

CHINESE BIRD-AND-FLOWER WALLPAPER  
FROM PAINTING TO DECORATIVE ARTS

A Thesis

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Yixin Xu  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates what remains of the Chinese bird-and-flower wallpaper export in Britain today in an attempt to answer the long-existing question of how these wallpapers, as one of the most successful and unique global products in the 18th century, have changed from a type of oriental painting to a Western interior decoration style. Apart from the summary and literature review, this thesis is divided into six parts. The first part introduces the “Chinoiserie” trend popular in Britain in the 18th century and how bird-and-flower wallpapers entered the UK market, while the second part traces the oriental source of inspiration of the Chinese bird-and-flower wallpaper export, known as Chinese bird-and-flower painting. The third part investigates how the emerging assembly line painting workshop in Canton, China, where most export wallpapers were produced, promoted the birth of this unprecedented global commodity, and the fourth part analyzes the impact of the enthusiasm for oriental plants in Britain on the market demand for Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers and discusses the relationship between bird-and-flower wallpapers and the export of botanical paintings. The fifth part examines how Chinese painters created large decorative art based on traditional art under the influence of Western customers from the perspective of artistic style, proving that both Chinese producers and Western consumers contributed to the birth of bird-and-flower wallpapers. The final part explores how the fashion of Chinese wallpaper gradually withdrew from the historical stage and how it is inherited in the decorative arts in the world today.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Yixin Xu was born on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 1996, in Wuhan, China where she grew up loving art and painting and spent the first 24 years of her life. In high school she became fascinated with decorative arts, so she started reading books introducing different ornaments and patterns all around the world.

After high school graduation, she entered College of Chinese Language and Literature at Wuhan University, where she took a variety of courses on Chinese and western history, literature and philosophy. In 2016, she decided to switch to the History Department and do research on history of arts. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 2018 with a thesis written in English titled *Female Education Reform and the Living State of Female Artists in Victorian Era*.

In fall 2018, she started graduate study at Cornell University in the Department of Asian Studies, where she continued her studies on material culture and history of decorative arts. Inspired and encouraged by the faculty and her friends at Cornell, she decided to investigate the cross-cultural communication between China and the west in her future studies.

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## Introduction

With the expansion of Sino-Western exchanges and the development of global historiography, the “Chinoiserie” trend of material culture prevailing in the European continent around the 18th century has recently become a new topic to art historians. Among them, China's export wallpapers, with their vivid patterns, bright colors and unique exoticism, have become a new favorite in the interior decoration of Europe, especially the United Kingdom. Benefiting from the first industrial revolution and greatly increasing national strength, the British stepped up their accumulation of wealth in the world's colonies and also became the giant of East-West trade with the huge power of the East India Company. The growth of economic power also promoted the development of art; the aesthetic consciousness independent of the European continent began to rise, and famous collectors and art critics began to emerge in the UK, creating a unique environment for the convergence and integration of material culture. As one of the most unique and successful commodities in the Sino-British trade in the 18th century, Chinese wallpaper was particularly favored in the British market. This wallpaper was not only closely related to the British social trend and fashion taste at that time, but it also benefited from the wisdom of Chinese painters that made them sensitive to the need of western market. The bird-and-flower wallpapers accounted for the largest proportion of Chinese export wallpapers and were particularly special because although they were rooted in the Chinese pictorial tradition of bird-and-flower motifs, they remain rarely known in their hometowns even till today. While the British people could not understand the deep meaning of Chinese bird-and-flower motifs, they still treated them as treasures. Emile de Bruijn, a specialist in Chinese export wallpaper, remarked, “When exactly this crucial

transition from pictures to wallpaper took place, and who was involved, may never be known”.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will use the same material culture as a classification method in the study of traditional art history, with the bird-and-flower motif as the core, and explain how the bird-and-flower wallpaper has changed from a kind of fine art work to the magnificent decorative art in 18<sup>th</sup> century British interior decoration.

### **Literature Review**

Chinese export wallpaper is a research field that has not been widely explored. Because it only occupies a relatively small proportion of Chinese export commodities from the Qing Dynasty, Chinese wallpapers received less attention from Western scholars before this century, and almost no one studied it in its country of origin. This is because these Chinese wallpapers created by unknown folk painters are almost never classified as Chinese art history. In the Western art history field and even in today's decorative arts, Chinese wallpaper is usually discussed in relation to the concept of Chinoiserie.

The word “Chinoiserie” is derived from French “Chinois,” which literally means “Chinese.” According to the Oxford Dictionary, Chinoiserie is generally considered to be the European interpretation and imitation of Chinese and East Asian artistic traditions, especially in the decorative arts, garden design, architecture, literature, theatre, and music.<sup>2</sup> In 1961, Hugh Honour published the book *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay*, which is usually regarded as the first academic work that fully introduces the history and influence of Chinoiserie. In his book, Honour used “Cathay,” a former Chinese name, rather than

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<sup>1</sup> De Bruijn, Emile. *Chinese Wallpaper in Britain and Ireland*. London 2017, 30

<sup>2</sup> "Chinois". *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved 2015-12-09.

“China” because he believed that people's love for Chinoiserie is based on a place they fantasize rather than a real China. He recognized the wisdom of European craftsmen in creating Chinoiserie-style artworks: “I have, perforce, approached the subject from a strictly European standpoint, attempting to discover how western artists and craftsmen, from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, regarded the Orient and expressed their vision of it. For chinoiserie is a European style and not, as is sometimes supposed by sinologues, an incompetent attempt to imitate the arts of China.”<sup>3</sup> In the same way, British scholar Michael Sullivan argued that the style of Chinoiserie is actually very different from the style of authentic Chinese painting: “It is clear that chinoiserie has very little to do with China. The arrival of Chinese arts and crafts in the seventeenth century worked no transformation on French art; rather were the exotic imports themselves transformed, beyond recognition, into something entirely French.”<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Chinoiserie is often associated with Edward W. Said's theory of Orientalism. Although Said's criticism is mainly European prejudice against the Islamic world, Orientalism is often extended to Westerners' attitudes toward all Eastern civilizations. In his thesis *Orientalism*, Said describes the word as a pervasive Western tradition—academic and artistic—of prejudiced outsider-interpretations of the Eastern world, which was shaped by the cultural attitudes of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>5</sup> Affected by this view, many Chinese scholars also regard "Chinoiserie" as a ridiculous product created by arrogant Westerners' lack of understanding of Chinese culture. Therefore, this topic is rarely given objective academic discussions in China. However, these bizarre Chinese wallpapers are

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<sup>3</sup> Honour, Hugh. *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay*. New York: Dutton, 1962. 1

<sup>4</sup> Sullivan, Micheal. *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art: From the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day*. New York Graphic Society Ltd.1973.12

<sup>5</sup> Tromans, Nicholas, and others, *The Lure of the East, British Orientalist Painting, 2008*, Tate Publishing, ISBN 978-1-85437-733-3)

indeed the works of the Chinese painters themselves, and they are essentially different from the Chinoiserie wallpaper created by the French painter Jean-Baptiste Pillement in the early 18th century based on his fantasy of the East, nor the "bizarre silk" popular in Europe at that time.

After Honour, Western scholars discussed the Chinoiserie phenomenon from more novel perspectives and came up with outstanding outcomes. In 1962, Robert Ferguson Hester, who gained his Master's degree at Cornell University, discussed the interesting Chinoiserie arch bridge and boat design in the English garden in his master's thesis *Chinoiserie: Some Specific Manifestations of Oriental Design in England, 1740-1760*, making him one of the early art historians who explored this topic.<sup>6</sup> In 1981, in his book *Chinoiserie: Chinese Influence on European Decorative Art 17th and 18th Centuries*, Madeleine Jarry introduced the material culture of chinoiserie with different materials such as textiles, lacquerware and porcelain. Jarry's work is an encyclopedia that investigated the major Chinoiserie collections around the world.<sup>7</sup> Dawn Jacobson's book *Chinoiserie*, published in 1993, provided a detailed and comprehensive introduction to the history of Chinoiserie and various collections from the perspective of material culture. It is also worth mentioning that this book discussed how contemporary artists use Chinoiserie in craft design, affirming its influence on modern European and American interior design.<sup>8</sup>

The scholar who first paid attention to the relationship between gender awareness, family concept and Chinoiserie is British art historian Stacey Sloboda. In her book *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical*

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<sup>6</sup> Hester, Robert F. *Chinoiserie: Some Specific Manifestations of Oriental Design in England, 1740-1760*. [Ithaca, N. Y.], 1962

<sup>7</sup> Jarry M. *Chinoiserie: Chinese influence on European decorative art 17th and 18th centuries*. New York: Vendore Press; 1981.

<sup>8</sup> Jacobson, Dawn. *Chinoiserie*. London: Phaidon, 1993.

*Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, published in 2014, she creatively used gender awareness as an artistic factor to examine the artistic style of Chinoiserie and believed that they were, in a sense, consistent with the notion of the weakness of women at that time. As one of the few scholars who attempted to examine these decorative arts from the context of the country of origin of Chinoiserie, and thus from the perspective of the East, she broke through the limitations of previous works that inevitably approached the topic from the perspective of Westerners. For example, she found that a series of illustrations of children that were often imitated by European merchants actually depicted the story of a heroic Chinese boy, Sima Guang, who saved a child who fell into a tank, but the original intention of the story seems to have disappeared during the process of imitation and communication.<sup>9</sup> Inspired by this book, this paper also intends to explore the topic of Chinoiserie from the perspective of the oriental source of Western fashion in the Eastern context.

In the 1920s, a group of Chinese scholars also began to pay attention to the imitation of Chinese style by Westerners. Chen Shouyi (陳受頤), one of the earliest Chinese scholars who traveled to Europe, published an article entitled “Chinese Gardens in Europe in the 18th Century” in the *Lingnan Journal of Chinese Studies*, arguing that Europeans' love for Chinese gardens was not only because of exoticism but also because “the spirit of the times within the European continent is the pursuit of natural beauty.”

<sup>10</sup>Comparative literary scholar Fan Cunzhong first explored the influence of Chinese culture on Enlightenment England in terms of Confucian theory, political system, and customs in his book *Chinese*

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<sup>9</sup> Sloboda, Stacey. *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Chen, Shouyi: *Chinese Gardens in Europe in the 18th Century*, *Ling nan Xue Bao* (《嶺南學報》) vol.2 1931. 38-39

*Culture in the Enlightenment England*. He paid particular attention to the influence of oriental gardens on British culture.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in his article *Chinese Gardens and the 18th Century British Art Fashion*, he reviewed many case studies of Western European countries imitating Chinese gardens.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Liu Haixiang's *Chinese Style in the European Land*, published in 2004, is the first Chinese academic work that comprehensively introduced Chinoiserie. The author mainly focused on how cultural history in France, where Chinoiserie was created, was influenced by Chinese-style art.<sup>13</sup> In 2005, Yuan Xuanping focused on the role of Chinoiserie artworks in European interior decoration and garden design in her doctoral thesis *17th-18th Century European Chinese Style Design*.<sup>14</sup> In his 2014 book “*Chinoiserie: Merchant Ship that Came with the Wind*,” Taiwanese artist Zhang Cuo used rich case studies and commentaries from the time to introduce the views and evaluations of the 18th-century European writers on the Chinoiserie style.<sup>15</sup>

When referring specifically to the research object of this article – that is, Chinese wallpaper – there are relatively few related academic works. As a product of global trade exchanges, the characteristics of Chinese wallpaper in both the East and the West have kept it in a plausible position for a long time. Since Chinese wallpapers did not enter the UK in the form of bulk goods, but were mostly in the form of shopping gifts or personal gifts, the research materials related to them are relatively rare, thus they are seldom involved in traditional art history research. Due to the large number and representativeness

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<sup>11</sup> Fan, Cunzhong: *Chinese Culture in the Enlightenment England*. Shanghai: Yi Lin Chu Ban She. 2010

<sup>12</sup> Fan, Cunzhong: “Gardens and the 18th Century British Art Fashion”. *Comparative Literature in China*. Vol.1 1985

<sup>13</sup> Liu, Hai Xiang: *Chinese Style in the European Land*. Shen Zhen: Hai Tian Chu Ban She. 2004

<sup>14</sup> Yuan, Xuan Ping: *17th-18th Century European Chinese Style Design*. Beijing: Zhong Guo Wen Wu Chu Ban She. 2006

<sup>15</sup> Zhang, Cuo. Zhong Guo Feng: Mao Yi Feng Dong, Qian Fan Dong Lai(*Chinoiserie: Merchant Ship that Came with the Wind*). Yi Shu Jia Press.2014

of the existing, Chinese scholars often pay special attention to the porcelain in the export goods. A few Chinese scholars who have paid attention to Chinese wallpaper include Yuan Xuanping, mentioned earlier, and Anna Wu. Yuan Xuanping wrote several articles on Chinese export wallpaper. These articles mainly covered the development of Chinese wallpaper and its trade history from two aspects, China and the West. However, the analysis from the perspective of art history is relatively simple. In 2018, Anna Wu's doctoral thesis at the Royal College of Art, titled *Chinese Wall Paper, Global Histories and Material Culture*, introduced the history and influence of Chinese wallpaper in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States in a more comprehensive way for the first time in the form of material culture research.<sup>16</sup> What is particularly rare is that the author visited a Chinese workshop that still sells Chinese bird-and-flower wallpaper on the spot and recorded the production process of Chinese wallpaper in the form of photography, which provides an important reference for this article. But she also paid attention to the issue of insufficient attention to this type of wallpaper by scholars who study the history of Chinese art: "There is currently relatively little research available which addresses Chinese wallpaper in the context of Chinese art, as a local product of China, as opposed to part of a European decorative style".<sup>17</sup>

In December 2018, China's most watched cultural variety show, "National Treasure," introduced to the Chinese people for the first time how the export wallpaper depicting farming life in the Qianlong period (1735–96) still survives in the Chinese Bedroom of Harewood House in the United Kingdom, resulting in the people's strong interest in Chinese export wallpapers. The wallpaper was made in Canton, China,

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<sup>16</sup> Wu, Anna: *Chinese Wall Paper, Global Histories and Material Culture*. PhD Thesis. <https://researchonline.rca.ac.uk/3939/>

<sup>17</sup> Wu.131

in the mid-18th century and probably came back on a ship of the East India Company. The original owners of the Harewood estate, the Lascelles family, had a connection with the East India Company.<sup>18</sup>

Western scholars provide limited research on Chinese wallpaper as well. The few relevant works in the 20th century include *Chinesische Tapeten für Europa: Vom Rollbild zur Bildtapete*, which was published in 1989 by German art historian Friederike Wappenschmidt.<sup>19</sup> This work is currently the most in-depth and comprehensive achievement of Western scholars on Chinese wallpaper. The author visited Chinese-style rooms across the European continent, attempting to understand how Chinese-style wallpaper as a global commodity has affected European decorative arts through detailed data. In her work, the author studied traditional Chinese design styles and linked the commercial product of exporting wallpaper to the traditional Chinese art style, which provided an important reference for future generations of scholars. Since the beginning of the 21st century, influenced by various new historiography studies, the Chinese-style wallpaper began to receive academic attention as a global commodity that witnessed cultural exchanges. In the 1920s, scholars and museum experts from the National Trust in the United Kingdom compiled a fairly comprehensive database of the collection of Chinese wallpaper in Great Britain and Ireland. This research was organized by British scholars such as Emily de Bruijn, Andrew Bush, and Helen Clifford, with the outcome called *Chinese Wallpaper in Britain and Ireland* published by de Bruijn, who introduced in time sequence how Chinese wallpaper gradually became popular under the influence of various factors but disappeared on the historical stage; he also examined its relationship

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<sup>18</sup> Moss, Richard, *Restored Chinese Wallpaper Goes on Show at Harewood House*. Culture 24, 2008. <https://www.culture24.org.uk/art/architecture-and-design/art55763>

<sup>19</sup> Wappenschmidt, Friederike. *Chinesische Tapeten Für Europa: Vom Rollbild Zur Bildtapete*. Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1989.

with Chinese fine arts, philosophy, feminism and aesthetic style.<sup>20</sup> In the book *The East India Company at Home*, published in 2018, Margot Finn innovatively studied first-hand materials, including letters from British importers, which demonstrated how Chinese wallpaper is derived from many luxurious Oriental products. The book revealed how Chinese wallpaper was loved by the British and became a common interior decoration for elite families in Britain at that time.<sup>21</sup>

The studies of these scholars discussed the history and cultural connotation of Chinese wallpaper, especially bird-and-flower wallpapers, from the perspective of Western trade history and material and cultural history, and they all claimed that the export bird-and-flower wallpapers have a deep tradition in the Chinese art history. Due to the limited materials written in Chinese, there are still few articles on Chinese bird-and-flower wallpaper exports from the perspective of Chinese art history. The few studies that have focused on this issue are Jessica Rawson's article "Ornament as System: Chinese Bird-and-Flower Design." In this article, Rawson paid attention to the Chinese origin of bird-and-flower wallpaper and described the combination of flowers, birds and small animals as a Chinese decorative art system with a long history; she claimed that the themes and layouts of the wallpapers are affected by the symbolic meaning of different birds and flowers in Chinese visual language. She noticed a significant contradiction in the export bird-and-flower wallpapers: although the oriental painters of these wallpapers were devoted to their understanding of different plant motifs when drawing them, their Western buyers often ignored the meaning behind these plants and animals. Rawson also agreed that the traditional Chinese bird-and-flower painting can be regarded as the direct source of inspiration for these

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<sup>20</sup> De Bruijn, Emile. *Chinese Wallpaper in Britain and Ireland*. London 2017, 30

<sup>21</sup> Smith, Kate, and Finn, Margot. *The East India Company at Home 1757-1857*. UCL Press. 2018.

wallpapers, so the flourishing development of bird-and-flower wallpapers in the UK can be regarded as an important example of cultural exchange.<sup>22</sup> With all this in mind, this paper will begin from the Chinese bird-and-flower painting tradition, interior design history and other aspects and explore in depth how the tradition of Chinese bird-and-flower painting entered the British nation as a decorative art.

## Chapter 1. British Passion for Chinese Products

### 1.1 Treasure from the Oriental Utopia

Prior to the brave European explorers setting foot in the East by ways of the ocean breeze during the era of geographical discovery, fantastical legends about China had already entered the West through the works of poets and missionaries. When Marco Polo, a businessman from the Republic of Venice, first set foot on the territory of Yuan Dynasty China in 1271, a myth surrounding Cathay, another name for China, had begun to take root in the hearts of Westerners. Although Marco Polo did visit China, the credibility of his travels remains controversial. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the country that possessed highly-cultivated and intelligent people; astonishing wealth; vast territory; and prosperous commercial ports, as described in his book *The Travels of Marco Polo*, together with silk, porcelain and other items from China, collectively form the illusion of Cathay that fascinated Europeans for centuries.<sup>23</sup> Another controversial work, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, also strongly praises China: “Cathay is a great country, which is fair, noble and rich, and full of

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<sup>22</sup> Rawson, Jessica. “Ornament as System: Chinese Bird-and-Flower Design.” *Burlington Magazine* 148, no. 1239 (June 2006): 380–89. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edo&AN=26751986&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>23</sup> Polo, Marco. *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Edited by William Marsden and Manuel Komroff. Modern Library pbk. ed. New York: Modern Library, 2001.

merchants.”<sup>24</sup>The author of the book is purported to be Sir John Mandeville, who, in 1322, set off from his hometown in England to begin his journey to the East. On this journey, Sir John Mandeville travelled throughout Central Asia, India, and China, before finally returning to Europe. In his book, Sir John Mandeville grossly exaggerates so as to flaunt the opulence of the East; thereby rendering China the ancient country of the East after which the British yearned. In the 17th century, the Chinese style imagined and imitated by Europeans, known as Chinoiserie, entered the art history field. Under the influence of British and French artists, such as François Boucher, Thomas Chippendale, and Jean-Baptist Pillement, the chinoiserie art blended with the Rococo style to become popular and eventually reach its peak during the mid-18th century. Many European paintings and garden buildings depicting the imaginary of Chinese scenes emerged at this historic moment; thereby contributing to the formation of a unique cultural trend in Europe lasting from the 17th to the 18th century. In addition to artworks being regarded as luxury goods, Chinese traditional philosophical thoughts were concurrently brought to Europe through translations of Confucian classics, such as the Analects of Confucius, which enthralled countless Western philosophers. In the work of the French revolutionary Voltaire, Confucius became an 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalist, while the ancient Chinese empire served as a democratic utopia. It can be said that, prior to the 19th century, China was synonymous with nobility, education and wealth in Europe.

Those Europeans who were obsessed with China could not be satisfied with intangible textual records alone. Rather, they began to collect goods from China so as to appreciate the charm of the East. The

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<sup>24</sup> Mandeville, John. "Travels of Sir John Mandeville." *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, March, 1. 2006. <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=22388850&site=ehost-live>.

most representative goods were exquisite textiles and porcelains adorned with birds-and-flower motifs. It is said that, during the first century before the peak, large quantities of Chinese silk had arrived in Rome along the trade routes of Central and Western Asia, which greatly pleased Roman nobility. The more plausible explanation for this is that, in Han Dynasty China, around 97 AD, General Ban Chao sent an envoy to “Daqin”, the ancient Chinese name of Rome, along the Silk Road winding through Central Asia. After the business path was successfully opened, large quantities of gorgeous Chinese silk and precious oriental spices were sent by caravan to West Asia and Europe.<sup>25</sup> In the 3rd century, the intense popularity of fabrics with Chinese-inspired patterns led to a wave of imitation in Rome. Archeologists have uncovered fabric from the 3rd century in modern-day Syria that is decorated with Han-style patterns. However, the craftsmanship of said fabric reveals that it was in fact a Syrian product. This piece is considered the earliest proof of Western artists imitating Chinese art.<sup>26</sup> The spread of Chinese design occurred not only through textiles, but also through smooth and elegant porcelain. On an 11th-century Byzantine-style ivory jewelry box, a lively embossed phoenix can be seen spreading its wings in the middle of the vines. Such a scene is a motif derived from Chinese silk. Embossing is an example of the successful migration of Chinese patterns on different materials. Moreover, this jewelry box can also be regarded as the first appearance of a Chinese-style product with a bird-and-flower theme in Europe.<sup>27</sup> During the Renaissance period, the weavers of Lucca, an Italian textile center, diligently produced textiles with patterns of lions, phoenixes, peacocks and other oriental elements, which were

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<sup>25</sup> Wang, Xiaofu: Xiang Si Zhi Lu: A Man Yu Zhong Guo De Zao Qi Jiao Liu(The Silk Road: the early exchanges between Oman and China-and answering questions about the "Silk Road"). *Journal of Tsinghua University*. Vol.4 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Honour.30-31

<sup>27</sup> Honour.34

sold throughout Europe. The renowned Medici family owned several clay pottery vases painted with Chinese-style twisted lotus patterns. Their finesse and elegance continue to win the praise of Western audiences to this day.<sup>28</sup>

To summarize, the historical application of Chinese decorative patterns has penetrated many aspects of European art. The Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers, widely loved by the British, has found its niche in interior decoration art. Their commercial success in 18th century British interior design is obviously not only due to the rising curiosity of the East during the era of geographical discovery, but also closely related to the long-term popularity of Chinese bird-and-flower designs in the Western world.

