

## *Introduction*

In the British nineteenth century, vision became subjective, material, and, consequentially, modern.<sup>1</sup> This book tells one part of the story of how those changes in vision came about, and tells too how literary and artistic texts directed and made plain those changes. But I recount my history of vision's development not through accounts of new technologies but through a study of one specific subject and object of vision: China, a geographical location that also came to designate particular kinds of visual and aesthetic form, as well as a particularly antithetical kind of foreignness.<sup>2</sup> China, for nineteenth-century Britons, was at once place, commodity, people, and, at the same time, something more than all of those. It was a field of imagined visual possibility that directed many other kinds of material and rhetorical interaction. Many who traveled to China, and many more who did not, understood the Chinese especially and fundamentally in terms of the way the Chinese seemed to look—or fail to look—at things. When Leigh Hunt writes of the Chinese, “little-eyed . . . and little-minded,” that toddle upon the surface of his porcelain teacup, he makes plain in fancy an assumption broadly held in fact: that deficient Chinese ontology manifested in the physical limitations of Chinese eyes.<sup>3</sup>

Equally important, those who understood the Chinese to look differently, in both senses of the phrase, further understood Chinese objects and spaces—whether located in China or Britain—to reflect that divergent way of looking back at the viewer. Artificial, constrained design deemed Chinese in origin was held to induce constrained and artificial ways of seeing in observers both Chinese and British. These infectious consequences

both include and go beyond a mirroring of anthropomorphic form. When William Rossetti, writing a review of James McNeill Whistler's painting *Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864), refers to Whistler's red-haired model Jo Hiffernan as a "Chinese woman painting a blue vase" despite the fact that there is "not even an attempt at the Chinese cast of countenance," he anchors an abstract conception of Chinese vision in a flippantly inadequate physical designation.<sup>4</sup> Even as Rossetti explains that the model's eyes obviously lack the "proper almond-shape," he continues to insist on her "Chinese"-ness as a function of the Chinese objects that surround her. The contradictions of his description demonstrate a central contention of my study: that China made sense to nineteenth-century British viewers through form and context as much as content.<sup>5</sup> The almond eye, initially the main point of distinction between the British and the Chinese, actually functions as a jumping-off site for a much broader and more abstract range of explorations of Chinese formal difference inspired by the eye's constrained dimensions. British writers and artists seized the obvious physical difference of the Chinese eye—in particular, its smaller size—to theorize the restricted and artificial influence that China's empire was held to offer. Given their preliminary grounding in the visual organ, such theorizations naturally found best expression in visual terms.

It is therefore my argument that descriptions of ways of seeing explicitly understood as Chinese reshaped the lived experience of a wide variety of nineteenth-century British subjects in a way that we can follow through texts like Rossetti's review and many others. These reshapings revised not only British conceptions of China but British understandings of themselves as well. Indeed, British adaptation to this Chinese way of seeing continued to be mystified as foreign interventions even as the transformations they incurred became exclusively domestic—just as Whistler's portrait of Jo Hiffernan among blue and white vases declares much more about his allegiance to a school of European painterly realism than his connections to Jingdezhen porcelain factories. But neither did the adjective "Chinese" entirely abandon implications of difference. Rather, the word evolved to accommodate both a racial designation and an aesthetic form described by its artificial composition and disregard of European perspectival arrangements. In this conflation of the physical and aesthetic realms, as in the hybrid Chinese Irish woman who is the subject of *Lange Leizen*, we see how British artists and writers used the imagination of foreign difference to change the way literary and artistic form explained the reality of the world at home.

This book, then, intertwines histories of nineteenth-century visuality together with histories of nineteenth-century Sino-British political, economic, and social relations because understanding vision's place in the literature of the nineteenth century requires that we do so. We cannot understand what nineteenth-century writers were writing about unless we also understand what they were looking at: in ways both globally encompassing and individually specific, vision, viewed object, and text were complicit in the writing of histories both aesthetic and political. With its silks, teas, willow trees, porcelain pagodas, and countless other designs occupying a familiar yet exotic place in the British visual and literary universe even as its governing empire became increasingly entangled with British political and commercial concerns, China offers an especially good example of this complicity. In explaining the complex presence of China in the nineteenth-century literary imagination, then, this book also gives an extended example of one way that visual images should matter to literary scholars and historians alike. Such images made silent yet constant backdrop to the production of literary and historical texts. But while many writings have survived, many more images have been lost or scattered from their original context. Restoring images to their proper place in the minds and eyes of nineteenth-century authors gives us a completed picture of the range of connotation that a particular term—"China," for example—must imply.

