

An Analysis of "China Illustrated"

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Abstract

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, Europe witnessed a "China craze," and in the eyes of some Europeans, China was regarded as the "ideal kingdom." Early missionaries to China vigorously promoted in their letters the prosperity and grandeur of Chinese cities, the noble and benevolent nature of the rulers, and the honesty and politeness of the people. Europeans were extremely curious about this Eastern country, and thinkers such as Voltaire praised China for possessing the highest morality. The nobility competed to acquire Chinese artworks, and merchants were eager to admire China's wealth. In this context, the renowned British architect and painter Thomas Allom created a set of watercolor paintings depicting Chinese scenes, which were engraved and published by Fisher, Son & Co. in London in 1843. The content of the engravings was comprehensive, ranging from magnificent royal palaces to exquisite and elegant southern towns, from extravagant and powerful nobles to struggling common people, from busy and lively production activities to sincere and devout worship scenes, from serene and peaceful seaport scenery to tense and fierce battle scenes—all depicted by Allom's delicate brushwork. The album was immediately highly sought after upon its release. Europeans who had never been to China hoped to gain an authentic picture of this ancient Eastern empire through this work. However, unfortunately, Allom himself had never been to China. His portrayal of China was derived half from the "reliable sketches" of those who had traveled to China, and half from his own imagination, or rather, the collective European imagination of China. He unfolded before his audience a series of pictures of Chinese customs in the late Qing Dynasty. While Chinese people have excelled at recording history through words, it is thanks to these Western paintings that our history has become more vivid and comprehensive. We can re-recognize that familiar yet unfamiliar Qing Empire through Western eyes.

Keywords

Qing Dynasty; Engravings; China Illustrated.

1. Introduction

Thomas Allom was born in Lambeth, south London, in 1804, the son of a coachman from Suffolk. In 1819, he became an apprentice to the architect Francis Goodwin and worked for him until 1826. He then studied at the Royal Academy of Arts. When his church designs were exhibited in 1824 and 1827, they attracted considerable attention in architectural circles. From 1834 to 1843, he collaborated with Henry Francis Lockwood in Hull, designing many Neoclassical buildings, such as Trinity House, the extension to the Hull Royal Infirmary, and Great Thornton Street Church; they also designed the extension to the Brownlow Hill Workhouse in Liverpool. Thomas Allom later designed many buildings in London, including the workhouse on Marloes Road in Kensington, Christ Church in Highbury, St. Peter's Church in Notting Hill, and part of the Ladbroke Estate in west London. He also collaborated with Sir Charles Barry on the design of the Palace of Westminster and the renovation of Highclere Castle. As an illustrator, his early success was *Constantinople*, published in 1838. However, his magnum opus, *China Illustrated*, was published shortly after the First Opium War and the signing of the Treaty of Nanking

(1842). This atlas was first published in 1843 by Fisher, Son & Co. of London. The original work comprised four volumes, each containing approximately thirty engravings, totaling over 120 illustrations—a monumental work. This work opened a window onto ancient China for Britain and the Western world. Upon publication, it immediately became popular throughout Europe and the Western world; both the intellectual community and the general public were eager to obtain any information about this ancient empire that had just fought a war against them. In the eyes of the publishers, the intellectual curiosity of readers represented a lucrative market opportunity.[1]

During the period of increasing Western interest in Chinese aesthetics and culture, this series of highly popular prints played a crucial role. It can be said that throughout the 19th century, Westerners' intuitive impressions of Chinese civilization were largely derived from Thomas Allom's work. The image of Chinese civilization, presented in the form of engraved illustrations, was clearly displayed before the whole of Europe and America, attracting numerous Western powers to venture, expand, and exploit.

2. Creation Background and Compilation Process

2.1. Publisher's Planning and Team Formation

Fisher, Son & Co. had previously published several illustrated books introducing the local customs and landscapes of various places, namely *Ireland Illustrated*, *The Rhine*, *Italy and Greece*, *Indian Scenery*, *America*, and *Constantinople*, all of which achieved considerable market success. Facing current market demands, the publisher began planning an illustrated book introducing China's landscape scenery and customs. Therefore, they invited the artist Thomas Allom and the writer George Wright, with whom they had previously collaborated, to design the illustrations and write the text respectively. George Wright was a writer and Anglican priest, born in Ireland. In 1817, he obtained a Master of Arts degree from Trinity College, Cambridge. His works mainly consisted of popular books on human geography and history. It is worth noting that neither of these two men had visited China. To jointly create such an illustrated book introducing Chinese customs and landscapes, they could only rely on secondary materials. Allom redrew the illustrations based on reliable sketches, while the Reverend Wright provided descriptive annotations from a historical perspective. With 128 engraved illustrations as the core, the book uses captions to depict China. Upon completion, the book immediately became popular among the upper classes in Europe and America and was reprinted several times. It was continuously reprinted in Britain throughout the 19th century and translated into French and German. It was published in many countries across Europe, America, and Australia, and quickly became the most influential illustrated reference work on Chinese history and culture in Britain and Europe. The book was issued in various formats: four volumes in one, four volumes in two, and five volumes in five. Besides the English edition, there were also German, French, and Chinese editions. Today, there are more than four Chinese versions. The first edition contained 128 illustrations of China. In the first German edition of 1845 and the 1858 revised English edition, thirty-nine illustrations by other artists were added to the original 128, totaling 167 engravings, accompanied by annotations from the historical writer, the Reverend Wright. The content of the paintings in this book was recreated based on the sketches of William Alexander, the official artist accompanying the 1793 British Macartney Embassy. Therefore, it actually reflects the social customs and folkways of China during the so-called "Qianlong Golden Age" of the 1790s.

