ENCOUNTERING CHINA
BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY

Ran Xu | Director of XuArtspace Group
Europe Encounters China

Encounters between Europe and China began long before Europe adopted its collective name and identity as Europeans. Luxury goods such as silk, ceramics, tea, jade reached markets in the Roman Empire and later, to wealthy states throughout Europe, engaging the great trade centers of Persia, Central Asia and South Asia along the way. Traders not only brought goods, but also technology, philosophy, religion, music, and many types of visual culture with them— allowing for a great blossoming of cosmopolitan exchange throughout the overland Silk Road.

But until the development of mass print culture in Europe, European encounters with China has been mostly limited to stories and crude illustrations, often fantastical, based on exaggerated tales of traders and the goods they brought. China, for most Christian Europeans, was a place of fantasy and luxury populated by a cultured but not quite civilized\(^1\) people. Europe for the Chinese of the time belonged to the vast areas of barbarian states but whose importance as trading partners and stabilizing force for nomadic populations along China’s borders, was recognized.

Marco Polo’s famous account of China is the first “best sellers” on China; it stoked European imagination and inspired voyages of exploration to reach this land of riches. Yet this Venetian’s 14th century account of his journey to China was only an early spark, the real blossoming of publications and illustrations about China did not occur until the 16\(^{th}\)-19\(^{th}\) century, when trade between the two regions flourished. Unlike the overland Silk Road, the impact of the maritime trade via newly discovered routes through Southeast Asia was fast and vast, touching more than just the elites. Merchants from East India companies brought porcelain, silk, spices, pearls, and lacquerware to sell at European markets. Tea, began as a luxury drink and became an essential drink of common Europeans. In this atmosphere, Chinese books, prints, and drawings describing the land and its people and their customs entered Europe. In turn, Western books, prints, and maps came to China as presents for the Chinese emperor. These Chinese and European works on paper were primary conduits for cultural transmissions and intercultural influences.

With trade came Christian missionaries who sought to find new souls to convert. Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci and Adam Schall von Bell were among the first people to spend decades in China, often at the Emperor’s court, learning Chinese and gaining deep knowledge of Chinese traditions, but also transmitting their knowledge of European science (such as cartography and mathematics) and arts (paintings and illustrations). In a time before photography, the illustrations that accompanied European books on China allowed the common man to see a world that they have only heard about before. Jesuit maps of China gave spatial form to an empire and brought new ways for both Europeans and Chinese to visualize themselves.

\(^1\) civilized as defined in the Christian European context- i.e. Christian.
Engraving’s Evolution as a Medium

The medium which Europe came to China and China came to know Europe was engraving, specifically copper and later, steel engravings. Wood engraving was the earliest form of mass print production and used in both China and Europe. However, wood did not allow for fine lines that create toned prints that mimic paintings; it also deteriorated quickly after few printings.

Copperplate engraving, and its related discipline etching, has its origins in goldsmithing, and involves pushing a wedge-shaped metal tool to gorge furrows in a copper plate. Etching similarly uses a sharp awl like tool to “scratch” out lines. The earliest engravings were produced in Germany in the 1430s but the first monumental engravings, rivaling painting in their ambition, were created in the 1470s—in Germany by Schongauer and in Italy by the Italian painter Andrea Mantegna. Albrecht Dürer, Schongauer and other masters elevated this “craft” into beautiful original works of art. They used many types of lines to create texture, shading and variations in their forms. The results are visually striking, clear images composed of long and short lines on white background.

In the 1600s, the medium took another leap in refinement through the invention of mezzotint or “half-tone” process. This process became useful for reproducing paintings, primarily because of its ability to capture subtle gradations of dark and light tones. It also allowed engravers to create images for print that rival the refinement and subtlety of paintings. As a result many artists also used the medium to create original works of art.

In 1792 American inventor Jacob Perkins invented steel engraving for the process of banknote printing. But it was not until 1820’s that steel replaced copper for many types of plate, partly because steel became mass produced during the industry revolution. Steel gives a much harder wearing plate that could be used for thousands of impressions, compared to a few hundred on cooper, before signs of wear appeared. Steel also allowed much finer detail to be engraved, which would quickly have worn on a copper plate. However, the task of engraving became much more difficult due to the change in metal, necessitating changes in methods and finer, harder, tools. From 1820s 1870s, steel engravings reach the pinnacle of its art and its rise is connected with demand for heavily illustrated books. These books, like the coffee-table books of today, were purchased by subscription by Europe’s increasingly wealthy middle class and often featured “picturesque” themes such as travel, historical events, and engraved versions of famous paintings. For instance, Finden's Ports and Harbours of Great Britain, which is a part of XuArtspace collections, is one of these. For their premium buyers, publishers would also hire professional water colorists to paint the engravings with color, giving these engravings a charming and beautiful glow, like miniature paintings.
XuArtspace collection
hand colored 19th Century steel engraving
Engraving’s Appeal in China