## 1.2. The East India Company and Sino-British Export Wallpaper Trade

Since the 16th century, Western merchants and missionaries have successively entered China through ports in Canton, known as Guangdong in Mandarin, and Macau, where they traded for Chinese handicrafts. Consequently, traditional Chinese goods, such as silk, porcelain, and lacquer, were sold in large quantities to Europe. During the final years of the 17th century, a small selection of Chinese wallpaper was gradually introduced to France by Portuguese and German merchants in the form of personal gifts. Such wallpapers were adored by the French, which led to widespread research and imitation. In 1788, France successfully copied Chinese wallpaper. Moreover, in 1734, British designers even published a monograph on wallpaper.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Medici Porcelain Factory. The J. Paul Getty Museum. <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/1192/medici-porcelain-factory-italian-1575-early-17th-century/>

<sup>29</sup> Huang, Qi Chen. "Macau is a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures in the 16th-18th centuries". Macau: Insituto Cultural. <http://www.icm.gov.mo/rc/viewer/10021/340>

However, according to Emile de Bruijn, it was not until the early 18th century that European artisans and designers began to use oriental motifs to imitate Chinese wallpapers.<sup>30</sup> Shortly after, Western society truly began to appreciate and order Chinese wallpapers in large quantities, while Chinese factories simultaneously began to respond to the tastes of Westerners. Prior to this, Chinese wallpapers were called Indian wallpapers or Japanese wallpapers due to the vague understanding of oriental geography among Westerners. In the 17th and 18th centuries, due to the prosperity of British maritime trade and the expansion of European colonies, Indian chintz with bright flower patterns was imported into Europe, where it was widely praised and desired. Indian chintz briefly became popular among fashion designers and interior designers. While it was originally utilized in the production of dresses, the increasing popularity of Indian chintz led to it being used for wall decoration in design patterns. As a result, "Indian wallpaper" became a synonym for textiles with mixed oriental styles. As shown in Figure 1.1, an Indian chintz that was stored in Ashburnham Palace at the end of the 17th century, is a mixed product of various oriental elements. On a white cotton cloth, flowers and vines drawn by "chay root", a red pigment produced in India, are regularly and evenly decorated on the cloth, with rich ethnic characteristics. However, at the bottom of the frame, neatly arranged rocks painted in a clear Chinese style can be found, surrounded by animals, such as a running deer, a fox and a dog. Moreover, there are small portraits featuring indigenous clothes, which make for a bizarre combination. Such a *mélange* of oriental motifs, de Bruijn believes, incorporates specific decorative elements of Chinese porcelain.<sup>31</sup> The prevalence of such mixed "Gazette", the first advertisement featuring Chinese wallpapers, claimed that they were

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<sup>30</sup> De Bruijn.30

<sup>31</sup> De Bruijn.22

selling "paper hangings of Indian and Japan figures", rather than wallpapers of Chinese origin.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 1.1:** Section of a late seventeenth century Indian Chintz. Originally stored at Ashburnham Place. Now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Chinese wallpaper is extremely popular in the UK thanks to the British East India Company's merchant ship that regularly transported goods between Canton and London. With its monopoly over trade between the UK and Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries, the East India Company became the most important channel for Sino-British trade. However, unlike other traded goods, such as porcelain and silk fabrics, these wallpapers were not mass produced. Instead, such wallpapers were likely traded privately. In other words, the East India company crew piggybacked these Chinese wallpapers without purchasing them via the list of bulk export goods purchased by the East India Company. By the middle of the 18th

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<sup>32</sup> London Gazette, 16-20 March, quoted in Jourdain and Jenyus. *Chinese Export Art*. 25

century, the possibility of British exposure to Chinese wallpaper had greatly increased. According to the literature, Henry Lascelles, 6th Earl of Harewood, was the captain of the East India Company's merchant ship called the York. Henry Lascelles visited Canton three times between 1741 and 1748, and brought back a set of Chinese wallpapers in private.<sup>33</sup> While the wallpapers in this set differ slightly in theme, together they produce a full painting of farm life in Canton during the Qing Dynasty. This set of wallpapers later decorated Harewood House, which was owned by the Lascelles family, and became one of the most famous collections on show there.

After the 19th century, as the Chinese fashion trend settled and Europe began imposing more import taxes on Chinese goods, China's main market for tea, porcelain and other export commodities shifted from Europe to the eastern US. In the Willard Straight Hall at Cornell University, a wallpaper created by Ezra Winter depicted the life of Willard Straight, a sponsor and career banker, who invested in Chinese art. In the picture, a Westerner wearing a red cape can be seen talking to a Chinese businessman wearing the official robes of the Qing Dynasty. When Ezra created this picture in 1927, republican Chinese officials no longer wore robes. However, this image of the Chinese businessman was clearly influenced by the image of Qing officials on porcelain and murals that were exported from China. In addition, in the New England area, there are still several houses that feature Chinese wallpapers. The Peabody Museum, which has the largest collection of exquisite Chinese export art in the US, also preserves exquisite Chinese export wallpapers. Hence, the influence of Chinese wallpaper traveled from Europe to the Americas, and has achieved considerable success among consumers.

### 1.3. Types of Chinese export wallpapers

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<sup>33</sup> Clifford. 53

With few exceptions, Chinese export wallpapers can be roughly divided into three categories. These are wallpapers depicting figures and customs; wallpapers depicting bird-and-flower motifs; and wallpapers that combine bird-and-flower patterns and figures. Wallpapers depicting figures and customs predominantly portray scenes from the daily lives of Chinese people, including scenes of farming, tea picking, family life and hunting. Occasionally, such wallpapers depict natural scenery, but unlike traditional Chinese landscape paintings, few wallpapers depict only scenery. Such wallpapers are the first type imported into Europe and the first brought back by the British envoy to China, George McCartney. In 1794, George McCartney gifted said wallpaper to a banker friend, who placed it on the wall of the conference hall at Coutts Banks in London, where it has survived to this day.<sup>34</sup>

Figure 1.2 depicts a figural wallpaper stored in the Chinese room at Carton House in County Kildare in the UK. On the wall of the Chinese room, several types of Chinese wallpaper are combined to form a strange exoticism. The main body of the wall is a large-scale landscape painting, while the background is composed of mountains and pine trees. In the lower section, there are many characters dressed in the style of the Qing Dynasty. Here, costumed men greet each other; women shake their fans and gently look at their curious children; and the boatman is preparing for the day. Such wallpapers show the varied lives of Chinese people and folk customs in the Qing Dynasty, which are similar to the typical theme of Chinese genre paintings in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century. The medium-sized frames on both sides of the wall are decorated with clearer scenes of daily life; seemingly providing additional detail on each character. The bottom section is supplemented by fine plant paintings, which together form a decorative border. It can be seen that these wallpapers, which have a variety of borders, are cut from the complete picture

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<sup>34</sup> Yuan, Xuan Ping: "The Prosperous Chinese Export Wallpaper". *Bao Zhuang Shi Jie*. vol.3 2005. 79-83

and placed in the shape of a folding fan or a window in a Chinese garden. These imply that the owner of the house has an extraordinary taste for Oriental culture.

The second category is wallpapers depicting bird-and-flower motifs, which make up the majority of existing wallpapers and are the most popular. Bird-and-flower wallpapers are elegant in style, painted with peony, bamboo, magpie, peacock and other plants and birds with distinctive Chinese characteristics.

The bottom section of such wallpapers are usually decorated with Gong-shi, or “scholar stones” that are typical elements in Chinese bird-and-flower paintings. For instance, Figure 1.3 depicts a flower and bird wallpaper currently on display in Cobham Hall in Kent, England. This set of wallpapers was hung around 1773 and surprisingly retains its original color, unlike many other surviving Chinese wallpapers.

On a blue background, two tall peony trees emerge from the land and wind up with a plum tree in



**Figure 1.2:** The Chinese Room at Carton House, County Kildare, decorated by the Countess of Kildare around 1759. The huge wallpaper is surrounded by depictions of everyday life.

between. The roots are dotted with rocks and shrubs, while a hen is feeding in the grass behind the rocks. Peony and plum branches extend to both sides of the picture; filling in one another's blanks and producing the main body of the picture whereby a pattern of different branches intertwine in a delicate manner. Various birds and butterflies flutter among the branches; adding vitality to the picture. It is worth noting that, although the main body of this wallpaper presents a decorative visual effect, such as that of a textile pattern, the tree root utilizes a perspective method, which creates waving water from the long-legged wading birds and mandarin ducks that are on the hunt from the perspective of the scholar rocks. In the upper section, there is a row of peonies arranged in a wave shape. Although they differ in color, they are almost exactly the same in terms of shape and size. Together, they form the top boundary of the screen. Such a spatial sense combined with the decorative main body of the picture form a peculiar visual effect.



**Figure 1.3:** The bird-and-flower wallpaper in the State Dressing Room at Cobham Hall, Kent, which was hung around 1773 by Thomas Bromwich. The tree root utilizes a perspective method which contrasts with the upper section of the wallpaper.

The third is wallpapers that combine bird-and-flower patterns and figures. Chronologically, this was the last type of wallpaper to appear. Such wallpapers are usually painted with Chinese characters in Qing costumes working on the bottom of flowers and birds (mainly bamboo). Although they are disproportionately small in size compared to the huge plants, their activities have an oriental, idyllic atmosphere. Such activities include mulberry harvesting; tea tasting; and women playing with young children, which together form a harmonious rural scenery. For instance, Figure 1.4 shows a mixed style wallpaper hanging in Wrest Park in the UK. Although the main body of the picture is similar to the bird-and-flower wallpaper, the foreground depicts a group of small figures wearing Qing Dynasty official hats in addition to the scholar stones. From their vivid movements and expressions, it is clear that they are practicing their archery under the supervision of their officer. As mentioned earlier, their proportions differ substantially from that of real humans, such that the peony flower in the background is almost twice as large as their heads. In fact, this is the most common feature of this type of wallpaper. This type of wallpaper likely appeared later because the keen Chinese painters noticed a new business opportunity vis-à-vis their European customers' love for the elegant and refreshing bird-and-flower wallpapers and exotic figural wallpapers. As a result, Chinese painters decided to make this new product so as to cater to the needs of a western market.



**Figure 1.4:** A bird-and-flower wallpaper with human figures practicing archery in the foreground located in Wrest Park, Bedfordshire. It was likely hung in 1792 (de Bruijn, 157).

However, among all the aforementioned types of wallpapers, bird-and-flower wallpapers are the most widely spread products on the British market. In her analysis of the 149 surviving Chinese wallpapers in the UK, Helen Clifford notes that 95, or 60% of the wallpapers, are bird-and-flower wallpapers.<sup>35</sup> These wallpapers are so popular that they have continuously occupied a place in the Western interior decoration market since the mid-18th century. One possible reason for this is that wallpapers with figures and landscapes are usually sold in sets. Such sets need to be stitched together to form a spectacular panoramic picture that can decorate the walls of an entire room. However, this panoramic wallpaper is more elaborate and takes additional time to produce. Consequently, panoramic wallpapers

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<sup>35</sup> Clifford. 45

are significantly more expensive than bird-and-flower wallpapers. Therefore, the figural wallpapers are mainly collected in the manors of the upper class, and rarely enter ordinary houses.

In summary, Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers, as unique export products, once occupied an important position in the history of Chinese export art. However, given that they were often brought into the UK in the form of personal gifts, scholarly research on this topic has been very limited. Furthermore, they are often confused with the 17th-century French-produced chinoiserie wallpaper based on European perceptions of Cathay, which puts them in an awkward category. Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers are exported goods made by the Chinese themselves, but they are often excluded from Chinese art history. An important reason for this phenomenon is that China does not actually have a historical tradition of using such pictorial wallpapers.

## Chapter 2. Chinese Bird-and-Flower Paintings — the Origin of Bird-and-Flower Wallpapers

### 2.1. “Chinese style” wallpaper and wallpapers in China

Although bird-and-flower wallpapers have a profound historical tradition in the Chinese artistic language, it is certain that the appearance of said wallpapers in Europe is not a direct product of “Chinese wallpapers” becoming “Chinese export wallpapers”. The reason why the bird-and-flower wallpapers exported to Europe have a weak reputation in China is because the Chinese people do not traditionally hang such wallpapers at home. Therefore, bird-and-flower wallpapers can be considered a new product born as a result of demand in the Western market.

Historically, Chinese people likely began to utilize tapestries and other textiles to decorate walls because they were influenced by nomads from the Middle East. During the Six Dynasties period (222-589 AD), which is famous for the great integration of the Han Chinese and northern nomads, in a geography book called "Sanfu Huangtu 《三輔黃圖》”, which translates as “The grand picture of the capital” and describes the architectural system at that time, it is noted that those in the capital palace “Paint the walls with herbs and then put on embroidered textiles.”<sup>36</sup> In the Tang Dynasty, walls were more commonly decorated with textiles. Although there is no record of particular tapestry styles, based on paintings depicting Persian pattern carpets from the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD), it can be inferred that such tapestries were most likely influenced by the culture of the nomadic peoples of the Middle East. Furthermore, it is likely that some tapestries may even have been directly imported from the Middle East. However, due to the inconvenience associated with transporting tapestries and their complicated

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<sup>36</sup> Anonymous :*San Fu Huang Tu*. Chapter 3. Si Bu Cong Kan: vol.3(四部叢刊三編史部). Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=124945&remap=gb>

craftsmanship, it has always been the privilege of nobles to decorate their rooms with tapestries. Therefore, such expensive interior decorations cannot be compared with the easy-to-produce Chinese export wallpapers from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, for ordinary Chinese people, decorating walls with wallpaper is rather economical.

It is difficult to verify when such wallpapers first appeared in China. British scholar Steven Parissien believes that the earliest decorative papers from China date back to 400 AD.<sup>37</sup> One piece of evidence that supports his view is that the Chinese first invented papermaking and paper did not enter widespread use in Europe until the early 15th century. In fact, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, wallpapers were commonly used to decorate the houses of ordinary people and in the royal courts. Does this then mean that these wallpapers were the inspiration for the Chinese export wallpapers that were widely sold in Europe and America in the 18th century? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to examine the tastes of Chinese people vis-à-vis interior decoration during the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, interior decoration styles in China differed by region. Jonathan Hay believes that Chinese interior design during the Ming and Qing Dynasties can be divided into three systems of taste. These are fashionable and showy urban taste, characterized by accumulation and spectacle; the Scholar's or literati taste; and the Qing imperial taste.<sup>38</sup> Among these three, palace aesthetics were mainly concentrated in the north, while interior decoration was more common in southern China, especially the Jiangnan area (江南, which translates to South of the Yangtze River), where literati aesthetic was prevalent. Although folk interior design tastes are diverse, tastes in Canton,

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<sup>37</sup> Parissien, Steven. *Interiors: the Home since 1700*. London: Laurence King, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China*, London, Reaktion Books, 2010.27.36

which is located on the southern coast, should have been more influenced by the tastes of Jiangnan literati.

The main reason that Southern Chinese people used wallpaper was to render the directly exposed walls of buildings brighter and tidier. Therefore, Southern Chinese people mainly used white paper or other low-key colors for the purpose of decorating walls. Any heavily decorated wall would have been considered as lacking taste. The Ming Dynasty painter Wen Zhenheng (文震亨, 1585-1645) expressed his disdain for excessively opulent walls in a book reflecting the literati's aesthetic standards for interior decoration and garden design in the Jiangnan area at that time. Zhenheng notes that "Small rooms ...should not use paper paste or open holes in the partition wall, which is no different from a bathhouse. Vulgar people like this very much and it is difficult to understand.... Avoid painting flowers and birds in the corners. The ancients preferred to write poems and draw paintings on the wall. Now even if the great painters Gu Kaizhi and Lu Tanwei<sup>39</sup> are invited to paint, the great calligraphers Zhong Yao and Wang Xianzhi<sup>40</sup> are invited to write, it would not be as good as a pure white wall."<sup>41</sup> Another Qing Dynasty literati, Li Yu, in his book "Xian Qing Ou Ji" 《閒情偶寄》, which translates as the collection of leisurely tastes and depicts his ideal domestic life, claimed that "The wall of the study is the most suitably chic and should not be painted. Paint is a vulgar thing." However, Li also affirmed that decorating walls with paper is a viable alternative. More precisely, Li noted that "If you use lime to

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<sup>39</sup> Gu Kaizhi (around 348-405AD 顧愷之) was a celebrated painter in ancient China, famous for his paintings *The Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* and *Nymph of the Luo River*.

Lu Tanwei (?-485AD 陸探微) was a Chinese court painter and calligrapher.

<sup>40</sup> Zhong Yao (151-230AD 鐘繇) was a government official and calligrapher who lived during the late Eastern Han dynasty and Three Kingdoms period. He was known as one of the Four Talented Calligraphers (四賢) in the history of Chinese calligraphy.

Wang Xianzhi (344-386AD 王獻之) was the seventh and youngest son of the famed calligrapher Wang Xizhi. Along with his father, he was eventually crowned as one of the Four Talented Calligraphers (四賢) in Chinese calligraphy.

<sup>41</sup> Chen, Zhi. *Zhang Wu Zhi Jiao Zhu*. Di 1 ban. [Nanjing shi]: Jiangsu ke xue ji shu chu ban she, 1984.

paint the walls, sand and make them smooth, which is the best way; secondly, use paper. Paper can make the color of the house and windows more harmonious... The color of the paper is not much different from that of lime. The painting and calligraphy between the walls are indispensable, but if you paste too much, leaving no room, you are still a literati but with mediocre taste."<sup>42</sup> It can be seen that, although it was common for walls to be decorated with white paper at that time, the ideal interior decoration style during the Ming and Qing Dynasties was generally simple and pure. Walls did not need bright colors, but furniture was expected to match the house in a harmonious manner. Moreover, the decoration of flowers, birds, calligraphy and paintings were expected to forego excessive density, so as to avoid appearing too vulgar.

In the interior decoration of the Qing court in northern China, wallpapers were more diverse. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, China's paper and printing industries were quite developed and capable of producing a range of delicate and exquisite paper. In the Palace Museum in Beijing today, the palace wallpapers are made by mixing mother-of-pearl powder with the relevant raw materials. The majority of these wallpapers are monochrome and plain with neat patterns, such as dragon patterns and flower patterns. However, they remain unaffordable for the public. Another type of wallpaper that was commonly seen in the Qing court is "Tie-luo paintings"(貼落畫), translated as Scenic Illusion Paintings. The theme of these paintings is similar to mural paintings, but such wallpapers can be more easily removed. After being mounted, these wallpapers can be either hung on a wall or taken down as a collection of paintings. The Tie-luo paintings were produced under the influence of Western missionary painters, with pictures that present a strong sense of three-dimensionality and depth (figure 2.1). When

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<sup>42</sup> Li, Yu. *Xian Qing Ou Ji*. Shanghai : Shanghai zhong yang shu dian, Min guo 25 [1936]

combined with real indoor scenery, Tie-luo paintings can play a role in expanding the visual space. The themes of these “Tie-luo” paintings were mostly created in accordance with the emperor's will in cooperation with a number of court painters. Hence, Tie-luo paintings are rare works of art and could not have served as a blueprint for the wallpaper sold in large quantities to the UK from Canton.

Westerners have a long tradition of utilizing tapestry carpets for the purpose of decorating walls.



**Figure 2.1:** A scenic illusion painting depicting a woman taking care of her children with a nanny. This work was painted by several court painters during the Qianlong Era and is now stored at the Ningshou Palace in the Palace Museum, Beijing. The use of the Western perspective gives this painting a visual sense of depth.

However, because tapestry carpets are expensive, wallpapers quickly become more popular as a cheap alternative. From the 15th to the early 16th century, Europeans used floral wallpapers to decorate their rooms, including both hand-painted and printed varieties. However, the style of these wallpapers

differed substantially from the Chinese export wallpapers that later entered Europe. In the 17th century, flock wallpapers appeared in Europe, which were a kind of wallpaper that used adhesive and fine wool to create a three-dimensional visual effect. However, flock wallpapers were mostly scarlet and ocher, with mostly geometric patterns, which differed from the style of Chinese export wallpapers.

In summary, the Chinese wallpaper popular in the UK in the 18th century cannot be considered a direct imitation of wallpapers from Chinese history, because they are completely inconsistent with Chinese people's aesthetics vis-à-vis interior decoration at that time. However, since the end of the 17th century, Chinese export wallpaper, a commodity that has no foundation in the history of China or Europe, began to be imported into Europe in large quantities and became a successful commodity. What can explain this phenomenon? Scholars Yuan Xuanping and Xu Wenqin believe that the earliest opportunity for Westerners to be exposed to Chinese export bird-and-flower wallpapers was most likely the export of Chinese bird-and-flower scroll paintings.

At the end of the 17th century, many Chinese export bird-and-flower paintings were brought back to Europe by merchants and missionaries through private gifts. However, Europeans who liked these works did not know how to hang them on the wall. Therefore, European merchants who discovered these new business opportunities likely entered into cooperation with local painters in China in order to produce Chinese wallpapers. Chinese scholar Qian Cunxun also believes that "the Chinese have long used painting scrolls of landscapes, figures, and bird-and-flower motifs to decorate walls. Perhaps it was this kind of scroll that the missionaries brought back to Europe."<sup>43</sup> It can be seen that there is a close connection between the deep tradition of Chinese bird-and-flower paintings and the birth of Chinese

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<sup>43</sup> Qian, Cunxun, *History of Chinese Paper and Printing Culture*, Guang Xi Shi Fan Da Xue Chu Ban She. 2004

export bird-and-flower wallpapers.

## 2.2 Chinese bird-and-flower paintings: the inspiration behind bird-and-flower wallpapers

Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers are unique because they differ from figural wallpapers that adhere to almost the exact same style as the genre paintings from the Ming and Qing Dynasties. To be precise, bird-and-flower wallpapers present an unprecedented combination of Chinese and Western style. Therefore, tracing the source of inspiration behind this new hybrid product is particularly important for understanding the purpose behind their creation. The majority of scholars believe that the artistic source of Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers is traditional Chinese bird-and-flower paintings.

Bird-and-flower paintings, as the name suggests, refer to a style of painting where flowers and birds constitute the main themes. Bird-and-flower paintings are one of the most important genres of traditional Chinese paintings. Moreover, bird-and-flower paintings formally came into being during the Tang Dynasty and reached their peak of prosperity during the Song Dynasty. Both the royal family and ordinary individuals were keen to collect flower-and-bird paintings. In fact, the royal family of the Northern Song Dynasty collected more than two thousand bird-and-flower paintings in the Xuanhe Palace (宣和殿), which housed several art collections. According to the collection catalog of Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song Dynasty, *Xuanhe Painting Book* (《宣和畫譜》), paintings from this era can be divided into ten disciplines. These ten disciplines are Taoism, figures, palaces, nomads, dragon and fish, landscapes, livestock, flowers and birds, bamboo, and vegetables. The last five disciplines in this list belong to the category of bird-and-flower paintings.<sup>44</sup> During the Ming and Qing Dynasties,

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<sup>44</sup> Mei, Zhongzhi: *Collected Papers on Chinese Flower and Bird Painting Art in the 20th Century*. Chongqing Press.2001.

bird-and-flower paintings became so popular that not only the literati, but even folk painters began to create colorful bird-and-flower paintings.

Like other traditional Chinese paintings, Chinese bird-and-flower paintings generally follow one of three styles. These three styles are “xieyi” (寫意), “gongbi” (工筆), and a style in between the two.