2.2. Source of Painting Materials

At that time, the British knew far less about China than the French. This was because the Jesuit missionaries initially sent to preach in the Chinese interior were mostly French. They sent back

information about this ancient Eastern country in the form of reports and letters, sparking a wave of enthusiasm for China in French intellectual circles. When Wright wrote this book, much of the textual material he relied upon came from these Jesuit missionaries.[2]

The first direct contact between the British authorities and China can be traced back to 1793 (the 58th year of the Qianlong reign), when Lord Macartney was dispatched by King George III to lead a large embassy of several hundred people to visit China, where he was received by the Qianlong Emperor. With the special permission of the Emperor, the embassy traveled south along waterways such as the Grand Canal to Guangzhou and returned after visiting various places. The official artist accompanying the Macartney Embassy was William Alexander, who recorded the sights along the way and created a large number of sketches reflecting Chinese local customs and culture. After returning, he published two albums of pictures. At this time, China was in an environment that seemed peaceful and harmonious but was actually fraught with internal and external crises. As the capital of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Beijing had already been built up to be quite prosperous. In Allom's copperplate engravings, one can see towering city walls, magnificent palaces, and exquisite gardens, all demonstrating imperial grandeur. At that time, China still maintained the last dignity of the Qing Empire, presenting a scene of prosperity and peace. In the eyes of Europeans, China was the only "superpower" in the world at that time, the only "Chinese Empire" comparable to the Roman Empire for over a thousand years. The paintings in the album had not yet been distorted or demonized; instead, China was depicted as a "paradise empire." This book is divided into several parts based on different themes, presenting the overall style and characteristics of the "Central Empire" from multiple perspectives such as natural landscape, cultural buildings, and social customs, uniquely and realistically reflecting China's history, society, folk customs, culture, and cultural exchanges between East and West.

3. Content Composition and Artistic Creation Features

3.1. Thematic Classification of Paintings

For instance, the "Chinese Scenery and Landmarks" category contains elements such as the "Great Wall," "Outside Xizhimen," "Jiangnan Boudoir," "Ancient Bridge over the Qinhuai," "Lakeside Daoist Temple," and "Mazu of the East China Sea," mainly depicting China's natural landscapes and ancient buildings; while "The Daily Life of the Common People" showcases the folk customs of ordinary people, such as "Laborers' Food Stalls," "Hat Shop in Guangzhou," "Acrobats at Tianqiao," and "Quack Doctors"; "Social Customs" depicts scenes of Chinese people celebrating traditional festivals, such as "Mid-Autumn Moon Worship," "Ancestor Worship," and "Receiving Betrothal Gifts"; the "War Scenes" reveal the cruelty of war, including the "Battle of Humen," "British Army Camp," and "Capture of Dinghai"-all these were presented before the eyes through Allom's brushwork. The Great Wall, the Grand Canal, Yuanmingyuan, Jingshan, the Meridian Gate, Tiger Hill Pagoda, Leifeng Pagoda, Bao'en Temple, the Glazed Pagoda, Jinshan Temple, dragon boats, lanterns, sluice gates, fishing, banquets, opium, and the queue-All these were also disseminated throughout Europe through this book, causing Europeans in the early 19th century to hold China in respect.[3]

3.2. Artistic Processing and Creation Defects

Generally speaking, the paintings along the canal and in Beijing and Tianjin in China Illustrated were all drawn based on Alexander's original drawings. Allom did not change the overall composition of the original works but made some adjustments. For example, in "Outside Xizhimen," Allom deleted irrelevant figures in the foreground and brought the viewer closer to the city gate, making the tower, walls, and gate appear more upright and majestic. In "The Great Hall of the Imperial Palace in Yuanmingyuan," Allom restored the scene of the emperor entering

