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Henri Bertin and the Representation of China in Eighteenth-Century France. By John FINLAY. x + 178 pages. Routledge Research in Art History, Vol. 7. New York and London: Routledge, 2020. ISBN 978-1-138-2047-3 (hardback), 978-1-315-46736-8 (paperback)

Coined after Voltaire's famous expression "commerce des pensées", praising a free exchange of ideas in the public sphere, the author of this book, John Finlay, characterizes the efforts of Henri Léonard Jean Baptiste Bertin (1718–1793), a key figure in the exchange between China and France in the late 18th century, as an attempt to enhance a "commerce in images" between China and Europe.[1] (p. 3) Bertin, one of the five ministers of state under King Louis XV (r. 1715–1773) who remained minister at the beginning of the reign of the latter's grandson, Louis XVI (r. 1774–1792), maintained the communication with the Jesuits in Beijing and provided the royal library in Paris with works and albums on things Chinese. Furthermore, he was part of a large network of likeminded individuals who were highly interested in acquiring books, ceramics, silks, and many other objects from China for their private collections. (p. 4)

Following a chronological sequence of important events in Bertin's life, which is, as the reader is informed, "as well a thematic path", Finlay has divided his study into four chapters.

The first chapter, entitled "Ko and Yang and the Mission Française", focuses on two Chinese Jesuits – Alois Ko and Étienne Yang – whom the Beijing Jesuits had sent to Paris to be ordained there as Catholic priests, but who, as a consequence of the abolishment of the Jesuit order during their stay in Paris, contacted Bertin, who was also director of the French East India Company, in the hope that he might help them in financing their return ticket. He came up with the idea of training them in European arts and crafts and then sending them back to China as his correspondents. Anne Robert Jacques Turgot (1727–1781), a disciple of the physiocrat François Quesnay (1894–1774), met the two Chinese men when they were spending some time at Quesnay's school and prepared 52 questions about the Chinese government and economic structure for them to take back with them to China.[2] (p. 15–19)

1 The phrase "commerce in images" is also used in the title of a separate article, see Finlay 2015.

2 See *Oeuvres de Mr. Turgot, Ministre d'Etat précédées et accompagnées de mémoires et de notes sur sa vie, son administration et ses ouvrage*s (Paris: L'imprimerie de Delance, 1808), vol. 5, 140–165.

The second chapter, "The Landscape of Fact and Fantasy", concentrates for the most part on the rich materials that Bertin received from the Jesuit missionaries about the Yuanming yuan, the palace in the vicinity of Beijing (later called "Old Summer Palace" after its demolition by European troops in 1860) that the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1795) had ordered to be constructed with the assistance of Jesuits (including Jean Denis Attiret, 1702–1768, and Michel Benoist, 1815–1774) after he had seen pictures of the royal park in Versailles. This palace with all its architectural elements that represented a hybrid European-Chinese style seems to have aroused the interest of the French king one generation later, who thought this palace appeared "Chinois".

In the third chapter, "Constructing an Authentic China", Finlay traces how Bertin provided the court, his circle of connoisseurs and also himself with texts and illustrations of elements of garden and house architecture that reflected contemporary Chinese tastes, in contrast to the more fantasy-based Chinoiserie that was at that time still en vogue in Europe. He hoped to receive the necessary information on this subject, primarily via the medium of images provided by missionaries in Beijing who continued to communicate with Bertin as his personal correspondants after the abolition of the Jesuit order by the pope in 1773.

The last chapter, "The Confucian Scholar of Enlightenment France", finally demonstrates how Bertin, after retiring from his official position at court, used all the materials available to him in order to realize his private "China dream" in Chatou, a place near Paris where he had a palace built in a style that he considered to be "authentically" Chinese. Finlay convincingly shows how Bertin maintained close contact with Pater Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–1793) and other Jesuits who still lived in Beijing, who did their best to answer all the questions posed by Bertin and to send him all the elements a Confucian scholar-gentleman needed in his studio. Unfortunately, in 1789, before all these plans could be put into practice, the French revolution broke out, and when he emigrated in 1791, Bertin had to leave all his belongings behind.

