goethe in 1827 remarked concerning the Chinese apartment of Mme. Pankoucke in Paris, "I think it is a pretty notion...But I cannot praise the man who fits out the rooms in which he lives with these strange old-fashioned objects. It is a sort of masquerade, which can, in the long run, do no good in any respect, but must, on the contrary, have an unfavourable influence on the man who adopts it" (Impey, p. 648). Princess Lieven, upon viewing the Prince Regent's Brighton Pavilion, wrote "I do not

believe that, since the days of Heliogabalus [a Roman Emperor used as a symbol of decadence and degeneracy], there has been such magnificence and such luxury. There is something effeminate about it which is disgusting. One spends the evening half-lying on cushions; the lights are dazzling; there are perfumes, music, liqueurs” (Mayor, p. 114).

When the aesthetes of the late nineteenth century collected old blue and white porcelain, they were satirized as ridiculous. In Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *Patience*, the caricatured aesthetic Bunthorne is an expert on blue and white pottery. In Burnand’s *A Tale of Old China*, a china dealer mistakes a blue willow teapot for a rare porcelain of “the Week Te [Weak Tea] period of the Song Dynasty” (O’Hara, p. 428-430). The focus on blue and white china was not only seen as amusing, it was also dangerous. Oscar Wilde, while a student at Oxford, reportedly remarked “We spend our days looking for the secret of life. Well, the secret of life is art...I find it harder and harder to live up to my blue china”. Dean Burgon, the Vicar of St. Mary’s in Oxford, attacked Wilde from the pulpit: “When a man says not in polished banter, but in earnestness, that he finds it difficult to live up to the level of his blue china, there has crept into these cloistered shades a form of heathenism which it is our bounden duty to fight against and to crush out, if possible” (Jullian, p. 37 quoted in Emerson, p. 108). He was attacking Wilde for his “heathenism”, but was he also referring to the “heathen” Chinese? Wilde, in part, was a victim of his taste for blue and white china, in that his remark was widely publicized and would come back to harm him later. When he sued the Marquess of Queensberry (who had accused him of posing as a sodomite) for libel some years later, Wilde’s testimony “I am in the habit of burning perfumes in my own rooms” shocked the jury as exotic and effeminate, just as the Brighton Pavilion had shocked Princess Lieven (Holland, p.126; Hyde, p. 124). Wilde’s association with his friend Alfred Taylor was part of the evidence used in Wilde’s trials for “gross indecency”, and the fact that Taylor kept a woman’s dress, “an Eastern costume”, in his rooms added to the evidence against Taylor and Wilde (Hyde, p. 205). It is doubly effeminate, presumably, to have a woman’s costume from the East in one’s apartment. Taylor explained that it was used for fancy dress parties, but like Goethe’s disapproval of *chinoiserie*’s “masquerade” the jury would have seen this as evidence of bad character (Hyde, p. 179).

The Willow Pattern was also used as an orientalist fantasy of a China that did not exist. Chinese pastoral landscapes and idealized images of China were used to advertise tea (Haddad p. 59), as well as appearing on the cups used to drink it. As the situation in China worsened from the time of the Opium war, advertisement and the idealized image parted ways with reality (Haddad, p. 74). European visitors who traveled to China often chose to ignore what contradicted this pastoral fantasy and instead sought its confirmation. Many visitors found this in Chinese formal gardens—which were artificial creations and not the natural landscape at all. One visitor to Canton in the 1860s wrote of the gardens at the Temple of Longevity “They reminded me forcibly of the old-fashioned...ware, known as the ‘willow pattern’ ” (Haddad, p. 72). Visitors would return and confirm to their compatriots that the Willow Pattern was indeed the true China. The real China had become subsumed into the china, as it were, and reduced to *chinoiserie*.

At the same time as these idyllic pastorales, the Willow Pattern was used for racist caricatures of the Chinese and their culture. An anonymous poem about the Willow Pattern, possibly nineteenth century or later, contains the lines

My Willow ware plate has a story,
Pictorial, painted in blue
From the land of tea and the tea plant
And the little brown man with a queue. (Haddad, p.77)

Here the “little brown man” is the Chinaman, there for exotic effect with no more cultural or ethnic accuracy than the Landgraf of Hesse-Cassel’s “negro milkmaids” in his false Chinese village (Bawden, p. 648-649). In 1851 at the Strand Theatre *The Mandarin’s Daughter, Or The Willow Pattern Plate* was produced as a Christmas extravaganza. The narrator, standing before a curtain adorned with the willow pattern, introduces the story. The play itself “burlesques Chinese culture and customs”, and the narrator is given the insulting name “Chim-Pan-See” [Chimpanzee] (O’Hara, p. 427).

In 1858 *Punch* published cartoons celebrating the occupation of Canton by the British and French. The first of these (see illustration) has the allegorical figures of Britannia and Marianne seated at a square table drinking tea from Willow Pattern cups, at a table

decorated with the Willow Pattern. A caricature of a mandarin recoils in fear, for the teapot Britannia is pouring from is in the shape of a cannon. The humiliation of China is reduced to a conversation over tea, while the destruction caused by the bombardment is just part of the background. The second cartoon directly parodies the Willow Pattern, with a caption viciously attacking the Chinese for “little pigeyes and large pigtail/ and their diet of rats, dogs, slugs, and snails” (O’Hara p. 427-8). Chinese ethnic identity, appearance, and diet are insulted (though “snails” would seem more familiar to the British through French cuisine). In the cartoon, a mandarin is represented with his impossibly long queue (the pigtail required of the Chinese by their Manchu overlords of the Qing dynasty) carried by a servant. Both have dark complexions similar to the “little brown man with a queue” of the anonymous poem (O’Hara, p. 428; Haddad, p. 77). Behind is a bridge with three figures, a willow tree, a boat on the water, and the two doves of the Willow Pattern. Here the Willow Pattern has become an accusation of barbarism and difference, and the background for a racist stereotype.

