

**Balzac's panoramic views of China and the Chinese:  
a virtual space between reality and fantasy**

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## **Abstract**

Honoré de Balzac's 1842 review of Auguste Borget's album of sketches on China and the Chinese has attracted attention from critics for the ambiguous manner in which it presents his disparaging views on the nature and essence of Chinese culture. Previous researchers have thus engaged in surveying the panorama of Balzacian references to China and the Chinese in the larger corpus of his works, registering the writer's genuine interest in China, but also his inclination to seize the topic as a pretext for an attack on French society's mores. Others have hurriedly classed Balzac's insertion of China and the Chinese in his works as haphazard, uncritical or aimless chatter. My study builds on existing scholarship in order to argue that there is a solid ground to be explored behind the writer's playful remarks and satire of Chinese and French vision. New and unexpected interpretations of his seemingly superficial engagement with stereotypes on Chinese artificiality and lack of perspective are reached through the study of visual and material culture scholarship. This will clarify that the writer's association of China with European modes of virtual travel or hoax theories of clairvoyance simultaneously bridge the gap between French and Chinese thought and distort reality. The overall conclusion of the study is that Balzac's introduction of Chinese motifs in his works does not merely perpetuate French or European myths of China's backwardness or cultural inferiority, but opens a meaningful dialogue on the elements of critical thinking that need to be applied in order to see things from the perspectives of both Western and Eastern sides.

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## Introduction: Est-ce que la Chine existe?

*Does China exist?* This is the question that Balzac rhetorically asks in his 1842 serialised journalistic article entitled *La Chine et les Chinois*. In a similar vein, French writer, journalist and *AFP* and *Le Monde* correspondent in China, Francis Deron, wrote, a century and a half later, that this country definitely does not exist: “la Chine, décidément, n'existe pas” (Deron, 1999, p. 80). The main French or European perspectives underlying such bold, shocking, and even offensive assumptions revolve around ideas of myth, fabrications, visual symbolism, clashing notions of mobility and immobility, the chasm between perception or appearances and the actual nature and existence of things in the context of travelling to know the Other. For this reason, this introductory chapter will critically appraise the different guises under which China exists in Balzac’s literary world. Parallels with Deron’s own text on China’s inexistence will be made in order to highlight problematic aspects of Balzac’s ambiguous representation of the country and its inhabitants; however, Balzacian texts remain the primary sources of consideration for the present study.

In the most comprehensive study on Balzac’s representation of China and the Chinese to date, Bui and Le Huenen (2017) compiled conference papers in a collective effort to elucidate the mystery behind Balzac’s ambiguous and paradoxical statements on China and the Chinese. The need to investigate why Balzac chose to include in his writing opposing views on China and its inhabitants without ever having stepped foot in the country stems from his oscillation between positive and negative perceptions of China as expressed by travellers who were his contemporaries or predecessors. The latter depicts China as a civilisation defined by immobility and stagnation, prone to chameleonism and duplicity, self-isolation, or refusal to let itself unveiled by the Western eye; nonetheless, the Chinese are also progressive, inventive, essentially pleasant, hilarious people who hold an upright attitude towards important aspects of artistic production or social and governmental organisation, unlike their French counterparts. Balzac’s incontestable use of China and the Chinese as a pretext to subliminally critique his own country has pushed scholars such as Counter (2017, p. 29) to gravitate towards the idea that there is no rationale or higher purpose for Balzac’s engagement with China and the Chinese as topics for his written pieces. Undoubtedly, the image of China and the Chinese is defined by

blurriness in Balzac's written representations, and the researchers behind the 2017 volume on *Balzac et la Chine. La Chine et Balzac* acknowledge the writer's exploitation of stereotypes on China and the Chinese - as constructed by the French imagination - in the interest of his literary ambitions. Roland Le Huenen (2017, p. 215) cannot help but register Balzac's obstinacy to preserve an image of China as a fantastical land, and therefore an implicit and unarticulated sense of France being more worthy of realist depiction. However, as will become evident in the section analysing China's place in the dialectic of the author's attempt to re-enchant - through the insertion of mystical forces - a scientifically-driven French society that bases its knowledge system solely on optically observable facts, Balzac was weary of a society that could not "see" beyond the visible realm in front of them, thus the idea that France should ideally be depicted in a realist manner, while China should represent the spiritual and the otherworldly does not necessarily mean that the former way of representation is superior to the latter in the writer's views on human nature.

Additionally, another way in which Balzac plays with the themes of China and the Chinese in order to complete his literary agenda is when he employs the term *chinois* (Chinese) in his novels in a depreciative manner, according to a contemporary derogatory usage and understanding of the word. Bordas (2017, p. 83) notes that Balzacian characters employ the term *chinois* to refer to notions of ugliness, social and cultural inferiority, bizarreness, cunning ruse, banality, complexity, or originality. From this point of view, a Chinese person may be seen as a mere pawn: Balzacian French characters use it as an insulting or ironic manner of appellation or admonition of other French or non-Chinese characters; the writer makes use of the negative connotations of the word in the French language in order to depict an ideological division between notions of civilisation and barbarity. However, the very fact that French characters use this term in a depreciative manner to refer to one another complicates the idea that Balzac's texts merely reflect the preeminence of European superiority over China. Bordas (2017, p. 89) too joins the group of scholars that cannot help but sense a penchant for dissimulation in Balzac's representation of the Other, judging that he pretends to be interested in someplace else in order to provide a fiercely critical account of his contemporaneous French society, alongside its history and its events.

The connotations of the signifier "China" in Balzac's works thus vary considerably. Bui (2017, pp. 96-97) focuses on its reference to the almost indistinguishable faraway. China as a geographic territory is so distant and different from that of France that its borders become

loose in Balzacian accounts. The Middle Kingdom is often associated with Asia as a whole, it is a land that can mentally be associated with a dream or chimaera: dreaming as desire for becoming rich and powerful in *Le Père Goriot*, where the main character, Rastignac, asks his friend Bianchon whether he would agree to the killing of a Chinese Mandarin if this heinous act - real and conceivable only in the mind's eye - would help him inherit a fortune; or dreaming as childhood memory, for Balzac admits in his articles that he has inherited some of his father's scholarly interest in China. The complexity of the moral dilemma of killing a mandarin can be resumed to its core message: is it morally acceptable to harm - even if it is just within the safe space of mental perception - an anonymous person of a different nationality, someone who resides so far away from one's own country and cultural reality that their disappearance would not change one's life in any other way than financially? Such a dilemma complicates common beliefs that problems related to remote places can or should be out of sight and out of mind for the majority of people, and it may indirectly raise questions about the ethics of forming strong opinions on foreign nationals through the medium of subjective perception.

In regards to the positioning of China and the Chinese at the centre of philosophical debates on morality, vision and existence, the 2017 study on Balzac's representations of China does not provide an extensive evaluation of the impact of the visual on the writer's imaginings of the country. For Bui (2017, p. 109), Balzac's main stance is that a visually illustrated China is solely and simply a reduction, and that the only China that could possibly exist is that which the author holds inside of his mind as heritage received from his father. This thesis aims to further explore the notoriously tricky notions of visibility and vision in Balzac's discourses on China and the Chinese, and to hopefully demonstrate that there are two lines of thought that the Balzacian articles follow. A first, superficial reading of the text may lead the reader to focus on the author's seemingly reductionist stance on the Middle Kingdom. However, more emphasis needs to be placed on the nineteenth-century yearning for an universal, absolute, all-encompassing knowledge present in travel writing and other literary, journalistic or artistic means of knowledge dissemination. The comprehensive picture of China that the French aspire to form and paint is inextricably linked to visual culture, therefore one of the main ambitions of the present study is to create a nexus between French vision, Chinese visibility and the range of creative outlets which reflect Balzac's heterogeneous representations of China, as well as the settings in which French literary production develops its panoramic views of the Middle Kingdom. Such outlets include knowledge disseminated through travel accounts, lithographic illustrations, panoramas, dioramas, journalistic texts, and decorative objects. These outlets are



permeated by visual images - mental, printed, engraved, sketched, or painted. The industrial speed at which they are produced reflect the realities of nineteenth-century Western societies, and one may draw the conclusion that they explore the foreign other for the sake of knowledge *per se*, out of sheer curiosity, but also for monetary gain, sensationalism and the somewhat shallow need to keep audiences engaged. After all, as Mozet (2017, p. 10, preface) acknowledges, China has helped Balzac create a metaphor for the commercial and cultural aspects of his own literary life and transpose it onto paper.

In order to understand why Balzac's recurrent references to China and the Chinese need to be reinterpreted in a closer relation to elements of visual and material culture, it is necessary to first gain an understanding of the centrality of vision and visibility in the history of acts of travelling from France to China and vice versa. Muriel Détrie's (2004) publication on Sino-French relations from the sixteenth century to the present is useful in demarcating some of the main ways in which elements of visibility and vision soak into the historical narrative of French and Chinese cultural exchange. As Détrie (2004, p. 15) notes, French missionaries have brought to China scientific knowledge that helped the Chinese to precisely locate France on the world map. Moreover, in order to convince each sovereign of the other's power and prestige, Jesuits have acted as intermediators, contributing to the circulation of engravings and portraits of Louis XIV and Kangxi in both countries, as well as to the reciprocal distribution of gifts showcasing each nation's creative and inventive prowess (Détrie, 2004, p. 16). In landscape architecture and gardening, Chinese and Western aesthetics principles have been incorporated in order to showcase the prosperity of this promising cultural dialogue. While the French elites started collecting porcelain, lacquerware, ivory, jade, folding screens, paintings, vases, and other decorative objects from China in order to create their Chinese cabinets of curiosities, the gardens of the Yuanmingyuan palace in Beijing incorporated French and European architectural elements, imitating the landscape of the Palace of Versailles and incorporating French-style labyrinths and geometrical arrangements of greenery, as well as boasting areas of spatial disorganisation characteristic to the Chinese aesthetic of the grotesque (Détrie, 2004, pp. 17-19).

The two countries have thus historically engaged in processes of mutual imitation, and this is an important aspect to bear in mind as a reflective reader who will eventually stumble upon Western stereotypical views of the presumingly tacky style of Chinese products - often associated with counterfeits. Likewise, the issue of imitation, reconstruction or reproduction is

present at a structural level in Balzac's journalistic articles, for they allegedly constitute an objective review of French artist's Auguste Borget publication on his sketching trip to China. However, as Véronique Bui's (2017, pp. 70-80) timeline of Balzac and Borget's close friendship reveals, the former's alternation between admiration and criticism towards Borget's artistic career may denote a trace of jealousy provoked by the success of the latter's publication, whose sketches of China had been purchased by the French King himself. Balzac seemed to want to appropriate Borget's success acquired after the publication of the latter's illustrated travel narrative, for the former subtly implied that his own version of *La Chine et les Chinois* was a valuable publication that was "worth a lot of thought" (Bui, 2017, p. 74). The problem of Balzac being remembered as the main author of a text on China and the Chinese and that of Borget's glory being reflected back on Balzac - similarly to how the latter understood that in China the merit and good reputation of the son falls on the father who raised and educated him - is in itself an issue that could be analysed in the larger context of the themes of creation and re-creation. However, it is mentioned hereby only to emphasise the fact that the issues of originality versus imitation which have altered Western perceptions of Chinese cultural products define the very configuration of Balzac's serialised articles on China and the Chinese. With this information at hand, it may become clear for the attentive reader that Balzac's exaggerated claim that he was a *sinographe-né* - a person born to write publications on China - may lead one to go beyond Orientalist clichés that class Chinese objects as cheap, inferior reproductions or designs. After all, as Balzac garners, the Chinese possess the genius for manufacturing imitative art to the highest degree: "(...) ils ont le génie de l'imitation manufacturière au plus haut degré" (Balzac, 2006, p. 147).

Deron's explanation for his bold statement on China's inexistence is the belief that the core of what is globally known as "Chinese culture" resides on the foundation of myth and fabrications. He questions whether the essence of China is in its symbols: "la Chine est-elle dans ses symboles?" (Deron, 1999, p. 72). While Deron is concerned with the symbolism of the Great Wall, Balzac (2006, p. 117) states that the Chinese are the incarnation of the very images of Chinese personae on emblematic objects such as porcelain, vases or folding screens. I choose the word 'persona' here not only to refer to an individual or human being, but also to emphasise the reference to a mask or appearance one presents to the world, for Balzac's text engages with the idea that the Chinese present themselves in different guises, which prevents foreigners from being able to see their true colours due to the veil of chameleon-like self-representation (Balzac, 2006, p. 129). However, this received idea is challenged by Balzac's

ambivalent language; his text brings into question the Western desire to reach ultimate knowledge about China and its truth or reality. Ultimately, the path towards this ideal attainment is paved with obstacles and barriers due to the complexity of this foreign culture and the perspectival nature of knowledge.