The “xieyi” style, also known as the freehand style, is characterized by its relatively bold and abstract outline. Meanwhile, the “gongbi” style depicts the birds and flowers with fine lines that are accurate in detail. Finally, the third style is a combination of the last two. Gongbi paintings can be further divided into line-drawing gongbi paintings and colored gongbi paintings. Although it is rare for the two painting methods to appear at the same time in Chinese painting, on this bird-and-flower wallpaper collected from Temple Newsam, the bamboo, which acts as the main body of the picture, is monochrome, while the peonies below have been carefully filled with color. This rare painting method may not be reflect the painter's special taste, but rather it was used to save time when producing such large-scale wallpaper.

Most of the motifs in bird-and-flower wallpapers are more realistic. In contrast, one of the most important features of gongbi bird-and-flower paintings is that they try to restore the details of animals and plants in order to create more lifelike imagery. Therefore, the prototype of such wallpaper should be gongbi bird-and-flower paintings. Those who paint gongbi bird-and-flower paintings attach great importance to restoring the true forms of plants and birds. According to ancient records, during the Five Dynasties period (907BC-960BC) in China, the birds and animals painted by the artist Huang Quan (黃荃, 903BC-965BC) were so realistic that they even caught the attention of a real eagle during a hunt.

Liu Daochun (劉道醇), a Song art historian, noted that "This winter Meng Chang (孟昶, the emperor of

Later Shu) is going out hunting and they took eagles and hounds with them. One of the eagles broke free because the person holding it could not control it. It flew directly into the palace to fight with the birds Huang Quan painted."<sup>45</sup> Although the story is exaggerated, it shows that only through meticulous observation and vivid depictions of birds and animals can a gongbi bird-and-flower painter achieve such realism (see Figure 2.2).



**Figure 2.2:** Xie Sheng Zhen Qin Tu (Sketches of rare birds), a typical gongbi bird-and-flower painting by Huang Quan, Five Dynasties. It is now on display at the Palace Museum, Beijing. This picture was used by Huang for his sketching exercises. In addition to various birds, there are also lifelike turtles and insects.

However, there is a tendency among literati painters in the upper class to look down on realistic gongbi bird-and-flower painters. Such literati painters emphasize that bird-and-flower painters should be equipped with excellent aesthetics and morals, but refrain from producing overly realistic paintings. A Ming Dynasty art critic even stated that “Only vulgar painters spend time facing flowers and trees to

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<sup>45</sup> Liu, Daochun. *Wu Dai Ming Hua Bu Yi: [1 Juan] ; Song Chao Ming Hua Ping: [3 Juan]*. [Taipei: Taiwan] shang wu [yin shu guan, 1974.

identify leaves, trace colors, classify flowers, and analyze flower stamens. The first-rate painters would not do this. They just need to follow their own thoughts.”<sup>46</sup> The mainstream in Chinese art during the Ming and Qing Dynasties advocated freehand “xieyi” bird-and-flower paintings, rather than meticulous “gongbi” bird-and-flower paintings. Such adherence to “xieyi” bird-and-flower paintings is telling of why export bird-and-flower wallpapers, which mainly used the gongbi painting method, rarely attracted the attention of Chinese art critics at that time.

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that, for Chinese people, gongbi style bird-and-flower paintings that could be easier learned and imitated were even more widespread among ordinary people. In the early Qing Dynasty, with the introduction of Western painting techniques to China, Chinese painters began to learn from Western painting techniques, such as the use of shadows to create contrast and single-point perspectives. Using such techniques, Chinese painters were able to create gongbi bird-and-flower paintings that more accurately depicted plants and animals, while maintaining the unique characteristics of Chinese scroll paintings. These novel paintings attracted the attention of Westerners even before the appearance of Chinese wallpaper. Starting from Canton, export paintings were taken by merchant ship to the homes of the British upper class; thereby laying the foundation for the emergence of bird-and-flower wallpapers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### 2.3 Gusu Woodcut Print: the Predecessor to Bird-and-Flower Wallpaper

Bird-and-flower paintings were able to successfully transition from fine art to decorative art in the 18th century thanks to the intermediary role played by the woodcut prints with bird-and-flower motifs that

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<sup>46</sup> Wang, Zhideng, Jiru Chen, and Chengyan Gao. *Huang Ming Wu Jun Dan Qing Zhi*. Taipei: Yi wen, 5419.

were produced commercially in Gusu (姑蘇), modern-day Suzhou (蘇州), in Southern China. There is even evidence to prove that Gusu woodcut prints are the predecessor to export wallpapers. In the 18th century, with the continuous development of the urban economy in southern China and the introduction of Western painting techniques by missionaries to China, a new form of painting-woodcut prints become increasingly popular in the Jiangnan region of China. Jiangnan (江南) is a geographic area in China that covers those lands immediately south of the Yangtze River. Jiangnan includes the southern cities that lie on its delta, such as Nanjing, Suzhou and Hangzhou. Historically and even today, Jiangnan is considered one of the most prosperous and well-educated regions in China with a long tradition of literati arts thanks to its wealth in natural resources and very high human development.

The most famous Gusu prints, Taohuawu (桃花塢, which translates as Peach Blossom Dock) New Year Prints, refer to the woodcut prints produced in the Taohuawu area of Suzhou during the reigns of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722) and Emperor Qianlong (1735–1796) when the printmaking industry reached its apex. Taohuawu woodblock New Year prints are so named because they are heavily influenced by Suzhou-style literati paintings, which were primarily created and produced in Taohuawu. Chinese people have a tradition of posting New Year paintings with auspicious motifs on their gates every Lunar New Year. Such New Year products are generally woodcut prints, which are easy to reproduce, cheap, and diverse in their themes. Among these themes, the most popular are Chinese mythology; women and babies; and birds and flowers. The well-educated Gusu people possessed a high literati taste for life and enjoyed decorating their homes with paintings. Thanks to prosperous commerce and a strong economy, Gusu housed numerous New Year print workshops and craftsmen during the 18th

century.<sup>47</sup> According to ancient records, several painting products were produced in the “Shantang (山塘)” painting shops. Such products were available in all sizes. Moreover, they were meticulous and freehand in nature. Generally, they covered a variety of subjects, including Taoist gods; landscapes; flowers and birds; character stories; and beautiful women.<sup>48</sup> One of the most popular subjects in these prints were flowers and birds, which were likely introduced to Europe before the wallpapers.

The period from Kangxi to Qianlong was the most prosperous period of the Qing Dynasty. Numerous Gusu prints were sold to Japan and Europe through trade and even influenced the style of Japanese art

at that time. Nowadays, several Gusu bird-and-flower prints that were exported from China in the mid-18th century can still be found in old European castles, such as Château de Filières in Normandy, France, and Oud Amelisweerd in the Netherlands.<sup>49</sup> Among the painters of these prints, Ding Liangxian (丁亮先) is likely the most famous artist. Ding Liangxian was a famous craftsman who lived in Gusu during the early Qing Dynasty. The works of Ding Liangxian are currently on display in the British Museum in the UK



**Figure 2.3:** Ding Liangxian. La Zhuan Chun Hui (Winter leaves and spring comes)”. Gusu Print. British Museum.

<sup>47</sup> Sun Yingqing: *Suzhou's Taohuawu New Year Prints*. China & the World Cultural Exchange; Beijing 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Gu Lu: *Tong Qiao Yi Zhao Lu*. Shanghai gu ji chu ban she.1980 150-151. Quoted in Wang, Zheng Hua: *Art as Commodity: The Commercial Aspects of Suzhou Single-Sheet Prints in the Early and Middle Qing Dynasty*. Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica ISSN:1029-4740.2016.09

<sup>49</sup> See Xu Wenqin: *A Study on the Dates of the Lady Figures in Suzhou Prints in the 18th Century and Large-scale Bird-and-Flower Prints*, Wen Yi Yan Jiu: <http://www.icm.gov.mo/rc/viewer/10102/2535>. Thanks to Professor Xu for providing advice and pictures from Suzhou prints expert Professor Christer von der Burg.

and the Umi-Mori Art Museum in Japan. However, few of his works have survived and collections of his prints in China are even rarer. Historical records show that Ding Liangxian not only had contact with Western missionaries, but was also Catholic.<sup>50</sup> Due to his close relationship with missionaries, Ding Liangxian's prints were introduced to Europe and can be most easily found in the British Museum and the European Wood Print Foundation established by Christer von der Burg. According to Christer von der Burg, many large-scale bird-and-flower drawings from the early 18th century that have survived in European castles are actually Gusu prints. However, Christer von der Burg notes that, due to the important position of Canton as a trade port in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many Western connoisseurs and scholars only refer to these works as "Canton products". Therefore, it can be inferred from the commercial nature of Gusu prints and their legacy in international trade that it is more plausible that woodcut prints arrived in Europe before wallpapers, rather than exotic bird-and-flower wallpapers suddenly appearing in British homes. In other words, even before Chinese painters realized that producing bird-and-flower wallpapers represented a new business opportunity, Westerners must have realized that the charm of the Chinese bird-and-flower motif was thanks to Gusu prints.

Further evidence that supports the notion that Gusu prints are a predecessor to Canton wallpapers is the emergence of large-size wood prints. In this period, the more expensive, traditional smaller bird-and-flower paintings that were originally mounted on scrolls, spawned large-size woodcut prints for overseas customers that were more suitable for decorating walls. According to the art historian Chi-Wen Chang, with Gusu prints, the size of Suzhou woodblock prints is very special. Such works are in fact a rare

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<sup>50</sup> Zheng Tingting, *Hua Tuan Jin Cu Chun Ying Yan: Qing Chu Ding Liang Xian Hua Niao Ban Hua*(Flower and Swallows in Spring, Ding Liang's Bird-and-flower Prints in the Early Qing Dynasty). <https://artouch.com/view/content-10874.html>

large-scale version in the history of global printmaking. The majority of the works are 90~105cm in length and 50~55cm in width. These large woodblock prints were made for Lunar New Year pictures for the purpose of forming New Year posters. Such prints were also exported overseas and eventually became Japanese and European interior furniture and were featured in collections.<sup>51</sup> In her investigation of European castles, Xu Wenqin discovered that the bird-and-flower themed Gusu prints that were already well-known were done by Ding Liangxian and other painters. These prints were small at about 30 x 40 cm. However, Xu Wenqin found some products in European castles that measured from 68 x 137 cm up to the size of an entire wall height (above 250 cm). Xu's new discoveries are telling of the possible changes made by printmakers in order to meet the needs of overseas customers. The excessively large size of New Year pictures, which were designed to be posted on doors, was not appealing to Chinese customers.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Chi-Wen Chang: *Cross-cultural Communication between Suzhou Landscape Woodcut Painting and Western Art in the Flourishing Age of Qing Dynasty*. National Pingtung University. Pingtung, Taiwan.  
<http://ir.nptu.edu.tw/bitstream/987654321/19433/1/13.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> Xu, Wenqin: "A Study on the Dates of the Lady Figures in Suzhou Prints in the 18th Century and Large-scale Bird-and-Flower Prints", *Wen Yi Yan Jiu*: <http://www.icm.gov.mo/rc/viewer/10102/2535>.



**Figure 2.4:** Birds, butterflies and lotus flowers. 120\*150cm. A large Gusu print at Château du Fayel, France. It was likely hung in 1750. Photo by Xu, Wenqin.

In summary, as an important stage in the commercialization of flower-and-bird paintings, Gusu prints played an important intermediary role in the birth of Chinese export bird-and-flower wallpapers. Furthermore, flower-and-bird paintings were sold overseas and become an important window through which Europeans could learn about Chinese traditional bird-and-flower motifs; their exquisite patterns and their practical largeness, which made them ideal for the noble oriental guests in European castles. With such foreshadowing of traditional art forms, it is reasonable that Canton's export flower-and-bird wallpapers would become a hit in the UK.

## Chapter 3. The New Fashion in Lingnan<sup>53</sup>

### - the Cultural Background to the Appearance of Chinese Export Wallpapers

#### 3.1. The special status of Canton in the 18<sup>th</sup> century trade

Chinese wallpaper and its history are inextricably linked to the East India Company and their merchant ships from the Canton trade route.<sup>54</sup> The ancient region known as Canton, modern-day Guangzhou, consisted of a unique harbor along the Southeast Chinese coast. Even to this day, this region is known as one of the three most developed alongside Beijing and Shanghai. According to unearthed foreign artifacts from a shipyard site in Canton dating to the Qin (221- 206 BCE) and Han (202 BCE- 220 CE) Dynasties, this region has not only served as an international commercial port city, but also the starting point of the Maritime Silk Road.<sup>55</sup> Its importance has not waned, as this region continues to play a pivotal role in Chinese maritime trade.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, in order to strengthen the centralization of power and taking safety concerns into account, Chinese rulers adopted a strict maritime policy that prohibited private individuals from going to sea. If the policy was enforced, however, it would have been due to the political and social climate of the time. Regardless of events that had an effect on individuals, Canton was able to maintain its role as a leading trading port. During the first year of Emperor Jiajing's rule (1522), the international trade agency for the two coastal cities of Ningbo and Quanzhou was abolished. As a result, only Canton was allowed to partake in foreign trade. Consequently, Canton was able to monopolize the industry and

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<sup>53</sup> Lingnan(嶺南) is a geographic area in China that refers to the lands south of the Nanling Mountains. The region covers the modern-day Guangdong, Macau and Hong Kong.

<sup>54</sup> Helen Clifford: *Chinese wallpaper From Canton to country house*. Edited by Margot Finn and Kate Smith: The East India Company at Home 1757-1857. London: UCL Press.2018.39

<sup>55</sup> Chen Ying: *Changes and Continuities in Lingnan: Flower-and-bird Painting 1368-1949*. Shanghai Gu Ji Chu Ban She. 2004.266

became the easiest port of entry for Western missionaries and travelers to China.

Canton's overseas trade and cultural exchanges reached unprecedented prosperity during the Qing Dynasty. In 1684, Emperor Kangxi, known for his collection of Western novelties, announced the abolition of the maritime ban; thereby allowing private citizens to conduct overseas trade. The following year, the Qing government set up “Hoppo”, which was the Administrator of Customs in Canton and Macau. This new agency was responsible for managing foreign trade and collecting tariffs, which helped to promote further trade with Canton and increase the region’s prosperity. However, in 1757, the Qing government under the power of Emperor Qianlong closed other trading ports. As a result, Canton was the only port open for overseas trade in China. The government stipulated that "barbarian ships are only allowed to trade in Canton." This economic power consolidation became known as the Canton System. From 1758 to 1838, on the eve of the first Opium War, all trade between the Chinese Empire and Western nations was conducted in Canton. During this time period, as many as 5107 merchant ships arrived at “Hoppo”. Canton had been China's first trade port and still remains a cosmopolitan city with a pivotal role at the center of the world trade system.<sup>56</sup>

Canton's foreign trade business professionals were primarily concentrated in a neighborhood called The Thirteen Factories, which was established in 1686 by 13 powerful merchants recruited by the local government. The Thirteen Factories neighborhood was explicitly designated for foreign trade. At its peak, the Thirteen Factories neighborhood hosted dozens of companies. However, at its decline, there were only 4 companies left in the Thirteen Factories neighborhood. This *feitoria* (trading post in Portuguese) was collectively called the Thirteen Factories, and the Chinese merchants who owned them

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<sup>56</sup> Chen, 267.

were called “Hong Merchants”. William C. Hunter (1812-1891), an American businessman be engaged in commercial activities in Canton for 20 years, explained the term in his book "The Fank-wae at Canton": " The Chinese word 'Hong' was applied to any place of business, but was more particularly used to designate the Hongs of the 'Security Merchants' whence Hong Merchants or any foreign Factory in its entirety. It signifies a row of buildings. By the Chinese, the places of business of foreigners were known as 'Foreign Hongs;'"<sup>57</sup>

Once established, the Thirteen Factories monopolized Sino-Western trade for nearly a century. Its decline and ultimate destruction was marked by the signing of the Nanjing Treaty in 1842 and China’s loss in the first Opium War. The Thirteenth Factories has overseas partnerships first with the Portuguese and then with other Western European countries, such as the Netherlands, the UK, Denmark, and Spain. Since the thirteen branches monopolized foreign trade, Hong merchants were often able to amass a substantial amount of wealth. Such wealth accumulation can be seen in a poem by Qu Dajun, a Qing Dynasty scholar, "Foreign ships rushed out to the sea, and the gate opened to the ocean. How fascinating the silk and satin are, the thirteen factories are full of silver".<sup>58</sup>

In summary, Canton's unique geographical conditions allowed the region to rise up and become the largest foreign trade distribution center in China during the Qing Dynasty. The busy European merchant ships, shrewd Hong merchants and enthusiastic missionaries from all over the world gathered in Canton. Together, they provided a solid foundation for the birth of popularized products, such as bird-and-flower

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<sup>57</sup> Hunter, C. William: *The 'Fan Kwae' at Canton Before Treaty Days 1825-1844*. Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/42685>

<sup>58</sup> Qu, Dajun(屈大均, 1630-1696), *Guang Dong Xin Yu*: vol.15: Huo Yu. 53. Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=900261&remap=gb#p54>

wallpapers.

### 3.2 The emergence of Canton professional painters

Scholars consider Chinese bird-and-flower paintings as the inspiration behind bird-and-flower wallpapers. However, unlike the inspiration, it is almost impossible to complete such large-scale wallpaper with only one artist.



**Figure 3.1:** A professional painter carefully painting peacock feathers at the de Gournay workshops, Wuxi, China. Photo by Anna Wu, April, 2015.

Art historian Anna Wu once visited a Chinese wallpaper workshop in Wuxi, a “Jiang-nan” city in China that still reproduces and exports authentic Chinese export bird-and-flower wallpapers in the authentic style. The wallpaper workshop is responsible for producing hand-painted wallpapers based on the 18th and 19th century export wallpapers for the renowned luxury British interior design company, de Gournay. In the bright and spacious studio, a group of professional painters are busy stylizing the

wallpaper that stretches across a large table: some paint flowers, some paint birds, and some paint branches. This mode of work matches the method utilized by professional painters in Canton during the Qing Dynasty, who worked together to create breathtakingly detailed images on these bird-and-flower wallpapers.<sup>59</sup>

The emergence of this design model which appeared in Canton is inseparable from the region's status as the center of modern East-West art exchange. During the first British Industrial Revolution in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the nation began to seek alternative means by which to expand its economic strength and satisfy its desire for Eastern resources. Consequently, the nation set its sights on the Chinese market. Canton, as the only trade port, was the sole commercial exchange center for western merchant ships and visitors, including missionaries, doctors, and painters. With their arrival, Canton stood at the forefront of the proliferation of Western culture.

According to historical records, as early as the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, Western portrait oil paintings appeared in the coastal areas of southern China. From the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Western professional or amateur painters came to Canton and painted during their stay.<sup>60</sup> At least 17 European painters came to Canton and produced oil paintings. British seascape painter William Daniel and his uncle Thomas Daniel once came to Canton and created the large-scale oil painting "Canton Hong Merchants District" based on the scenery of the Thirteen Factories neighborhood. This painting became an importance reference point for scholars and historians to learn

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<sup>59</sup> See process of making wallpaper in Wu, Anna: *Chinese Wall Paper, Global Histories and Material Culture*. PhD Thesis. Royal Academy.

<sup>60</sup> Jiang,Yinghe: *Western Painting and Canton Port during the Qing Period*. Beijing: Zhong Hua Shu Ju.2007 43.

about the Thirteen Factories. George Chinnery (1774—1852), another British painter, had the greatest influence and the longest residency in Canton. Chinnery revealed his artistic talent at a young age when he studied Western painting at the Royal Academy of Art at the age of 17. When he was 24, he exhibited 21 of his works at the Royal Society. Due to family and debt problems, Chinnery left the UK and went to Macau in 1825 and lived in the Canton region until his death in 1852. Chinnery opened studios in the local foreign residential areas and painted portraits for foreigners and occasionally prominent Chinese officials.<sup>61</sup>

Chinnery headed many Western artists, which may how countless Chinese painters were introduced to the Western painting style, as Chinnery allowed Chinese students to study under him. Amongst those who claimed pupilage was Kwan Kiu Cheong(1801-1860), known as “LamQua” in Cantonese, who went on to become his most famous student.<sup>62</sup> Although Lam Qua had learned a certain degree of western painting skills from local oil painters, he still came to Chinnery as an apprentice in search of more fashionable painting methods. In fact, it was as early as the mid-18th century that Canton painters had already mastered certain Western painting techniques. Pehr Osbeck, a Swedish explorer who arrived in Canton in 1751, commented that “some years ago the Chinese were very defective in their drawings; but as of late, since they have had opportunities of seeing the performances of European artists, they are much improved, and particularly in perspective, with which they were before perfectly unacquainted.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Sullivan. 87:

<sup>62</sup>According to Chinese scholar Liang Jia Bin, “Qua” refers to “official” in Cantonese. Similarly there were other Canton painter called “Howqua” and “Tingqua”. See Liang Jia Bin: *Guang Dong Shi San Hang Kao*. Guang Dong Ren Min Chu Ban She. 1999. 45

<sup>63</sup> Peter Osbeck, *A Voyage to China and the East Indies* (London: Printed for Benjamin White, 1771), 242–43. Quoted from Paul, A. Van Dyke and Maria Kar-wing Mok, and Mok, Maria Kar-Wing. *Images of the Canton Factories 1760–1822 : Reading History in Art*, Hong Kong University Press, 2015. 48

Although Chinnery later denied Lam Qua was one of his pupils, there is no doubt that Lam Qua was a close student of his work.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, with the ability to imitate Western paintings, Lam Qua opened his own art studio and became one of Chinnery's biggest competitors. Lam Qua's export painting business soon became a big success. Lam Qua extensively recruited local students and taught them how to copy Western artworks. However, due to the competitive trade of export paintings, few painters have left their mark on history. The work of less famous artists are generally considered tacky and fruitless, as they drifted to the lower recesses of Canton society.

The painters from Canton accounted for 75% of the total number of painters in the province. With painters in Fuzhou and Guangzhou provinces, on the southeastern coast of China, their numbers were staggering. However, this percentage only accounts for the fine-art painters.<sup>65</sup> In reality, the number of professional export painters living in Canton was even greater. The lives and prosperity of professional painters in Canton during that time period were well documented in the travel notes of Westerners during the 18th and 19th centuries. For example, 19th-century British traveler Osmond Tiffany wrote that, "The painters are a numerous class in old and new China streets, and are certainly much better than I expected to find."<sup>66</sup> American missionary, S. W. Williams, in 1847 conducted an investigation and found that the manufacturing industry of Canton pith painting employed two to three thousand painters.<sup>67</sup> These professional export painters were relatively unknown and lived in the shadows of society. From the

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<sup>64</sup> Micheal Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art: From the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day*. New York Graphic Society Ltd. 1973. 88

<sup>65</sup> Zhao, Zhenyu: "An Analysis of the Geographical Distribution of Qing Dynasty Paintings——Taking the Distribution of Qing Dynasty Painters as a Clue". *Rong Bao Zhai*. 2016.6

<sup>66</sup> Tiffany, Osmond, 1823-. *The Canton Chinese: Or, The American's Sojourn In the Celestial Empire*. Boston: J. Munroe and company, 1849. 83

<sup>67</sup> S. W. Williams, *The Middle Kingdom*, New York: John Wiley, 1861, p.175.

1850s to the late 19th century, professional export painters set up studios near the Thirteen Factories neighborhoods; copied Western paintings; created other artworks, including bird-and-flower wallpapers, as they relied on the commissions and support of art connoisseurs.

