



Figure 1: Plate showing Pilgrims to Cythera, China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Yongzheng period (1723–1735), ca. 1730 / 1735. Porcelain, onglaze colors, h. 2.8 cm, d. 22.6 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum, 1902,252.

Matthias Weiß

Cytherian China

Abstract Though, or since, this plate is a piece of export porcelain made in China, the model for its main motif is a widely distributed engraving by Paris-based artist Bernard Picart showing a pilgrimage to Cythera—the utopian island of love. Analyzing the object as a whole, the notions of travelling and seduction are not limited to this depiction. Still a proof of the European china craze and the efforts of Chinese manufacturers to fulfill that need, it rather evidences the complex interactions of economic interests, scientific inquiry, and artistic rivalry as well as the limitations of such mutual exchange processes.

Keywords Encre de Chine (schwarzlotmalerei), Europerie, Export porcelain (chine de commande), Famille rose (yangcai), Isle of Cythera

A visitor to the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin who is familiar with rococo styles and iconographies might easily identify this plate as a piece from the mid-eighteenth century, even though the depiction of some of the details may seem a bit odd. Framed by various round ornamental borders, the group in the center is reminiscent of the *galanteries* invented by Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721). Well known from paintings and their graphic reproductions, similar scenes appear on porcelain from the manufactures in Frankenthal and Meissen (Lübke 2013). The plate from Berlin, however, does not draw on Watteau. Its model is a drawing kept at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (see <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O892090/a-courtier-pouring-wine-for-drawing/>), or, more likely, a copperplate engraving in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum 2017; Weiß 2017, no. 48; Fig. 2). Conceived and executed by Bernard Picart (1673–1733) and first distributed in 1708 by the Paris-based publisher Gaspard Duchange (1662–1757), the motif became so popular that its transfer to porcelain was quite common, as examples from Germany illustrate (Ducret 1972, 96).

Following Picart's invention quite closely, three figures dominate the scene on the plate: a winged Amor holding up a torch and a male-female couple whom the boyish god guides to the island called Cythera—the mythical birthplace of Amor's mother, Venus, and presumably the isle seen in the background of this depiction. In the early eighteenth century, the departure to Cythera was understood as a search for a utopian place of love and requited love (Coward 2001; Dickhaut 2014), here visualized mainly by the intense exchange of gazes, but also by the cavalier offering a drink from a bottle gourd and the lady accepting it. Other elements remind us of the fact that the concept of Cytherian love originally meant prudent love, that is, a love balancing carnal and spiritual desires. The coats and the walking sticks indicate that the three travelers are pilgrims, while the torch raised by Amor and the church-like building on the island make it clear that their undertaking can only be accomplished in matrimony (Held 1985, 7–8, 61; Dickhaut 2014, 321). At the same time, while travelling from one medium to the other, the motif underwent minor but important changes: In Picart's drawing, the woman uses a scallop shell (like the ones on the hat and coats) as a drinking vessel, which confirms that she is taking part in a pilgrimage. In the engraving, the scallop shell is replaced with a vulva-shaped snail shell, which underscores the phallic appearance of the approaching bottle gourd and thus foregrounds the sexual aspects of the journey—anticipating the trivialization of the concept of Cytherian love as libertine seduction in the late eighteenth century and beyond (Dickhaut 2014, 325–326). On the plate, however, the cup is neither a snail nor a scallop shell, but an unidentifiable and therefore neutral container, which significantly reduces the sexual allusion.

When considering the object as a whole, we find that the notion of travelling—and seduction—is not limited to the depicted subject of two pilgrims about to embark to the utopian island of love. The familiar composition clearly originated in Europe, but the plate itself was molded and decorated



Figure 2: Bernard Picart: *Pelerins de l'Isle de Cithere*, 1708. Etching, h. 9.6 cm, b. 12.9 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-1921-273.

in China. Being one of an uncountable number of export pieces, it is evidence of the porcelain craze that first took hold in Europe in the seventeenth century. While desperately attempting to get behind the secrets of porcelain production, shiploads of the so-called 'white gold' were imported from China (and, to a certain extent, from Japan), making Chinese sellers and Dutch traders wealthy. In order to fulfil the wishes of their clients at home, European merchants provided the artists at Jingdezhen and other centers of porcelain production with books and prints (Howard and Ayers 1978, vol. I). These obviously included Duchange's reproduction of Picart's pilgrimage.

As it happened, the situation began to change the same year Picart's print was published. In 1708, Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682–1719) and Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708) finally succeeded in producing hard porcelain in a European laboratory. Just two years later, Augustus II the Strong (1670–1733), the Saxon Elector and King of Poland, founded the first European manufacture in Meissen that, starting around 1720, was followed by numerous other production sites, including in Vienna (1718), Stockholm (1726), and Doccia near Florence (1735). In other words, when the plate with the image of pilgrims to Cythera left a Chinese kiln between 1730 and 1735 (or possibly about ten years later), the production of porcelain was no longer an Asian arcanum. Nevertheless, the import of porcelain from China continued to play a vital role, as the output of the European workshops was not sufficient to satisfy market demands and artists in Europe looked for models to copy or, indeed, outdo. Because

the Chinese had the advantage of a tradition of more than a thousand years, the objective of surpassing the quantity and quality of their production was not easy to achieve. Though a piece of mass production, the plate showing pilgrims to Cythera illustrates this: The porcelain is thin enough to let light through; the color palette is elegantly confined to black, gold, and various shades of iron red; and the paint is applied as gently as possible—features which evoke a sense of rococo-ish lightness and playfulness.