Throughout this paper, the term *essence* will refer to the idea of the fundamental nature of Chinese qualities, despite appearances. To reflect on of the essence of a culture is to explore the most significant, basic, and invariable elements that make up the reality of that culture. The desire to form accurate impressions on the way Chinese people *really are* is interlinked with the inevitable formation of inaccurate or unfair cultural representations of the Eastern world in Western thought and writings. As it is widely known today, especially by virtue of Edward Said's popular definitions of Orientalism, perceiving the Oriental world from a biased and presumptuous European or Western viewpoint has led to an abundance of negative or distorted images of the East. Such images can distance even the most well-intentioned, knowledgeable, and passionate Orientalist from engaging with the core, on-the-ground reality of life in Asia. Although Orientalism was originally supposed to designate a field of study or scholarship of Asian subjects and languages, the history of the politics of empire has generated numerous Western depictions of the Orient that claim to know more about the Orientals than the Orientals do about themselves (Said, 2000, p. 87). As Balzac acknowledges in *La Chine et les Chinois*, he too has engaged with the more or less accurate accounts of travellers, which means that he is conscious about the virtual reality *avant la lettre* that readers of travel writing were exposed to.

Throughout this dissertation, the term *virtual* will refer to visual and sensory experiences specific to nineteenth-century forms of entertainment and escapism that imitate real, actual travel. Such visual outlets would simulate scenes, objects, or landscapes that appeared to be real, making audiences feel immersed in artificial surroundings and transported to distant realms. My research also explores the way in which Balzac presents us with a China as a virtual world in which his characters can find themselves instantly teleported to. In texts such as *Voyage to Java* or *La Peau de Chagrin*, a visual or graphic incentive such as a newspaper or object with Oriental-like qualities would suffice to immediately transport narrators and characters to an imaginary Eastern realm. In *La Chine et les Chinois*, the Chinese become avatars - on objects such as vases - in the sense that the visual representations of their race on *chinoiseries* may call for a reflection on the type of person, idea, or quality that such

two-dimensional icons embody. Balzac's journalistic articles question whether these avatars, in their miniature form, can visually and mentally encapsulate the essential features of an entire nation.

The idiosyncrasies of the practice of collecting *chinoiseries* are related to the scope of Orientalism as identified by Said (2000, p. 93). If Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient is approached systematically, and its subjects are studied, classified, and depicted through the distorted lens of Westerners, the objects evocative of the Orient are similarly collected, organised, displayed and circulated in an attempt to produce knowledge about the mysterious Other. Balzac's playful engagement with notions of immobility versus mobility in his discourse on China and the Chinese resonate with Emma Bielecki's (2012, p. 38) observations on the nineteenth-century collection as a closed, narcissistic space versus the nineteenth-century collection as an open site of change and exchange that offers a vast panorama of material culture. On the one hand, it can be argued that the collector removes objects from the order of time and history, possessing it in selfish ways, impeding their circulation, and creating a space closed off from the rest of the world and reality by arranging them in a display specific to his own fantasy and conjecture (Bielecki, 2012, p. 38). On the other hand, even if the traces of the hands that fabricated the objects may disappear in the commodity process, the collector can still "restore a human dimension to the object" by imprinting on it the marks of his own hands (Bielecki, 2012, p. 39). It is perhaps through this lens that one ought to comprehend Balzac's claim that Chinese screens were history: "les paravents étaient de l'histoire" (Balzac, 2006, pp. 150-151).

The Balzacian metaphors of screens as canvases onto which both French and Chinese artists may represent China through visual symbolism, and as material, physical and mental barriers to a far-reaching cultural exchange experience between France and China is worthy of exploration in order to make sense of the writer's polysemous characterisations of the Chinese. As Goulet's (2013) study on the preoccupation with the nature of sight in nineteenth-century fiction indicates, the relation between what the eye sees and what the mind knows, as well as the questioning of subjective perception's capacity to guarantee accurate knowledge of external reality, were subjects of thought for realist works like Balzac's which could not completely eliminate idealism as a visual mode. It is through the standpoint of visual epistemology, an enquiry which is scientific and philosophical in nature, that Balzac's playful remark on the role of the constitution of the eye in the lack of perspective in Chinese art should be explored:

*Selon moi, le génie de ce peuple devait le porter à ne représenter que ce qu'il voyait, et tel qu'il le voyait, car le défaut de perspective est sans doute le résultat de la constitution de l'œil.* (Balzac, 2006, p. 117).

*In my opinion, the genius of this people must have led them to represent only what they saw, and as they saw it, because the lack of perspective is undoubtedly the result of the constitution of the eye.* (Balzac, 2006, p. 117, my own translation).

An initial reading lacking an awareness of or reflection on the links between notions of sight as a biologically constituted faculty and the concept of visuality as shaped by cultural perceptions that may vary depending on different historical circumstances and philosophical views may lead the reader to interpret this passage as a derogatory remark about the shape of Chinese eyes and their different physiognomy. However, the omission of an indirect object pronoun such as *leur* (their) in Balzac's ambiguous statement on the structure of the eye suggests that the question of whose eye and whose lack of perspective he refers to is open to interpretation. Although in Chinese art perspective is envisioned in a manner that is significantly different from Western notions of perspective in art, to the extent where Western critics may consider that perspective is inexistent in Chinese visual productions, it is possible that Balzac may subtly refer to a fault in the European gaze on the Other, a barrier present at both an optical and a mental level.

The images of China that populate Balzac's psyche are linked to his immersion in the travel accounts of missionaries, which were often infused with fantastical elements or completely fabricated. When reading statements that associate China with Asia as a whole, describing it as a land that inspires dreams about gold, or phrases that point to the author's hatred of the naturalist accounts of Victor Jacquemont who "killed Asia for us" or "nous a tué l'Asie" (Balzac, 2006, p. 118) because they painted a bleak picture of the unpleasant realities of voyages to Asia, the reader may distinguish the delineation of a stereotypical portrait which reinforces the idea that the Orient is nothing more than a phantasmagorical entity, constructed by the West, as postcolonial critics such as Edward Said may suggest. Yet, as Meyer (2017, p. 111) notes, the China Balzac writes about is also an object of thought impregnated with elements pertaining to the historicity of the French state of mind, thus it is also grounded, to a certain extent, in the actuality and factual nature of the evolution of French modernity. My study departs from the acuity of this observation and aims to further advance the understanding of Balzacian texts' relation with China's visual presentation - created and delivered either by

the French, Europeans or the Chinese themselves - through the comparison of magots with daguerreotyped portraits and that of folding screens as material objects grounded in reality, but also invested with surreal imagery.

Departing from Balzac's ideas that the Chinese have demonstrated their inventive genius - long before the French did through illustrated panoramic literature such as *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* - by painting themselves onto such objects, and that the magots - Chinese statues or smaller figurines executed in a grotesque fashion - are the Chinese version of the French *daguerreotype* portraits, my research provides an extended analysis of the links between Balzac's multifarious representations of China and their connections with domestic frames of mind. Although the realist writer's statement that to teach France the truth about China seemed to him one of the greatest crimes committed by travellers against the imagination's power of enchantment over the human psyche may first inspire the reader to detect a sense of European overconfidence or egotism, it is important to see such comments through the filter of the writer's deception with an increasingly rationalistic French society ignorant of the mysterious depths of human existence: "apprendre à la France la vérité sur la Chine m'a semblé l'un des plus grand crimes de lèse-imagination" (Balzac, 2006, p. 117). The Balzacian emphasis on the futility of Borget's act of travelling to China to observe more closely what one can already see on the shelves of European furniture - namely immobile and silent, muted *bibelots* or magots that, in the writer's view, perfectly capture the essence of China and represent all the knowledge on this country that one can possibly depict - is at once a reductionist and a universalising posture.

Readers of Balzac's articles on China and the Chinese may equally interpret the writer's intriguing references to Chinese screens as metaphors for China's historical isolationism from the rest of the world and its resistance to Western attempts to convert the Chinese to Christianity and to introduce changes in scientific or cultural domains. These *paravents* symbolically keep European travellers from getting too close to the essence of Chinese culture, in order to avoid the risk of a foreign alteration of sacred Chinese traditional values and customs. They also embody stereotypes of Chinese duplicity and the ostensible practices of visually tricking foreign visitors by only allowing them to see what the Chinese officials wanted them to see. China's "immobility", its static and traditional approach to its inventions, is equated with France's moderate pace of colonial expansion and reduced readership interest in publications related to China, but also to China's refusal to grant total access to Western travellers into the

country, in order to protect their cultural and territorial integrity. From the outset of his review, Balzac complains about France being “the least travelling nation and the most exclusive people there is” (*le peuple du monde le moins voyageur, le plus exclusif qu'il y ait*) in order to motivate his opinion that Borget’s publication would have sold out instantly if it were published in London - the capital of a country who, at that time, was more successful than France in establishing trade relations with China (Balzac, 2006, p. 115). As Abbattista (2022, p. 37) observes, Western attempts - from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries - at changing the Chinese reality on Chinese territory have been, for the most part, unsuccessful. European missionaries or merchants have encountered many roadblocks on their journey to the core of China. On the one hand, they could not gain access to the ultimate truth of China's essence due to language barriers, cultural differences, and the plasticity of perception. On the other hand, foreign trade access to China was limited to the port city of Canton, which limited the circulation of Europeans in the Middle Kingdom.

The idea that China was a static country is not exclusive to Balzac’s commentaries. In fact, in his studies of the shifting perspectives in European discourses on China from the late-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth-century, Abbattista (2022, p. 39) identifies the contribution of thinkers such as Herder, Volney or Benjamin Constant in the establishment in European opinion of “an image of China as a static, immobile reality, outside of history, inserted in a time flow of its own, separate and different from that of Western Europe”. It is perhaps the popularity of such views that influence Balzac’s claims that “the screens are screens and the traveller is not a prophet”, that “the folding screens are history” and that the Chinese were no more and no less than their projected images on objects such as folding screens, room dividers, vases, or porcelain. I argue that the playful and ambivalent language that Balzac uses when he refers to China can be considered as an impetus for readers to consider the multitude of perspectives present in Orientalist discourses. For every narrative that creates a virtual, stagnant, and stationary China - and thus distorts historical facts - there exists another way of looking at things. Balzac’s articles sketch different facets of China and of its relationship to France and Europe; at once backward, stagnant, ingenious, laborious, tyrannic, hospitable, pleasant, odd, frugal, modest, producers of objects considered luxurious, poetic, prosaic and promoters of banal, everyday, grotesque, or supposedly perspectiveless art, the Chinese people may strike the foreign visitor through their complexity. Grasping a complete understanding of their essence and seeking solutions to “the infinite problems that the existence of this people presents” is as complicated as solving a Chinese puzzle (Balzac, 2006, p. 126). In the entangled

process of the formation of French mindsets on China and the Chinese, reality can co-exist with fantasy. Objects produced by Chinese prowess, such as folding screens, reflect the history of the reception and the attitudes towards such items in Europe. They can be considered a metaphorical canvas for cultural projections of both French and Chinese cultures, as well as barriers to accurate vision:

*Quelque bizarre que soit l'objet créé par la fantaisie chinoise, si vous l'examinez, vous y découvrirez une idée qui vous fera rire. Notre voyageur, malgré ses préjugés sur les bizarreries chinoises, fut encore surpris à l'aspect des temples et de toutes les choses du pays. Si l'on aime tant la fantaisie, c'est qu'on la croit impossible ; aussi M. Borget a-t-il été stupéfait en voyant, comme je vous l'ai dit, que les paravents étaient de l'histoire.* (Balzac, 2006, pp. 150-151).

However bizarre the object created by the Chinese fancy, if you examine it, you will discover an idea that will make you laugh. Our traveller, in spite of his prejudices about the Chinese oddities, was still surprised at the aspect of the temples and of all the things of the country. If one likes fantasy so much, it is because one believes it to be impossible; so Mr. Borget was stunned when he saw, as I told you, that the screens were history (Balzac, 2006, pp. 150-151, *my own translation*)

The presence of a figurative mosaic of outlooks in the Balzacian text is in itself indicative of the history of the love-hate relationship between China and France - or China and Europe, in general. From the seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth-century, when the only sources of information on China available were those of missionaries - who tended to paint an idealised picture of the country - French society experienced *sinophilia*, or a strong love and interest in China and the Chinese (Cartier, 1998, p. 7). However, starting from the mid-eighteenth century, contradictory or relatively more objective information became available through the travel narratives of merchants, diplomats, and other secular travellers. This access to different points of view due to the more widespread literary coverage led to attitudes of *sinophobia* - an apprehension or dislike of Chinese people, their culture, their language or the goods produced in China. As the volume *La Chine entre amour et haine* edited by Cartier (1998) reveals, the transformation of the image of China in France and in the West is a complex process that lasted until the end of the nineteenth century. This study will reveal that Balzac's writing on China is designed as a junction between French positive and negative



attitudes towards China, creating an intricate imaginary itinerary for the reader who becomes a traveller himself, and who may feel the urge to explore the various possible interpretations of the writer's rough or sketch-like portrayal of the Middle Kingdom, as well as their connection with the historical facts of cultural exchange between France and China.