Europeans were not the only ones to be enamored with engravings, so were the Qing Emperors. Partly due to the popularity of books and engravings about China and its landscapes, Chinese gardens and architectural follies were fashionable in Europe. But the interest was not just from the European side. As missionaries at Imperial Chinese court showed Emperor Qianlong engravings of Western art and gardens (such as those at Versailles), he too commissioned European Pavilions at the Garden of Perfect Clarity, or Yuan Ming Yuan. Designed principally by Jesuit architects and engineers and built in Beijing between 1747 and 1783, the complex was intended for the emperor's pleasure and as a place to display his collections of European objects. A suite of 20 engravings of these European Pavilions, is the only contemporary source of that time that documents the appearance of the architecture and landscape remaining to us today.

The engravings are among the largest of all Qing printed works and the first copper-plate engravings to be produced in China by local artists. The prints are credited to Yi Lantai, a Manchu who received his training in methods of linear perspective from Jesuit court artists.

The Qing court, and KangXi and Qianlong Emperors in particular, were exceptional in their patronage of European artists; their reign saw the flowering of Sino-European art with missionary-artists Giuseppe Castiglione, Jean Denis Attiret, Giovanni Damasceno, and Ignatius Sichelbart living at court. Together they were instrumental in production of a new form of Sino-Western art, including some of the pavilions at Yuan Ming Yuan. In the same way engravings brought visions of China back to Europe, these images now bring visions of Europe to China.

When Emperor Qianlong admired European engravings of panoramic battle scenes that reproduced paintings by the German artist Georg Philipp Rugendas, he commissioned a similar series based on wall paintings of the battles, conquests, and ceremonies that marked his successful campaigns in the Western Region. These European court artists then drew reduced versions of the battle paintings in the Hall of Imperial Glory and sent them to Paris, where the best European printmakers made costly engravings. Pingding Zhunga'er Huibu desheng tu (Images of the victories over the Zunghars and the Muslim tribes) is
the first and most accomplished suite of 16 prints that celebrated notable Qing victories. These sets of engravings exemplify the unique beauty that comes from the fusion of Chinese and European artistic traditions.

**Thomas Allom’s Images of China**

By the time Thomas Allom (1804-1872) was commissioned to produce drawings for Reverend George Write’s book on China in the 19th century, he was already a part of a tradition of European artists across many mediums, from painters to ceramic makers to tapestry designers, who brought images of China to European society. The increased volume of trade in the 19th century as well as the growth of Western imperialism as a result meant greater European contact with China and more Chinese goods in the European market. At a time of great public interest in China London-based Fisher Sons & Co published *China, in a Series of Views, displaying the Scenery, Architecture and Social Habits of that Ancient Empire* in 1843. It was a lavish book which featured over 124 steel engravings by a number of master steel engravings based on Allom’s drawings of China and numerous other plates based on paintings from previous books on China such as *The Costume of China* published in 1805.

![Image of Thomas Allom's work](image-url)
XuArtspace collection
19th century steel engraving
Thomas Allom
At the time of commissioning, Allom was already a noted travel and topographical artist. His work in *China, in a Series of Views* presented the mid-19th century Western world with the most complete portrait of China and Chinese culture at that time. The engravings show architecture and scenic views, mainly of the South-East (Hong Kong, Canton, Macao, Nanjing, and Shanghai) but also include several images of Peking and Yehol and other cities. Allom’s skills as a travel artist was honed by his profession as an architect; he was one of the founders of the Royal Institute of British Architects, where he worked on various projects, including the Houses of Parliament, Highclere, and the Thames Embankment. But he was more than a draftsman, his images were painterly with careful balance of composition between nature, human, and architecture. Allom’s images of China ranged from landscape and architecture, such as “The Fortress of Terror, Donghai” to human-scaled, such as “Transplanting Rice” and “Ladies of Mandarin’s Family at Cards.” Together they depict Chinese society in the early 19th Century through both its grandeur and intimate society. For contemporary Chinese people, these images are indispensable window to China’s own past through the eyes of artists who are also historians, capturing China in a time before photography. These miniature engravings also highlighted a time when engraving was the medium which brought both China and the West close together and allowed both to create works of art inspired by the other.
XuArtspace collection
19th century steel engraving
Thomas Allom
XuArtspace collection
19th century steel engraving
Thomas Allom