The assembly line work and its division of labor was pivotal in the exportation of bird-and-flower wallpapers. In fact, this traditional division of labor has been the cornerstone of the large-scale figural or flower-and-bird paintings that have long existed in China. As early as the Song Dynasty, the Palace established "painting academies" to recruit painters who were good at painting different subjects. According to the records of Qing Scholar Li E's "*Nan Song Yuan Hua Lu*", translated as the Records of Southern Song Painting Academy, there were more than 90 painters in the Academy of Painting. Some of these painters specialized in landscapes and others in painting flowers and birds, however, more than half excelled at both<sup>68</sup>. During the citizen class expansion in the Ming Dynasty, there were many folk painters who were good at depicting flowers and birds, and even painters who had turned from literati painters to professional painters began to emerge. Tang Yin (唐寅, 1470-1524), a famous painter known as one of the "Four Masters of Ming dynasty", took first place in the Suzhou Provincial Examination during his youth. Tang Yin possessed excellent painting skills. He excelled at both freehand xieyi landscape painting and delicate gongbi bird-and-flower paintings. However, in his later years, he lived in poverty and had to rely on friends for support. Consequently, Tang Yin went from being a member of the literati to a professional painter who sold paintings in order to make enough money to live.

Although there exists few records regarding wallpaper painters (export paintings), it is easy to learn

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<sup>68</sup> Li E, *Nan Song Yuan Hua Lu*(南宋院畫錄): *Mu Lu*. Chinese Text Project: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=123876&remap=gb>

about the working system of folk painters through another commodity in the export painting industry-pith paintings<sup>69</sup>. Pith paper, otherwise known as rice paper, is made from the inner pith of the plant *Tetrapanax papyrifera*, which is a shrub native to Southern China.<sup>70</sup> Pith paintings were the most popular type of paintings sold abroad. In order to meet the increasing demands for pith paintings from western merchants, private art studios adopted assembly lines and recruited large numbers of skilled artists to speed up production. The "China Series" published in October 1835 stated "There are more than 30 shops selling pith painting albums near the thirteen factories, and two to three thousand people are employed to make these paintings." "Studio of Ting Qua", as shown in Figure 3.2, depicts the workplace of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century folk painters employed by export painter Ting Qua, presents a spacious and airy room, with several painters drawing their parts surrounded by walls featuring many different themed paintings. These paintings displayed on the walls were either samples for copying or products to be sold to visiting Western customers. Furthermore, in order to meet market demand, painters often rushed to imitate paintings popular among costumers, as the market was often volatile. For instance, in the export painting "Three Hundred and Sixty Industries", as shown in Figure 3.3, a Qing Dynasty painter is carefully copying a seemingly western style painting while employing the use of a ruler, which suggests that copying paintings was a common business practice among Canton folk painters.

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<sup>69</sup> According to Jiang Yinghe, Canton's export painters were generally able to concurrently master several painting types. Many painters could produce oil paintings and glass paintings, as well as portraits and port landscapes. See Jiang, Yinghe: *Western Painting and Canton Port during the Qing Period*. Beijing: Zhong Hua Shu Ju. 2007 146

<sup>70</sup> Penny Jenkins, A partial reprint from "Conservation of Pith Paper". *Paper Conservation News*, March 1995



**Figure 3.2:** Studio of Tingqua. Active mid-19th century, Guangzhou, China. Shop of Tingqua, The Painter, about 1830. Gouache on paper. Peabody Essex Museum.

This mode of work also explains why, in wallpapers featuring combinations of figures, flowers and trees, there are discrepancies. The characters at the bottom of the wallpapers were often not related to the large-scale plants above, as they were most-likely completed by several painters in an assembly line. Such wallpapers were undoubtedly influenced by the demands of the western market. Compared to the more traditional and expensive figural wallpapers, the combination of bird-and-flower wallpapers with popular Chinese elements and figures undoubtedly led to more profits, as these were easily replicable for the local painters. Therefore, we can assume that the assembly line and commercial mass production played an indispensable role in the development of flower-and-bird wallpapers from their roots as Chinese bird-and-flower paintings loved by the literati, into an art product enjoyed by the general public.



**Figure 3.3:** Anonymous: An export painting showing a Canton painter carefully coping a sample of glass painting. Qing Dynasty. Peabody Essex Museum.

### 3.3. Folding screen and porcelain——various carriers of bird-and-flower motifs

Since the people of south China have never used garish and bright wallpapers for the purpose of decorating their interiors, the emergence of export bird-and-flower wallpapers does not represent a vertical transfer from Chinese native wallpapers to export ones. Instead, it is likely that the reason for this is that Westerners came into contact with Chinese bird-and-flower motifs through various channels. Consequently, Westerners treated such motifs as an exotic cultural symbol of China. This section explores the various means by which Chinese bird-and-flower motifs reached the UK, and their impact on the demand for bird-and-flower wallpapers.

Canton's prosperous commercial trade led to positive interactions between culture and craftsmanship. Cantonese embroidery, Cantonese colored porcelains, export paintings, export wallpapers, export silverware, export lacquerware, export fans and business card cases were produced in Canton and sold overseas. All these products are permeated with both Chinese tastes and features that specifically cater to UK aesthetics. Based on the Chinese-style products that were sold in the UK, it is likely that the British first encountered Chinese bird-and-flower motifs through bulk commodities, such as porcelain, silk, screens and fans.

As one of the earliest Chinese commodities that came to Europe, porcelain introduced the charm of bird-and-flower motifs to Europeans long before the appearance of export wallpapers. Before Europe entered the period known as the Middle Ages, Chinese porcelain was introduced. However, at this time, very few Europeans managed to obtain Chinese porcelain. Consequently, Chinese porcelain remained a symbol of wealth and status for European aristocracy until the late 16th century. In 1699, the British merchant ship "Macclesfield" was allowed to enter Canton and subsequently returned to England with

53 boxes of porcelain and a substantial quantity of tea. As a result, the British set up a branch of the East India Company in Canton and began to transport large quantities of Chinese porcelains to Europe.<sup>71</sup> Such exported porcelains can be divided into two groups. The first is porcelain for the local Chinese market, which generally produced for to local Chinese aesthetics, mostly with traditional landscapes, figures, and flower and bird patterns. The second is ceramics produced for the Western market, which often featured woodprint patterns and royal coats of arms. Among such export porcelain, bird-and-flower porcelain, which was highly unique in China, not only elevated the reputation of traditional Chinese decorative patterns in Europe, but also promoted other export products featuring bird-and-flower motifs, such as Cantonese bird-and-flower fans and glass crafts.

Bird-and-flower porcelain paintings were integral for the development of bird-and-flower motifs from that of fine art to that of decorative art. In addition to inheriting the various manifestations of paintings, porcelain paintings added certain characteristics typical seen in decorative art. Nonetheless, the two types retained their own qualities; thereby showcasing the differences in the understanding of painting different materials and different painters. Bird-and-flower porcelain paintings first appeared in Changsha kilns during the Tang Dynasty. The appearance of these paintings coincided with bird-and-flower paintings being established as a painting category. During the Song Dynasty, the Cizhou kiln became the main source of bird-and-flower ceramics. Although it was not colored, the style was remarkably similar to that of the court bird-and-flower paintings of the Tang Dynasty. In the Yuan and Ming dynasties, blue and white porcelain became mainstream and was exported to Europe in large

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<sup>71</sup> Wang, Wenhong: *The Trade Relations between Britain and Zhoushan in the Early Qing Dynasty*. Ning Bo Da Xue Xue Bao: 2015. Vol.2.

quantities. As a result of such exportation, there was huge demand and a proliferation of imitations. Then, during the Qing Dynasty, colored porcelain paintings occupied the hearts of society, whilst blue and white flower and bird porcelain paintings took a backseat. Qing-colored porcelain is known for its fine lines, rich colors and meticulous depictions of branches and leaves. Moreover, Qing-colored porcelain is considered an illustration of strong realism. After the Qianlong period, people began to desire paintings that invoked wishes for wealth and longevity that were magnificently presented. Furthermore, it is this style that appears in export bird-and-flower wallpapers and fans.<sup>72</sup>

The porcelain exported from Canton during the Qing Dynasty was called Kwon-cai, or Kwon-Glazed Porcelain. Such export porcelain was made, glazed, and fired at Jingdezhen, the “porcelain capital”, before then being decorated with enamel in Canton for export to the west via the Thirteen Factories. Kwon-Glazed Porcelain utilized numerous pigments, including natural pigments, like golden red, water blue, water green, eggplant purple and lake water green, as well as foreign pigments, such as copper oxide and cobalt oxide. Due to the close relationship between porcelain art and traditional Chinese paintings, porcelain paintings can be considered another form of "export painting".<sup>73</sup> By comparing the export Kwan-cai bird-and-flower porcelain, folding screens and wallpapers, it is clear that similar bird-and-flower motifs appear in various other exports. For instance, an export porcelain plate with famille rose enamel decoration from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century depicts the classic phoenix motif in a bird-and-flower painting (see Figure 3.4). In the middle of the disk, surrounded by pink, blue and green borders, a proud

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<sup>72</sup> Peng, Liuyun: "The Evolution and Significance of Flower and Bird Image in Flower and Bird Porcelain Painting". *Ceramic Studies*. Vol.34.2019. 85-86

<sup>73</sup> Valenstein, Suzanne G (1989). "A handbook of Chinese ceramics". [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org). Metropolitan Museum of Art.

bird with a long tail stands on the rock and majestically looks back—it is a *fenghuang*(鳳凰), or phoenix, the king of birds in Chinese mythology. The phoenix is an auspicious symbol in China, while mountains and rocks symbolize stability and longevity. Together, the phoenix, mountains and rocks represent luck and longevity. A similar pattern also appears on a surviving export bird-and-flower embroidered folding screen in the Peabody Essex Museum in the USA (see Figure 3.5). On the screen, two phoenixes appear in the center and are looking at each other. The phoenix nearer the center stands elegantly on a fantastic rock. Frolicking amongst the trees and shrubs in the background are a variety of different birds, including golden pheasants, sparrows and swallows. On this screen, the arrangement of flower and bird elements is closer to that of traditional bird-and-flower paintings. In other words, the distribution of various plants conforms to the typical composition of traditional Chinese paintings, whereby sufficient space is left between the different subjects. In fact, this phoenix motif is immensely popular amongst Chinese citizens and has been extensively copied by Canton export painters.



**Figure 3.4:** “Ruby-Back” dish with Phoenix. Qing Dynasty. 18<sup>th</sup> century. Porcelain with overglaze famille rose enamel decorations. On display at the Art Institute Chicago.



**Figure 3.5:** Section of six panels with birds, figures, and characters in the form of a screen. Qing dynasty, late 18th-early 19th century. Suzhou, China. 366 x 498 cm, Embroidery (xiu): silk and gold-wrapped threads on satin ground, cotton, paper, and pigments; lining. Gift from William F. Spinney, 1933. Peabody Essex Museum



**Figure 3.6:** A folding screen decorated with three copies of print, each with a phoenix perched on a rock, surrounded by flowers and trees. Now stored at Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire.

Figure 3.6 shows the three-leaf folding screen located in Woburn Abbey, England, which depicts a colorful mythical creature with a long tail. With the exception of the different types of rocks and trees, the shape and demeanor of the colorful mythical creature portrayed are almost the same as the phoenix on the folding screen from the Peabody Essex Museum. The same-shaped phoenix also appears in a room called the birdcage house in Grimethorpe Castle in the UK. Studies have shown that this phoenix—most likely belonging to the same batch of imported phoenix screens—was cut from another painting and re-pasted on another wallpaper in order to better frame the creature relative to the size of

the room. The height of the screen currently in the Peabody Essex Museum is about 366cm, and the height of the phoenix plus its long tail accounts for about a quarter of the overall screen height, which equates to approximately 90cm. However, for the bird cage house that is over four meters tall, the original dimensions are not sufficient for if it is meeting the needs of the room. Therefore, the phoenix has been cut out and re-spliced. This case proves that at least in 1760, British interior designers tried to combine the bird-and-flower motifs from Chinese gongbi painting with local decorative arts in order to create an exotic Chinese room that could adapt to British houses. Furthermore, this decorative demand likely influenced Chinese wallpaper painters and led them to modify traditional bird-and-flower paintings for Western interior decoration.

In summary, although the Chinese people did not traditionally use flower and bird elements as wallpaper, the addition of the Chinese bird-and-flower motifs entering Europe by way of the UK through various export commodities, such as porcelain, screens, and fans, allowed for the industry to blossom. In turn, British consumers began to appreciate the charm of Chinese bird-and-flower motifs. Consequently, the market's demand for such products was stimulated, which then encouraged Canton folk painters to innovatively expand beyond more traditional, small-sized bird-and-flower designs to adaptable decorative art.

## Chapter 4. The Grand Tour of Botany

### —Bird-and-Flower Wallpaper and the Enthusiasm for Exotic Plants

#### 4.1. The beauty of asymmetry—the charm of a Chinese garden

Chinese decorative art became popular in the UK in the 18th century due to the British people's desire for China's wealth; admiration for China's morality; and fascination with Chinese gardens and their naturalistic ideas. Sullivan believes that, although the impact of China on 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe is very "indirect and subtle", for Chinese garden designs "its effect was immediate and revolutionary".<sup>74</sup>

The UK has a long tradition of gardening. In 2011, the British anthropologist Alan Macfarlane emphasized the importance of gardens in British culture in a lecture at Tsinghua University. Macfarlane noted that "Long before urbanization and industrialization in the second half of the 18th century, the British interest in flowers and gardens is already very persuasive and strong... More importantly, the British garden aesthetics is inseparable from its national character... Which reflects something unique."<sup>75</sup>

Before learning about Chinese-style gardens, British gardens were mainly influenced by classical Baroque gardens from Italy, whereby the style of the entire garden is centered on the central axis. The distribution of flower beds and layout of buildings are both regular and symmetrical, which creates a solemn and open visual effect. Since the 18th century, there have been extensive exchanges between Eastern and Western gardens as the enthusiasm for Chinese objects swept across Europe. The development of English landscape gardens, in which an idealized view of nature is presented, has also been influenced by Chinese philosophy and culture, especially the naturalistic ideas and asymmetric

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<sup>74</sup> Sullivan. 108-109

<sup>75</sup> Sun, Hong Wei: *The Lies about English Gardens and Plant Collection*. Guang Ming Daily. 2020 Jan 09. 13

aesthetic in Chinese gardens. In China, the art of gardening takes the pursuit of the spiritual realm of nature as the ultimate and highest goal, with the purpose of achieving the aesthetic purpose of "Although it is made by humans, it is naturally formed".<sup>76</sup> According to Ieoh Ming Pei, the renowned American Chinese architect, in China, "architecture and the garden are one. A Western building is a building, and a garden is a garden. They're related in spirit. But they are one in China."<sup>77</sup> The charm and philosophy of Chinese gardens lie in their expert use of water, stones and plants for the purpose of creating a livable environment, like nature.

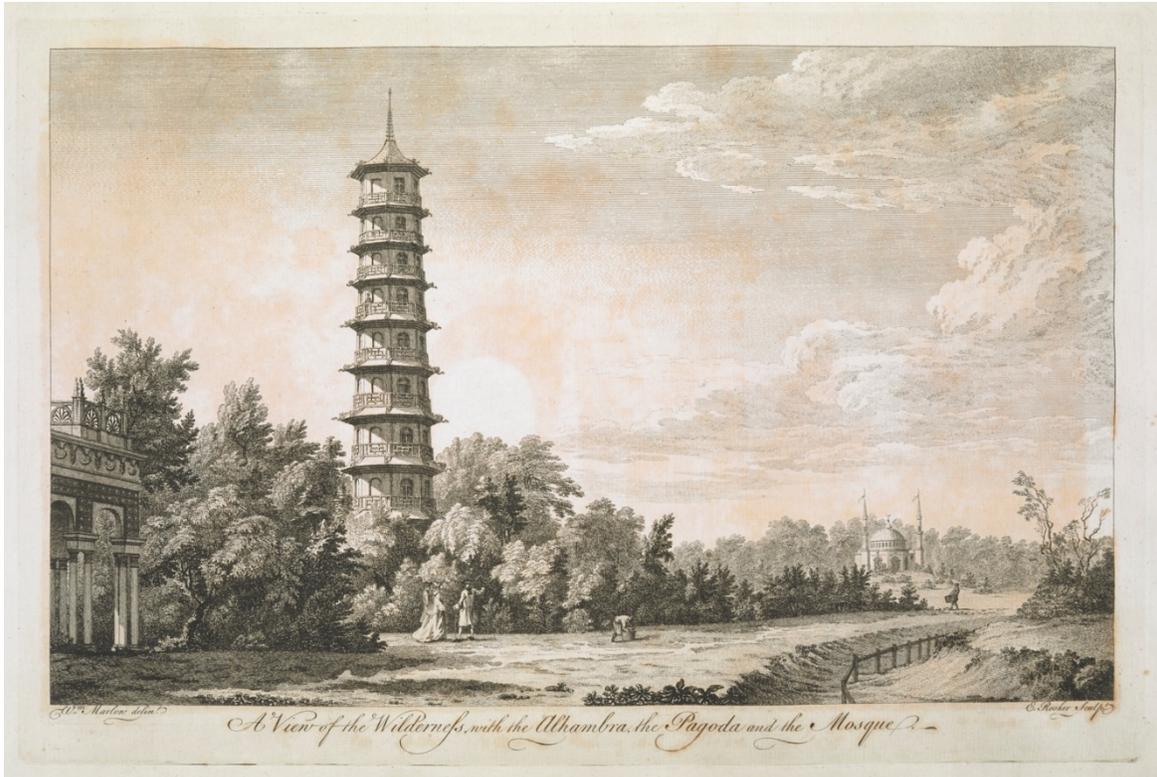
The famous British gardener William Chambers played a pivotal role in the promotion of Chinese naturalistic gardens. In the 18th century, Chinese natural-style landscape gardens were first introduced to the UK by William Chambers, which resulted in a spike in imitation Chinese gardens in the UK at the time. Chambers visited Canton during his youth and lived there for several months. As a result, Chambers was deeply moved by the charm of the Chinese garden. In 1757, Chambers published *Chinese Architecture, Furniture, Clothing, Machinery and Utensils Design* and discussed crucial points in the construction of Chinese gardens in the chapter *the Art of Laying out Gardens among the Chinese*. Later, Chambers was responsible for the renovation of Kew Gardens, the Royal Botanic Gardens, as a court architect. Specifically, Chambers built a number of Chinese-style buildings in the garden, including the famous "Chinese Pagoda"(see Figure 4.1). This octagonal, brick pagoda was built in 1762 and stands at a height of approximately 50 meters. The top of the pagoda was originally decorated with a Chinese dragon but has since been replaced with more modern dragons. Chambers designed the pagoda with

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<sup>76</sup> Ji, Cheng (1582-1640): *Yuan Ye (the Craft of Gardens)*. Chinese Text Project. [https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&res=2883&by\\_title=%E5%9B%AD%E5%86%B6](https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&res=2883&by_title=%E5%9B%AD%E5%86%B6)

<sup>77</sup> Barboza, David: *I. M. Pei in China, Revisiting Roots*. New York Times. Oct.9 2006

reference to the drawings of the glazed “Da-bao-en” tower in China as drawn by the envoy of the Dutch East India Company.



**Figure 4.1:** A print titled “A View of the Wilderness with the Alhambra, the Pagoda and the Mosque”, Plate 43 of William Chambers’s *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew ...* 1763

At the time, many British garden designers were willing to add a little Chinese element to their gardens, the most common examples of which are Chinese pagodas, arch bridges, pavilions and exotic rock groups. Sir William Temple was probably the most enthusiastic admirer of China in the UK at the time. Temple admired everything in China, including its politics, morality, philosophy, art, cultural knowledge and medicine. In 1683 "Upon Heroic Virtue" praised the natural beauty of Chinese gardens, noting that “their greatest reach of imagination is employed in contriving figures, where the beauty shall be great,

and strike the eye, but without any order or disposition of parts that shall be commonly or easily observed.”<sup>78</sup> The theoretical and practical creations of Chambers and other gardeners attracted great attention in the UK at the time, which briefly set off a wave of imitation Chinese-style gardens. In the 18th century, Romanticism was emerging in the UK and the gardening concept advocated by Chambers brought to life the ideal garden as theorized by scholars. The British also refer to Chinese-style gardens as picturesque gardens because Chinese gardens create an idyllic and romantic atmosphere. Later, French gardens were similarly influenced, as they sought to replicate the British practice of constructing gardens. The French called such gardens "Chinese-style gardens (jardins chinois), or "Anglo-Chinese gardens (jardins anglo-chinois). In 1779, Christian Cajus Lorenz Hirschfeld, a professor of German aesthetics, commented in *Theorie der Garten kunst* that “Nowadays, people build gardens not according to their own ideas, or according to more elegant tastes from the past. Instead, they only ask whether or not they are Chinese style or Anglo-Chinese style." According to Hirschfeld, the popularity of Chinese gardens in Europe at that time was considerably large.

The British enthusiasm for Chinese gardens in the 18th century further stimulated their enthusiasm for exotic plants. Be it a chintz from India, a pua (ikat textile from Southeast Asia), embroidered textiles, or bird-and-flower wallpapers from China, living in harmony with nature like Asian people became an ideal pursued by the British.

#### 4.2. The love of Chinese plants—Motivation for buying bird-and-flower wallpapers

In 2010, at the World Expo held in Shanghai, China, a dandelion-like building with long and thin fluff

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<sup>78</sup> Willam Temple: *Upon Heroic Virtue*. Quoted from Sullivan.109

caused a sensation among tourists. This construction, the British National Pavilion, otherwise known as the Seed Cathedral, was a wooden structure pierced by 60,000 fibre-optic rods that each contain plant seeds at their tips. These seeds come from the seed bank jointly established by Kew Gardens in the UK and the Kunming Institute of Botany in China.<sup>79</sup> The British National Pavilion was designed to celebrate the profound friendship between China and the UK in relation to botany. In 1851, when the first World Expo was held in Hyde Park in London, Joseph Paxton, gardener of Kew Gardens, took inspiration from the leaf structure of The Giant Lily and designed a sketch of the Expo venue Crystal Palace.<sup>80</sup> For more than a hundred years, the British have maintained an extraordinary love for exotic plants, which contributed to their interest in Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers. Today, Kew Gardens, which has the world's largest seed bank, has a collection of plants from the East and the West. It is worth mentioning that 18<sup>th</sup>-century Plant Hunters and the Chinese painters they hired also made outstanding contributions to these collections.

The 18th century can be characterized as a period of rapid development in the natural sciences in Europe, when people becoming increasingly interested in nature. Aristocrats and scholars from across Europe bought shells, strange stones, straw-stuffed animal specimens, strange gadgets and exotic plants from returning explorers. Consequently, they put the collected novelties on display for people to see, and even set up a special room to collect and store them while the general public visited the botanical garden and learned about rare plants. The prosperity and development of European natural history and the pursuit of exoticism make naturalists eager to record information on the growth of plants from all over the world.

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<sup>79</sup> UK Pavilion: Shanghai 2010. Thomas Heatherwick Project. <http://www.heatherwick.com/project/uk-pavilion/>

<sup>80</sup> MIT Press: *The Giant Lily That Inspired the Architect*. 2019 Jan 14. <https://medium.com/@mitpress/the-giant-lily-that-inspired-the-architect-b10126dd71c6>

In addition, naturalists wanted to acquire plant seeds from all over the world in order to bring them back to their home countries.