A further quirk ("bizarrerie complémentaire") of the nation that Deron addresses is China's flair for managing to "persuade the rest of mankind of the reality of this wall" (Deron, 1999, p. 73, *my own translation*). Moreover, Deron claims that the only plausible explanation for "the imbecility of the principle of static defence" would be that the Chinese have consciously wanted to construct a myth, an illusion so enormous and implausible that it would found a nation: *un leurre tellement énorme et invraisemblable qu'il fonderait une nation* (Deron, 1999, p. 73). The author believes that, in founding this myth, the Chinese "have created something far more important than a monument to stupidity and corruption", they have created a *virtual universe* which gave rise to an infinite number of masterpieces and inventions, and to an art of living that was, in some ways, worthy of admiration (Deron, 1999, p. 74). Nonetheless, this universe also gave rise to "a prodigious mass of artistic and artisanal waste" reflected in the mass-produced trinkets and ornaments that can dazzle the eye of foreign visitors. In the modern era, these products seem to be displayed in seemingly never-ending kilometres of neon-lighted shop windows. Searching for a souvenir to bring back home, the foreign visitor is presented with tasteless, disproportional, grotesque and counterfeited knick-knacks that are "shamelessly" displayed and marketed as "cultural products". In a similar vein, Balzac's serialised articles address the question of Chinese people's craft not only for miscellaneous and visually striking objects, but also for deception, artificiality or theatricality. The writer's concern with the phenomenon of *staging* and manipulation of reality by only revealing the aspects of their culture that the Chinese wanted foreign travellers to see can open a discussion on how the French were equally engaging in manipulation: travel writing itself as a literary genre can present misleading information to its readers. Similarly, nineteenth-century visual mediums such as panoramas or dioramas faked reality in a convincing manner, manipulating sensory impressions in order to virtually transport audiences to foreign cities and countries. Further, the Balzacian articles bridge the gap between European or Western classical conceptions of beauty, art and the sublime - which are understood traditionally as propagators of feelings of pleasure with a high aesthetic value - and the Chinese grotesque, a propensity for ugliness, asymmetry and the haphazard organisation of visual elements in the spatial planning

of gardens, landscape or painting, which would bring feelings of displeasure, aesthetic disvalue and worthlessness to followers of European standards of Classicism (Kuplen, 2013, p. 260).

The association of China with the virtual, the fantastical, the illusory, the artificial, the imitative, the fraudulent, the static, the isolated, the excessive, the nonessential, and with worthless or valueless objects or trinkets may create a sense of a relative unimportance of the subject in the area of French studies. This sense of superfluousness may be behind Counter's (2017, p. 29) claim that "the choice of China is no doubt arbitrary" in Balzac's novella *L'Interdiction*, for "China has in Balzac's work the very precise function of connoting the impossibly remote and therefore unimaginable". Conversely, this thesis will ultimately sustain the argument that there is a rationale for Balzac's open enquiry on the essence of China, and for his introduction of China and the Chinese as recurring - albeit not always central - motifs in works such as *L'interdiction*, *La Peau de Chagrin*, *Le Cousin Pons*, or *Ursule Mirouët*. The ambivalent language of Balzac's articles encourages reflection on the history of relations between China and France and how travel writing constituted a catalyst for shifting perceptions and opinions. This sense of oscillating points of view cannot be separated from visual culture. By opening a discussion on who between the visible object and the viewer retains more power, knowledge, or accuracy of sight, the writer encourages his readers to consider how both reality and fantasy are inseparable from the process of record-making of the experience of travelling or depiction of the Other - whether that is through direct contact or secondary sources. Everything that one sees in their day to day life - landscape, buildings, lithographs, paintings, sketches, photographs, advertisements, objects - whether that is at home or abroad, may have been produced with an intention different from that of the reception. The meaning of all this visual data changes according to the imagination of each viewer. Although at times China may have been seen as an inaccessible, distant land and culture, the plurality of outlooks traceable to the history of Sino-French cultural exchange since Louis XIV's reign is sufficient proof that China has been represented in numerous imaginable ways with the passage of time (Détrie, 2004, p. 11). Balzac's ideas - quoted hereinbefore and hereinafter - that one loves fantasy so much because one believes it to be impossible and that sometimes the coincidental, the random or the unplanned takes on the appearance of the impossible are perhaps key to understanding that he aimed to make his readers see beyond the conventional association of Chinese heritage with inconceivability or unworthiness and reflect more on China's place in world history.

In the history of Sino-European relations, China has indeed been represented and seen through the lens of virtuality by the French, as an inevitable consequence of their desire to grasp the reality of this intriguing culture. Balzac's articles can help readers explore aspects of virtuality from different perspectives. Although technological development - especially in the nineteenth century - democratised travelling and diminished inconveniences related to long voyages such as affordability or time constraints, the sense of comfort that armchair travel could provide and the feeling that the world could be brought at one's feet through the visual and written representations of others who have made the effort to physically direct themselves to unknown places metamorphosed China into a virtual place in the French and European imaginary. While this study is exploratory and interpretative in nature, it relies on previous research on virtual travel and its correlation with visual mediums in order to provide a fresh perspective on Balzac's association of China with a mental space that allows subjects - through the supernatural power of second sight - to be in two places at once. Byerly's (2007) insights into the nineteenth-century panoramic perspective and its capacity of immersing audiences into a virtual travel experience where the boundaries between reproduction and reality are blurred can advance our understanding of what Balzacian texts may transmit about a type of travel that does not require a genuine engagement with foreign people or ideas, but that pretends to offer reliability and up-to-dateness on other places and cultures.

As will become apparent in the remainder of this paper, the Balzacian articles, although organised as a written sketch of China and the Chinese rather than a detailed portrait, provide a space for deeper contemplation on the links between histories of visual and material culture and the role of China in French or European thought and aesthetics. The oscillation between positive and negative views on China and its people ultimately recalls Lowe's (1991, p. 5) argument that Orientalism is formed of heterogeneous discourses on the exoticism of the Other. The relativism of the love-hate relationship that France or other European countries have historically entertained with their own ideas of China reminds the reader that generalisations and distorted visions about what is foreign to us are an ever-present element in literary or visual attempts to catch a glimpse of the true essence of the foreign Other and one cannot escape the bias of their own subjective physical or mental perception.

From certain viewpoints, China's cultural heritage is treated with esteem for its unique outlook on what can be considered aesthetically pleasing to the eye. The grotesque figurines

and forms, paintings and sketches that seemingly do not conform to the rules of perspective in Western art, the negation of total unity and formal definitude that can be observed in Chinese landscape paintings or garden design, these are all aesthetic principles which are usually considered outside of Western norms and which Balzac compliments. It has long been a common idea that one of the major differences between Western and East Asian approaches to representation is the subordination of the former to the rules of classical doctrine of ancient Roman and Greek art. However, if the Chinese are criticised for the propagation of mass-produced trifle and inferior quality imitation, it is important to note that Classicist rules dictated that imitation was the basis for artistic creation. Therefore, Balzac's ambivalent engagement with the stereotypes of Chinese deceitful imitation, coupled with his appreciation of the Chinese genius for producing original, mysterious, never-before-seen objects that become attractive in the Western eye for their unusual characteristics and subsequently enter Western domestic spaces as fashionable memorabilia, reveals indeed that one should not hurriedly judge Chinese art as a practice entirely disparate from Western creative conventions. Coextensively, all these considerations on notions of beauty and originality versus ugliness and imitation in Chinese and European art reveal that Balzac has at least one ample scope for writing on China and the Chinese: that of creating a nexus between the seemingly disparate French and Chinese cultures. This is evident in the passage where he compares the Chinese version of the grotesque - understood in the West as a humorous, eccentric and peculiar style - with the European adaptation of the grotesque - used, from the Middle Ages in countless of imposing architectures such as Milan Cathedral - that mutates into a serious style in the Western world. However, Balzac highlights that the original type of grotesque - the Chinese - was already a type of "poetry", that Europeans have merely "rectified", "ennobled" and adapted to their own conceptions of an elevated style (Balzac, 2006, p. 150). Likewise, French or European objects are never too estranged from Chinese ones in the writer's opinion, for the magot - the emblematic Chinese figurine whose role Balzac meditated on in order to end arguments with this father on the essence of the Chinese people - "was the brother of many groups in the ornaments of the fireplace" (Balzac, 2006, p.150).

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from this introductory chapter is that China becomes a virtual space in the French imagination, as there are endless vistas of the country that illustrated and narrated travel productions or travelling objects provide to its European audiences. China certainly exists in the physical world; however, the very materiality of objects produced in China for Western consumption signals the fact that the country's

cultural essence takes on various appearances once Chinese goods are relocated. When asking the rhetorical question “Does China exist?”, the French writer seems to actually query “In what ways does China exist in the Western imaginary?”. In her study *Britain’s Chinese eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Elizabeth Chang focuses on China as a specific subject and object of vision in nineteenth-century Britain. For nineteenth-century Britons, China designated more than a geographical location: it designated particular kinds of visual and aesthetic form, it represented a contradictory type of foreignness; it 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.”(Chang, 2010, p. 1, introduction). In a manner akin to the general field of view of nineteenth-century Britain, Balzac’s 1842 articles conceptualise China in multifarious forms. The repeated references to Chinese objects such as vases, porcelain or screens and the claim that Chinese people are no more and no less than exactly how they are represented on this kind of objects are indicative of the idea that China itself becomes a commodity through the widespread consumption and accumulation of either original Chinese objects or their European replicas.

This thesis departs from Chang’s observation that China was a generator of boundless visual possibility to explore how Balzac envisages the topic of China and the Chinese as a project grounded in both immateriality or abstractness and materiality. Chinese or Chinese-style objects acquire a multitude of deeper meanings in Balzacian works. On the one hand, the act of collecting such objects may symbolise gratuitousness and triviality. Gazing at these objects with a subjective European vision or touching them may render China tangible only due to the deceptive nature of imagination. On the other hand, Balzac’s recurrent references to *chinoiserie* objects are inextricable from his duties as a journalist and writer; in order to keep his reader’s interest alive, he constantly needs to find rhetorical devices that exude exoticism and novelty.

It is important to note that the term *chinoiserie* is used in this thesis to refer to objects fabricated in an original or imitative Chinese style, reflecting or believed to reflect Chinese qualities and motifs. These objects spark European fantasy and allow their collectors to invest them with meaning according to their personal taste and vision. The following chapters will delve into the details of Balzac’s multifaceted approach to representing China’s visuality.

## Chapter I: *D'abord, pourquoi aller en Chine? Between imaginary and real journeys*

Balzac's motivations for engaging with travel writing vary depending his personal desires. While a realist writer would normally be expected to take their time and carefully observe the things seen during a particular trip, his unwillingness to thoroughly describe the places he passed through during his journey to Ukraine in 1847-1850 may be regarded as an indifference towards the culture of the Other. Le Huenen (2018, pp. 59-60) notes that Balzac's voyages to Russia, Poland, and Ukraine – which inspired the creation of the *Letters on Kyiv* (1847) reveal the writer's inclination to depict and analyse in depth only certain elements that remind him, through association of ideas, of France. However, as it is evident in *Voyage de Paris à Java* (1832), Balzac associates the Orient with feminine passion, sensuality, and danger. If he is in a hurry to reach Ukraine, it is because the woman he loved, Madame Hanska, was waiting for him there (Le Huenen, 2018, p. 59). As Le Huenen (2018, p. 60) notices, Balzac's interest for foreign landscapes awakens when he enters Ukraine, at the border with Russia, because he was closer to the Orient of his fantasy. Although Ukraine is part of Europe, Balzac cannot help but feel as if he was in China (Le Huenen, 2018, p.60).

Therefore, it is not uncommon for Balzacian real or imaginary voyages to inspire the presentation of a virtual or fanciful space where power is more important than knowledge. In his travel writing, Balzac claims that he wants to avoid using the personal pronoun "I", in order to avoid the pitfalls of triviality, subjectivity, and triteness. Nonetheless, as Smethurst (2002, p. 278) observes, elements of the writer's dominating subjectivity persist in his travel accounts, and the blueprint of his description of the foreign Other follows the triad of subjectivity, travel, and desire. In this chapter, it will hopefully become clear that Balzac's interplay of reality and fantasy in his writing on the foreign Other is a deliberate strategy to confuse, surprise, and divert readers to unexpected pathways. This is all because, according to Lascar (2012, p. 43), in accepting the Balzacian invitation to voyage, readers must learn to better read a text, to get out of their comfort zone, surpass obstacles, call into questions the truth of the information present in travel accounts, and take some distance from the subjective worldview of travel writers.