The fascination with the Willow Pattern continued beyond the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912. An Edison film portrayed scenes from the Willow Pattern, and in 1931 Walt Disney produced one of his animated “Silly Symphonies” entitled “The China Plate”. In the Disney cartoon, a Willow Plate comes alive as the viewer enters a fantasy world. Unfortunately the racism of the preceding century continues, as the emperor’s musicians play both their instruments and a stray cat for the ladies of the court—an insulting commentary on Chinese music (Internet Movie Database; Haddad, p. 76).

An interesting continuation of the Willow Pattern idea of China is found in John P. Marquand’s mystery *Mr. Moto is So Sorry*, published in 1938. The hero of the mystery, the American Calvin Gates, takes a train from China to Manchuria, and notes:

...the landscape itself had changed. The land had assumed a level, peaceful aspect...The country had begun to resemble the scenes on a blue-and- white china plate, which had been placed before him as a child. There were the same houses with the same sweeping curves to their eaves, the same willow trees drooping above them, the identical bridges across the streams. The same figures, half reassuring and half grotesque, bent over fields or plodded with poles on their shoulders. The oddest sights seemed to fit into a sort of decorous order, impervious to change, and life rose

robustly out of the earth in earthen houses and villages surrounded by high walls. Life sank back into earth again, to a past which was marked by the mounds of ancestral graves that dotted corners of nearly every field (Marquand, p. 222).

His companion, Miss Dillaway, remarks on its resemblance to a plate, at which Gates expresses his disappointment that his idea was not an original one. Miss Dillaway replies “There’s nothing original about any of it. . . .It’s been going on for two thousand years”. She complains that she misses smokestacks and factories, but when Gates asks if she saw these in Japan, she dismisses the Japanese: “All this is going to swallow them up in two or three hundred years. Maybe they realize it even now. They look like little boys playing soldier, don’t they?” (Marquand, p. 222)

Here, over a century after the Willow Pattern was introduced, we find the same attitudes concerning China: the unchanging landscape and civilization, the quaint yet odd figures, “half reassuring and half grotesque”, the idyllic landscape of china superimposed upon the real landscape of China. Calvin Gates, who according to the story is on his first visit to the real China, is reminded of his childhood and the porcelain with which he first encountered its imagined image. The porcelain fantasy dominates the landscape as he travels through the country, confirming his childhood image of the land. In this case, however, the pastorate is even more of a deception—the landscape is that of the Manchurian home of the Qing dynasty, but the Japanese have invaded and “restored” the last Qing emperor Puyi. The country may appear part of the old China, but it is in fact a puppet state ruled by Japan under a new name, Manchukuo.

Marquand’s description of the Willow Pattern landscape here not only imposes a *chinoiserie* image of China, but seems at first glance complicit with the Japanese occupation. The occupied countryside is as it had been under the Qing, unchanging and “peaceful” (which of course was not true in the latter days of the Qing dynasty). It is an occupied land, part of an as-yet-undeclared (the declaration would come in 1937) war between China and Japan. Gates has ignored the reality of invasion and fighting, and has retreated into a childhood fantasy of China. Dillaway’s remark goes beyond Adam Smith’s idea of a land refusing to progress, and dismisses Chinese civilization: “There’s

nothing original about any of it” even though “it’s been going on for two thousand years” (Marquand, p. 222).

In contradiction to this, Marquand also uses the Willow Pattern as a metaphor for the continuation of China even under foreign occupation. The Japanese, like so many other conquerors, will be swallowed up “in two or three hundred years”, their armies no more than “little boys playing soldier”. The Willow Pattern is not just a peaceful image on a round plate, like a formal garden seen through a moon door. The idealized and eternal land suggested by the plate will prove stronger than the invaders. Ironically, the *chinoiserie* Willow Pattern suggests to Marquand the essence of China and the strength of its civilization.

One final image of the Willow Pattern may introduce the end of old China. It appeared during World War II, which devastated and changed the country. In his cover for the *New Yorker* of November 14, 1942 the cartoonist Charles Addams parodies the Willow Pattern, but in a way that is different from the racist stereotype of the 1858 *Punch* cartoon. This issue was published just after a major Nationalist Chinese victory over the Japanese in Kiangsi province and the allied victory over Japan in the Solomon Islands. Here the Willow Pattern has soldiers on the bridge, a gunboat on the river and cannon along the fence. In place of the birds in the sky there is a dogfight between Chinese and Japanese warplanes. The Willow Pattern has been updated to represent the reality of war, which shatters the idyllic associations of the design (this is typical of Addams’ penchant for the darker side of the commonplace, as evident in his cartoons featuring “the Addams Family”). Nevertheless, he has chosen the *chinoiserie* Willow Pattern as the representation of China most recognizable to an American audience (O’Hara, p. 436). World War II would see the end of the Japanese attempt to dominate China, and the end of the “reign” of the puppet Emperor Puyi, whose ancestors ruled at the time of the creation of the Willow Pattern. It is here, at the start of a new China, that the Willow Pattern story should end. Nevertheless, its use as a symbol of the Western fantasies and misperceptions of China continues.

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