The British are particularly passionate about oriental plants. In fact, the British were the first to collect plants in mainland China. The British government dispatched McCartney and William Pitt Amherst to visit China in 1792 and 1816. On both these visits, the British had the rare opportunity to further explore China and collect natural history specimens. The director of Kew Gardens, Joseph Banks (1734-1820), was responsible for arranging the plant collection. Banks was a scholar interested in the study of Chinese natural history, who strived to introduce Chinese plants to the UK. On one occasion, Banks told the British mission to China, that upon encountering "useful, novel or beautiful" plants, you must seize the opportunity to get them; try to obtain "mysterious" Chinese gardening knowledge and introduce them to the UK.<sup>81</sup> However, due to strict policy restrictions in the Qing Dynasty, British naturalists and plant hunters were unable to thoroughly explore mainland China for the purpose of collecting plants. Consequently, British naturalists and plant hunters had to limit their work to Canton. In 1844, Scottish botanist Robert Fortune was commissioned by the Horticultural Society of London to visit the Thirteenth Factories in Canton, where he visited the local gardens and collected new plant categories, including palm trees, magnolias and lychees.<sup>82</sup> Seven years later, Fortune smuggled tea seeds and seedlings from south China to India. Encouraged by the outstanding achievements of their predecessors, more and more British plant hunters were attracted by oriental plants and went to Canton so as to collect plant seeds or make plant specimens. Meanwhile, those finds that could not be made into specimens

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<sup>81</sup> Fan, Fa-ti, *British Naturalists in Qing China*. Harvard University Press, 2004.45

<sup>82</sup> Fan,82-83

were recorded with natural history illustrations and brought back to the UK.

On the one hand, British plant hunters zealously collected plant seeds, specimens and scientific illustrations in Canton. On the other hand, Cantonese businessmen and flower farmers who became rich by doing business with Westerners also kindly introduced native plants to their guests. Thanks to its warm climate and variety of plant species, Canton has always been known as the "Flower City" in China. Due to the limited scope of activities available to foreigners in Canton, naturalists and gardeners generally could only search for plant varieties in flower markets and gardens near the foreign factories. Among them, Hwa-Te, a village near Canton, which translates to the land full of flowers, was the most popular attraction among foreigner plant hunters. William C. Hunter, a New York businessman who lived in Canton for several years, recalled his experience of visiting Hwa-Te in his book *Bits of Old China*. In particular, Hwa-Te mentioned a famous local gardener called Aching who enthusiastically introduced him to countless famous flowers and shared extensive gardening knowledge.<sup>83</sup> Hospitable Hong merchants were also willing to proudly invite Westerners to visit their gardens for the purpose of enhancing mutual understanding and friendship. These Hong merchants often hosted banquets in the gardens of their homes so as to entertain Western officials, businessmen and guests from various industries. In 1812, English naturalist John Reeves came to Guangzhou as an employee of the East India Company. In the span of a few months, Reeves participated in two or three banquets held by Pwan-Kei-Qua, a rich and powerful local Hong merchant, for foreigners. At these banquets, Reeves hunted for treasure plants among the three thousand pots of high-quality chrysanthemums in Pwan's private garden.

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<sup>83</sup> Hunter, William C. *Bits of Old China*. London: K. Paul, Trench, & Co., 1885.  
<http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001257184>.

In the context of the active exchange of natural history information between China and the UK, it is not surprising that the British were willing to fill their houses with exotic plants from China. One example of this is the frequency with which peonies appear in export bird-and-flower wallpapers. Although it has not been officially certified, the peony has always been the national flower of China. Thanks to its gorgeous shape, huge flowers and bright colors, the peony is referred to as the "king of flowers" and "the rich man in flowers" in folk culture. Hence, the peony is deeply loved by ordinary people. The poet Liu Yuxi of the Tang Dynasty once praised the incomparable status of the peony among the Chinese in a poem. Liu noted that *Paeonia Lactiflora* is so pretty and coquettish before court/Lotus in pool short of emotion/Only Peony, the true beauty of national/Makes a stir in the capital in her flowering season.<sup>84</sup> Peonies often appear in Chinese bird-and-flower paintings, porcelain paintings and prints. Furthermore, peonies often form a motif combination with the phoenix that implies wealth and power. Among the bird-and-flower wallpapers exported to the UK, peonies appear in almost every wallpaper. One reason why the peony enjoyed such a reputation is that Chinese native painters love the auspicious meaning of the peony. In addition, the British love the peony as an exotic plant. British plant hunters who are active in Canton liked to visit the gardens of Hong Merchants. Those gardens are planted with exotic flowers and trees that are rare in general commercial nurseries, such as fine tree peonies. Peony is one of the most desired flowers and trees for the British. In addition to their bright and eye-catching flowers, peonies are originally grown in temperate regions, so British believed that such flower can grow well in Britain. However, due to the characteristics of peony, there were few high-quality peonies in Canton.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Liu, Yuxi. *Liu Yuxi Shi Wen Xuan Zhu*. Di 1 ban. [Nanjing]: Jiangsu ren min chu ban she, 1980.116

<sup>85</sup> Fan, 36-38

In the 17th century, merchant ships carrying Chinese porcelain successively arrived in Europe and the UK. Locals first saw the peony on porcelain and were immediately attracted to its beauty. From Chinese drawings and praise bestowed on the plant in books, an “ardent desire was excited in Sir Joseph Banks—the head of the royal gardens at Kew—and others to obtain some of the Plants.”<sup>86</sup> In the 18th century, Sir Joseph Banks asked a doctor who worked for East India Company to seek out peonies on his behalf. Finally, in 1787, the peony that captivated the British was introduced to Kew Gardens in London. By 1835, the peonies introduced by Banks had grown to a height of more than two meters and covered an area of several square meters, with thousands of flowers in bloom.<sup>87</sup> The British poet John Keats once mentioned the peony in his "Ode on Melancholy" written in 1819. In particular, Keats stated that "Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose, Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, Or on the wealth of globed peonies".<sup>88</sup> In 1815, Keats enrolled as a medical student at Guy's Hospital which belongs to King's College London. Keats likely saw peonies at Kew Gardens in the southwestern suburbs of London. In his poem, the beauty of the peony can be compared with the rainbow above the waves, which shows that the peony quickly captured the hearts of the British people.

The peony appears in the earliest Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers exported to the UK. A set of bird-and-flower wallpapers currently in Milton Manor House is considered one of the earliest examples of this decorative trend (see Figure 4.2). In 1764, a successful London businessman, Bryant Barrett, bought and began to redecorate Milton Manor House. These Chinese wallpapers were hung in the bedroom and

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<sup>86</sup> Harding, Alice (Howard), "Mrs. Edward Harding." *The Book of the Peony*. Philadelphia, 1917.279

<sup>87</sup> Luo, Gui Huan. *History of Western Botanical and Zoological Studies in China*. Taipei: Showwe Information Co., Ltd. 2018.70-71

<sup>88</sup> Keats. *Ode on Melancholy*. Great Neck Publishing: Great Neck Publishing, 2000.

the dressing room separately around 1760. They were hung separately because they were too large to hang in only one room. On the bottom part of this wallpaper, the designer cut the peonies from another bird-and-flower wallpaper and rearranged them to form a foreground for the whole picture. In other blank spaces on the wallpaper, there are also peonies that have been rearranged to make the picture looks fuller.



**Figure 4.2:** A bird-and-flower wallpaper featuring peony motifs in a dressing room at Milton Manor House. The upper branches of the trees were combined with a repasted foreground.

In another set of bird-and-flower wallpapers that were introduced to the UK at an earlier date, the presence of peonies seems to be stronger (see Figure 4.3). This set of wallpapers was decorated in Nostell Priory, a country house in West Yorkshire. In 1771, the interior designer Thomas Chippendale, who was entrusted by the owner to redecorate the house, provided eighteen volumes of "exquisite Indian

wallpaper" and asked for them to be hung on the walls of the master bedroom and two dressing rooms. Although it now looks bronze, the background of this wallpaper was originally light blue, but over time the paint has faded. Moreover, there is a phoenix on this wallpaper, next to which red or purple peony flowers can be seen blooming on a huge peony tree. This combination indicates prosperity and success. Although the peony tree can grow to a height of about two meters, this wallpaper obviously exaggerates the scale of the peony tree. On the blue background, the branches of the peony tree cover the entire wall, while the majestic phoenix is the size of a small pheasant.



**Figure 4.3:** A bird-and-flower wallpaper featuring peony motifs at Nostell Priory. A phoenix is perched on a tree branch, surrounded by peonies in full bloom.

Obviously, the British who purchased these wallpapers were content to fill their living room with exotic plants like peonies. Moreover, there are many bird-and-flower wallpapers with peony motifs like these two wallpapers that are still on display in the UK. Although the British had never seen real peonies when these two wallpapers were first hung, they nonetheless loved peonies so much that they still wanted them in their private domestic life, such as in bedrooms and dressing rooms. Such a strong interest in exotic plants and animals may be one factor that motivated the British to purchase Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers.

#### 4.3. The relationship between export botanical paintings and bird-and-flower wallpapers

Among the export paintings in Canton, there is a special type called Chinese botanical paintings. Roughly drawn between 1770 and 1840, these paintings typically depict plants from the Lingnan area. Due to the similarities between the botany paintings and bird-and-flower wallpapers, it is necessary to determine whether the artists who painted botanical paintings had ever interacted with the export artists who created the bird-and-flower wallpapers.

Local painters were hired by European naturalists and various plant hunters to create these Canton export botanical paintings throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries for the purpose of depicting various plants that they had found or their specimens for documentation. Due to the difficulties associated with keeping plants during their long voyages (i.e. plants drying out; becoming withered; or losing their original shape and colors), it made conducting research harder. Therefore, many naturalists decided to hire painters to draw the plants for them, so as to aid in their documentation work. In his book *British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire, and Cultural Encounter*, Fa-ti Fan discusses how plant

hunters in Canton at the time instructed local painters to draw botanical illustrations. When European plant hunters first came to the Canton region, Fa-ti Fan noted that they randomly asked local painters to paint the Chinese plants. These actions often resulted in the drawings being copied from the Chinese herbal medicine book "*Bencao gangmu*(1596)", or they took creative liberties and painted what they wanted, far from the naturalistic drawings required by Europeans.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the British East India Company and plant hunters sent employees to guide Canton painters so that they could learn how to illustrate animals and plants in a manner compatible with the requirements for natural history research. British naturalist John Reeves (1774-1856) contributed the most in relation to Canton's botany paintings. Reeves was a tea inspector stationed by the East India Company in 1812, who found himself actively exploring the southern coastal cities for more than two decades.<sup>90</sup> The British Horticultural Association requested the watercolor and sketch botany paintings that Reeves had obtained during his travels. These botanical paintings, all 138, are now displayed at the Lindley Library in London. According to his journal from 1829, Reeves would typically hire four painters to paint for him. These painters were Akew, Akam, Akut, and Asung. These names are not their real names, but nicknames given to them by Reeves based off their Cantonese names. Therefore, it is impossible to verify their identity. Under Reeves's instruction, most of these botanical paintings were drawn in accordance with the standards of scientific illustrations. The pictures would include the overall appearance of the plant, plus details such as the branches, leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds, as well as the cross-sections of its flowers and fruits. Due to requests from Western plant hunters, some plants (like the palm tree), not present in traditional Chinese

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<sup>89</sup> Fan, Fa-ti, *British Naturalists in Qing China*. Harvard University Press, 2004. 50

<sup>90</sup> Bernard Barham Woodward, *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 47, Reeves, John (1774-1856)*.

bird-and-flower paintings, were able to become the subjects in some botany paintings.<sup>91</sup>

Like bird-and-flower wallpapers, these botanical paintings were influenced by the traditional sketches and designs present in the bird-and-flower paintings, these paintings emulated many of the same characteristics. One of the most realistic and intricate types of bird-and-flower gongbi paintings were Yuntai paintings, the name of which translates to courtyard painting and date back to the Song Dynasty. As the name suggests, courtyard paintings refer to bird-and-flower paintings produced by the court painters residing at the Imperial Painting Academy established by the emperor. In order to accurately depict plants in their truest nature, the painters attached great importance to their sketching exercises and participated in the caretaking of the plants. Furthermore, the painters cultivated fruits and flowers so as to accurately depict them throughout the changing seasons. In order to fully observe the plants, the painter, Zhao Chang, would watch the plants growing around the railing in the early morning. Chang would then paint the plants on the spot; utilizing colored paints to capture their essence. Chang was known as "Zhao Chang the Sketcher".<sup>92</sup>

Figure 4.4 depicts a famous painting called "Camellia and Butterfly" that is currently on display in the Shanghai Museum. "Camellia and Butterfly" features a typical Song Dynasty courtyard painting style. In other words, the painting is set on a square silk cloth canvas, with a size not exceeding 25cm on all sides. Moreover, the paintings have a meticulous composition and a simple yet exquisite framing. Upon the monochromatic background, a few camellias and a single butterfly are sporadically placed. The elegant flowers and the butterfly are depicted in such lifelike ways that the butterfly is seemingly

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<sup>91</sup> Fan, 53.

<sup>92</sup> Mei, 34.

following the flower's fragrance. As with any traditional painting, this painting also includes deep auspicious meanings. The camellia, containing the meaning of "cha-shou" or tea longevity, wishes the viewer a life to the age of one hundred and eight years. Said camellia, in conjunction with the butterfly, also symbolizes spring, which seeks to encourage an eternal youth. The white color of the flower in relation to some of the other elements not only represents virtue but also the wish of the artist for a good life. Like many other courtyard paintings, this composition is no different. This painting incorporates the method of "zhe-zhi" or broken branches. Zhe-zhi seeks to showcase the most beautiful parts of the plant or tree and draw the viewer's eyes towards it. This is accomplished by leaving negative space in the painting, so that these images may stand out further.



**Figure 4.4:** Camellia and Butterfly. Anonymous, Yuanti Painting. Song Dynasty. Now at Shanghai Museum.

The Song Dynasty could be considered the golden age for the development of the gongbi bird-and-flower paintings. The stylization and composition of the courtyard paintings have far reaching capabilities and have inspired several generations of Chinese painters. Due to the proliferation of this style throughout the Canton region, it would not have been difficult for plant hunters to find artists to assist them in their documentation and illustration ventures. The artists were required to carefully select the most engaging quality of the flower, much like how modern photographers use viewfinders to showcase their subjects, but instead the artists had to use their own skills and aesthetics to further showcase these flowers with a sense of realism. In this painting, the artist sought to create poetry. A single camellia stretches out from the lower right corner and arcs to the upper left, on either side of the flower stems, so as to create contrast and demonstrate size and depth. Consequently, this creates a sense of unity and balance, static and dynamic in every part of the image. Thus, the painting could be considered poetry on such a small canvas.

Despite received training from British naturalists, the courtyard painting techniques and styling still bled through. Figure 4.5 illustrates an export plum tree painting collected by John Reeves that currently resides in the Natural History Museum in London. Although a scientific illustration, plum blossoms are familiar to Chinese painters and the painting displays many qualities of courtyard painting techniques. From the shape of the plum blossoms in this painting, one can witness the influence of the guidelines of Chinese bird-and-flower paintings. More precisely, the branches of the plum trees are diagonal from the bottom right of the picture and are scattered in opposite directions. The way that the branches are portrayed, such that they are drooping and then grow upwards, seem to form a dynamic balance, as if dancing together in the wind. The viewer can pick out all the details in each branch and twig. At the

bottom right of the painting, the artist wrote "Jiangnan Hongmei (江南紅梅)", which translates as red plum flowers in Jiangnan. These Chinese characters seek to demonstrate the mood that the unknown painter wants to express. More precisely, the painter wants to show that Jiangnan is a symbol of poetry that embodies the spirit of the Chinese literati. The red plum blossoms that contrast with the pale winter represent the noble and unyielding spirit. Such composition and combination undoubtedly indicate that this botanical painting shares qualities and aesthetics like that of the more traditional courtyard paintings. What makes this painting even more interesting is how the artist even went against the idealistic requirements of bird-and-flower paintings by painting in the flaws of the plant. The artist painted a broken part of the plant, being held together by a yellow fixing strap. This unsightly image, whilst unnecessary in traditional paintings, was added to adhere to the naturalists' requirements for accuracy and objectivity.



**Figure 4.5:** Jiang Nan Hong Mei. *Prunus* cv., hybrid tree. John Reeves Collection of Botanical Drawings from Canton, China. Held in the Botany Library at the Natural History Museum, London.

If comparing botanical paintings with courtyard paintings, it is not difficult to find that, although the functions of the two are quite different, the main components of the picture are similar. First, both paintings are small and are mostly squared. Secondly, the themes surrounding the paintings are relatively simple. Third, both types of paintings showcase a single plant with a clean background and lots of negative space. Whilst both paintings have high requirements for realism and vividness, courtyard paintings seek to paint the plants in their most ideal form, whereas the botanical paintings seek to demonstrate the plants as they were. Both paintings require a high degree of sketching competency, however in botanical paintings, when the artists complete the paintings themselves, the requirements surrounding technique and color aesthetics are much higher.

Since these professional Canton painters who were employed by naturalists have long been educated in traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting, they often added their own aesthetic awareness while drawing scientific illustrations. Consequently, these export botanical paintings have an artistic quality that ordinary scientific illustrations lack. Therefore, even though some believe that the realism of Chinese export bird-and-flower paintings comes solely from training by Western naturalists, art historian Chen Ying is of the view that such realism cannot be rapidly acquired through short-term training. Instead, Ying believes that such realism is the result of long-term infiltration and accumulation in a specific historical and cultural atmosphere. In particular, the sketching traditions of courtyard-style paintings in the Song Dynasty coincide with the realistic requirements of Western botanical paintings. As a result, Canton painters were good at creating export botanic paintings.

Furthermore, Westerners have also noticed that Chinese painters have a natural advantage when drawing botanical paintings for science research. Art historian CHR. Tillotson claims that “The inclusion of

blemishes is a characteristic inherited from traditional Chinese botanical drawing, but developed to be of service to the scientist.”<sup>93</sup> Sir Joseph Banks, a professional sketcher, was deeply impressed by the vivid value of Chinese bird-and-flower paintings. “The plants painted by the Chinese, even in their furniture, are so exact and so execrated as to be intelligible to a Botanist.”<sup>94</sup> Another British correspondent of the Zoological Society of London also praised the birds painted on Chinese fans and folding screens, stating that “(They)are all more or less good representations of birds which exist in reality…(where the Chinese artists) to pay more attention to minute detail, their drawings would give us a good idea of the ornithology of the country.”<sup>95</sup>

Ironically, the Chinese *gongbi* bird-and-flower paintings valued by Westerners are usually considered vulgar or unstylish. As mentioned in the previous article, Chinese literati bird-and-flower painters generally paid more attention to abstract freehand *xieyi* painting than detailed *gongbi* painting. Therefore, it is possible that the British appreciation of Chinese bird-and-flower paintings is not based on Chinese aesthetic standards. The Chinese attach great importance to expressing their emotions through flowers and birds, while the British during the 18th and 19th centuries liked bird-and-flower paintings because they embody the realistic qualities of botanical paintings.

Bird-and-flower wallpapers have been subjected to similar evaluation criteria. Figure 4.6 shows a bird-and-flower wallpaper posted in the Chinese Drawing Room of Temple Newsam. This bird-and-flower

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<sup>93</sup> Giles Henry Rupert Tillotson, Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation: Fan Kwae pictures: paintings and drawings by George Chinnery and other artists in the collection of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. Spink & Son Ltd for The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, 1987.58

<sup>94</sup> Downing, Charles T. (Charles Toogood). *The Fan-qui, Or, Foreigner In China: Comprising a View of the Manners, Laws, Religion, Commerce, And Politics, of the Chinese, And the Present State of Their Relations With Great Britain*. Vol 14. F66 quoted from Fa-ti Fan,50

<sup>95</sup> Proc. Zoo. Soc. (1862) 220. Quoted from Fa-ti Fan,50

wallpaper was a gift from the Prince of Wales to Lady Hertford, the hostess of the house in 1806. Moreover, bird-and-flower wallpaper is one of the most famous Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers in the UK.<sup>96</sup> More precisely, this bird-and-flower wallpaper features a jade green background that is evenly covered by monochrome bamboos. Their branches and leaves are spread on the canvas, with magpies and butterflies flying among the bamboo leaves. This combination creates a vigorous scene. On the lower section of the wallpaper, there are low shrubs, such as peonies and tangerines, planted in flower pots with typical Chinese style rocks at the side. These motifs are common themes in Chinese bird-and-flower paintings. However, the most unique feature of this set of wallpapers is that Lady Hertford added a picture cut from a natural history book called *Birds of America* under a magpie on one of the wallpapers. Said picture forms a scientific illustration featuring a section of tree trunk and two American birds. The two different types of paintings are spliced together, although they are rather harmonious in a visual sense. Such a delicate feature, which is similar to that of zoological illustrations, must have been highly appreciated by the hostess, who had the idea to cut out an American bird and add it to the wallpaper.

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<sup>96</sup> De Bruijn.153



**Figure 4.6:** Section of the Chinese wallpaper at Temple Newsam. A pair of magpie jays and a tree trunk were cut out and added to the wallpaper. Leeds Museum and Art Galleries.

Therefore, a question arises. Do those who painted botanical pictures and those who painted bird-and-flower wallpapers belong to the same group? In other words, to what extent did the two groups of painters influence one another? It is known that the standards for drawing botanical paintings and bird-and-flower wallpapers differ substantially, as do their technical requirements and painter workflows. Unlike other Chinese export paintings that can be copied according to the given samples, botanical paintings have particularly high technical requirements for artists. Generally speaking, the working method used by export painters is assembly line work, whereby painters often copy only a specific section for which they are responsible, based on the samples. Consequently, botanical paintings are often regarded as commercial works that are lacking in creativity. However, because botanical paintings are used for rigorous natural history research, their work is beyond the reach of ordinary assembly line painters. More precisely, with botanical paintings, the artist needs a precise modeling ability and strong color expression ability, as each painting must be completed by a single artist. In addition, with botanical paintings, the artist must understand the concept of drawing Western scientific illustrations, but ordinary Chinese painters who had never received Western scientific training tended to paint flowers and birds based on the experience they gained from their traditional art training. Hence, it was easy for them to inject their imagination during the painting process. However, it was not easy for Chinese painters to comply with the standards of complete realism. As a result, these plant hunters had to restrain the painters' imagination and make their works conform to the rules of naturalistic paintings. For instance, John Reeves once invited some Canton painters to his home and trained them to draw plant paintings and animal paintings according to strict standards. Only after they mastered the basic rules of naturalist illustrations could they paint in his studio.

In other words, although it is very likely that the export painters of botanical paintings were selected from the original group of export painters, their working conditions must differ when drawing botanical paintings and bird-and-flower porcelain paintings or wallpapers. Bird-and-flower wallpapers generally depict mythical animals or plants in unrealistic proportions. Thus, the painting method applied to wallpapers must not have met the requirements of botanical paintings. Therefore, the painters who drew botanical paintings and those who mass produced commercial bird-and-flower wallpapers should belong to two groups. Although there may be a degree of overlap between the two, the painters who created botanical paintings should be a minority since they were carefully selected and trained. The extent to which the artists directly influenced the style of bird-and-flower wallpapers is still debatable. Therefore, it remains debatable the extent to which these botanical painters exerted a direct influence on the style of flower and bird-and-flower wallpapers.