Besides querying China's existence as an entity, place or space with a dose of scepticism, another fundamental question that Balzac addresses to the readers of his articles on Borget's journey to China is that of the purpose and motivations behind the decision to pack and head towards such a remote and unbelievable destination:

— *D'abord, pourquoi aller en Chine ? qui lui a mis cette idée en tête ? (...) Que pouvait-il y faire ?* (Balzac, 2006, p. 116)

- *First of all, why go to China? Who put this idea in his head? (...) What could he do there?* (Balzac, 2006, p. 116, my own translation)

Departing from this enquiry and from the articles' vacillation between imagination and reality, between dreamscapes and actuality, this chapter will provide a synopsis of the possible motivations and rationale behind Balzac's decision to introduce the *topoi* of China and the Chinese in his literary universe. I use the term *topoi* to refer to China and the Chinese as topics in Balzac's work; however, the etymology of the word effectively carries connotations that are relevant to this study: the Aristotelian notion of *topos* has been associated by critics with physical space, commonplaces, or points of view (Drehe, 2011, p. 132). Furthermore, as Miller (2000, p. 130) argues, *topoi* are traditionally understood as elements of decorum in rhetorics, but they are also sources of novelty, of invention. Ancient rhetoricians thought of *topoi* as place where one can go to find generative ideas. As this thesis will hopefully foreground, China seems to be constructed, in Balzac's works, as a liminal space between physical and mental journeys, between scientific knowledge and spiritual abstraction; it is an ever-changing entity due to the multiplicity of points of view formed in the West about its essence, yet commonplaces or clichés may give visual or textual representations of the Middle Kingdom an air of triteness or stagnation. Counter's (2017, p. 29) assertion that China plays a non-specific role in Balzac's works is understandable to the degree where the writer sometimes seems to confuse China with other Asian countries. This occasionally undifferentiated representation may convey the idea that many of the Balzacian deliberations on Chinese culture are largely applicable to any other country that may be deemed exotic in the European imagination. However, the following discussion hopes to demonstrate that Balzac's references to China and the Chinese are not merely used for rhetorical embellishment. Rather, they open a meaningful dialogue on the connection between China's representation in Balzac's texts and the historical backdrop of the French desire for and modes of depicting the foreign Other. In order to do so, it is important to first understand where one can situate his 1842 articles in the context of travel

writing and journalism and how the text's structural elements reflect the ambivalent attitudes towards China omnipresent in European travel productions since the sixteenth century - when, according to Détrie (2004, p. 11), the Middle Kingdom partially opens its doors to the Jesuits. The logical starting point for this investigation is to situate the fragmentariness of Balzac's serialised articles, their lack of a detailed, original analysis or portrait of China and the Chinese and their heavy reliance on lengthy quotes from Borget's own travel notes in the context of what Sonya Stephens' (2007) edited volume on pre-texts and projects in nineteenth-century literary and artistic productions appropriately names "the aesthetic of the incomplete".

Balzac's self-admitted ignorance of Borget's visual sketches on China and the Chinese and his preference to engage with the artist's written notes which provide a vignette of Chinese life - as perceived by the traveller's eye - may inspire readers to reflect on the characteristics of written and visual sketches in the context of the century's ambition of capturing the world *as it is* - if such a dream is even realisable (Balzac, 2006, p. 170). Stephens' volume defines the written sketch as a form of writing that reassembles the fragmentariness of daily life. Both visual and literal sketches open new creative horizons for viewers and readers through their suggestiveness, unfixity, open-endedness and their incomplete character, inviting them to "create logical connections and relationships between impossible couplings" (Stephens, 2007, p. 6). I argue that Balzac's ambivalent inclination towards fantastical journeys, that allow imaginative people to "travel" with the mind's eye and his partial acceptance of the merits of physical journeys to China, is an invitation for readers to indulge in the "divine sleep of the soul called Fantasy" and entertain themselves with fanciful descriptions and representations of this country and culture; however such "unfortunate dreamers" should still be grounded in reality and keep "enough strength to break down the ivory doors" of fantasy as a dream or sleep state (Balzac, 2006, p. 119). In other words, readers should remain aware of the fact that European projections on China may not always correspond to the Chinese sense of reality as perceived by the Chinese themselves.

At first glance, the association of China with theories of Mesmerism and *second sight* popular in France in the eighteenth and nineteenth century may seem a whimsical way of highlighting China's chimerical status in French thought. However, this thesis proposes a literal *second reading* of Balzac's suggestive sketch of China and the Chinese and identifies close connections between French and Chinese principles of seeing with the mind's eye. As Goulet (2013, p. 25) maintains in her investigation of nineteenth-century literary works' concern with



the real existence of things perceived by the physical eye or mind, Balzac's insertion of mystical seers or *voyants* as characters in his novels deemed to be the chosen few who can perceive "truths" that ordinary people cannot see calls for "a second time around" type of vision or reading in order to achieve true understanding. Thus, the topoi of China and the Chinese do not merely symbolise the fantastical, the unreachable, the unknown or the mysterious in Balzac's writing; they may also direct the reader towards a comparison of French and Chinese aesthetic and philosophical judgement.

The concept and even practice of visionary or mental journeys are not exclusive preferences of French readership or audiences. Tian (2011, p. 19) identifies a strong preoccupation with landscape and the idea of seeing with the mind's eye in early mediaeval China, as well as the importance attached to visualisation and imagination in traditional Chinese discourse. The formation of mental images has long been in close correlation with the physical world in which physical landscapes are grounded, but also with the pictorial scenes of landscape paintings or metaphysical reasoning of landscape poetry. As Tian's (2011, p. 26) study reveals, Chinese poets and painters have been so intrigued with the idea of visualising an object of contemplation in one's mind in order to understand its transcendental essence, that some formed the conviction that only a select group of people could ever see the absolute truth of things or have it revealed before their mind's eye by the spirit of Buddha. Such beliefs are strikingly similar with the Mesmerist ideology that Balzac employs in his works and that Marcus (1996, p. 9, *introduction*) analyses as a credo concerned with a longing for accessing secret knowledge, by understanding and mastering the hidden processes or realities of the mind and engaging - through imagination - with the immateriality and materiality of ideas. As Marcus notes (1996, p. 64), Franz Anton Mesmer - the pioneer of the eponymous pseudoscientific theory - was himself a foreigner in Paris, and Parisians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "were ready to make of him an exotic, supernatural and mythological figure, a prophet, a Messiah who can cure their social, psychological and physical ills" such as boredom, fatigue, or lack of will. From this perspective, understanding Balzac's enigmatic claim - in the 1842 articles - that the traveller is not a prophet and that Chinese screens (*paravents*) will stand in the way of an accurate vision acquires a new significance. Lacking the will or the means to physically travel to China, nineteenth-century French nationals nonetheless longed for entertainment and for novel experiences. Travel writers or artists found solutions to capitalise on their needs by stirring their imagination and playing with their senses through staging and manipulating texts or visual mediums that could encapsulate whole new

foreign territories in a manner that can best be described as magical realism. Further interpretations of this idea will be provided in the chapter focusing on the panoramic modes of visualising China.

In *Ursule Mirouët*, Balzac inserts a scene where a hypnotic *séance* takes place, in which an anonymous hypnotist influenced by the doctrines of Mesmer and Swedenborg claims that he can virtually transport his subject either to a familiar and nearby location such as Paris or to an unknown and faraway place such as China, in order to demonstrate that the latter will enter a state of mind which may seem like a state of deep sleep, but which is, in fact, an act of inward consciousness that will allow the patient to become a special kind of somnambulist who can explore other realms, hearing and seeing everything accurately in their mind's eye, crossing the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual world. Similarly to Chinese beliefs, the Balzacian narrative indicates that only a few initiated people can access this type of transcendental vision and knowledge. The idea of being in two places at once was appealing to nineteenth-century audiences, and Balzac's usage of the topoi of China, Chinese people and Chinese objects in liaison with Mesmerist ideals of visionary journeys may not only provide an alternative to the contemporary *mal du siècle* and its inherent feelings of ennui, world-weariness or boredom, but also offers readers a setting for deeper reflection, where they can identify the desire in both French and Chinese society and culture for constructing, perceiving, and interpreting mental images of the foreign other.

Tian's (2011) study on mental acts of travel from a Chinese perspective may also prove facilitative of a deeper insight into the quarrel between mobility and immobility in the 1842 review of Borget's album on China and the Chinese. The scholar notes that, in both its early mediaeval period and the nineteenth century, China came into contact with the foreign world, and things or people "moved around a great deal", boundaries being constantly crossed or changed - which led to a phenomenon of continual shifts between notions of centre and periphery (Tian, 2011, p. 10). As it will become evident in the second chapter, Balzac highlights characters or objects that may normally be deemed as marginal, foreign or unimportant, bringing them in the centre of Parisian society in order to situate his fictional creation against an increasingly disenchanted France. Although for Chinese inhabitants, physical journeys and the discovery of unfamiliar territories were mostly effectuated at a national level in the earlier centuries of Chinese history, mental journeys and their subsequent recording were necessary to find meaning in the processes of discovering foreign lands and allowed them to make sense

of a Western world in commotion which was new and strange to mid-nineteenth century Chinese elite travellers (Tian, 2011, p. 5). The information provided by Tian Xiaofei can be used to detect a certain counterbalance to Western visions of China as an immobile, stagnant empire: nineteenth-century Chinese travellers were able to experience a double culture shock and a sense of dislocation in their encounters with a Western world that was undergoing dramatic transformations due to the Industrial hypoevolution, imperialist expansion and the embryonic stage of modernity leading towards capitalism and visual or material consumption. Beside the physical nature of this displacement discerned by the relatively small number of Chinese travellers to the West, there is also a figurative sense to it: mentally, people had to grapple with feelings of groundlessness and instability at the sight of an unsettled and unpredictable Western society (Tian, 2011, p. 6). In other words, the fact that Balzac's articles situate China between an immobile, backward or self-enclosed empire, and a progressive, inventive and congenial nation, leaves a space of in-betweenness at a narrative level, which may be partially filled by the reader who examines how notions of movement and inertia have flown into French and Chinese intellectual, cultural, and social spheres.

Before reflecting back on the format of the primary text this thesis engages with, and on its own engagement with the importance of form in Chinese culture as a hint to the text's self-referentiality, I would like to draw attention to another possible rationale behind Balzac's association of China with an assumed reliability of clairvoyant faculties. Scholarly observations that China may play a relatively unimportant role in Balzac's works are reminiscent of the Enlightenment's philosophers premise that things which are hidden from our sensory perception or invisible cannot be judged worthy of our serious attention, as Marcus (1996, p. 66) observes. While such assumptions may sound reasonable to the extent where Balzac points to a virtual, imaginary and imagined China without overtly expressing much on the potential realities of this culture, it is important to bear in mind the writer's playful linkage between China as a real, geographical space and the act of magically transporting a hypnotised subject to a realm that is invisible to those who do not possess the gift of second sight. This realm is thus partially nonexistent due to its invisibility in the eyes of the masses; however, it does occur in the imagination, and it is real enough for the sleepwalking subject to be able to report back accurate information on the things or events witnessed. As Goulet (2013, pp. 20-24) indicates, one of the main objectives for Balzac's multi-volume collection of interconnected novels - *The Human Comedy* - was to represent the contemporary world in a precise manner, from the point of view of an omniscient narrator who sees and knows

everything, and all at once. Objects and phenomena need to be seen in full and captured in their wholeness, therefore one may need to become attentive to the mystical essences imperceptible to the untrained eye due to visual appearances. Ultimately, this desire to see everything at once can be linked to speculation. Taking into consideration the etymology of the word “speculate”, one may gain a fresh insight into the association of China with metaphysical and epistemological enquiries. To speculate, in the modern usage of the word, is to make an inference based on inconclusive evidence, or to think and meditate on a subject. Additionally, the Latin roots of the word indicate that to speculate is also to “look out” or “to look at”, suggesting that one may form a point of view, mentally view or contemplate something from a “watchtower”. A speculator is therefore, as the Latin roots of the word suggest, a close observer, an explorer or investigator, but in modern times it may also refer to someone engaged in risky trades for the sake of profit.

Seen from this angle, Balzac’s texts engage with presuppositions on the foreign Other, yet they simultaneously aspire towards an all-embracing point of view. They are speculative not only in the sense that they may present certain unfounded opinions on China and the Chinese that ignore all the details and facts of the existence of such a complex culture, but also in the sense that they conform to the century’s strong desire for a vision so global that it may reach mystical or prophetic heights. Mental investigation is invested with more power than physical exploration in the impractical venture of finding the definitive answers to questions on the purported nature of Chinese mercantilism and hypocrisy. Notwithstanding European or French views on China’s unorthodox approach to commerce and financial matters, Balzac’s construction of the marquis D’Espard, a fanatic character obsessed with all things Chinese, highlights the idea that the French are just as capable of being money-oriented as the greedy Chinese merchants portrayed in Western travel accounts - are. The marquis D’Espard recognises that he has engaged in speculative ventures in order to help a friend - who had returned from abroad with no amassed fortune - profit from the publication of an encyclopaedic book on China (Balzac, 2015, p. 97).