Yet making connections between the nineteenth century's visual contexts and its conditions of cultural and racial difference, whether in China or elsewhere, has been difficult to do. For scholars of the present day, asking about how visual practices divide along cultural lines seems to invite replication of bad nineteenth-century patterns of racial determinism and stereotype at worst, or descriptive catalogues of images of difference at best.<sup>6</sup> While works like Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* have explained to us the priority of visual practice in the creation of the modern subject, we have often lacked the cultural genealogies to complement his technical histories of visual apparatus. These challenges do not mean that we have to abandon questions about global differences in vision, however—just that we ought to change their emphasis. Instead of investigating only *how* different cultures were understood to see and perceive differently, we also need to ask *why* that difference mattered. What did it mean for British writers and artists to define themselves through or against a way of seeing they understood to be categorically incommensurate?

I set out to answer this question in this book by following the formation

of an imaginary vessel of perception that I have termed Britain's Chinese eye.<sup>7</sup> British writers and artists used the idea of the Chinese eye as a point of internal reference, nuancing their invented version of that organ to aid in interpreting and expanding their own creative productions. The Chinese eye came to serve as a disembodied lens through which Britons might write for or against what was imagined to be a system of Chinese aesthetics. That imagined Chinese aesthetic system, for a wide variety of British writers and artists, became a defining corollary to an evolving British self-image. These comparisons worked sometimes positively and sometimes negatively: Dante Rossetti, brother to William, asserts his unconventional artistic sense through his studio displays of blue and white porcelain, while Charles Dickens condemns protectionist Tory foreign policy by comparing its insular perspective to carved Chinese ivory balls nested one inside the other.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, however, the explication of foreign difference through aesthetic form is crucial to an articulation of a domestic identity. To understand what it means to have Chinese eyes, then, is to understand the ways that British subjects theorized not only Chinese vision but also their own.

Explaining the visual influence of China in Britain is important because we learn something new about the history of visibility in the nineteenth century when we follow the ways that aesthetic and visual sensibilities, broadly understood, connect to particular geographies. We learn that conditions of culture, governance, and race do matter in constructing a history of vision. They matter when telling stories not only of appropriation and loss but also of stories of incorporation and gain. Most crucially, culture, governance, and race tell us of the predicatory importance of visual and aesthetic form for establishing the foundations of the nineteenth-century British literary subject. One part of the invention of the British subject as a reader, writer, and depicter in general emerges when we follow the invention of the British subject as a reader, writer, and depicter of China in particular. These inventions concern not only the individual, but the nation; China's place within the individual imagination affirms that individual's connection to a collective British vision.

It should be immediately clear that we cannot explain China's imagined visual value to Britons simply by deliberating the authenticity of the objects and spaces that the British called Chinese. We also must ask what China, in particular, lent to the British writers and artists who claimed a Chinese aesthetic as their own. Beyond the material borrowing of patterns for blue

and white china and designs for landscape gardens, what did the process of invoking Chinese aesthetics and Chinese visual practice mean for the British author? How did the sense that an object “looked Chinese,” or, more precisely, “looked like something a Chinese person might look at,” carry weight for the British artist? Why were the fantastical, artificial, and unnatural qualities of Chinese artistic productions so significant to British viewers, and why too were the restricted, immobile, and shallow powers of Chinese perception so commented on by British writers in works ranging from William Chambers’s *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? Surely a desire for escape, a love of the exotic, and a fascination with a civilization supposed immobile for many centuries are all factors here, as many scholars of Orientalism and chinoiserie have already observed. Yet these observations do not tell the whole story. British engagements with an idea of Chinese aesthetics during the nineteenth century instruct us more specifically on the evolution of vision and visual realism during that time period. In the century in which realism reached its greatest heights, the persistence with which authors and artists continued to invoke a defiantly antirealist aesthetic that they claimed to be Chinese demonstrates an aspect of realism’s development that has so far received little attention.<sup>9</sup>