In addition, it is also a question of the circulation of these botanical paintings outside the professional fields of naturalists and botanical painters. In fact, these botanical paintings produced in Canton in the 18th and 19th centuries were all directly shipped back to the UK without entering Canton's export market. Those who produced these paintings never left a definite record in history. However, Chinese scholars Cheng Meibao and Chen Ying, who studied Chinese export botanical paintings, both believed that local Chinese literati and painters at the time may have had knowledge of such botanical paintings.<sup>97</sup>

Chen Ying believes that the famous Cantonese painters Gao Jianfu (高劍父, 1879—1951) and Cai Shou (蔡守, 1879—1941) tried to imitate European botanical paintings, and in their works "a vague influence

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<sup>97</sup> Cheng, Meibao. "Natural History Knowledge in the Trend of Chinese Studies in the Late Qing Dynasty—On the Natural History Pictures in "Guo Cui Xue Bao". *She Hui Ke Xue*. 2006.vol.8. 30

of the botanical paintings exported to Europe and America in the 18th and 19th centuries can be seen”.<sup>98</sup>

However, the author believes that such rigorous botanical paintings had a limited impact on the relatively large volume of export bird-and-flower wallpapers, because the method of having one person do one painting not only failed to increase production in assembly line work, but also failed to meet the purposes of interior decoration with regard to bird-and-flower wallpapers. Many plant and animal motifs in bird-and-flower wallpapers have been exaggerated or distorted, which is highly inconsistent with the requirements of scientific botanical paintings. Therefore, further research is needed to confirm how many botanical paintings, which mainly existed for scientific research, were bird-and-flower wallpapers. However, it is undeniable that the positive comments of British botanists regarding traditional Chinese bird-and-flower paintings confirms a motivation among British people to treasure such wallpapers. Legendary phoenixes and ordinary magpies, both of which appear on wallpapers, are as real as scientific illustrations in the eyes of the British.

In summary, the British enthusiasm for Oriental plants, especially Chinese plants, during the 18-19th century, alongside their appreciation for and adoption of the realistic virtue of Chinese bird-and-flower paintings, promoted their interest in purchasing wallpapers with similar motifs. Although such interest was sometimes based on their correct or indirect understanding and knowledge of Chinese plants, they nonetheless gave substantial praise to such wallpapers out of pure preference for the lifelike painting style used.

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<sup>98</sup> Chen, 427.

## Chapter 5. From Fine Art to Decorative Art

### —Inheritance and Innovation of Bird-and-Flower Wallpapers

#### 5.1 The Debate between Decorative Arts and Fine Arts——an alien to Chinese art history

The term "decorative arts" in the Western context, according to Salem Press Encyclopedia, refers to the creation of ornamental or functional objects for the home or for personal use. Such functions include ceramics, basketry, needlework, woodworking and decorative paintings. Although the decorative arts often require a high level of skill and artistic sensibility, they differ from the fine arts, which refer to paintings, drawings and sculptures used in everyday affairs.<sup>99</sup> From the definition of the decorative arts, it is clear that, in the field of Western art, the possession of a certain function is what distinguishes the decorative arts from the fine arts. In this context, bird-and-flower wallpapers, with a clear function in interior decoration, appears to belong to the field of decorative arts. However, for Chinese painters, the difference between traditional Chinese bird-and-flower paintings—based on these standards of belonging to the fine arts—were exported to Europe - so the classification is unclear. For Chinese people, the terms "fine arts" and "decorative arts" are both foreign concepts.

Furthermore, for Chinese people, the boundary between decorative arts and fine arts has always been blurred. On many occasions, when Chinese people comment on a work of art, they utilize terms like "elegance" or "vulgarity" to define said work, rather than decorative arts or fine arts. However, like Westerners, the general preference for relatively abstract "xieyi" paintings over fine "gongbi" paintings among Chinese people further proves that decorative artworks are less artistic in their eyes. Zhang

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<sup>99</sup> Driscoll, Sally. "Decorative arts". Salem Press Encyclopedia.2019. <https://eds-b-ebSCOhost-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/eds/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=3d75bc5d-0229-4af2-8200-3d8f1776d1eb%40pdc-v-sessmgr05&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=100259069&db=ers>

Guangyu, China's first decorative art historian, claimed: "A (Chinese) history of painting has never divided the so-called decorative paintings and non-decorative paintings too strictly, neither has (Chinese) art. However, in all the arts, it is absolutely possible to analyze their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their obvious and implicit decorative characteristics. While it is not possible to state that decoration and non-decoration are opposites, it would be incorrect to place decoration within the scope of arts and crafts, without studying the issue of decoration in paintings and sculptures."<sup>100</sup> Decorative art in the history of traditional Chinese art is usually not considered orthodox in Chinese art history, and its artistic value is considered far from the paintings created by the famous artists. The Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty loved art and divided paintings into six groups according to the subject matter, none of which were related to decorative arts, such as porcelain paintings or mural paintings. Moreover, the decorative painters in the Chinese court almost never left their names in art history. The Imperial Painting Academy of the Song Dynasty regarded literati paintings as "authentic", "essential" and "elegant" in Chinese art history, which further led to negligence in research on the heritage of Chinese decorative art. As a result of such simple differences and oppositions between the concepts and relationships between "art" and "technology", "elegance" and "vulgar", "artist" and "craftsman" in art history, the Chinese attach importance to paintings, calligraphy and poetry, while looking down on craftsmanship. At the same time, Chinese people value the aesthetic interests of the literati and despise the artistic creations of folk artisans. Furthermore, Chinese people even consider decorations on utensils an unimportant skill and those who produce such decorations are deemed ordinary craftsmen who lack cultivation and taste. By employing the aforementioned definition of decorative arts, porcelain paintings

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<sup>100</sup> Zhang, Guangyu. "Decoration Problems". *Zhuang Shi(Decorations)*.50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Memorial Volume. 2008. 25

and wallpapers in China can be considered almost the same as those in the West.

Although ancient Chinese literati and artists always held certain prejudices against the decorative arts as drawn by folk painters, it is undeniable that decorative characteristics and so-called orthodox Chinese art are linked. Artist Pang Xunqin (龐薰堦) believes that "(Chinese) decoration started with painted pottery in the Neolithic Age, and there was decorative art at least before the 17th century BC."<sup>101</sup> The portrait tiles that appear in tombs from the Han Dynasty and the Southern and Northern Dynasties, with their rich, steady composition and mildly exaggerated, deformed figures and animals all display the characteristics of decorative art.<sup>102</sup> The superb porcelain-producing technology of Chinese craftsmen also combines their deep understanding of traditional Chinese art for the purpose of rendering said porcelain both decorative and artistic. Furthermore, traditional Chinese bird-and-flower paintings have possessed the characteristics of decorative art since their birth.

## 5.2 The decorative features of Chinese bird-and-flower paintings

The bird-and-flower motif first appeared in the background of decorative paintings involving characters. In the Neolithic Age, bird-and-flower motifs were often decorated around characters because "Chinese ancient paintings are mostly figural. The images of flowers, birds, and animals are combined with common practical utensils in life and appear as patterns which serve to beautify artifacts. Moreover, the images of flowers and birds only appear as accessories to artifacts. They appear only as a decoration

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<sup>101</sup> Pang, Xunqin *Chinese Decorative Arts*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ren Min Mei Shu Chu Ban She. 1982.

<sup>102</sup> On Chinese ancient decorative arts, see Weng, Jianqing (翁劍青): *Form and Meaning-Eight Lectures on Traditional Chinese Decorative Art*. Peking University Press. 2006.

without being separated from the artifact itself, and do not form an independent aesthetic value."<sup>103</sup> In other words, bird-and-flower motifs, when they first appeared, seemed to set off the beauty of the artifact or add beauty to the figure painting.

Since the Tang Dynasty, bird-and-flower paintings have gradually become an officially recognized painting subject, on par with figure paintings. Consequently, bird-and-flower paintings can finally be classified as fine art, but gongbi bird-and-flower paintings are still considered one of the most decorative types of Chinese paintings. "Learning nature from the outside, living from the heart inside(外師造化, 中得心源)" is the basic principle of Chinese bird-and-flower paintings.<sup>104</sup> Even in the Song Dynasty, court painters paid special attention to sketching real plants and animals. However, such attention does not mean that bird-and-flower paintings are pure imitations of reality, but rather represent a combination of sketching experience and personal aesthetics. Thus, the blurred boundary between fine art and decorative art in bird-and-flower paintings can be explained in terms of painting formula, color setting and material.

The formula for bird-and-flower paintings is an important factor behind their rapid popularity and obvious visual beauty. "Formula"(程式), in the Chinese context, means the experience system of lines, composition, color and even detail depiction methods based on Chinese bird-and-flower painters from the past. Zhang Tinglu, an art historian who first paid attention to the decorative nature of Chinese paintings, believes that the use of "points, lines, and surfaces" in Chinese paintings played an important role in the evolution of their decorative nature. Furthermore, Zhang notes that the use of "lines" is one

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<sup>103</sup> Yao, Shunxi: *Introduction to Chinese Bird-and-flower Painting*. Beijing: Higher Education Press. 2007.4-7

<sup>104</sup> Zhang, Yanyuan(Tang Dynasty). Li Dai Ming Hua Ji (歷代名畫記). Vol.10 Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=102482&page=346#%E9%80%A0%E5%8C%96>

of the most important formulas in gongbi bird-and-flower paintings, because gongbi bird-and-flower paintings focus more on the form of reconstruction and the structure of animals and plants, while mainly using lines for modeling.<sup>105</sup> "Lines" in meticulous bird-and-flower paintings not only represent the subject through lines, but also emphasize the attachment of one's own subjective consciousness to the drawn subject; thereby giving different animals and plants the personality and will of different thoughts and human emotions. For instance, when painters draw different plant parts, they use the length, thickness, density, and degree of realism of the lines to express their subjective understanding of a particular plant. More precisely, if they believed that the pine tree symbolizes a strong character, they would use rougher brushstrokes; or when giving plum blossoms a more slender character, they would use more detailed painting methods. Therefore, it is not difficult to find that, even when Canton painters were creating bird-and-flower wallpapers, different brush strokes were used when drawing flowers and stones, respectively.

In addition, the composition of bird-and-flower paintings also has a set of fixed formulas. In order to create the greatest visual beauty, Chinese painters used set of fixed composition formulas for drawing bird-and-flower paintings, such as "Zigzag", "S", "Triangle" and other linear compositions designed to express the spatial relationship between different subjects and enhance depth. Furthermore, Chinese painters also used formulas to leave appropriate blank spaces between flowers and leaves so as to create a subtle and elegant artistic conception. Such formulas further strengthened the decorative features of gongbi bird-and-flower paintings. However, in a later section, it is explained that the composition formula of traditional bird-and-flower paintings is the most modified aspect of the export wallpapers

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<sup>105</sup> Zhang, Tinglu: "On the Decoration of Chinese Painting". *Guo Hua Jia*.1995.vol.5. 36-41

created by Canton painters.

Color setting is another decorative factor in meticulous bird-and-flower paintings. The colors used in gongbi bird-and-flower paintings emphasize the contrast between color blocks and same-color layering, which enhance color evenness and brightness. On occasion, in order to achieve the ideal aesthetic effect, artists would use fantastic colors. In particular, the use of mineral pigments, such as azurite, patina, gold and silver produced a magnificent visual effect to create a colorful, neat and delicate decorative style.<sup>106</sup>

These features have always been preserved in bird-and-flower wallpapers. For instance, the majority of bird-and-flower wallpapers use pure colors, such as pale blue and jade green, to fill the background. Such a technique is called "Hong-tuo(烘托)" in bird-and-flower paintings. More precisely, "Hong-tuo" refers to a painting method that adds shading around an object in order to make it stand out. The background colors in exported wallpapers are often stronger than those of traditional bird-and-flower paintings. One possible explanation for this is that painters had to adapt the product to fit the style of 18<sup>th</sup>-century European interior decoration. Bright colors are another reason why Chinese bird-and-flower paintings are popular in the West. George Bennett, a British naturalist, thought that "the brilliancy of the Chinese color for painting, has often been very highly extolled as being superior to the European."<sup>107</sup>

The material of bird-and-flower paintings, or its close integration with handicraft, also imbues such paintings with the dual attributes of artistry and decoration. In Chinese paintings, fans, *Dou-fang* (斗方, square canvases that measure 25-50 cm in length) and *Ce-ye* (冊頁, usually booklets) are considered

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<sup>106</sup> Zhang, Tinglu. 38

<sup>107</sup> Fa-ti Fan.50

regular painting materials, especially for gongbi bird-and-flower paintings.<sup>108</sup> While fans have a certain function, artistry is unaffected by the type of fan used. In Chinese culture, fans have always been a must for literati with elegant tastes. In the Song Dynasty, when gongbi bird-and-flower paintings were at their most popular, many literati enjoyed painting flowers and birds on fans. The book *Hua Ji* (畫繼) records that "In the Zhenghe era (1111-1118), every time the Emperor Huizong painted a fan, the royal family and aristocrats rushed to imitate it, sometimes producing hundreds of copies."<sup>109</sup> Fans painted with bird-and-flower motifs from in the Song Dynasty are regarded as elegant even today. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, folding fans introduced from Japan were preferred to round fans in fan painting. Many artists famous for their bird-and-flower paintings, such as Qiu Ying and Dong Qichang, once painted bird-and-flower motifs on fans. Among the existing collections in the Forbidden City, there are even bird-and-flower fans painted by Emperor Daoguang (1782-1850) and Emperor Xianfeng (1831-1861) of the late Qing Dynasty.<sup>110</sup> Since the predecessors of export bird-and-flower wallpapers are likely prints used on screens, Canton artists who created these wallpapers may not have had a clear concept of so-called decorative art, but they nonetheless came to understand the requirements of Western customers so as to improve their works.

Even with these decorative features, Chinese scholars mostly emphasize that bird-and-flower paintings differ from decorative paintings. While bird-and-flower paintings have many decorative features, they are inherently different from the decorative nature of craft design. "If you pursue the decorative effect

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<sup>108</sup> Yao, 189.

<sup>109</sup> Deng, Chun(Song Dynasty): *Hua Ji* (畫繼). Chapter 10. 205. Chinese Text Project.  
<https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=103972&page=205&remap=gb>

<sup>110</sup> Li, Shi: "Late Qing Court Painting Round Fan from the Palace Museum Collection", *Wenwu(Cultural Relics)*. 2010.vol.5.

too much, such that the characteristics of the subject are completely submerged in the taste of decoration, it violates the essential characteristics of Chinese paintings, while also weakening their artistry and appeal.”<sup>111</sup> Thus, export pictorial bird-and-flower wallpapers with strong decorative effects have fallen out of style among Chinese people, even today.

### 5.3 The position of bird-and-flower motifs in interior decoration

As mentioned above, there is no tradition of using bird-and-flower elements in wallpapers in the history of interior decoration in China. Instead, bird-and-flower wallpapers have only been used for export since their birth. As a result, few Chinese people have heard of bird-and-flower wallpapers, even today. Therefore, it was necessary for Canton painters to innovate so as to adapt bird-and-flower wallpapers to European interior decoration in the drawing process. This section explores the innovation of Canton painters vis-à-vis traditional bird-and-flower motifs under the influence of customer demand. As a special commodity, most motifs on bird-and-flower wallpapers come from traditional Chinese bird-and-flower paintings and still maintain the characteristics of said paintings to a certain extent. However, in order to produce decorative bird-and-flower wallpapers suitable for larger houses, it was necessary to solve the problem of picture size.

In order to understand the efforts made by Chinese painters in the innovation process, it is necessary to first discuss the general types and sizes of Chinese paintings, especially bird-and-flower paintings, as well as their role (if any) in interior decoration. Chinese paintings are relatively diverse in terms of form.

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<sup>111</sup> Li,Fu Gui. “The Decoration of Chinese Painting and Decorative Painting” *.Journal of Mudanjiang College of Education*.2007.vol.2.

According to the author's personal preferences, Chinese paintings can be divided into different groups, the most important of which are folding screens, *Dou-fang*, scrolls, *Ce-ye* and fans. Those that unfold horizontally are called *Changjuan*, or long scrolls; those that unfold vertically are called *Tiao-fu* (banners painted or written in vertical lines) and *Zhong-tang* (paintings that hang in the middle of the hall); and smaller ones are *Dou-fang* and *Ce-ye*.<sup>112</sup> Finally, there are also folding fans and round fans. Among these, long scrolls are larger in size and are mainly used to draw landscape and genre paintings. For instance, "Along the River During the Qingming Festival" by Zhang Zeduan of the Song Dynasty, which depicts the grand bazaar in the Song Dynasty in a panoramic style, is 528.7 cm in length. However, due to thematic characteristics, the main gongbi bird-and-flower paintings are hanging scrolls, *Ce-ye*, *Dou-fang* and fans. In particular, most bird-and-flower paintings from the Song Dynasty are only about 25 cm wide and 25 cm long. As such paintings are small and delicate, they are very suitable for depicting only one species of animal or plant. Bird-and-flower motifs painted on folding fans and round fans are often designed according to the utensil shape. Consequently, such paintings are generally more compact and delicate. As for three-dimensional objects, such as porcelain vases, the painters need not only to consider size, but also to redesign the spatial relationship between the two-dimensional picture and the three-dimensional object so as to fully express the subjects on a curved surface. Hence, the idea of porcelain bird-and-flower paintings being used directly by wallpaper painters is not so straightforward. In other words, although bird-and-flower motifs are common in Chinese material culture, given that paintings and wallpapers are both regular in shape and two-dimensional, it can be inferred that scroll bird-and-flower paintings are a direct source of inspiration for these wallpapers.

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<sup>112</sup> Yao,189.

The use of bird-and-flower paintings in the history of Chinese interior design is diverse. Paintings and calligraphy, especially bird-and-flower paintings, appeared as a typical Chinese interior decoration in the Song Dynasty. The emperors of the Song Dynasty, headed by Emperor Huizong, were generally enthusiastic about literature and art, as they enjoyed collecting calligraphy and paintings.<sup>113</sup> Since then, using calligraphy and scroll paintings in interior decoration has become fashionable among the upper class. Such fashion has gradually spread to ordinary people, such that even restaurants and tea shops hang calligraphy and paintings. Moreover, some establishments even use famous works to attract customers and increase the popularity of their store.

During the Song Dynasty, Canton's economy developed and its commercial culture was prosperous. Consequently, Chinese people were no longer satisfied with preaching for figural paintings in interior decoration, but instead favored landscape paintings or bird-and-flower paintings that were more decorative and could express natural themes. Furthermore, an art critic in the Northern Song Dynasty commented disappointedly that "Nowadays painters rarely create paintings of story figures, and such works lose their educational and admonish functions."<sup>114</sup> The prosperity of the commercial economy and the development of the printing industry during the Ming and Qing Dynasties allowed not only the literati, but even ordinary people to hang paintings in their houses. Furthermore, with the appearance of New Year paintings in particular, ordinary people could hang paintings in their living rooms or on their doors during the Lunar New Year as a mark of auspiciousness.

Regardless of social class, there is a special emphasis on the exact manner in which paintings were used

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<sup>113</sup> Huo,Wei Guo, Huo,Guang: *History of Chinese Interior Design*.Beijing: Zhong Guo Jian Zhu Gong Ye Chu Ban She.2007. 115.

<sup>114</sup> Deng,Chun. *Huaji*.Chapter.4 <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=103972&page=81#%E8%BF%91%E4%B8%96>

to decorate interiors. In the *Zhangwu Zhi* (長物志), it is noted that famous paintings and calligraphy should not be mixed. Furthermore, larger works should be hung on the wall, while small ones should be placed in the desks.<sup>115</sup> Larger bird-and-flower paintings can also be made into "hanging screens" by adding wooden hanging frames and arranging them in the center of a hall.

In order to determine the role played by bird-and-flower paintings in interior decoration for ordinary Chinese houses from the 18th to 19th centuries, it is worth examining the Chinese export paintings collected by the British Library. The British Library has collected many Chinese export paintings brought back by the East India Company that are telling vis-à-vis folk customs and daily life in Canton during the Qing Dynasty. Such paintings have different themes and delicate details, which are important references for understanding the life of Chinese people during the Qing Dynasty. Among these paintings, there are a group of interior furnishing paintings produced between 1800 and 1806, which were based on the furnishings of official or wealthy merchants. Moreover, some of these interior furnishing paintings are based on New Year pictures and illustrations from ancient novels. These interior furnishing paintings reflect the tastes of officials, wealthy businessmen and scholars from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, as they depict the sort of items with which the rich and educated liked to surround themselves.<sup>116</sup>

In this typical Qing Dynasty hall furnishing picture shown in Figure 5.1, there are bird-and-flower motifs that are ubiquitous in interior decoration. More precisely, there are exquisite lanterns, couplets and

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<sup>115</sup> Wen, Zhengheng: *Zhang Wu Zhi*. Chapter 5. Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=60376&page=90#%E4%B9%A6%E7%94%BB%E5%90%8D%E5%AE%B6%E6%94%B6%E8%97%8F>

<sup>116</sup> Andrew Lo, Song Jiayu, Wang Tzi-Cheng, Frances Wood. *Chine Export Paintings of the Qing Period in the British Library*. Volume 4. Guangzhou: Guangdong Principle Publishing Group. 2011. 6

flower stands decorated with flowers and plants on both sides of the hall that appear in pairs, which emphasizes the visual symmetry. Porcelain vases of different shapes are placed on the flower stands on both sides and are decorated from left to right with begonias and ganoderma lucidum, which symbolize peace and happiness. In the center of the hall, there is a very decorative wooden table that is decorated with two small porcelain vases filled with flowers. On the front wall, there is a framed ink painting of plum blossoms, with the author's name "Master Xingyun" inscribed in the corner. Plum blossoms, which often bloom in winter and symbolize having a strong and noble character, are one of the most beloved motifs in Chinese bird-and-flower paintings. The owner of this hall deliberately hung and carefully framed the plum blossom picture in the most visually conspicuous position in the hall, so as to demonstrate that they (the owner) possess a strong and noble heart, just like a plum blossom.



**Figure 5.1:** A Chinese export furniture painting showing the typical interior design of a hall in the Qing Dynasty. Gouache on western paper. British Library.

"Wang-shi Yuan (網師園)" in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, is a typical literati residence from the Qing Dynasty. Wang-shi Yuan was built during the Chunxi period of the Southern Song Dynasty (1174-1189) and originally housed the bibliophile Shi Zhengzhi. During the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty (circa 1770 AD), Song Zongyuan, a retired official in charge of the palace banquet, purchased and rebuilt the courtyard, before renaming it Wang-shi Yuan". The hall of this mansion is called *Wan-juan Tang*, which translates to ten thousand books. On the front of the hall, the plaque "Wanjuantang" by Wen Zhengming, one of the Four Masters of Wu School paintings, hangs high on the wall. Under the plaque, there is a couplet and a bird-and-flower painting. The theme of the picture is a tall pine tree which symbolizes self-reliance and perseverance. Unlike the bird-and-flower wallpapers often used as backgrounds in British interior decoration, in this hall, bird-and-flower paintings almost play the role of the protagonist among the decorations. More precisely, when visitors enter the hall, the first thing they see is this bird-and-flower painting and couplet in the center. The tall pine tree not only demonstrates the host's elegant moral character, but the painting also silently declares that the master possesses excellent aesthetic preferences. It can be seen that Chinese bird-and-flower paintings in Chinese interior decoration usually act as the protagonist decoration that attracts attention at first glance, rather than the decorative element that is used as a background and covers the entire wall.



**Figure 5.2:** “Wanjuan Tang”, a typical literati house showing the position of a bird-and-flower painting in the interior design. Photo by Wangshiyuan Tourist Center.