In addition, the doubtful validity of Mesmerist practices and their association with *charlatanerie* are elements preoccupying eighteenth and nineteenth-century society which can be compared to Balzac’s enquiry on whether China was a country full of beguilers or morally superior people. The 1842 articles present their readers with an imagery of Chinese *paravents* or screens as material objects brought back “home” to France either literally through

commercial enterprise and imitative manufacturing processes, or figuratively through visual mediums and travel accounts. Balzac is concerned with the idea of impenetrable barriers - whether physical or perceptual - and the presumed Chinese mastery of disguise. In my opinion, his reference to China's "chameleonism" should be understood as a signifier for the visual, mental and material obstacles presented to any physical or visionary traveller who may want to expound the true nature of Chinese people and to determine whether they are manipulators, tricksters or possessors of an irreproachable moral compass, and whether they are part of a despotic or constitutional state (Balzac, 2006, p. 129).

The most allusive passage suggesting both Chinese artificiality, but also the pervasive sense of deception present in nineteenth-century France due to dishonest ways of visually or textually representing foreign places, such as panoramas, dioramas, travelogues or the charlatanism associated with spiritualist practice, is that in which the author explores the myth of Potemkin villages. Balzac suggests that Borget's act of physical travel to China might ultimately not be very different in its illusory nature than an imaginary voyage, for the former compares the artist's experience of seeing China and perceiving the realities of everyday Chinese life to the myth of Potemkin villages. The "Potemkin village", a presumably popular folk-tale, refers to a ruse that Grigory Potemkin - a Russian military leader and a favourite of Catherine the Great - seemingly employed in order to impress Catherine the Great and other visiting officials. The visual trick involved the construction of painted façades to mimic real villages, inhabited by happy, nourished people, in order to hide the unpleasant realities of a despotic regime (David-Fox, 2011, pp. 98-141). Correspondingly, Balzac deems that mandarin officials stretched "an infinite number of screens along the road" when the British embassies of Lord Amherst and Lord Macartney visited China in an attempt to form trade and diplomatic relations (Balzac, 2006, p. 127). Furthermore, the writer envisions that any subsequent missionary sent to China in order to change the country's established customs is doomed to "walk between two formidable lines of illusions, of opera decoration, of painted things", similarly to how the Englishmen had to turn back and walk again "between two hedges of lies and Chinese farces" when they refused to respect the Chinese etiquette of kowtowing before the emperor (Balzac, 2006, p. 127). As Astapova (2017, p. 58) notes, the existence of Potemkin villages has been hard to prove and, in the eyes of historians, they remain linked to stories, rumours, speculations and myths. However, acts of building façades in order to mislead foreign visitors are still an unexplored reality observable in "socialist rituals concealing the real unflattering state of things" (Astapova, 2017, p. 57). Such enterprises are particularly relevant

to twentieth-century despotic regimes; however, Balzac, as a visionary thinker, offers his readers a complex metaphor which reflects the fact that Jesuit missionaries or nineteenth-century travellers experienced the same feelings of being constrained in their movements by the same “planned and policed standard itineraries” - to speak in Hughes’ (2007, p. 35) words - with which their twentieth-century French counterparts struggled due to the strict Chinese surveillance or overseeing of the foreign visitor.

Such considerations bring us back, as readers and interpreters of Balzac’s complex metaphor of the folding screen as a mobile wall that may conceal the realities or mysteries of both physical and mythical landscapes, to the concept of speculation - which is inseparable from the manner in which French imagination construes China as a contact zone between Chinese and European cultures. This simultaneously virtual, but nonetheless real realm is defined by visibility, myths, speculation, deception, and it appears as an almost *staged* spectacle, coordinated by a superior, overseeing eye. After all, David-Fox (2011, pp. 98-141) defines the practice of presenting certain ideal or idyllic places to foreign visitors as the art of “window-dressing” or “cultural show”. If French travellers, missionaries or other thinkers, writers and artists were able to form a mythical image of China and the Chinese, one must not forget, as Didier (2014, p. 14) notes, that there is a kernel of truth in every myth. Smokescreens as distractions from everyday realities are to be found on both sides of the barricade: from French illusory promises of shamanistic healing, of highly accurate virtual modes of travelling, or ephemeral trends of constructing social status through collecting exotic objects to the Chinese refusal to fully reveal their well-kept secrets of geographical or cultural diversity to the curious Western eye.

Balzac’s undeveloped analysis of Chinese culture does not necessarily indicate that the simple compilation of opposing views on the common places about China should be regarded as an inventory of purely conjectural statements that do not engage the reader in a more serious meditation on certain characteristics of Chinese artistic tradition. Observations such as that of the appreciation of form, above anything else, in Chinese fundamental aesthetic principles of calligraphy or painting, provide relevant information in regards to Chinese artistic expression:

*(...) car, en fait de lettres, ils apprécient avant tout la forme !... l'esprit vient après, ou, si vous voulez, ils l'incrudent dans la forme. Ce système est toute la Chine.* (Balzac, 2006, p. 125)

*(...) because when it comes to letters, they appreciate the form above all!... the spirit comes afterwards, or, if you like, they embed it in the form. This system is the whole of China.* (Balzac, 2006, p. 125, *my own translation*)

As twentieth-century Chinese artist Guo Dawei observed, referring not only to the shape and structure of any object or being, but also the artist's power to convey a certain mood and communicate sentiments or ideas, form comes first in Chinese visual art (Kwo, 1990, p. 56). The form of circles and squares, for example, is of utmost importance in traditional Chinese thought, for it is metaphorically used in order to remind followers of the Confucian school of proper conduct to act ethically, be well-rounded individuals, but also remain strictly disciplined (Kwo, 1990, p. 56). These beliefs are traceable to ancient times, before the advent of modern science - brought into China, to a certain extent, by Western travellers - when it was believed that the universe moved in a circular orbit and that the shape of the earth was square. I bring such considerations into the foreground in order to highlight how Balzac's representation of the Chinese as "a people that turns onto itself" not only reflects an age-old Western circular argument about China's modernity versus its conservatism and backwardness, but can also be associated with more accurate interpretations of Chinese visual representation, from the point of view of Chinese scholars themselves. Moreover, the Balzacian passage on the significance of form in Chinese letters may be correlated with characteristics of Chinese calligraphy. As Kwo (1990, p. 57) states, each Chinese character has a standard accepted written form, but calligraphy is an art that allows artists to slightly modify the character's appearance through their unique brushstrokes, changeable disposition and their personal outlook. The very idea of Chinese characters taking a different appearance according to the circumstances and subjectivity of artists resonates with Balzac's awareness that things may take on different forms in the eyes of the biased traveller or collector of counterfeit or original Chinese objects, but also resonates with the author's references to the Chinese genius for trickery - the mastery of theatrical-like techniques to deceive the eyes and the mind of foreign visitors through suspending access to certain routes or buildings, for example. More importantly, although the affirmation that "ce système est toute la Chine" may seem a one-dimensional characterisation of China, the author's focus on the paramountcy of form in Chinese visual culture also calls for an examination of Balzac's concern with form and representation in his own text depicting the exotic Other.

Balzac defends his digressions from what should constitute the main topic of his discourse, namely the realities of China and the Chinese, as perceived by French travellers and observers, by reassuring his readers that the connections he makes between French personalities such as the King or the Enlightenment philosophers do not truly divert readers from their journey of discovering China's role in European thought. Before pondering on the impact of form in Chinese visual culture and China's "letters", the writer associates Chinese characters with logograms that have evolved over time from pictorial representations with the *Belles-lettres* - a category of "beautiful" or "fine writing":

*Ne croyez pas que cette critique (...) nous écarte de la Chine ; nous sommes en pleine Chine ! Les Chinois ont, tout aussi bien que Louis XIV, que Diderot, que Jean-Jacques et Porpora, que les peuples anciens et modernes, que les rois et les pontifes, senti la puissance des inscriptions, et surtout celle des Belles-lettres !* (Balzac, 2006, pp. 124-125).

*Do not think that this criticism (...) takes us away from China; we are in the middle of China! The Chinese have, just as well as Louis XIV, as Diderot, as Jean-Jacques and Porpora, as ancient and modern peoples, as kings and pontiffs, felt the the power of inscriptions, and especially that of Belles-lettres!* (Balzac, 2006, pp. 124-125, my own translation).

In its modern, narrower sense, the category of the *Belles-lettres* refers to literary works that do not fall into the major categories of fiction, poetry or drama. Instead, the category of *Belles-lettres* may include other miscellaneous works, such as essays, *récits*, satirical or humorous writings, journal entries or letters. Thus, the reader of Balzac's articles may be inclined to reflect on the very literary form of the articles and why their fragmentary, serialised, incomplete and even imitative structure may be connected with pre-nineteenth and nineteenth-century French or European divergent modes of seeing and annotating China. In a similar vein, Lauster (2007, p. 19) considers verbal sketches to be a distinctive type of literature in their own right and classifies Balzac as a sketch-writer. Indeed, the publication of his text on China and the Chinese in a *feuilleton* - the part of a European newspaper devoted to reviews, light literature and *faits divers* or general entertainment articles, usually printed in instalments - reflects the idea of an open, collectable and heterogeneous medium. Likewise, the chinoiserie objects feverishly collected by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europeans constitute, for them, highly visual mediums which are open to interpretation and may accrue a vast amount



of meanings - the sum of which is directly proportional with the collector's strong desire to accumulate Chinese curiosities. The open structure of the serialised articles accommodates an assemblage of disparate views and information, a potential for boundless modes of composition and interpretation. As Lauster (2007, p. 28) deliberates, the reader of a sketch is always an observer, for he or she can engage in an act of literal reading, but also in an act of *reading into it*, of finding additional meaning or different interpretations. When trying to make sense of the information presented on Chinese culture and of the variety of perspectives on China - both positive and negative - the reader may need to consider the *feuilleton's* flexibility as a publication that is neither a journal nor a book, and the new forms of writing emerging from it, which present content that is neither fiction nor factual information.

At the end of each instalment, Balzac signs with his surname and notes, in brackets, that he will publish the rest of his text "tomorrow": *La suite à demain* (Balzac, 2006, p. 148) or *La fin à demain* (Balzac, 2006, p. 157). This is as much a sales strategy, a way of winning the loyalty of his readership, as it is an attempt to prolong the reader's curiosity and interest in the topic. Balzac addresses his readers directly to instil a sense of collaboration between writer and reader, for they are ultimately two observers, although the latter is invited to become a less passive spectator than the deliberately detached writer:

*Il y aurait beaucoup à redire sur ce passage, que je ne cite que pour montrer combien, en Chine, le vol est peu autorisé par les mœurs. Continuons l'examen de cette question.* (Balzac, 2006, p. 157)

*There is much to be said on this passage, which I quote only to show how little theft is tolerated by Chinese morality. Let us continue the examination of this question* (Balzac, 2006, p. 157, my own translation)

The author's lengthy quotations from Borget's own text and the lack of a detailed analysis or interpretation of the quoted passages can be seen as a calculated decision to structure the verbal sketch in such a way that its very structure stresses the idea of imitation, of copying someone else's original work - an idea that, as it will be subsequently discussed, permeated aspects of French and Chinese cultural exchange. Additionally, Balzac's apparent abstraction and distance from Borget's written record of his experiences in China not only betoken a potential undesirability of physical journeys, but also convey a sense of covert humbleness - a strategy adopted by visual and verbal sketch artists as a selling method. By boasting an apparent

inadequacy and insufficiency, sketch productions such as *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* aspire towards credibility and plausibility, to compensate for, what Lauster (2007, p. 5) terms a hubristic ambition to delineate and compile an entire “moral encyclopaedia” of the century. If Balzac repeatedly exhorts his readers to “Let our traveller speak on this subject” (Balzac, 2006, p. 154, *my own translation*), thus displaying a self-effacing attitude, he also proudly urges them to trust him, for he is a writer who was born to write texts on China: “LA CHINE, croyez-en un sinographe-né, les Anglais n'y ont encore rien vu ni connu” (Balzac, 2006, p. 127).