At the very beginning of the introduction, Finlay mentions an anecdote that sheds light on the initial motivation that led Bertin to engage so intensely in this exchange between France and China. It was an anecdote told by Friedrich Melchior Grimm (1723–1807) and Denis Diderot (1713–1784), both of whom were contributors to the famous *Encyclopédie*. According to them, Louis XV had the impression that things were not running so smoothly in France and asked his minister Bertin how one might reform the spirit of the nation. Bertin is reported to have answered that the solution would be to "inoculate the French with the Chinese spirit."[3] (p. 1) But what exactly did Bertin do in the time following this exchange by way of putting his proposal into practice and "inoculating" the French with the "esprit chinois"? Finlay's laconic information on this is

3 See Taschereau 1830, vol. 12, 493 (Nov. 1785): "Sire, c'est d'inoculer aux Français l'esprit chinois." See also Bernard-Maitre 1948, 449.

> In seeking to learn all that he could about China, he [i. e. Bertin] truly sought to improve France based on Chinese models. (p. 1)

But what precisely did Bertin manage to do to "improve France", as Finlay puts it? Was there, for example, a flow of information from the two Chinese Jesuits, Ko and Yang, back to Paris, to the school of the physiocrats, especially to Turgot with his 52 questions on agriculture and economy in China, that it was hoped would enlighten the royal house or the French public?

We will postpone this question until later in this review and instead follow the path paved by Finlay, who indeed presents to the reader a whole kaleidoscope of Bertin's endeavors in collecting all kinds of materials on things Chinese, which led to the publication of a huge work, the *Memoires concernant les Chinois, les Sciences, les Arts, les Moeurs, les Usages, &c. des Chinois, par les Missionnaires de Pe-Kin*. As for the places where all these assembled materials were housed, Finlay says this was first and foremost the royal library, and second his own private collection. Moreover, Finlay very convincingly shows that much of the information contained in the materials sent by the Jesuits from Beijing that was meant to illustrate what the authentic China really looked like was used by Bertin in pursuing his own ends, namely to have a house in "authentic" Chinese style and to have a studio built on the basis of these materials on his private grounds in Chatou. In Finlay's words

> His [i. e. Bertin's] plans for Chatou, which would include a Cabinet chinois for his Chinese collections, were ostensibly in contradiction to the prevailing European taste for Chinoiserie garden follies – decorative structures in a fanciful "oriental style" – and his vision for what he would build was informed by a knowledge of the historical figure of Confucius and certain crucial Confucian texts. What he planned to build at Chatou manifested in many ways a selfstyling as a Confucian scholar in Enlightenment France. (p. 107)

It is indeed impressive to read about all these materials in Finlay's account, especially the images relating to texts that Bertin had received from the Jesuits: the "Forty Views of the Yuanming yuan", the "Gengzhi tu" (On Ploughing and Weaving), the "Life of Confucius", "The Facts about Emperors", the many sketches of Chinese architecture, the scenes with all kinds of Chinese arts and crafts, but also the album on the inundation of Yanzhou, etc. But how were these albums used, apart from the fact that some of these were collected in the royal library, some of them went to Bertin's private collection, and, as Finlay writes, some of them also went to other members of Bertin's vast network?

It would of course be interesting to know which of the materials, either in the royal collection or in Bertin's private house, could also be accessed by individuals who did not belong to the royal family or were closely related to the king. There are indeed hints that some individuals were given access to either the royal collection or Bertin's own collection, at least for special purposes. When Bertin entrusted Isidore-Stanislas Helman (1743–1806?) to reproduce the depictions of scenes from the life of Confucius that Amiot had sent to Paris, he must have given him access to other albums in the collection as a means of

assisting him in producing his own sketches in a more authentically Chinese manner. If one takes a closer look at the background before which Helman has placed his figures, we find houses and gardens that strikingly resemble those of the sketches contained in the "Essai sur L'Architecture Chinoise", a work that had also been compiled by the Jesuits and sent to Paris to provide examples of authentic Chinese buildings and gardens (see fig. 1).[4] It must be emphasized, however, that what is called "authentic" here regarding pictures related to the time of Confucius is of course wholly anachronistic, the houses and the gardens having been inspired, as mentioned, by the style in which Qing scholars lived and Qing palace architecture.