Given the important symbolic significance of bird-and-flower paintings, the majority of Chinese house owners frame them carefully. Scroll paintings are usually drawn on a special paper called Xuan paper, which is a high-end artistic paper mainly used for Chinese brush painting, calligraphy, mounting, rubbing and watermarking. Since ancient times, the price of Chinese paintings and calligraphy has generally been based on the size of the Xuan paper used. In this context, size refers to the original size without the border and before mounting. The smaller ones have an area of 33 x 33 cm, while the larger ones have an area of 200 x 498 cm.<sup>117</sup> Even taking into account the small number of bird-and-flower paintings relative to larger hanging scrolls, it is not difficult to find that even the largest framed Chinese paintings are not designed to fill the entire wall in interior design.

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Chinese people mounted bird-and-flower paintings because they paid

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<sup>117</sup> On common size of Chinese painting, see: Cai, Fengming: “Introduction to Collection of Calligraphy and Painting: Chinese Painting Size Calculation Method”. [http://fmtsai.blogspot.com/2016/12/blog-post\\_11.html](http://fmtsai.blogspot.com/2016/12/blog-post_11.html)

special attention to the significance of such motifs in interior decoration. For Chinese paintings, mounting is about more than just adding a frame to distinguish the painting from a mural. Mounting, as an indispensable part of the Chinese scroll paintings system, not only helps to increase longevity, but also tests mounters through their choice of color, material and size. The ancient Chinese people even wrote a monograph titled *Zhuang-huang Zhi*, which translates to "Notes on Mounting", so as to emphasize the importance of framing a painting. In *Zhuang-huang Zhi*, it says "When mounting a calligraphy painting, we must first examine its temperament."<sup>118</sup> In order to successfully frame a bird-and-flower painting, it is necessary not only to examine the dryness and humidity of the painting, but also to make the frame match the temperament of the work and even the circumstances. Thus, decorating paintings can be considered a sacred ritual for Chinese people who collect paintings, as well as an important step in making paintings harmonious with the interior decoration style. In contrast, the scale of bird-and-flower paintings relative to wallpapers is not a factor in the Chinese concept of elegance. For Chinese people, the artistic concept behind bird-and-flower paintings is more important than scale. When examining the beautifully framed bird-and-flower paintings decorated in the study, Chinese people often look beyond the paintings themselves and admire the beautiful artistic concept displayed by the content of the paintings. In addition, Chinese people usually participate in the process of constructing the artistic concept in accordance with their own experiences. However, such a process is not available when British buyers are admiring Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers.

In European interior decoration, the use of bird-and-flower motifs is different. Although wallpapers in

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<sup>118</sup> Zhou, Jiazhou (Ming Dynasty): *Zhuanghuangzhi*. 120. Chinese Text Project.  
<https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=84064&page=120#%E6%B0%A3%E8%89%B2>

the modern sense only began to appear in the homes of merchants in the 16th century, the motif combination of flowers and birds came to Europe through lacquerware and textiles imported from the East before the Chinese began to produce wallpapers for export.<sup>119</sup> Among such goods, the French contributed to the promotion of Chinese bird-and-flower motifs. This engraving painted from the 1635s describes the ideal noble life and furnishings at the time (see Figure 5.3). This engraving features a magnificent room, in which several women are playing cards or choosing gloves and ribbons that match their outfits. Moreover, there is a woman enjoying her reflection in front of a stylish ebony-framed mirror. Behind the woman in the far left of the picture, a bamboo wallpaper with a typical diagonal composition is hung on the wall, with typical Chinese-style “scholar rocks” to the left. It is very likely that this bizarre wallpaper comes from the East.



**Figure 5.3:** Abraham Bosse, “Les Vierges sages et les Vieges folles” (The Wise and Foolish Virgins) 1635. Bibliotheque nationale de France. A bamboo painting is in the background.

<sup>119</sup> “A Brief History of Wallpaper”. Victorian and Albert Museum. [https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/a-brief-history-of-wallpaper?gclid=EAlalQobChMlluzexLPB6QIVA9vACh3tygTLEAAAYASAAEgJwFvD\\_BwE](https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/a-brief-history-of-wallpaper?gclid=EAlalQobChMlluzexLPB6QIVA9vACh3tygTLEAAAYASAAEgJwFvD_BwE)

In the middle and late 18th century, France became the center of European decorative arts under the leadership of King Louis XIV (1643-1715). King Louis XIV, who claimed to be a connoisseur, designer and artist, repeatedly demonstrated a strong curiosity towards the East. At the time, the veneration of Chinese style was on the rise in Europe and Louis XIV even sent a scientific investigation team to establish diplomatic relations with Emperor Kangxi. Unsurprisingly, Emperor Kangxi, who was extremely proud of his empire, generously presented King Louis XIV with porcelain, wallpaper, architecture, silk, lacquer and other Chinese artworks, which increased the French fascination with Eastern art. Among these goods, the French were particularly fond of the patterns from bird-and-flower paintings and porcelain lady paintings. On the lacquer cabinet from the middle of the 18th century that belonged to the mistress of King Louis XV, the decorative patterns imitate the color scheme of Chinese blue and white porcelain, while there are also delicate bird-and-flower decorations (see Figure 5.4). Such patterns and designs show the hostess's enthusiasm for Chinese porcelain.



**Figure 5.4:** Mattieu Criaerd. Commode, Paris, 1742. Oak and fruitwood veneer, venis Martin lacquer, silvered bronze. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

However, compared with the interior designers of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, early Westerners who were exposed to bird-and-flower paintings preferred to use them as a decorative element for collages. Xu Wenqin once researched earlier Chinese rooms in Europe and found that the wallpapers hung in some European castles were collages of prints exported from China. In the Château de Filières in France (see Figure 5.5), the designer arranged a group of Chinese-exported bird-and-flower prints neatly on the wall, decorated with round European borders, which reflect the style of mixing Chinese and Western elements. Xu believes that these Chinese prints were likely produced in Suzhou during the mid-18th century and appeared earlier than the Guangzhou wallpaper.



**Figure 5.5:** A China room decorated with several bird-and-flower paintings. Château de Filières, Normandy, France. Rebuilt in 1768. Photo by Xu, Wenqin.

A Chinese bird-and-flower painting with similar themes is on display in Woburn Abbey Castle in England (see Figure 5.6). Said painting is a large-scale engraving with a similar height to that of the wall. The size of these works has been deliberately scaled to fit Western rooms. Therefore, it is likely that, before Canton painters began to respond to market demand in the West and shrewdly painted large-scale decorative wallpapers, Westerners already regarded their Chinese bird-and-flower paintings as works of decorative art rather than fine art. Consequently, Westerners decorated the paintings in the same way that they hang gorgeous Chinese plates, by putting them on their walls.



**Figure 5.6:** A large-scale pheasant and peony themed print at Woburn Abbey Castle. Hung in 1752. *Wallpaper History Society Newsletter*, Issue 9, Spring 2015

In summary, Chinese bird-and-flower paintings in European interior decoration have shifted from serving as a protagonist in rooms, showing the noble morality of the owner, to functioning in a supporting role, with more decorative elements. One possible reason for this is that it is difficult for Westerners to understand the auspicious meaning of different combinations of bird-and-flower motifs. As a result, Chinese export bird-and-flower wallpapers have become a background for various Japanese-style screens, Indian Chintz bed sheets, Parisian rugs and Chinese porcelain in so-called Chinese rooms

#### 5.4 Means of change in bird-and-flower motifs

One of the most significant differences between Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers and paintings lies in the manner in which plants are displayed. In the context of Chinese bird-and-flower paintings, different combinations of animals and plants have different, symbolic meanings. These images are either elegant or very popular, but they always express positive characteristics. Elegant examples include the "plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum" regarded by Chinese people as the four gentlemen of flowers. These plants symbolize having a noble character, even in difficult situations, because of their graceful appearance and the seasons in which they bloom - autumn and winter. Popular motifs, such as pomegranate, symbolize fertility and multiple children, while the combination of a pine tree and crane symbolizes longevity. Moreover, the bat symbolizes good luck because it is pronounced "Fu", which also means good fortune in Chinese. In the UK during the 18th century, developments in the natural sciences made people interested in exotic plants. Since India's calico chintz entered the UK and occupied an important place in the fashion market, the British have increasingly loved natural, gorgeous bird-and-flower decorative arts. However, due to cultural differences and the unique needs of Westerners vis-

à-vis bird-and-flower wallpapers, Chinese painters changed their style and abandoned traditions that were unpopular even according to native aesthetics.

#### 5.4.1. Confusing seasons

In traditional Chinese bird-and-flower paintings, the birds and flowers that appear in bird-and-flower motifs often mirror nature in so far as they appear in the same season(s). Ren Bonian (任伯年, 1840-1895), a painter from the Qing Dynasty, is known for his expertise in painting flowers and birds. His masterpiece, the screen painting "Four Screens of Flowers and Birds" has certain distinct seasonal characteristics. This group of screen paintings is composed of four pairs of flowers and birds depicting the four seasons, as shown in Figure 5.7. Among these four pairs, the lush wisteria flowers and nestlings represent spring; the brightly colored loquat tree and lifelike rooster represent summer; the swallows flying in between represent autumn; and the quail frolicking on the shore represents winter. Even if flowers from different seasons appear in the same painting at the same time, the artist adds in 'personal space' around each group of flowers and birds. In essence, this painting still consciously displays plants from different seasons.



**Figure 5.7:** A set of screen paintings by Ren Bonian showing four pairs of bird-and-flower motifs representing the four seasons. Hua Niao Si Ping. 1882. Private Collection.

During the Ming Dynasty, the theme of "Hundred Flowers" was popular in China. "Hundred Flowers" by Zhou Zhimian (周之冕) from the Ming Dynasty does not have a complicated background or different flowers superimposed on a single painting (see Figure 5.8). Instead, Zhou lists the plants of the four seasons on the scroll and leaves blank spaces between the different plants. Xu Wei (徐渭, 1521-1593), from the Ming Dynasty, painted such works and wrote an accompanying poem. The poem is as follows: "Old men like me enjoy using ink to their heart's content. I can even paint flowers and plants regardless of the seasons." In his painting, plants such as peonies, grapes and plantains are not restricted by season. However, there is space between every two different flowers, which makes them relatively independent.

However, the theme of “Hundred Flowers” may have been a novel approach for the time, meaning Xu Wei was rather proud to write poems so as to demonstrate his creativity.



**Figure 5.8:** Section of Zhou Zhimian: Bai Hua Tu Juan (Painting of Hundred Flowers). 31.5\*706cm. All plants are depicted neatly with blank spaces in between on a long scroll. Palace Museum.

However, the bird-and-flower wallpapers exported from China often have a mix of flowers and birds from different seasons. In this bird-and-flower wallpaper from Abbotsford, England, there are two plants from different seasons surrounding a pair of peacocks (see Figure 5.9). In the lower section of the picture, several clusters of brightly colored peonies (they are not roses because they have zigzag-shaped leaves) add contrasting colors to the picture. Meanwhile, on the tree by the peacock, there are several mature pomegranates. The peonies symbolize wealth. Meanwhile, the pomegranates with seeds, one of the most popular plant motifs in China, represent fertility. However, peonies bloom in spring, while pomegranate trees bear fruit from September to October. Thus, there are six months between the two bloom seasons. It is not uncommon for any combination of peacocks, peonies or pomegranates to appear in bird-and-flower paintings, but this spliced mixed seasonal composition is likely designed to make the picture look richer. Therefore, it can be inferred that, although the British believe that Chinese bird-and-flower

wallpapers have a delicate and realistic charm, this impression is likely due to the delicate gongbi painting method, rather than any loyalty to the natural appearance of plants. After all, peonies were introduced to the UK at the end of the 18th century. Hence, it is understandable that the British did not appreciate that this combination of bird-and-flower motifs did not make sense.



**Figure 5.9:** Peacock themed wallpaper at Abbotsford, Roxburghshire, hung around 1822.

#### 5.4.2. Decorative composition

The arrangement of Chinese bird-and-flower motifs differs substantially from that of western bird-and-flower patterns. The previous article demonstrates that, be it on porcelain, screens or fans, the Chinese bird-and-flower decoration system is always presented in a manner that is biased towards painting. Even on porcelain vases, painters still pay attention to the sparse and dynamic composition of flowers and birds, rather than filling every available space. Furthermore, Ernst Gombrich noticed this when discussing oriental floral decorative patterns. More precisely, Ernst Gombrich stated that “The other extreme is reached in Far East decoration, where the freely growing plant is allowed to make its effect without the aid of symmetry or repetition, of framing, filling and linking.”<sup>120</sup> In contrast, traditional European plant motifs, such as ranunculus and palm leaves, tend to appear in a simple and orderly arrangement.

How did the “freely growing” traditional Chinese bird-and-flower motifs transform into wallpaper suitable for British interior decoration? In his book "Sense of Order: The Psychology of Decorative Art", Gombrich summarizes the main steps involved in the creation of infinitely stretching decorative art. These steps are "framing and filling".<sup>121</sup> Framing is used to define the boundary of the area, while filling is used to compose the picture within the drawn boundary. For some designs, steps such as "linking, branching and expansion" are also required for the purpose of drawing thinner, curly lines to fill the blanks. In the same manner, the nature of indefinite expansion for wallpaper patterns on a two-dimensional plane on walls of various sizes is particularly important. However, for the Chinese bird-

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<sup>120</sup> Gombrich, E. H. (Ernst Hans). *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. 1979.159.

<sup>121</sup> Gombrich. 80

and-flower paintings that are often collected in scroll paintings, designers must cease depicting free-growing plants and create products with more abstract and continuous patterns in order to produce repeatable patterns. One option for defining the process to achieve this function is to examine the bamboo element in export bird-and-flower wallpapers.

Bamboo, which is native to China, is one of the most common plant motifs in bird-and-flower paintings. Chinese literati regarded bamboo as a symbol of elegance and modesty thanks to its hollowness. Bai Juyi(白居易,772-846), a poet from the Tang Dynasty, commented that: "The center of bamboo is empty and this emptiness embodies the way of life. People with moral cultivation consider the virtue of humility when they see the hollowness of bamboo."<sup>122</sup> Bamboo trunks are divided into many "jie" (which translates to "sections"), is a homonym of "jie" which means integrity in Chinese. The cold-resistant and evergreen bamboo is also regarded as "unyielding", while its tall, straight appearance is considered "gentlemanly" in China. Bamboo is indispensable in the ideal home aesthetics of Chinese people. Su Shi (蘇軾,1037-1101), a great writer from the Song Dynasty, even stated that "you can eat without meat but you cannot live without bamboo. Without meat, one is thin, and without bamboo, one is vulgar."<sup>123</sup> Hence, it is clear that bamboo was important to Chinese literati. Bamboo has been a favorite object of Chinese painters since the Song Dynasty. The Palace Painting Academy of the Song Dynasty divided paintings into ten categories, one of which consisted solely of bamboo.

Bamboo was first brought to the UK from China in 1827, with more than 400 different types of bamboo

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<sup>122</sup> Bai,Juyi(Tang Dynasty): "Yang Zhu Ji(養竹記)". *Bai Shi Chang Qing Ji*. Vol.43. Qin Ding Si Ku Quan Shu(欽定四庫全書). Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=431522&remap=gb#p12>

<sup>123</sup> Su Shi(Song Dynasty)."Yu Qian Seng Lv Yun Xuan(於潛僧綠筠軒)". *Dong Po Quan Ji*. Vol.4. Qin Ding Si Ku Quan Shu(欽定四庫全書). Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=3917&page=144&remap=gb%E4%B8%8D%E5%8F%AF%E5%B1%85%E6%97%A0%E7%AB%B9>

brought by European botanists from Asia.<sup>124</sup> In other words, prior to the 19th century, the British had never seen bamboo with their own eyes, but they nonetheless realized its unique status in Eastern culture based on Chinese handicrafts. Due to Western customers' strong curiosity with regard to exotic plants, bamboo has become one of the most common and easily distorted plant motifs on export bird-and-flower wallpapers.

The early bamboo prints exported to France appear to have retained the botanical characteristics of bamboo. More precisely, these early bamboo prints have straight trunks and thin leaves. Zheng Banqiao (鄭板橋, 1693-1766), a Qing painter famous for painting bamboo, summarized his experience painting bamboo by stating that "So the bamboo body is thin and tall, every branch can withstand heavy snow, every section of the trunk can reach the sky, just as high as a gentleman's ambition, without succumbing to the world."<sup>125</sup> Traditional bird-and-flower bamboo paintings are very particular in terms of composition, especially vis-à-vis the gathering and scattering relationship of bamboo leaves. Bamboo leaves in paintings should look mixed and scattered, rather than being treated uniformly. The artist should consider and plan the placement of bamboo, spread of bamboo and use of blanks before painting, otherwise the beauty of the whole work is adversely affected.

However, as more and more Chinese wallpapers were introduced to the UK, huge bamboo that does not conform to botanical reality has gradually become a common theme among exported bird-and-flower wallpapers.

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<sup>124</sup> D. Ohrnberger. *The Bamboos of the World*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science. 1999. 225

<sup>125</sup> Zheng, Banqiao (Qing Dynasty): "Ti Hua Zhu (題畫竹)" *Ban Qiao Wen Ji*. Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=681027&remap=gb#p106>

Figure 5.10 shows a huge Chinese wallpaper in Wellington Bedroom in the UK.<sup>126</sup> On this wallpaper, Chinese painters have adopted a completely different painting method from traditional bird-and-flower paintings when drawing bamboo. More precisely, Chinese painters drew bamboo branches as curved and slender, with some bamboo roots exaggerated to appear sturdy. The treatment of bamboo leaves is even more unusual, as bamboo leaves should grow on taller trunks rather than branching from the bottom of the bamboo. Moreover, bamboo leaves should grow radially such all parts are left blank, rather than being evenly distributed with bamboo leaves. Consequently, the picture has no subject at first glance, but instead has only bamboo leaves extending repeatedly across the whole wallpaper. In addition to filling the blanks with bamboo leaves, the artist even painted entwined flower branches around the bamboo in order to enhance fullness. Furthermore, in order to fill and branch out, the natural posture of bamboo obscuring one another in Chinese bird-and-flower paintings becomes a flat extension posture spread out on a huge wall. In the natural state, bamboo units are independent of one another on the ground, but the common roots and stems are closely connected underneath. As a result, bamboo units often appear to grow together. In this wallpaper, the bamboo is equally spaced and regularly distributed on the ground, like the trees that line streets. Such a regular distribution allows a huge wallpaper to be evenly distributed on several small wallpapers of the same size and easily reposted, which facilitates transportation. Such methods of distorting the natural form of bamboo so as to remove blanks reflects the characteristics of "filling" and "branching", which are essential to creating repeated decorative patterns as described by Gombrich.

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<sup>126</sup> De Bruijn.180



**Figure 5.10:** Section of the wallpaper in the Chinese bedroom at Belton House, hung around 1840.  
©National Trust Images/Martin Trelawny

There are some people who might wonder whether structural plant errors suggest that these wallpapers were not made by Chinese painters. This question is highly debatable. Firstly, in the absence of a systematic study of Chinese bird-and-flower paintings, it is difficult for Western painters to truly imitate the painting style of Chinese painters. It is possible to determine whether a painting is a Western imitation based on the handling of shadows on the screen. Secondly, there are examples of Chinese

painters misinterpreting the actual situation in order to cater to the preferences of Western clients. Export paintings and wallpapers are essentially commodities, the main purpose of which is to generate a profit. Therefore, Chinese painters often "invent" the images that they want to see in order to satisfy the curiosity of foreign customers. For instance, Canton export paintings depicting Chinese punishments often depict appalling punishments, such as "Yaozhan" (slicing through a prisoner's waist) and "Tingzhang" (beating someone to death with a stick). However, such punishments were already abolished when they were drawn and "Lingchi"<sup>127</sup>, another cruel punishment, was rare. Nonetheless, the influence of Lingchi is was magnified during the spread. Many Westerners mistakenly believe that the Qing Dynasty used this form of torture on a daily basis.<sup>128</sup> Finally, due to differences in cultural backgrounds and aesthetic concepts, The British were not obsessed with purchasing works done by renowned artists, but instead all products with similar styles were readily accepted. Therefore, whether these export paintings considered high quality among Chinese people is unimportant.

In summary, although the bamboo motif in Chinese export wallpapers retains certain characteristics of traditional bird-and-flower paintings in terms of method, its composition has shifted from emphasizing the main body like fine art, to emphasizing form and lacking a clear subject like decorative art. Consequently, the bamboo pattern on the dimension plane was infinitely expanded by means of filling and branching. Such an innovative combination of Chinese and Western methods of composition demonstrates the superb adaptability of Canton painters vis-à-vis the needs of the Western market.

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<sup>127</sup> Ling-chi means using a knife to methodically remove portions of the body over an extended period of time, eventually resulting in death. Lingchi is often regarded as the cruelest form of execution in the world.

<sup>128</sup> See the misunderstanding of Lingchi by Westerners in: Brook, Timothy, Jérôme Bourgon, and Gregory Blue. *Death by a Thousand Cuts*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008.

### 5.4.3 The faded auspicious meaning

Imbuing animals and plants with moral qualities is an important concept in Chinese bird-and-flower paintings and traditional Chinese culture more generally. *Xuanhehuapu*(宣和畫譜) notes the importance of human emotions in paintings, stating that "The beauty of a painting lies in the similarities between it and poets (writing poems)." "If flowers and birds can convey human emotions, then "The beauty of nature is transferred to one's own spirit."<sup>129</sup> Although bird-and-flower paintings pay special attention to capturing the true form of flowers and birds through sketching training, their ultimate goal is to project the virtues of natural things onto themselves. For instance, the "four gentlemen of flowers" loved by literati bird-and-flowers painters, which are the plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum, are all entrusted with the painters' desire for noble morals. Meticulous bird-and-flower paintings that are more widespread among ordinary people mostly pursue auspicious meanings.<sup>130</sup> Different bird-and-flower motifs are combined to express the simple desire for a happy life, such as "longevity" as expressed by camellia and a ribbon bird, or the peony and Chinese bulbul (a white-headed bird) which convey the meaning "Rich until (one's) hair turns white".

Different types of plants and birds can be combined to form different meanings, but it is rare that multiple artistic concepts are combined on paintings like Chinese export wallpapers. The author analyzed more than forty bird-and-flower wallpapers included in the "Chinese Wallpaper in Britain and Ireland" between the 18th and 19th centuries. Their findings show that peonies, peach blossoms and

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<sup>129</sup> Anonymous: *Xuan He Hua Pu*(宣和畫譜). Vol.15. *Qin Ding Si Ku Quan Shu*(欽定四庫全書). Chinese Text Project. <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=63603&page=74&remap=gb#%E7%BB%98%E4%BA%8B>

<sup>130</sup> Li, Fu Shun: "The moral of flower-and-bird painting and the character of plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum". *Art Observation*.1996.08.

rose flowers appear far more frequently than the plums, orchids and pines loved by Chinese literati painters. Among them, peonies are particularly common and appear in almost every picture. In some wallpapers, even if the plum blossoms appear, their role is just to serve as a background for stretching branches. The winter plum motif, which Chinese bird-and-flower painters particularly love, was unlikely to appear as the classic method of painting flowers without leaves seems out of place among such colorful flowers.

One possible explanation for this is that the British in the 18<sup>th</sup> century yearned for wealth over noble morals and thus preferred Chinese wallpapers painted with colorful peony motifs over ones featuring pine trees, plum blossoms and other motifs. This explanation is incorrect. Regardless of whether a motif represents wealth or integrity, these concepts did not enter the UK through bird-and-flower wallpapers. Therefore, the British chose wallpapers that expressed pure appreciation for patterns or colors. For British collectors who do not understand these implications, bird-and-flower paintings are attractive merely because of their rich colors and delicate lines, rather than any implied meaning. As a result, Canton painters tended to paint whatever motif is attractive to the foreigners, making reading the implication behind the motifs less important.