In an antithetical characterisation of the Chinese as inventors, Balzac not only represents them as old-fashioned and conservative, but also suggests that they are ahead of their time on the subject of visual representation (Balzac, 2006, p. 117). It may seem peculiar that the writer chose to change the original title of the publication *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* into the singular form and demarcate it from the imagined Chinese version by leaving the latter in the plural form. *The French Painted by Themselves*, a seemingly interminable publication of 422 instalments edited by Léon Curmer released in nine volumes between 1840 and 1842, is a nineteenth-century social panorama of contemporary French society. It reunites illustrations, caricatures and portraits by famous artists and textual characterisations of French social *types* and an examination of their moral principles. Balzac himself has contributed to the publication with significant written entries. The strong contrast between the singular, the individual, the separate, and the universal, the general or the collective is redolent of the fundamentals of nineteenth-century French travel writing. In *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, Wendelin Guentner defines the period between 1789 and 1914 as the ‘long nineteenth century’ of travel writing, due to the abundance of narratives resulting from both actual and imaginary voyages (Guentner, 2011, p. 504). She identifies Montesquieu’s thesis that human values and institutions are not universal, and that they vary according to outside factors such as climate, as one of the main outlooks that impacted the nineteenth-century desire for travel to foreign places. It is perhaps this awareness that people from different cultures and backgrounds possess distinctive characteristics that influenced Balzac to claim that China’s climate contributes to its people’s happiness, helping them to maintain low food prices and live a healthier and less stressful lifestyle than their French counterparts (Balzac, 2006, p. 135). Moreover, Guentner argues that travel writers who were active during this period developed a sense of relativism which resulted from their ability to identify national prejudices. This shift in thinking occurred during the French Revolution of 1789, and the political, social and ideological instability that followed in the aftermath of the revolution brought to the surface

questions of individual and national identity. On the cultural scene, the static worldview created by Classical values was equally challenged. These changes resulted in a re-evaluation of contrasting notions, such as relativity versus universality, the particular versus the general, the individual versus the collective (Guentner, 2011, p. 504). In conclusion, Balzac's association of Chinese cultural productions with a French publication that typifies and stereotypes individuals is an indicator of the need to reconsider the subjective judgement of an inward-looking society.

Balzac's association of China and the Chinese with a publication that aims to study social identity and individual types - and thus implicitly engages in the stereotyping of larger social groups - evokes not only the complications of Orientalist clichés, but also the overall situation of nineteenth-century journalism and its synchronicity with key elements of travel writing, such as entertainment, escapism, gratuitousness, falseness and armchair-based writing that enacts imaginary worlds and journeys. In *La Civilisation du journal*, Pinson (2011, p. 663) analyses an illustration present in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* of a journalist sitting and smoking comfortably in his armchair, in a disorderly room where newspapers are haphazardly scattered on the floor. This illustration shows the other facet of journalism, different from the rigorous process of writing and publicising: a side of journalism where spare, leisurely time needs to be filled with miscellaneous and minor news items; where serious topics may be rendered superfluous and vice versa; where journalists may try to gain interest in their articles through the use of exaggerated or inaccurate facts or events - sometimes perhaps without even going out into the field to research and verify information.

Nineteenth-century journals aimed to introduce their readers to a wide variety of topics to keep them entertained and preoccupied. From the different types of periodicals and columns, one may distinguish a few whose content and purpose resonate with Balzac's notion of *staging* inherent in travel narratives. Certain journals would provide readers with theatrical entertainment, in a virtual manner - that is, on paper rather than on a physical stage - by reproducing dialogues from plays (Lyon-Caen, 2011, p. 800). The aim of providing illustrations of spectacle was part of a print media mission of becoming the eye of the reader who cannot attend the performance in order to transform him into a virtual spectator (Yon (2011, p. 378). Similarly, travel narratives are deeply involved with transferring the gaze of travellers at distant places, landscapes, foreign people and their animals and objects into the text in visual or written forms, in order to create a sense of palpability of the foreign world for

the audience at home (Alù and Hill, 2018, p. 1). A sense of fluctuation and even amalgamation between the real, the serious, the meaningful, the noteworthy or the newsworthy, and the imagined, the visualised, the light-hearted, the lowbrow, the unnecessary or the ordinary prevails in journalistic and travel writing. However, that does not mean that the topoi of China and the Chinese do not engage the reader in more serious reflection on elements of Sino-French cultural exchange and the often interspaced or mirroring perspectives of the two countries.

## Chapter II: China's visual and material (non)presence in hybrid spaces of encounter between the China and the West

The content of the following two chapters is interlinked and aims to analyse how Balzacian texts' references to China may be placed within the framework of visual and material culture or may reflect elements of eighteenth and nineteenth-century encounters between China and Europe. The volume of essays on artistic exchanges between China and the West edited by Chu and Ding (2015) is an invaluable source of understanding the reciprocal aspects of these visual and material, real and imaginary encounters that prefigure Balzac's rendition of China as a hybrid space that is virtual and imagined, as much as it is grounded in factual records of Sino-French cultural exchange. As Greg Thomas (2015, pp. 235-234) argues in his essay on the intercultural dialogue that European chinoiserie opens, the Western bewitchment with Chinese imagery and visual motifs should not be adjudged as a strictly playful, whimsical or superficial act; instead, it may spark a serious and meaningful conversation on the spaces of intersection between European and Chinese culture. Similarly, in the context of Balzac's engagement with China, the latter may represent a light-hearted topic of conversation for his French characters, or may even be classed as a light-hearted and entertaining topic in the context of journalistic productions; however, as this thesis hopes to demonstrate, Balzac seems to *play* with language or with the stylistic and structural elements of his prose in order to provide his readers with the opportunity to see and think beyond the conventional representations on China and the Chinese in French or European discourses.

Vinograd (2015, p. 11) identifies two types of hybrid spaces of cultural and artistic encounter between China and Europe in the long Qing era from 1644 to 1912. The first type of spaces are physical and they constitute spaces where elements of Chinese and European politics, architectural and cultural principles fuse together. Such physical sites of diplomatic, trade and social connection may include gardens, palaces, or treaty port areas. The second type of hybrid spaces of cultural rendezvous are the ones that are concerned with exchanged objects between the two countries and may include domestic environments where such objects are viewed, collected, displayed or used, as well as export artists' studios. The pictorial images covering the surfaces of exchanged objects were a source of documentation on the supposed

essence of the target culture for their viewers, as well as a source of inspiration and projection of imaginary scenes from the supposed realities of the foreign Other's everyday life. Most importantly, these two types of spaces are hybrid due to the blending of French and Chinese means and techniques of production and reproduction observable in their bilateral relations. The two countries have historically borrowed from each other motifs, decorative patterns, technologies, and they have even united their representational skills. They have been mutually interested in the visual images and symbols used in the other's artistic productions and have observed each other's differing notion of perspective. French and Chinese artists have occasionally attempted to incorporate elements of the other's idea of perspective (Vinograd, 2015, pp. 22-24).

To illustrate how the history of the exchange of images or artefacts between China and the West complicates Orientalist notions of European superiority, it is enough to reflect on the stereotype that Chinese artists were mere "copyists". Balzac's comparison between daguerreotype portraits and Chinese magots as symbols of export objects makes more sense if one reflects on the facts of Sino-European mutual imitation. The example of the anonymous photographic portrait of a Chinese artist copying a photograph of a Western subject provided by Vinograd (2015, p. 20) reflects the history of European subjects commissioning Chinese reproductions. Despite unfair European views on the supposedly inferior quality of Chinese mass reproductions of non-native subjects' portraits, as Cao (2019, pp. 72-93) and Vinograd (2015, p. 21) argue, techniques such as copying in reverse on glass or enlarging photographs by creating their exact replicas through the medium of oil painting were unique and difficult means of reproduction. They required great skill, patience and were rather a manual than mechanical labour. The fact that they were sought-after in the West and that Western subjects recruited Chinese artists to reproduce their photographic portraits indicates their potential superiority to photography.

The screen and magots Balzac refers to in his work can be identified as "trans-portal objects", as Vinograd (2015, p. 19) names objects that are portable or transportable in their material nature, additionally functioning as portals that can transport observers to new realms through imaginative projection. They represent vessels of tangible contact between China and Europe, due to their ever-changing places of fabrication, and the ways in which they are used and transported, or the modes in which they literally and figuratively travel.

### China as a travelling landscape: between mobility and inertia

Balzac was able to categorise China as a country that is “extremely poetic” on account of Borget’s landscape drawings - which the former claims to have deliberately ignored in his review of the artist’s rendition of China and the Chinese. Veronica della Dora’s (2007) study on the ‘travelling landscapes’ of the nineteenth century is eminently useful for a better understanding of Balzac’s focus on virtual travel, for it investigates the secondary meaning of landscape - that of the representation of scenes from nature on different media - instead of prioritising the primary meaning of the term - which may refer to the material and visual forms present in a specific geographic area. In the process of cultural exchange between the East and the West, objects such as panoramas, dioramas, folding screens or vases are travelling objects at once visual and material and they display an array of visual cues on the target culture. Their material properties have, for the most part, allowed importers and exporters to transport and relocate them across space and time. Therefore, the value and significance of such outlets of visual representation transmuted according to different cultural contexts and perceptions.

As della Dora (2007, p. 287) explains, although the nineteenth century embraced modernity through the Industrial Revolution, globalisation, imperialism, and the development of transportation and optical technologies that contributed to the process of visually capturing the essence of the foreign Other and exposing it back home, the Western Europeans’ desire for experiencing distant places and changes of scenery developed at a faster rate than railways or steamships. Although, in theory, travel was perceived as an activity that gradually became accessible to members of all social classes, in reality it was mainly the privileged artists, writers, officers, soldiers, merchants or diplomats that could benefit from it. Nonetheless, the rest of the population who needed to satisfy their thirst for exotic or picturesque landscapes and curiosities had a viable alternative: that of virtual travel. The latter social category seemed to be able to effortlessly satiate their curiosity due to the phenomenon of what della Dora terms *travelling landscapes*. One was thus able to experience a literal sense of the world being brought to one’s home: landscapes travelled through the mediums of written and oral accounts, but also through highly visual mediums such as illustrated newspapers, periodicals, albums, books, paintings or drawings, art exhibitions, fairs, and, in the later part of the nineteenth

century, through photographs or postcards. They were shifting between stationary and mobile positions by finding a temporary or permanent base in museums, art galleries or private houses.

Balzac reflects on the illusion of China being brought back home, its landscapes and its people figuratively travelling as imprints on decorative objects that become stationary once displayed on the mantelpieces of European and French fireplaces:

*Notre voyageur berrichon pense avoir fait des merveilles ! Croyez-moi, si je vous parle de lui, de son voyage et de son album, c'est que j'ai raison : les paravents sont les paravents, et le voyageur n'est pas prophète ! Oui, il n'y a pas d'autre Chine que la Chine des magots. Vue de près, la Chine est plus incroyable, plus fantastique que vue sur nos cheminées. En faisant un dessin sur place, M. Borget nous a rapporté des écrans, des paravents, des vases extravagants, dont les fleurs et les fruits sont décidément vrais. Nous sommes maintenant en plein dans le sujet. Oui, ce peuple tourne sur lui-même, il ne change pas, il est bien l'empire du Milieu. (Balzac, 2006, p. 121)*

Our traveller from Berry thinks he has done wonders! Believe me, if I tell you about him, his journey, and his album, it is because I am right: screens are screens, and the traveller is not a prophet! Yes, there is no other China than the China of the magots. Seen up close, China is more incredible, more fantastic than seen on top of our fireplaces. While making a drawing on the spot, Mr. Borget brought back folding screens, room dividers, extravagant vases, whose flowers and fruits are decidedly real. We are now in the middle of the subject. Yes, this people turns onto itself, it does not change, it is indeed the Middle Kingdom. (Balzac, 2006, p. 121, *my own translation*).

Similarly to nineteenth-century European panoramas of foreign and exotic locales, material objects such as drawings, sketches, folding screens, room dividers, or painted vases are dislocated from their country of origin and transported to France through physical means. During this process, the importers of these objects may acquire a visual geographical knowledge of the objects' native place. However, this knowledge is not prophetic - in the sense that it is not far-sighted or revelatory of an absolute truth - but open to interpretation and altered by the distinctive features and credos of the new spaces through which these objects circulate. The writer claims that it is possible, in the eyes of the physically present traveller, for China to appear as an even more chimerical entity than it would in the eyes of the home-stayer gazing



at decorative objects of Chinese provenance. Theories and schools of criticism ‘travel’ in the same manner that people do: they may vary from person to person, from place to place, and from circumstance to circumstance (Said, 1984, p. 226). Any object that is relocated inevitably suffers modifications at least at a perspectival level; that is, if it arrives at its place of destination in physically intact shape or form.

The role of visual mediums such as Chinese folding screens or nineteenth-century European panoramas can be examined analogously through the prism of Balzac’s text, for they provide visual information that is “captured on the spot” either by Chinese or Western artists, translated onto canvas and ulteriorly transferred to other locations so that European observers can experience distant places at a local scale. Balzac’s emphasis on the idea that there is no other China than the China of *magots* is not only resonant with the corpus of French discourses that philosophise on China as a virtual world, estranged from Western normative rules of conduct or artistic creation, but also indicates that *magots* are - to use della Dora’s words - representative of “a miniature world for visual consumption”. If *magots* are emblematic of the entire Chinese culture for Balzac, it may be because they concretise the idea that landscape can be understood as a material and moveable object. As Mitch Rose (2002, p. 455) notes, landscape works as both a visual and material space and can be understood as a physically present environment that appears to viewers in different ways, according to perception. It is a portion of land that may seem comprehensible at a single, first or quick glance, it is both a physical environment and a visual image onto which people project their own values and tastes, guided by their imagination. Landscapes may contain concrete geographical areas with natural or artificial scenery, as well as people and objects as part of a live visual experience. Rose (2002, p. 457) is concerned with the landscape’s appearance, relevance and existence in the world and considers that “the engine for the landscape’s being is practice: everyday agents calling the landscape into being as they make it relevant for their own lives, strategies and projects”. These considerations on the dual nature of landscapes may help Balzac’s readers reflect beyond the mere surface of the text. In the light of these new reflections, it looks like the 1842 articles do not reduce the substance of a complex culture to an immateriality specific to unanimated figurines for no particular reason, but they push readers to think how China, the Chinese and the objects they produce may appear in the world and French people’s everyday consciousness as figurative landscapes.