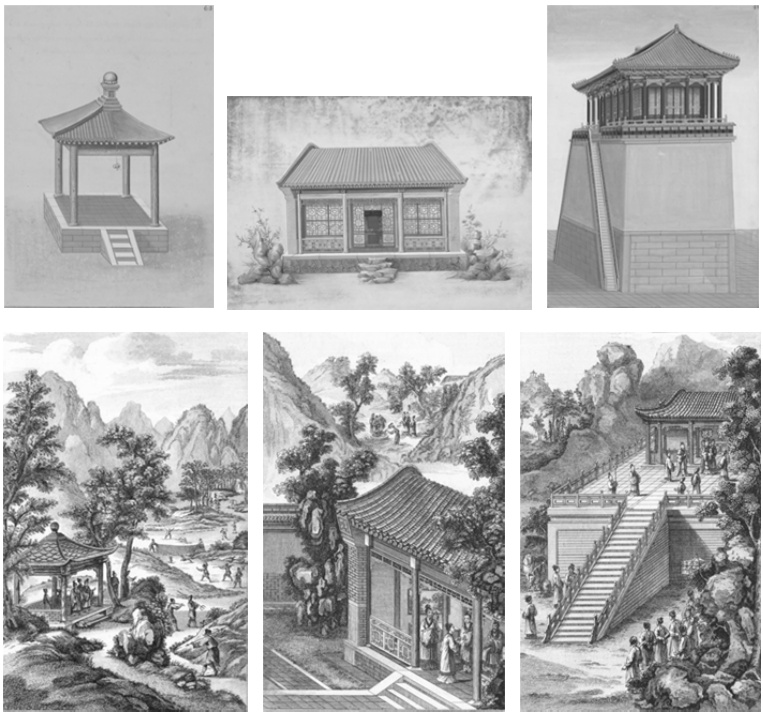

Fig. 1: Three examples (comparison between sketches in "Essai sur L'Architecture Chinoise" and Helman's *Abrégé historique des principaux traits de la vie de Confucius*)

4 Compare, e.g., the sketch of the pavilion in "Essai", vol. 1, no. 63, with Helman, no. 8, the house (explained to be that of a scholar, "Lettré") in "Essai", vol. 2, no. 2, with that of Confucius' home (with bizarre stone formations) in Helman, no. 10, or the terrace ("tai") in "Essai", vol. 2, no. 43, with the terrace in Helman, no. 18.

The evidence adduced above thus provides an example of an occasion where materials contained in the royal collection were used as a source for the production of a work of art in which pictures sent from China were used to create new pictures that by and large had been adapted to suit European tastes and thus became more widely distributed. But do examples such as this one suffice to confirm that the knowledge received from and about China and the materials collected in the royal and other libraries were used for a reform or revitalization of the spirit of the French nation?

Interestingly, Grimm, whose anecdote in which Bertin advised King Louis XV that the French nation should be "inoculated with the Chinese spirit" was quoted earlier in this review, is reported to have come to the following conclusion in 1785:

> L'esprit de la nation ne paraît pas à la vérité se ressentir infinement de l'heureuse révolution que devait produire l'idée ingénieuse de M. Bertin; mais on se souvient encore qu'il y eut un moment où toutes nos chéminées furent couvertes de magots de la Chine.[5]

While Finlay does not mention the second part of that anecdote, the question that comes to mind when reading about Bertin's comprehensive preparations for his Chinese buildings at Chatou is whether Finlay does not in fact indirectly come to the same result as Grimm, albeit with less sarcasm, namely that even if Bertin indeed tried to improve France with the Chinese spirit, in the end he merely managed to fulfill his private dreams and those of some likeminded people in his circle. But if this was the case, what prevented Bertin from using the knowledge he had gained from China to the benefit of the French nation? Maybe this question cannot be answered so easily, and this is probably the reason why Finlay does not pursue it further.