At the same time, though, the subtlety of the painted scene in terms of sexual allusions may be attributable to the fact that the Chinese artist did not appreciate the subject in all its dimensions. What is much more noteworthy is that the artist, intentionally or not, combined his European model with Chinese elements such as the boats, the roof of the church-like building, and, most of all, the delicately dabbed-on leaves of the trees. This creates a 'Chinese' setting of sorts for the scene as a whole, suggesting that the utopian island of Cythera is now no longer found in the Mediterranean but much further east, in China. On the production side, such a subversion of the subject by translocating it is unlikely to have been deliberate. As mentioned, pieces such as the plate showing pilgrims to Cythera were mass produced for the delectation of European clients, and the painter most likely did not care about the spiritual or physical nuances of the concept of the Cytherian love. In this sense, there is good reason to classify the work as an *europerie* (► **Europerie**), a neologism coined by Bruno Kisch in 1937 to describe—primarily but not exclusively—the adaptation of European styles and motifs in Chinese porcelain production intended for sale overseas. In terms of reception, however, the combination of a well-known European topic with a Chinese setting may have resulted in a conflation of the two. And this may, indeed, have been quite meaningful to customers in the West, if we keep in mind that Voltaire (1694–1778) and others idealized the so-called Middle Kingdom as a utopian place where all the shortcomings of their own societies had long been overcome.

From an even larger transcultural perspective, a plate such as the one showing pilgrims to Cythera reveals the mutuality and complexity of exchange processes, especially during the period when both the Europeans and the Chinese frequently appropriated and re-appropriated motifs as well as techniques from one another. This is especially evident in the use of ornaments and color: As we learn from a January 1722 letter written by the Jingdezhen-based Jesuit François Xavier d'Entrecolles (Yin Hongxu, 1664–1741), the Chinese were unsuccessfully experimenting with black painted decoration (d'Entrecolles 1843, 316). Around the same time, a technique of black-enamel painting called *schwarzlotmalerei* was developed in Europe, that German *hausmaler* preferably used on white wares imported from China rather than on porcelain from the newly established factory in Meissen. Presumably, those hybrids (► **Hybridity**) were sent back to Guangzhou in order to be copied by Chinese painters, although the technique was perfected—and adopted for *chine de commande*—only later as a direct result of the Viennese du Paquier period (1719–1744). Yet another

feature of the du Paquier manufacture was the decorative border of *laub- und bandelwerk*, which was based on two series of engravings by Paul Decker (1677–1713). Continually modified and varied, its main elements were strapwork, palmettes, trelliswork cartouches or foliate scrolls (Le Corbeiller 1974, 68). In the case of the plate from the Kunstgewerbemuseum, the strapwork is supplemented by little cornucopias and a golden shepherd border.

Looking not just at *encre de chine* pieces (see Howard and Ayers 1978, vol. II, no. 354; Goldsmith Phillips 1956, 137) but also at polychrome examples showing the same Cytherian arrangement (see Beurdeley 1962, no. 122; Howard and Ayers 1978, vol. II, no. 353; Jörg 1989, no. 80; Litzenburg 2003, no. 155), a similar argument may be made. Today, the correct name for this type of decoration is *famille rose*, a term that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century (Jacquemart and Le Blant 1862, 77–78) to distinguish a color palette dominated by different shades of pink, white, and yellow from an earlier one (the so-called green family or *famille verte*). Used from around 1720 on, the Chinese called this new palette *yangcai*, meaning “foreign colors”, most likely in reference to the fact that the craftsmen at the Imperial kilns developed the recipes for their new tints in collaboration with Jesuit missionaries (Kerr 2000). Taking all this into account, europeries like the polychrome and *encre de chine* plates showing pilgrims to Cythera cannot be dismissed as merely copying figural motifs and lavish ornaments, but also need to be understood as sharing technical expertise such as the invention and application of new painting techniques—which had tremendous impact on Chinese taste as well. Therefore, the history of (export) porcelain should be written as a multi-layered history or as entangled histories (►**Entangled Histories**) linked primarily by economic interests. Nonetheless, the history of the elaborately decorated plate from the Kunstgewerbemuseum Berlin and all related pieces in other collections throughout Europe and the United States is not just about selling tableware, but also about scientific inquiry, artistic rivalry, and a utopian idea of love, with the latter at the same time showing the limits of such mutual exchange processes.

Figures

Fig. 1: © SMB, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Dietmar Katz.

Fig. 2: © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

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