For the writers and artists I consider in this study, China’s aesthetic difference gains existence when realism’s most basic tenets get denied: narrative or pictorial representation cannot be understood to be analogous to direct experience, and temporal and spatial order no longer advance symmetrically or progressively. Further, the Chinese absence of interest in techniques of linear perspective signified to Western readers a profound indifference to the system of individual perception that perspective’s techniques imply, and, by extension, the massive framework of Western subject formation predicated on the individual eye.<sup>10</sup> These kinds of formal denials of realist standards are frequently granted to later, more familiar media of visual modernism such as photography, cinema, and Impressionist painting. But the things about those media that are most interesting to us—their manipulations of renditions of temporality, interruptions of perspectival representation, and radical rethinkings of the cohesion between the pictorial subject and its background—all began to appear much earlier, in the British writing and picturing of Chinese aesthetics.<sup>11</sup>

Although much of this book expands on the difficulties incurred by Chinese visual difference, the texts I read also share an embedded idea of

China's promise for the British imaginary. When the *Academy* mourns in 1899 the "[I]and . . . of little bridges and temples, and cock-boats shining in the soup-plate, or glowing in the rare and splendid lantern. . . . All that is doomed. Our children will not think so of China, for China will become real," the sorrow is only part facetious and the loss is only partly in fantasy.<sup>12</sup> In its defiance of the real, China made visible the priorities of native British vision; in becoming real, China deprives British vision of its key counter-example. In both cases, the capacity to see and be seen sets the standard for understanding what is real in the first place. Without the specific visual evidence of China's difference drawn from the wide range of nineteenth-century texts and objects that wrote or pictured China, the broader case of China's profound strangeness to nineteenth-century Britain cannot stand.

For China did indeed offer an extraordinarily broad order of both national and visual difference to the nineteenth-century British thinker. In its territorial expanse, large population, enduring civilization, and globally distributed commodities, the Asiatic empire formed a space both profoundly separate from, yet uniquely imbricated in, the European imagination. No other sovereign nation in the geographical imaginary was held at once to stand apart from Western history and yet, at the same time, to penetrate its domestic and commercial spaces as much as China. Apparent throughout nineteenth-century thought is the contention that China, in particular, forms the fixed, atemporal visual and spatial alternative to European linguistic dynamism.

As a country at once entirely foreign yet well known, China thus successfully made the terms by which what I call the familiar exotic came to be understood. The familiar exotic, a paradoxical category, conveys a sense of unbridgeable cultural and aesthetic difference that is amplified, not diffused, by increased circulation and reproduction; I argue that we need such a category to account for China's simultaneous presence and difference in the nineteenth-century imagination. China by no means meant the same thing to all people, yet all agreed that the designation "Chinese" offers an essential opposition to British conventions, even if the object it designates has been entirely domestically produced. What I broadly term a Chinese aesthetic, then, might more awkwardly be named a familiar-exotic aesthetic, as this paradoxical sense of everyday foreignness is as relevant as more material design parameters for describing the nature of China's formal influence.

A foundational piece of China's foreignness comes in its temporal dif-

ference, a difference particularly relevant given that art and literature of the period reflected changes in the representation of time more radically than ever. In British minds, China's stasis and recursion stands in contradiction to empire-building progress and order: "[B]etter fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay" as Tennyson explains in "Locksley Hall."<sup>13</sup> While receptive of externally imposed delineations, China is understood by nineteenth-century observers to be internally unproductive, unwilling or unable to travel forward in time along with the European nations.<sup>14</sup> As the civil servant, and secretary to Lord Macartney, John Barrow writes in his 1804 *Travels in China*, an account of Macartney's diplomatic embassy to the court of the Qing emperor: "The Chinese . . . were civilized, fully to the same extent they now are, more than two thousand years ago . . . but . . . they have since made little progress in any thing, and been retrograde in many things."<sup>15</sup> This dismissal represents a sea change in European attitudes toward China's social constancy; earlier observers, such as the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, had praised China's immovability as evidence of the legitimacy of its governmental structure.<sup>16</sup>

Barrow's critique echoes other late-eighteenth-century denigrations of Chinese influence that, for later interpreters, together seem to signal the definitive end of the era of European interest in Chinese aesthetics. Yet this interest cannot be connected solely to aesthetic concerns. As David Porter has shown, the eighteenth-century fondness for Chinese fashions known as chinoiserie connected crucially to larger debates about aesthetic theory, consumerism, and the global commercial prowess of the British nation.<sup>17</sup> Even though nineteenth-century writers abandon the earlier fondness for the decorative style of chinoiserie, they maintain and even strengthen the notion that China's visuality must be linked to political and economic conditions. In the nineteenth century as in the eighteenth, China is understood through its aesthetic objects and the conditions of its seeing; whether the understanding is celebrated or deplored does not diminish that primary circumstance.