Returning to the question of to what extent materials belonging to these collections had a chance to be accessed more widely than merely by some selected people from the court, I would like to adduce a hitherto more or less unknown piece of evidence: the publication of the *Scenes of the Life of Confucius* by Helman as a separate book allowed them to indeed reach a wider circle of interested people. The album found its way to Germany, more precisely to the court of Leopold III Frederick Franz, Duke of Anhalt-Dessau (1740–1817), who must have received it shortly after its publication, because only two years after the publication of Helman's book in Paris the duke entrusted a local painter to make paintings in two rooms of his palace in Oranienbaum based on Helman's copper engravings.[6] Somewhat later, he also had the park surrounding this palace renovated into an Anglo-Chinois garden, in which a building known as the Chinese House was erected and, nearby, a pagoda, and inside the

5 "The spirit of the nation does not seem, in reality, to have been much influenced by the happy revolution which the ingenious idea of M. Bertin was to produce; but we still remember that there was a time when all our fireplaces were covered with Chinese loot, and most of our furniture in the Chinese taste." [Translations is mine.] SeeTaschereau 1830, vol. 12, 493, Bernard-Maitre 1948, 449.

6 See Schaab-Hanke 2020.

Chinese House the portrait of Confucius as it is presented in the first copper engraving of Helman's book was painted, along with two scenes showing Confucius' birth. This is indeed a nice example showing the wider distribution across Europe of one of these albums that originated from the cooperation between Amiot and Bertin. And there is much more to this than simple decoration, because, as I have demonstrated in a book on this topic, Duke Franz was an ardent adherent of the cameralist movement, the German wing of the French physiocratic movement, and it seems that the reason why he had depictions of Confucius and the scenes showing his reforms made for his palace and the Chinese House was to express his reformatory spirit and also his dedication to the various religious teachings.

As for Bertin himself, we have no information indicating whether he, too, had planned to have some of Helman's adaptations of the scenes of Confucius' life depicted on the walls of his Chinese cabinet in Chatou. But what we do know for sure is that he wished to model himself after a Chinese Confucian scholar and that he hoped that Amiot could provide him with the necessary equipment to do so. In a letter addressed to Bertin in 1790, Amiot wrote that since he could not travel to France physically to take a glimpse of Bertin's Chinese residence and the studio in Chinese style that he had drafted for Bertin as the ideal surroundings for a Chinese Confucian scholar, he just tried to imagine holding one of the Chinese classics or *The Life of Confucius* in his hands and enjoying himself in times of leisure, meditating like a sage on the principles of things.[7] And slightly further in his letter, Amiot writes that this environment should be similar to the one that the "roi de lu" had provided Confucius with in one of his gardens in the suburbs of the city.[8] He thus draws a direct analogy between Bertin's relationship with King Louis XV and Confucius' with the king of Lu (who was, however, actually merely a duke in real Chinese history), and upon closer reflection, a Sinologist will be inclined to sense a subtle irony in these sentences of Amiot's. Having read and translated so many books on the early Chinese state philosophers, Amiot would have known, of course, that the Duke of Lu had no gardens in the vicinity of his city. However, the very fact that he talks about the *king's* gardens, and not Confucius', may well be interpreted as an expression of a critical attitude towards Bertin's wish to have such a garden and such a studio for himself and not for his monarch. Furthermore, Amiot must have been quite familiar with the philosopher Mengzi, who criticized his ruler for having a luxurious park without allowing the common people to enter it for their own enjoyment. So one may sense from his remarks how Amiot may have felt about Bertin's unending quests for more information on the architectural elements of Chinese gardens.

7 [...] tenant en main l'un des King chinois ou de la vie de Kong-Tsée, vous voudrez jouir quelque temps de vous-meme at méditer en sage sur les principes de choses [...] Vous pourrez leur en donner une semblable à celle que le roi de lou donna à Koung-tsee [Confucius] dans l'un de ses jardins aux environs de la ville." Amiot, lettre à Bertin, 1790, Ms 1517, fol. 139, cited from Bienaimé and Michel 2014, 156.

8 Bienaimé and Michel, ibid.

On the other hand, Amiot would also have known that in times of bad rulership even the best ministers were allowed to retire and enjoy their private lives. So given that this was the reason why he continued to support Bertin in satisfying his exotic wishes, we may suggest that Amiot in far-away Beijing knew well how far the French monarchy had already degraded by that time.

Finlay's book is one of those fine books that provide a reader with new insights and at the same time leave room for further questions to be pursued. It has clearly been written from the perspective of an art historian, which explains why the author focuses his attention on the representation of China in France through the media of arts, crafts, and architecture. For a general historian there are, of course, many more aspects, for example the question of why the initial idea of using China as a model for the French nation seems to have been completely abolished somewhere along the way, which seem worthy of further research.

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