It may not be a coincidence that Balzac too, as Mitch Rose (2002, p. 455) points out in their analysis of landscapes as part of cultural geography, refers to the Egyptian obelisk of the *Place de la Concorde* in the passage where he compares the visual data present in both French and Chinese cityscapes that may strike the onlooker. The immense quantity of inscriptions that surprised Auguste Borget during his voyage to China is presented in a positive light by Balzac - who praises the preaching of moral sensibility conveyed by Chinese inscriptions - and contrasted with the presumably infamous or embarrassing inscriptions visible in French streetscapes (Balzac, 2006, pp. 125-126). Balzac imagines that, similarly to Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist principles, the hieroglyphs carved on the surface of the Egyptian obelisk - which was placed in the public square of *Place de la Concorde* in 1833 to deter the attention from the vivid memory of a site where thousands of Parisians were guillotined during the reign of terror - may warn passers-by “not to decapitate their kings” (Balzac, 2006, p. 126, *my own translation*). Moreover, the writer claims that “The Egyptians and the Chinese are similar, they are cousins of Buddha” (Balzac, 2006, p. 126). This analogy between the Egyptian obelisk and Chinese visual culture does not appear as a random authorial choice of referencing exotic cultures if one compares the significance of the obelisk as a symbolic landscape and the longstanding tradition of French discourses concerned with China’s ontological truth. Rose (2002, p. 455) discusses George Bataille’s analysis of the Egyptian obelisk as a monument that “operated via an absence”, for it signified political neutrality, an attempt to move away from acts of cruelty. As a national symbol, it was paradoxical because it did not define the nation directly. Parisian strollers had the freedom to interpret its significance in any possible way and had the impression that the memorial structure represented something, but that it could represent anything. Its meaning was not static, it was rather a mystery that one had to unravel, similarly to how unfolding 360-degree European panoramas of exotic locations or Chinese screens had the capacity to extend and display their visual imagery. Most importantly, Rose (2002, p. 456) notes how Bataille understood the power of the *Place de la Concorde* on the French imagination to be situated not in its physical existence as a space, but in the meanings that it acquired from how people interpreted, used it, or referenced it. For Georges Bataille, this is how the obelisk came to exist in the world as a landscape. For Balzac, it is in a similar manner that the question of China’s existence in the French sphere should be explored. China’s virtual presence in the French mental or optical vision is paradoxically possible through the absence of a real grasp of the country’s realities. Its national symbols, the magots, the folding screens and other decorative objects, do not define the nation through their mere outward appearance

or material existence; instead, they provide French audiences with the illusion of being able to envision the plenitude of Chinese culture due to the suggestive power of their visuality.

A strict interpretation of Balzac's description of the Chinese as a people that "turns onto itself" would connote China's tradition of insularity and its detachment from outside people and influences. However, understood as visual imagery, the metaphor of a people that constantly rotates on its own cultural axis is redolent of the degree of mobility of Chinese folding screens and their subsequent Japanese versions. As inventors and producers of goods destined for exportation, the Chinese have symbolically opened or spread out the core visual elements of their culture and flattened them out onto canvases or containers such as folding screens, vases or porcelain figurines. As a material object for decorative or utilitarian purposes, a folding screen also becomes a virtual continuous plane. Its series of separate, vertical panels are attached in a manner that allows movement, and the hinges in between each panel allows the degree of the angles between these panels to constantly change. When folded in its characteristic symmetrical format, the centre of the frame and picture becomes visually distorted and metamorphoses into the least visible part of the composition, obliging the viewer to change their position in order to discern the overall pattern (Komanecy and Butera, 1984, p.16). Fundamentally, visual mediums such as panoramas or folding screens give the impression that people, as observers, may be able to see everything, but also nothing, since they display only a simulacrum of reality and they may occasionally lack coherence or fail to completely conceal that they have been stage-managed. Moreover, the circularity of panoramas is at the origin of viewers' simultaneous feelings of isolation from the external world and the state of being at the centre of it, for they are constructed around the viewers. Thus, such mediums envelop viewers in an embrace akin to the conception that the Chinese are a self-sufficient people that allegorically gravitates around its own traditions.

*Panoramic modes of perception: the freedom and limits of virtual travel*

Understood from the prism of panoramas' influence upon the mind and senses of nineteenth-century society, Balzac's oscillation between the importance of veritable, physical acts of travel that genuinely and sincerely depict the things observed abroad and the advantages of armchair travel or the power of imaginative visualisation does not merely reflect the writer's uneasiness to adopt a stance in regards to China's reputation in France. It is rather revealing of the correlation between the mystifying characteristics of Chinese culture or the fusion of realistic and fantastical elements in travel narratives and visual mediums which provoked confusion and speculation in the minds of observers. Moving panoramas or dioramas had the effect of stimulating audiences to the point where the actual experience of travel almost became a superseded practice. A sense of instantaneous wonder and relocation anticipated modern means of transportation and travel, such as the railway or steamboat. Panoramas and other nineteenth-century optical devices provided their viewers with an almost corporeal form of distant locations. The attempt to provide a complete copy of the reality of distant scenes of those in charge of staging optical devices was successful in creating the impression of a tangible gaze. Similarly to Balzac, Charles Dickens, one of the major nineteenth-century realist writers, published in 1850 a journalistic text called "Some Account of an Extraordinary Traveller" in the weekly literary magazine *Household Words*. In this text, readers are introduced to an exceptional traveller, Mr. Booley, who ostensibly left England for the first time at the age of 65 in order to travel around the world. His indefatigability distinguishes him from any other traveller "of whom we have any knowledge through the help of books" (Dickens, 1850, p. 73). Mr. Booley claims that he is grateful for the opportunity to have seen, at a later stage in life, numerous countries, and that this direct experience helped him possess indispensable knowledge that one cannot acquire from merely reading books. Mr. Booley delivers a laudatory speech on the capacity of moving panoramas and dioramas to provide viewers with a microcosm of virtual realities that expands their horizons and bring an awareness of the wider surrounding world, awakening their desire to inform themselves, reflect on, sympathise with, or gain an interest in the Other. However, it is worth noting that he perceives panoramas and dioramas as a "mode of conveyance". The term "conveyance" not only suggests the capacity

of such devices to instantly transport viewers to distant lands, but also the very evocation of contrasting emotions resulting from the intermixture of reality and fantasy:

*It is very gratifying to me," said he, "to have seen so much at my time of life, and to have acquired a knowledge of the countries I have visited, which I could not have derived from books alone. When I was a boy, such travelling would have been impossible, as the gigantic-moving-panorama or diorama mode of conveyance, which I have principally adopted (all my modes of conveyance have been pictorial), had then not been attempted. It is a delightful characteristic of these times, that new and cheap means are continually being devised for conveying the results of actual experience to those who are unable to obtain such experiences for themselves; and to bring them within the reach of the people – emphatically of the people [...] Some of the best results of actual travel are suggested by such means to those whose lot it is to stay at home. New worlds open out to them, beyond their little worlds, and widen their range of reflection, information, sympathy, and interest. (Dickens, 1850, p. 77).*

Dickens' journalistic publication is comparable to that of Balzac's because both texts promote the idea that, despite the potential superiority of physical geography over imaginative geography in the quest for objective, absolute knowledge, textual or pictorial means of visiting the world may be accessible to a wider audience, promoting an increased interest and consideration of the Other and offering an experience that closely simulates actual travel. Imagination can thus be understood not as mere phantasmagoria, but also as a systematic, analytical, and inquiring mental process. Panoramic modes of perception have shaped collective consciousness, bringing unknown worlds within the reach of those unable to travel. They have enabled a sense of being able to experience the world through a long vista on cultural history - which can include everyday attitudes, values, assumptions or prejudices, as well as social etiquette. The prosaic realities of everyday conventional forms of travel by rail, river or sea are rendered more exciting by illusory perception, for individuals' lived experience of the world is enhanced and given a magical dimension. It is this transcendental mode of representing the world, in itself inevitably grounded in reality and materiality, that can elucidate our understanding of the omnipresent fantastical element in Balzac's work often deemed unsuitable for his canonical realist texts. As Blic (2007, p. 261) notes, critics have long struggled to find a logical coherence between Balzac's visionary ideas and his realist representational

endeavours. Blic (2007, p. 262) refers to Balzac's "magnetic realism" by discussing the important role of "second sight" in his visual practice. Taking into account the quasi-magical effects of panoramic modes of vision, it becomes easier to fathom why, for Balzac, realism has roots in supernatural practices and why he associates travelling to China with the pseudoscientific theories of Mesmerism or "second sight".

Nineteenth-century members of the bourgeoisie were frantically searching for new means of observing the world from an angle that could offer infinite, unbounded vision: crossing the ocean, looking down at the world from the vantage point of an air balloon, the newly powerful middle class aspired to god-like vision and constructed machines and apparatuses to achieve their dreams (Oettermann, 1997, p. 21). However, panoramic vision on the one hand liberated human vision and opened up an entire world of possibilities, but on the other it restricted and confined it by enforcing a "normative" vision of the world and promoting sedentary travel (Della Dora, 2007). This entanglement between the apparent benefits of virtual travel and their pernicious tendencies that can lead to the formation of stereotyped views explains Balzac's paradoxical claim that "screens are screens, and the traveller is not a prophet" or, as expressed in the original language of the text, "*les paravents sont les paravents, et le voyageur n'est pas prophète*" (Balzac, 2006, p. 121).

Sketching China and the Chinese: a casual process of aimless observation and representation?

The history of panoramas' development into mobile, travelling, meticulously crafted technical re-enactments of real landscapes or historical scenes is interlinked with the role of sketches in the suggestive representation of the natural world. Panoramas were initially sketches of landscapes executed on the spot, for which artists travelled great distances and spent significant amounts of time doing preparatory work, in order to imitate nature as accurately as possible (Della Dora, 2007, p. 299). In order to better understand the motivations behind Balzac's review of Auguste Borget's publication on China and the Chinese, it is necessary to explore the status of literary and visual sketches in the nineteenth century.

According to Alison Byerly (1999, p. 349), sketching and painting are two cognate arts that inspired literary and visual artists to invoke principles of each other's art forms in order to

equitably distribute the responsibility of representation through multiple frames of reference, eliding “the question of a work’s relation to reality by judging it according to its success in reproducing another form of art”. Sketches aspire to a status of artlessness, humbleness, naturalness, simplicity. When observing the object to be depicted, the artist deliberately chooses to translate his experience onto paper in a manner that recreates an air of an unstudied, unadorned and unfinished project. Precise details and aesthetic finish become irrelevant in the process of rapidly drawing a picture to capture the spontaneity of the experienced moment. The artist consciously embraces casualness or even derision: he *could* draw a detailed picture if he wanted, but chooses to give a quick, brief and broad overview of the scenery or scenes in front of him instead of particularising them (Byerly, 1999, p. 349).

The art of sketching - originally a highly professional activity and subsequently adapted by amateurs - was a symbol of upper-class leisure that became widely imitated in the fashionable social circles of the nineteenth century (Byerly, 1999, p. 349). Novelists such as Dickens or Thackeray appropriated the style and content of visual sketches in order to distinguish themselves, in their literary creations, as *flâneurs* - city-strollers who ostensibly observe society in an aimless or casual manner. However, as Byerly (1999, p. 350) indicates, artists would try to conceal their economic necessities by shifting the emphasis from the product - which they would market as modest artwork - to the process of creation. Both literary and visual artists were constrained to choose their subject matter according to the demands of their buyers. Similarly to the hostile European attitudes to miscellaneous items of Chinese manufacture, sketches acquired value through their status as material rather than aesthetic objects.