While the commanding, possessive gaze that renders its racially other object primitive and degenerate has become a well-studied visual formula, particularly in the British imperial encounter, forms of viewing dependent on movements of integration and exchange should receive more attention.<sup>18</sup> This book, therefore, makes several complementary arguments. First, that ways of seeing and ways of occupying space are crucial components in the experience of any given historical moment and that these components not

only are apparent in the physical experience of daily life but also are recordable in narratives both visual and verbal. Second, that nineteenth-century artists and writers broadly understood these ways of seeing and ways of occupying space to happen differently in different places, and that cross-cultural relations are inflected accordingly. And finally, that these assumptions about cultural variations in vision have great power to direct the ways that novels and other kinds of writing explain themselves to be real, and so to shape our knowledge of what could be called real in the British nineteenth century in the first place.

The story of how the British came to understand and rely upon a sense of Chinese visual difference must be, of course, closely tied to the story of how the British came to interact politically as well as economically with the Chinese during the nineteenth century. This book relies on key Sino-British historical encounters to flag its narrative, beginning with the first official British contact with the Chinese empire in Lord Macartney's 1793 embassy to the Qing court and continuing through to the Boxer Rising of 1898–1901, the last and most significant antiforeign uprising before the collapse of the Qing imperium. This is a period whose historical significance has been greatly revised in recent scholarship. The rise of the British empire over the course of the long nineteenth century is a story well known and often told; the decline of the Qing dynasty over the same period, perhaps equally so—and both narratives have been nuanced and complicated by recent scholarship on British and Qing imperial history.<sup>19</sup>

In particular, two kinds of historiographic models have both recently become insufficient, in large part because of an increasing attention to global economic patterns. Histories reading Britain's relations with China as functionally equivalent to Britain's other international relations, on the one hand, or, on the other, histories claiming a special paternal and improving privilege for British influence on Chinese politics and culture no longer fit with the ways we understand the early modern world as a dynamic space of exchange. Recent works by economic historians Kenneth Pomeranz and R. Bin Wong, for example, criticize earlier accounts which presume that industrial modernity must be unique to the geography of Western Europe.<sup>20</sup> These accounts, Pomeranz and Wong show, wrongly decentralize China's place in international economic development. Pomeranz's contention that it is "China, more than any other place, that has served as the 'other' for the modern West's stories about itself"<sup>21</sup> forms the foundation of his critique of Western-centric narratives of modern economic development; only in di-



vesting ourselves of essentialist ideas about China's contrasts with Western Europe, he proposes, can we properly conceive of the development of both global regions as simultaneous and mutually progressive.<sup>21</sup>

Productive recent analysis of China has adopted the broader concept of "informal empire" to negotiate the complex network of political, economic, and cultural influences and exchanges that delineated connections between the two powers in lieu of other formal instantiations of empire.<sup>22</sup> Although informal empire is not itself a new nor an uncontested model for describing Sino-British relations, its use to describe a range of knowledge-producing practices beyond the traditional venues of diplomacy and commerce have shifted the possibilities of its conceptual and geographical application. Jürgen Osterhammel influentially defines British informal empire in China as semi-colonialism, "a historical situation of some stability and permanence in which overt foreign rule is avoided while economic advantages are secured by 'unequal' legal and institutional arrangements, and also by the constant threat of political meddling and military coercion that would be intolerable in relations between fully sovereign states."<sup>23</sup> Fa-ti Fan has more recently proposed extending Osterhammel's model to questions of scientific imperialism and the political economy of knowledge among British naturalists in China; but the epistemological implications of informal empire can extend beyond individual disciplines.<sup>24</sup> More important is that we understand informal empire as epistemological engagement rather than systemic control. Making meaning of China, in a manner useful for understanding nineteenth-century empire, demands an integration of historical incident, material artifact, and ethnographic evidence, among others, into a schema in which ways of being—reflected especially in my reading by ways of seeing—produced ways of knowing. China could be imagined to be open to politically and economically beneficial influence and entry by the British, whatever the reality, thanks in part to the British understanding of Chinese visual practice as both a dominant, yet deeply deficient, mode of comprehending the surrounding world.