the hall according to relevant textual records, making the scene richer and more vivid compared to Alexander's original. "The Small Potala Palace at Rehe," "The Great Wall of China," and "The Tianjin Theater" were treated similarly. For the various figures created by Alexander, Allom made some modifications and integrated them into specific scenes. In the picture "Street Performance at Linqing," this is most obvious. The flute player undoubtedly came from Alexander's "Wandering Musicians," where the musician in the original played the erhu. The puppet show scene was derived from "Street Performance," and the puppeteer's expression, demeanor, and costume closely resembled the bookseller in Alexander's painting. To make the entire scene more realistic and full of life, Allom also added various types of spectators. By selecting different figures and scenes from Alexander's works and recombining and integrating them, he created a series of vivid genre paintings. Of course, due to not having experienced it personally, there are inevitably some deviations in details. For example, in the picture "Silkworm Reeling in Jiangnan," the facial features of the several silkworm-reeling women are clearly replicas of European country women; the two men in front of the A-Ma Temple in Macau have hairstyles like Japanese monks, wearing garments that are neither clothes nor robes, looking more like Indian monks. However, the defects do not detract from its overall quality. Allom's recreation was generally well-considered, without significant deviations. The entire book had a consistent layout: the right-hand page featured a full-page engraving, totaling about 120 illustrations; the left-hand page contained descriptive text, accompanied by small copies of the original sketches, most of which were by William Alexander. Apart from the sepia tone on the cover, all the pictures were in black and white, combining free, vigorous brushwork with the meticulous realism of engravings, possessing a rich and distinctive flavor. Thanks to Allom's vivid imagination and reconstruction of topography, he almost recreated the Chinese landscape. His works included not only scenery but also social customs, history, law, and politics, helping Europeans gain a clearer picture of the Chinese Empire.

4. Historical Context and Cultural Value of the Work

4.1. Western Perception of China in the Mid-19th Century

In the eyes of Westerners at that time, the so-called "Central Empire" named "Qing" was the world's largest country and also a mysterious and distant land. After the Opium War, the vast and powerful China was pushed to the forefront of public opinion and gradually became the focus of Western attention. After the signing of the Treaty of Tientsin in 1858, the trade barriers between China and Western countries were cleared, and British nationals needed only a passport to travel freely in this Eastern country for business or tourism; Protestantism and Roman Catholicism were granted freedom of mission; the official language for diplomatic correspondence between British agencies was changed from compulsory Chinese to English; [4] the Qing government took on the task of cultivating qualified language personnel, responsible for Chinese-English translation of official documents between the two countries. As the Qing Empire, which had long adhered to a policy of isolationism, abandoned its closed-door policy and opened its doors to the world, cross-cultural exchanges between China and the West became increasingly frequent. Especially since the signing of the Treaty of Tientsin, European society's interest in China has grown day by day. They are eager to lift the veil of the "Central Empire" and understand the country's natural resources, social economy, and local customs, while missionaries hope to spread the glory of God to the other end of the world. The impressions of the vast majority of Westerners about China were all based on what those who had the opportunity to visit China saw and heard. Only thus could the West understand this ancient Eastern country's etiquette, literature, art, science and technology, and ancient civilization.

4.2. Depiction of Jiangnan Region and Traditional Production Techniques

In *China Illustrated*, apart from the paintings of places like Beijing and Tianjin, there is another important theme-the Jiangnan region of China. This region was still the wealthiest area in the world at that time. Both early missionaries and the Macartney Embassy that visited China during the Qianlong era, as well as the victorious British troops in the Opium War, all highly praised it. Europeans keenly observed that it was the diligence of the people of Jiangnan that created the prosperity of this region. Here, the scenery is beautiful, people work from dawn till dusk, yet the living environment is built with extreme elegance. The ancient and charming Nanjing, the comfortable and livable Suzhou, the picturesque Hangzhou, Ningbo with its busy merchant shipping, and the numerous exquisite and beautiful water towns-all these places condensed the best of Chinese folk lifestyle and displayed the late empire's vitality. Besides marveling at the urban customs, landscapes, grandeur of cities, and exquisite architecture of the Chinese Empire, Europeans were also very concerned about China's traditional production technologies.[5] Scenes of planting or manufacturing such as grain, tea, cotton, and silk were naturally included in the collection, and distinctive Chinese techniques became a particular focus. They keenly captured the canal locks in the ancient canal that could quickly adjust water levels, witnessed cormorant fishing in Zhenjiang, observed the complex dragon-bone waterwheel in Suzhou, the simple and practical bamboo tube water wheel in Poyang Lake, and the light and efficient bamboo water pipes on Hong Kong Island-all of which attracted Westerners' attention. However, despite the warm reception from Qing officials, the Macartney Embassy still noticed that this former empire was gradually decaying and was not to be feared. In 1840, after again failing to reach a trade agreement with the Qing government, the United Kingdom launched the Opium War, and the Qing government was easily defeated. Finally, it had to cede Hong Kong Island and open Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai as treaty ports. The painters accompanying the British navy, Stoddart and White, drew some of the war scenes at that time, which were also reprocessed by Allom and included in the published copperplate collection.

5. Conclusion

In *China Illustrated*, Allom portrayed China's wealth and poverty, nobility and humility, grandeur and darkness as fully as possible, offering a vivid portrait of life in the late Qing. While China's historical tradition is primarily textual, these Western images have enriched our historical record with vivid visuals. Through Western eyes, we may rediscover a Qing Empire that is at once familiar and strange.

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