Figure 5.11 shows an export silk bed sheet currently on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. On this printed silk, a plum tree with extremely scattered branches winds up the center of the painting, but the plum blossoms may be too monotonous in color. Hence, the painters drew a peach tree with a s-shaped trunk that sits at the center of the painting. Two different plants simultaneously occupying the center of a picture would almost never appear in traditional bird-and-flower paintings. The main body of the picture is surrounded by a circle of lace composed of pine trees, chrysanthemums,

plum blossoms and other flowers that symbolize the four seasons. At the bottom of the picture, a golden pheasant with gorgeous feathers frolics among the colorful peonies. Motivated perhaps by concerns about space on both sides of the painting, the artist painted a fruit basket and a bird cage on both sides of the branches of the winter plum.



**Figure 5.11:** This painted silk resembles the wallpapers made in Canton (Guangzhou) for export, suggesting that it might have come from the same workshops that produced export wallpapers.

©Victoria and Albert Museum

Similarly, this wallpaper in Cobham Hall (see Figure 5.12) has a similar composition (except for the absence of borders), as it uses a monochrome plum as its base and incorporates peony flowers in order to accentuate the color, just like the embroidered bed sheet. Although bird-and-flower wallpapers are export products derived from Chinese bird-and-flower paintings, Chinese painters let their pursuit of auspicious meaning take a back seat and replaced them with methods that make the wallpaper look fuller and the colors brighter. As a result, bird-and-flower wallpapers differ from common export products that used traditional painting methods.



**Figure 5.12:** Section of the wallpaper in the State Dressing Room at Cobham Hall, Kent. The white plum blossoms can be seen in the background, with more colorful plants in the front.

©National Trust

In summary, it seems that the bird-and-flower motifs used in the Chinese market differ substantially from the bird-and-flower wallpaper motifs sold overseas as painters came to understand that their Western customers cared about aesthetics and decoration, rather than auspicious meaning or noble morals. Therefore, Canton painters began to splice irrelevant combinations of motifs on large wallpapers, such that winter plums and orchids, which were not gorgeous in appearance but popular among Chinese literati, could never appear. Canton painters boldly changed the traditional thoughts that emphasized the meaning of bird-and-flower motifs and produced novel and popular products. Such innovation represents one of the most creative revolutions among Canton painters.

#### 5.4.4 Replaceable fun

As mentioned in the previous article, bird-and-flower wallpapers account for 60% of existing Chinese export wallpapers in the UK. Hence, bird-and-flower wallpapers are a very successful export product. The primary reason behind the popularity of bird-and-flower wallpapers is their low cost. At the time, figural wallpapers cost at least 7 shillings per yard, while bird-and-flower wallpapers cost only 4 shillings per yard. In addition to relatively affordable prices, the interchangeability of bird-and-flower wallpapers allowed Western collectors to use them more freely in the new cultural context. The reason for this is that China's export wallpapers are usually sold in sets. Figural wallpapers are usually more expensive panoramic wallpapers because they depict a complete scene, while bird-and-flower wallpapers allow people to freely choose parts of a set according to personal preferences. Consequently, compared with large-scale Chinese figural wallpapers that form a complete scene and cannot be easily adjusted, bird-and-flower wallpapers are relatively smaller; easier to replace and change; and cheap to

reproduce. Hence, bird-and-flower wallpapers were better equipped to enter more British families.

As mentioned above, the bird-and-flower wallpapers posted in the Chinese Drawing Room of Temple Newsam fully demonstrate the ability to be freely replaced and spliced. Lady Hertford, the hostess of the house, added her own biological illustrations cut from a lavishly illustrated book *Birds of America* by John James Audubon onto one of the wallpapers (see Figure 4.6). Although there are obvious differences in style, the middle section of the two bird-and-flower wallpapers is decorated with a set of Japanese lacquer bookcases surrounded by inlaid gold borders in the style of King Louis XIV. Consequently, such a "Chinese room" decoration style essentially became a mixture of various Oriental arts.<sup>131</sup> A set of bird-and-flower wallpapers currently on display in Milton Manor House was also re-composited by British interior designers (figure4.2). In order to fill a blank space on the screen, the designer cut and added peonies and other flowers from the original wallpaper to form the "foreground" and fill out the picture. It can be seen that these Chinese wallpapers are similar to European natural illustrations thanks to their vivid pictures and gorgeous colors. Such features inspired British collectors to engage in secondary creation. Such practicability further enhanced their popularity among British households. In summary, the ability to replace with bird-and-flower wallpapers enhanced their cultural adaptability. Although bird-and-flower wallpapers lacked material foundation in China and the British struggled to understand the artistic connotations behind their motifs, they nonetheless became the most successful commodities among export wallpapers.

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<sup>131</sup> De Bruijn.152

## Chapter 6. The Decline of Bird-and-Flower Wallpapers and the Inheritance of the New Century

### 6.1. The Lost Oriental Paradise—the Changing British Impression of China in the 19th Century

Alongside the trend of "Chinoiserie" in the UK, Chinese export art, led by bird-and-flower wallpapers, was sold in the UK from the 17th century until the early 19th century. At the same time, the British attitude towards the ideal China of the past underwent a period of change. More precisely, China ceased to be the rich and noble land described by Marco Polo, while bird-and-flower wallpapers became less popular.

In 1792, in order to further expand the British market in the Far East, King George III sent Lord McCartney to lead a substantial mission of nearly 700 people. After almost a year at sea, Lord McCartney met with Emperor Qianlong on September 14, 1793. However, the 81-year-old Emperor Qianlong viewed these strange-looking British people as barbarians who came to swear allegiance just like other small neighboring countries. Furthermore, Lord McCartney refused to "Kow Tow" when meeting the emperor, which caused offence. After exchanging gifts with the mission, the Qing Dynasty believed that the British mission was finished. Lord McCartney made six demands at the time, including the expansion of trade, which were rejected. As a result, the British were euphemistically notified to leave Beijing as soon as possible. Although the British mission did not achieve its intended goals, they confirmed the rumors that the formerly powerful and glorious country had become sick and started to lag.

After returning to the UK, Lord McCartney's mission provided their assessment of China's state through a considerable number of travel notes, the most famous of which are McCartney's own diary, Sir John Barrow's *Travels in China* (1804) and George Leonard Staunton's *An authentic account of an embassy*

(1797). In his diary, Lord McCartney commented that the Qing Empire was about to fall, stating that “In fact the volume of the empire is now grown too ponderous and disproportionate to be easily grasped by a single hand, be it ever so capacious and strong. It is possible, notwithstanding, that the momentum impressed on the machine by the vigour and wisdom of the present Emperor may keep it steady and entire in its orbit for a considerable time longer, but I should not be surprised if its dislocation or dismemberment were to take place before my own dissolution.”<sup>132</sup> Such records from McCartney and other ambassadors vis-à-vis China can be described as a turning point in the British impression of China. These notes overturned the ideal image of China in the hearts of Westerners that had taken hold following Marco Polo’s travels. Furthermore, the British began to believe that China was no longer a civilized, polite and ideal country, but rather a doomed empire with backwards technology, ignorant people and a corrupt government.

Many scholars believe that the deterioration of the British impression of China caused by McCartney’s visit to China was a crucial factor that led to the Opium War between China and the UK in 1840. In 1839, Lin Zexu, a Chinese official who was dissatisfied with Britain's insistence on bringing opium to China, was entrusted by the emperor to destroy a large amount of opium in Humen, Guangdong. As a result, British business groups began to advocate for a declaration of war against China. In 1840, the first Opium War broke out. However, the Qing Empire, a technologically backwards agricultural country, was no longer an opponent to Britain, which had begun to industrialize. The war ended with the defeat of the Qing Empire; the forced signing of the "Treaty of Nanking"; the opening of trade ports; and the

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<sup>132</sup> McCartney, George McCartney. *An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord McCartney during His Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-Lung, 1793-1794*. [London]: Longmans, 1962. 51

ceding of Hong Kong. Since then, the image of China among the British has been weak, and the craze for Chinoiserie and Chinese goods, born out of the beautiful fantasy of the Eastern Empire, has gradually declined amid criticism in the UK.

## 6.2. The rise of the arts and crafts movement and the decline of Chinese-style wallpapers

Chinese-style decoration reached its peak in the UK during the mid-18th century. Ordinary people's almost exaggerated pursuit contained their yearning for this mysterious oriental country. However, with the documents on China brought back by the McCartney mission to China, this craze finally faded away. At the same time, the UK began a comprehensive criticism of the Chinese style from politics to literature and increasingly to art. British politician Anthony Ashley Cooper noted "Effeminacy pleases me. The Indian figures, the Japan work, the enamel strikes my eye. The luscious colours and glossy paint gain upon my fancy... But what ensues?... Do I not for ever forfeit my good relish? How is it possible I should thus come to taste the beauties of an Italian master, or of a hand happily formed on nature and the ancients?"<sup>133</sup> John Baptist Jackson, the brilliant engraver of chiaroscuro prints, grew even angrier as the popularity of Chinese wallpapers left no room for his classical statue wallpapers. Jackson lambasted 'those who chose the Chinese manner' and remarked that they 'ought to admire, in pursuance of that same Taste, the crooked, disproportioned and ugly, in Preference to the strait, regular and beautiful'.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Lord Shaftesbury, "Advice to an Author". *Characteristics of Men: Manners, Opinions, Times, etc.* ed. John Robertson. 2 vols. London 1900.1:219. Quoted from Porter, David L. "Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35, no. 3 (2002): 395-411.403.

<sup>134</sup> Honour.129

In the second half of the 19th century, the rise of the arts and crafts movement increasingly pushed people to reflect on their fanatical sentiment towards that which was Chinese. The arts and crafts movement was a design improvement movement that began in the UK during the second half of the 19th century. The theoretical guide in the arts and crafts movement was the writer John Ruskin, while its figurehead was the artist and poet William Morris. This campaign sought to remedy the decline in design standards brought about by the industrial mass production of furniture, interior products and architecture. Moreover, this campaign explored ideas from nature with an emphasis on the importance of handicraft production and resistance towards industrial manufactures and tawdry Victorian designs. The aim of such exploration was to restore the standard of traditional British design.

However, Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers were not covered by Morris's campaign. Although bird-and-flower wallpapers account for the largest proportion of surviving Chinese wallpapers in the UK, there are only 120 British buildings that have preserved export Chinese wallpapers. Helen Clifford also believes that part of the appeal of Chinese wallpapers lies in their rarity. In 1772, Lady Mary Coke proudly declared "I have taken down the Indian paper, put up another upon a blue ground with white birds & flowers. Tis very pretty & has the additional recommendations of being quite new. There are but eight sets come to England."<sup>135</sup> It is conceivable that, although wallpapers were cheaper than other Chinese export goods, they were nonetheless only affordable among the wealthy. However, Morris did not seek to design wallpapers that only the rich could afford. Rather, Morris believed that art should be affordable, handmade and honest.

William Morris (1834-1896) was one of the leaders of the arts and crafts movement; a world-renowned

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<sup>135</sup> *The Letters and Journals of Lady Mary Coke*, vol.45. London: 1757.56 Quoted from Finn. 51

designer and painter of furniture, wallpaper patterns and fabric patterns; and a socialist. Morris founded the Socialist Union in 1884 and even painted the cover for its brochure. Furthermore, Morris created more than 600 wallpaper, fabric and embroidery patterns in his lifetime, many of which were derived from natural elements, such as flowers, birds, vegetables and fruits. Unlike Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers, which mix plants and were over-pretentious, Morris' wallpapers have been abstracted to a certain extent. Consequently, the patterns on Morris' wallpapers are both delicate and realistic, with a rich composition that has a beautiful geometric rhythm (see Figure 6.1). In the end, Morris's wallpapers were enthusiastically sought after by the local British people because of their relatively low price and fresh, natural patterns. Moreover, Morris' wallpapers gradually replaced Chinese export wallpapers, which were targeted at wealthy consumers.

The prosperity of the wallpaper industry in the UK brought Europe and even the US into the golden age of wallpaper design. At the end of the 19th century, when the British wallpaper market was booming, previously popular Chinese export wallpapers suddenly disappeared. The fascination with Eastern countries finally came to an end.



**Figure 6.1:** A pink and rose wallpaper, designed by William Morris, manufactured by Jeffrey & Co., around 1890, England. Museum no. E.708-1915. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

### 6.3. Bird-and-flower wallpapers today—the evolving Chinese style

In the second half of the 19th century, although Chinese export wallpapers did not return to their glory as the popularity of the Chinese style in British society faded, bird-and-flower wallpapers continued to occupy a position in the market thanks to their strong adaptability with regard to Western interior design. Starting in 1930, Gracie, a Chinese wallpaper seller in New York, began cooperating with a painting workshop in Beijing for the purpose of producing Chinese-style wallpapers (the workshop later moved to Taiwan in 1949).<sup>136</sup> Said unique cooperation model lasted until 1986, when the London-based luxury wallpaper company de Gournay also began to establish contact with Chinese studios. Consequently, de Gournay became the second company to focus on producing Chinese-style bird-and-flower wallpapers. De Gournay was founded by Claud Cecil Gurney. The majority of the products sold by de Gournay are replicas of antique bird-and-flower wallpapers that exist in the UK, but some patterns differ slightly in their proportions. In general, the bird-and-flower patterns on the wallpapers produced by De Gournay are smaller in size, with more space between patterns and less overlap among different plant patterns, which creates a more elegant and clear appearance. Many of the names given to the wallpapers sold by de Gournay pay tribute to the historical sites where the originals can be found, such as Coutts & Co, or Badminton. In addition to the high-quality hand-painted wallpapers produced by Gracie and de Gournay, in 2016, Tempaper placed an advertisement in *Vogue* announcing the launch of "temporary affordable Chinese wallpapers." Tempaper had begun collaborating with Shanghai artist Vick Xie, using his hand-painted wallpaper as a prototype to launch a "de Gournay-style" wallpaper starting at \$12 per square

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<sup>136</sup> De Bruijn, 226.

meter. Such a price made these Chinese wallpapers affordable for ordinary families.<sup>137</sup>

In China, although ordinary families still do not typically hang wallpaper in their homes, the bird-and-flower wallpapers that were popular overseas have begun to enter China's high-end fashion circle. Anna Wu cites fashion photos taken by the Chinese version of *Bazaar* in 2018 for the popular Qing Dynasty historical drama "Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace" as an example to illustrate the resurgence of bird-and-flower wallpapers in the Chinese fashion industry (see Figure 6.2).<sup>138</sup> Moreover, these photos were taken for the cast and crew of this drama by the famous Chinese fashion photographer Yin Chao. In order to create a classic and luxurious look, Yin deliberately used de Gournay's hand-painted wallpapers as a background to reflect the graceful and luxurious aesthetic characteristics of the Qing court. Since the 21st century, as China's national strength has continued to increase, younger generations have begun to find a new sense of cultural identity in traditional Chinese costumes and patterns. At the same time, people have become increasingly demanding of costumes, makeup and props in historical TV dramas. In Yin's works, the actresses wore the exquisite and luxurious costumes and jewelry of the Qing Dynasty with gorgeous, export-style bird-and-flower wallpapers to reflect the exquisite and luxurious style of the imperial courts.

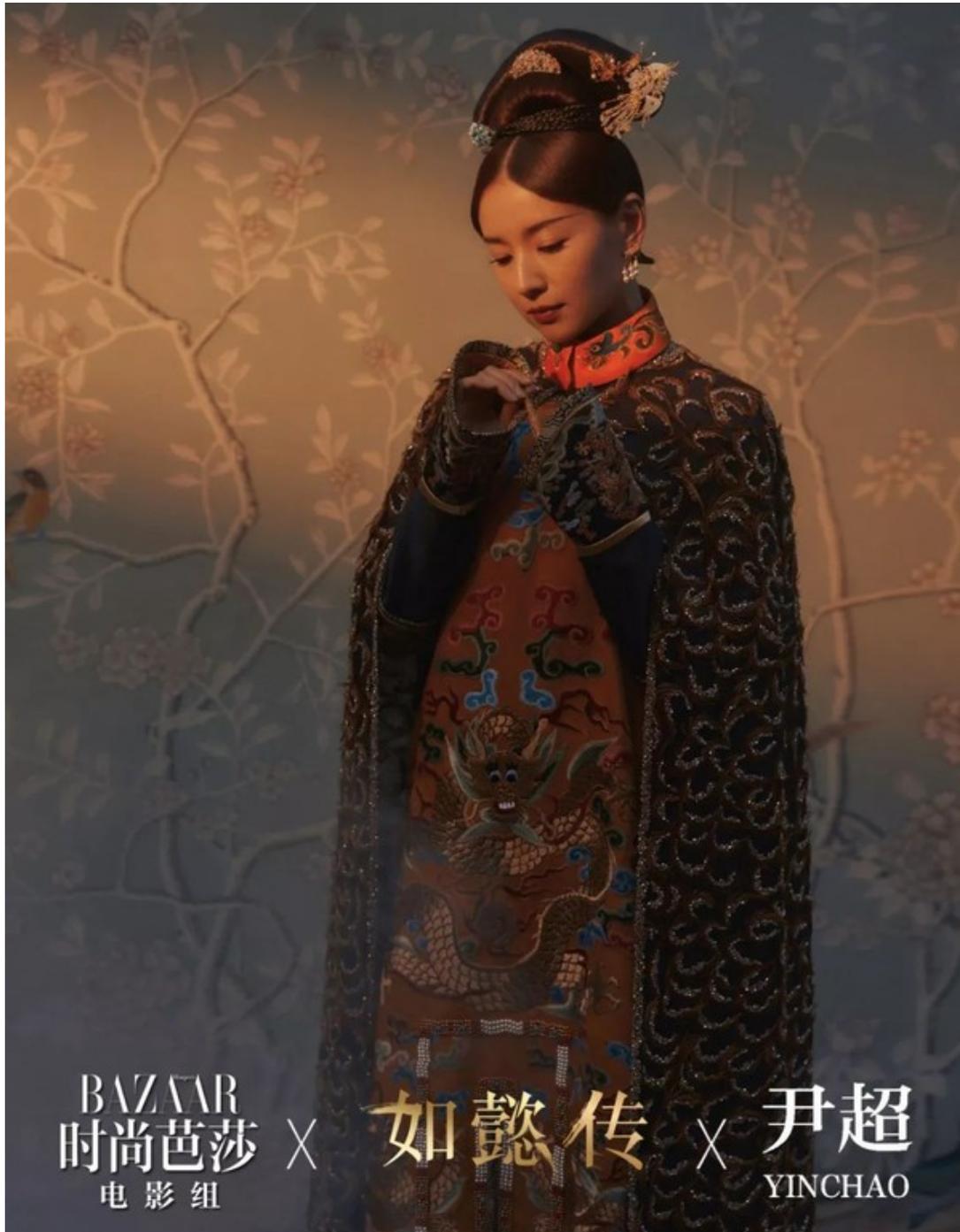
In summary, China's export bird-and-flower wallpapers are still sold in the international market for luxury interior decoration, which has reinforced the status of the "Chinese style" in the view of the Chinese fashion industry. While the Chinese editions of famous fashion magazines are still often considered "orientalist" in relation to the impression they convey of China, for the Chinese fashion and

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<sup>137</sup> Inglese, Elizabeth. "This Chinoiserie Wallpaper Is Temporary, Affordable, and Basically a Dream Come True". *Vogue*. 2016. May 17. <https://www.vogue.com/article/chinoiserie-wallpaper-temporary-affordable-diy>

<sup>138</sup> Wu, 438-439.

design circles created since reform and opening up began, bird-and-flower wallpapers remain an excellent means of proving Chinese cultural identity to the Western world



**Figure 6.2:** An actress from “Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace” wearing an exquisite embroidery costume while standing in front of a gorgeous de Gournay’s hand-painted Chinese export style wallpaper.

## Conclusion

This article attempts to answer a question that has long existed in the field of Chinese wallpaper research from the perspectives of Chinese art history and interior decoration history. In doing so, natural history and sociological research methods have been adopted. The question is as follows. How did Chinese bird-and-flower paintings, with their profound artistic traditions, become popular as decorative art in the UK and achieve such unprecedented success?

Firstly, the historical background of bird-and-flower wallpapers laid the foundation for its success. During the mid-18th century, Chinese-style fashion reached its peak in the UK. The earliest impressions of Chinese bird-and-flower motifs among the British come from Chinese export porcelain, textiles and other Chinese items. The goods created an eagerness for Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers.

Secondly, this article examines the recognized source of artistic inspiration behind bird-and-flower wallpapers - Chinese bird-and-flower paintings. Even before the birth of these wallpapers, Chinese bird-and-flower paintings were decorative and commercialized during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. However, the southern Chinese did not have a tradition of using similar wallpapers, which suggests that the birth of export bird-and-flower wallpapers was not a vertical transmission across identical materials.

Thirdly, this article analyzes the necessary conditions for the birth of commercial bird-and-flower wallpapers, the most important of which are the emergence of professional painters and the appearance of assembly line work patterns in Canton. Moreover, various items with bird-and-flower motifs produced in Canton are used as examples to illustrate that the spread of Chinese bird-and-flower motifs to the West was not about wallpapers, but rather concerned the multitude of export commodities that influenced the overall impression held by Westerners with regard to Chinese export art.

Fourthly, this article investigates the relationship between bird-and-flower wallpapers and Canton export botanical paintings. Moreover, it has been proven that the British enthusiasm for exotic plants is one reason that explains the popularity of Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers, but the painters behind these works were not rigorous botanical painters. Hence, bird-and-flower wallpapers are distinct from export botanical paintings.

Fifthly, this article examines the manner in which Canton painters adapted traditional Chinese bird-and-flower paintings to the needs of Western customers in order to create decorative bird-and-flower wallpapers. The distortion and mixing of plants on such wallpapers also prove that Chinese painters and British purchasers had different perceptions of wallpaper. While British purchasers appreciated realism in wallpapers, Chinese painters did not adhere to the principles of Chinese taste.

Finally, this article discusses the decline of bird-and-flower wallpapers in the late 19th century and their revival in the 21st century. As an interior decoration style inspired by Chinese bird-and-flower paintings, these wallpapers represent one of the most important factors that influenced Westerners' perception of Chinese export arts.

In summary, even though bird-and-flower wallpapers are an export product without a direct counterpart in China and share no common cultures with the UK, the birth of bird-and-flower wallpaper refutes the idea that there was a unilateral imitation of Asian style in Europe thanks to such Chinese-style products.

As a successful commodity, Chinese bird-and-flower wallpapers also display the mutual compromise and tolerance embedded in the cultural exchanges that took place between China and the UK in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the pursuit of bird-and-flower wallpapers and great enthusiasm for Chinese plants among the British upper class, to the enthusiastic promotion of domestic plants by Chinese flower

sellers, ordinary Chinese painters made an effort to adapt their products to the Western interior furnishing style and a global product was born out of the misunderstandings and appreciation shared between the people of the East and the West. Such a unique scenario reflects the wisdom of the relatively-unknown, ordinary Chinese painters who imitated, absorbed and recreated the wisdom of foreign decorative art styles. In the modern world, where there are more frequent and complex cultural exchanges between the East and the West, such elegant and exquisite wallpapers are undoubtedly a valuable inspiration bequeathed by the Chinese and British people of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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