This makes China a difficult but interesting counterpoint to the example of India.<sup>25</sup> The influential models developed by critics like Sara Suleri for reading the rhetoric of English India transfer only partially to the Chinese context.<sup>26</sup> While both the history of the British in India and the history of the British in China contain a midcentury flash-point—the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion in north and central India and the so-called Opium Wars of the 1840s and 1850s in China—China's political constitution greatly differed

from political conditions on the subcontinent. As the British government well understood, China was ruled long prior to British arrival by a centralized non-native dynasty that exerted profound national control over social and economic systems large and small.<sup>27</sup> The notion of the despotic emperor—if not the niceties of Qing imperial politics—was clearly grasped by ordinary Britons as well. This idea of the emperor’s central body contributed signally to the theoretical embodiment of the single Chinese eye, and thus, by extension, to a range of considerations on the way that vision operated along national and cultural lines. Thus, we can read Sino-British exchange sympathetically, but not congruently, with accounts of the making of British India.

That the British held only the island of Hong Kong as an official colony makes the clearest practical difference between semicolonialism in China and colonialism in India. Long before the claiming of Hong Kong as a Crown colony, and far beyond the boundaries of that small and rocky southern territory, however, British informal empire claimed a presence in China. The story of these claims emerges through a series of significant visual encounters, in which the opposing empire of China could be imagined by the British to be both opposing and an empire in ways both viewable and visually distinct.

Sino-British history in this book begins with perhaps the most famous of these imagined scenes of encounter: the refusal by Lord Macartney to “kow-tow” before the Qianlong emperor during Macartney’s 1793 diplomatic embassy to the Qing court.<sup>28</sup> Although British trade relations with China through the East India Company dated back to the start of the seventeenth century, Macartney’s rebuff came to be understood as an important beginning point in the course of Sino-British history. As Lydia Liu has observed, this single act was deeply branded into British imperial consciousness and drove symbolic and physical acts of retaliation throughout the century.<sup>29</sup> But it also established an initial point of visual exchange from which radiated a wide range of unofficial and informal engagements with Chinese visual practice. From the example of the Macartney embassy, a moment carefully visually stage-managed by both the governments of Britain and China, British writers and readers learned that Chinese ways of seeing not only could be but had to be linked to Chinese ways of ruling and, further, that the linkage could be extended to Chinese ways of being in general as those ways were brought home to Britain’s daily experiences and domestic spaces through commodities and through narratives.

This was both a literal and a metaphorical transference. The commodity trade in silk, tea, and porcelain active through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries meant that Chinese objects were growing ever more materially present in British households. But the rise of free trade in opium meant to restore British specie reserves depleted by trade imbalances, which increased especially after the 1834 dissolution of the East India Company monopoly on the China trade, carried opium from India to China directly. British arguments about the trade in opium, both for and against, therefore depended on an abstract understanding of China's objections rather than a material contact with these commodities. In the frequent rhetorical slippage between descriptions of closed Chinese markets and blinded Chinese eyes, attention shifted away from the relative morality or economic benefit of the opium trade and toward the constitution of China as visually defiant to British influence. This understanding of China as closed and despotic made increasing contrast to a Britain moving throughout the 1840s toward a revision of its own restrictive trade tariffs via the repeal of the Corn Laws.

Thus the curtailed perspective described by members of the Macartney embassy easily transformed into a critique of Chinese blinkered vision in arguments for the British right to free trade and free travel in China. Such rights were gained, in part, through the first Opium War (1840–42) and its concluding Treaty of Nanjing (1842), which granted increased British trading rights, established the extraterritorial system of coastal Chinese cities opened to British settlement and mercantile activity called treaty ports, ceded the island of Hong Kong to Britain, and specified the payment of a large indemnity to the British by the Chinese for damages incurred in the conflict.<sup>30</sup> Major further Chinese concessions came in the Treaty of Tianjin, signed in 1858 amid the Sino-British conflict of the Arrow War (1856–60, also known as the Second Opium War) and the internal upheaval of the anti-Qing Taiping Rebellion (1856–64).<sup>31</sup> In the Treaty of Tianjin, China granted unrestricted travel to passport-holding foreigners throughout the country, expanded British trading activity further into the interior of China, and ceded an additional six treaty ports to the British (and subsequently other European and U.S.) commerce. When the Qing emperor resisted compliance to these terms, British and French troops, in a significant re-staging of Macartney's humiliation some seventy years earlier, retaliated by razing parts of the imperial palaces in Beijing, causing the Chinese to make still further territorial and economic concessions in the 1860 "Convention of Peking."