At a compositional level, sketches incorporate an incongruous juxtaposition of intentionality and arbitrariness. As Byerly (1999, p. 355) notes about Dickens’ literary sketches, picturesque scenes are defined by a sense of accidental discovery, of spontaneity and immediacy. Similarly to visual sketches, literary sketches rely on an illusory absence of intentionality to attest to their impartial judgement and their faithfulness to nature: the artist has fortuitously found the scene he wants to depict; he has not composed it. In his review of Borget’s album, Balzac explicitly acknowledges the sense of randomness and casualness assignable to literary or visual sketches by indicating that he simply returned home one day and “found” the album containing thirty-two lithographs of Borget’s hand-drawn sketches:

*Je suis rentré chez moi, j'ai trouvé la Chine et les Chinois : trente-deux lithographies faites à deux teintes sur les dessins d'un Berrichon, par un jeune homme qui porte un nom cher aux arts et aux artistes, Cicéri. Jacquemont n'était pas artiste, et c'est ce qui le rend incomplet, il n'a vu les choses que sous une face. S'il avait su tenir un crayon, nous aurions eu l'Asie à deux teintes !* (Balzac, 2006, p. 120).

*I went home and found China and the Chinese: thirty-two two-toned lithographs reproducing the drawings of a Berrichon, made by a young man whose name is dear to the arts and to artists, Cicéri. Jacquemont was not an artist, and this is what makes him incomplete; he only saw things from one side. If he had known how to hold a pencil, we would have had Asia in two shades!* (Balzac, 2006, p. 120, my own translation)

Besides momentarily denying the calculatedness and purposefulness of writing a review on another artist's written impressions of his journey to China (Balzac ulteriorly re-estimates his intentionality on writing on China and the Chinese as a subject of thought when he declares himself to have been born to write texts on China), the commencing statement of the aforementioned passage conjointly reminds readers of the imaginative power of transportation retained by travel narratives or visual representations as panoramic windows on the world. There is a certain feeling of China and the Chinese having metaphorically been brought home by the vivid illustrations of Cicéri - themselves functioning as a testament to European engagement in the printing and reproduction, thus imitation, of original works of art. If there is a broad conclusion to draw from the antithesis between artistic sketches and Victor Jacquemont's positivist and naturalist travel accounts of his experiences in an Asian country - India - that, according to Balzac, offer a stern representation of the reality of the exotic Other, it is that, in the quest for finding an universal truth about the Asian or foreign Other, one must consider different perspectives and potentially try to understand the Other's own perspective on his or her own culture. Both positive and negative outlooks need to be envisioned when discussing the essence of what is foreign to us, in the same manner that sketches offer a two-toned representation of reality, nature or society, combining intentionality and arbitrariness to enjoy a panorama of life that surveys "the best of both worlds".



### **Chinese magots and French daguerreotype portraits: between realism and enchantment**

Balzac's association of Chinese culture with immobility has a paradoxical effect in a text that problematises the issue of first-hand knowledge versus second-hand knowledge in the context of a travelling world. The nineteenth-century wealthy and privileged could easily embark on journeys of discovery of the foreign Other, but those who had no other option than to remain at home were presented with visual opportunities that seamlessly re-created the reality of unfamiliar landscapes. To those who preferred stationary, imaginative ways of travelling, the expanding field of visual culture created a sense of the world being brought to their doors through the phenomenon of *travelling landscapes* - which has been previously analysed. The Balzacian text thus creates a space of fascinating virtuality, where readers can explore the different dimensions of cultural assumptions and projections from a vantage point that overlooks both China and France.

*Les Chinois, immobiles dans leurs inventions, conservateurs de toute chose acquise depuis cinquante siècles, avaient inventé "Les Chinois peints par eux-mêmes", mille ans avant que Curmer n'inventât "Le Français peint par lui-même". Cette opinion, qui ne tend pas moins qu'à considérer les magots comme des portraits daguerréotypés, arrêtait net toute discussion. (Balzac, 2006, p. 117).*

*The Chinese, immobile in their inventions, preservers of all things acquired for fifty centuries, had invented "The Chinese Painted by Themselves", a thousand years before Curmer invented "The Frenchman Painted by Himself". This opinion, which intends no less than to consider magots to be akin to daguerreotyped portraits, stopped any discussion dead in its tracks. (Balzac, 2006, p. 117, my own translation)*

The possible significance of the writer's comparison between Chinese and French styles of pictorial representation, as well as the peculiar modification of the title of the nineteenth-century moral encyclopaedia *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* has already been discussed in the context of travel writing's simultaneous engagement with concepts of cultural relativity

and universality of human experience. The next section of this thesis will focus on comprehending why Balzac's association of Chinese magots with Daguerre's photographic technology was a powerful argument that the writer could use to conclude heated discussions on the topic of China and the Chinese with his own father. The principal aim of evaluating the features of Daguerre's contribution to new forms of visual communication in the nineteenth century is to illuminate the broader and deeper meaning of Balzac's seemingly superficial engagement with common stereotypes on alleged Chinese duplicity and the Chinese propensity for manipulating reality in order to deceive foreign travellers.

Louis Daguerre, a French artist recognised for his contributions to modern photography, had a natural vocation for mounting realistic spectacles: he worked as a draughtsman, operated panoramas and developed them into dioramas - complete theatrical experiences that offered the supplementary illusion of transition and movement. He masterfully used lighting and visual tricks in order to obtain a dissolve from one scene to the other that anticipated the cinema fade, which inspired awe to the audiences that could thereby feel instantly and realistically transported to another place and time. Don Slater (1995, p. 218) refers to this phenomenon of combining scientific and technological methods with magical effects as "the spectacle of natural magic", believing that the environments created by Daguerre were not simple representations, but simulations or spaces of "absorbing reality". People were consciously paying to be deceived: they wanted a multidimensional enactment of reality, not a mere picture of it.

Besides playing a rhetorical role in the Balzacian articles, the key question on China's existence is attributed to an observation made by one of the most powerful French leaders: *Et puis, a fait observer une des plus fortes têtes du pays, est-ce que la Chine existe ?* (Balzac, 2006, p. 116). This question may seem redundant to nineteenth-century or modern readers who have already travelled to China and had visual proof of its existence, but its jejune message becomes more complicated and sophisticated if one considers it in the context of the virtual realities and spaces created by travel narratives or visual spectacles. Balzac's mysterious attribution of the disbelief in China's existence to an anonymous head of state resonates with the question of the French King's son on the realness of a living goat used as a prop in Daguerre's reconstruction of a view of Mont Blanc (Slater, 1995, p. 219). In Daguerre's perfectly staged dioramas, the material world is transformed in appearances, and appearances are discerned by the eye as corporeal realities. As Slater (1995, p. 223) notes, the paradox of

modernity is that it focuses on the idea that seeing is the only perfectly justifiable means of believing, but it also permanently seeks new ways of seeing. When the possibilities of seeing are scarce - for example, when one does not possess the resources or even the adventuresomeness for an overseas trip - modern society engineers visual spectacles which concomitantly defy and strengthen belief.

As Baker's (2009) study on the phenomenon of empiricism and enchantment in nineteenth-century realist fiction reveals, if fantastical elements are present in the work of Balzac in connection with the colonial or the foreign Other, it is due to a sense of bewailing the loss of mystery in a world that is increasingly interested in attaining knowledge through exploration. This loss of mystery is aggravated by cartographical and technological advancements in transportation or *graphic* - that is, written, drawn or printed - representation. To repudiate the notion that the world is merely made of matter in motion and that it should be reduced to its appearance, to its visible surface, to measurable facts and observable properties or behaviour of material things, Balzac "imports" peripheral and colonial figures into Paris - an increasingly disenchanting, rationalised or positivist metropolitan centre. Nineteenth-century realist writers became worried about the future of imagination, feeling that some regions ought to be left unexplored for the sake of poetic imagination (Baker, 2009, p. 8).

Chatterjee (1986, p. 51) identifies a polarisation between the material and the spiritual in imperialist and nationalist culture. The material is associated with Western scientific, technical, political, or economical superiority that ought to be, from a Western point of view, carefully assimilated and replicated by the East. Surprisingly, the material is a domain that belongs to a realm classed as the "outside" in imperial and nationalist discourses, while the spiritual domain is classed as the "inner", mysterious, and invisible realm. This is a space where the East has an augmented authority over the West, for it is extremely difficult for the Western eye to pierce the veil of Eastern secrecy. One can deduce, from these observations, that China has a double role in Balzac's work. It is a geographical location unwilling to fully disclose its condition, and its construal as an immaterial or spiritual space in the French imaginary is juxtaposed with the materiality of China's man-made or even artificial, mechanically reproduced travelling objects or landscapes. This duality stands for the desire to re-enchant a desacralised world, for, as it is visible in dioramic representations or simulations, the material and the spiritual harmonise perfectly in the pursuance of a bearable reality of the internal and external world.

The presence of the foreign in the nineteenth-century novel serves as an indicator of a reconfiguration of the realist space. The life of the protagonist of *La Peau de Chagrin*, Raphaël de Valentin, completely changes when he enters a Parisian antique shop, discovering a near-Eastern talisman made of shagreen that can ostensibly fulfil any wish. However, for each wish granted, the wild ass skin shrinks and shortens the young man's life, therefore he embarks on a frenzied quest of trying to understand the essence and the mechanism of this magical object, resorting to both scientific and spiritual explanations. Balzac portrays the interior of the antique shop in a manner that best represents his use of magical realism. The presence of lengthy, enumerative, and descriptive passages of foreign objects is regularly associated with the conventions of realism; however, the imaginativeness of this seemingly chaotic display of curiosities and whatnots and their fantastic properties indicates the co-existence of empiricism with enchantment. The objects are displayed and classed in a fashion that is suggestive of museum collections, and the protagonist uses his senses - such as vision and touch - to convince himself of their presence *there* and experience pleasant sensations of being transported to mythical times and dimensions.

Understandably, Chinese objects are present in this collection of foreign and universal miscellanea, and they are classed as “instruments of life”, contrasting with the neighbouring “instruments of death” - weaponry which may suggest imperialist or colonial violence. The aggressive colonial expansion in the name of scientific and technological advancement is associated with wreckage or even junk - thus with demise, downfall, and expiration - while decorative objects known as *chinoiserie* represent the liveliness, the spirit of the world and the fusion of European and Asian artistic taste, manufacturing prowess and capacity for reproduction and imitation. Hints to the idea of mobility, flexibility, or animation inherent in processes of object or knowledge importation from the East to the West and vice versa are paradoxically present in the stillness of such objects displayed for producing fascination:

*Les instruments de mort, poignards, pistolets curieux, armes à secret, étaient jetés pêle-mêle avec des instruments de vie : soupières en porcelaine, assiettes de Saxe, tasses orientales venues de Chine, salières antiques, drageoirs féodaux. Un vaisseau d'ivoire voguait à pleines voiles sur le dos d'une immobile tortue. (...) Tous les pays de la terre semblaient avoir apporté là un débris de leurs sciences, un échantillon de leurs arts. (Balzac, 1855, p. 31)*

*Instruments of death, daggers, curious pistols, disguised weapons, were thrown in a jumble with instruments of life: porcelain tureens, Dresden plates, oriental cups from China, antique salt cellars, comfit-boxes reminiscent of feudal times. An ivory ship was sailing at top speed on the back of an immobile turtle (...) All the countries of the earth seemed to have brought there a debris of their sciences, a sample of their arts. (Balzac, 1855, p. 31, my own translation).*

The fact that *La Peau de Chagrin* is a novel that grounds its realism in both the material and spiritual value of exotic collections or collectible items may constitute an incentive for readers to reconsider received ideas on the status of Chinese-manufactured objects as unnecessary, gaudy ornaments of little value. As Baker (2009, pp. 45-46) notes, Balzac himself coined the term “bricabracologie”, to create an alternative or a replica to the real world in order to expose the epistemological changes that disrupted nineteenth-century notions of realism. Balzac’s insertion of objects that are exclusively Chinese or a curious hybrid of European and Asian taste and style in his narratives make one envisage the potential pleasures of collecting knick-knacks and may also be considered an attempt to shift attitudes towards the characteristics of what one would normally consider an uncollectible object.

*L’Inde et ses religions revivaient dans un magot chinois coiffé de son chapeau pointu, à losanges relevées, paré de clochettes, vêtu d’or et de soie. Près du magot, une natte, jolie comme la bayadère qui s’y était roulée, exhalait encore les odeurs du sandal. Un monstre du Japon dont les yeux restaient tordus, la bouche contournée, les membres torturés, réveillait l’âme par les inventions d’un peuple qui, fatigué du beau toujours unitaire, trouve d’ineffables plaisirs dans la fécondité des laideurs. (Balzac, 1855, p. 35)*

*The spirit of India and its religions was revived by a Chinese magot wearing a pointed, rhombus-shaped hat, adorned with bells, and dressed in gold and silk. Next to the magot, a mat, as pretty as the Indian temple dancer who had rolled in it, still exhaled the odours of sandal. A goggle-eyed Japanese monster, with an awry mouth and twisted limbs, awakened the soul by reflecting the inventions of a people who, tired of the harmonious nature of beauty, find ineffable pleasures in the fecundity of ugliness. (Balzac, 1855, p. 35, my own translation).*

As Baker (2009, p. 46) notes, objects from the farthest corners of the world are brought into Paris. They are ordered, enumerated, described, and imagined by a Parisian gaze in a fashion that foreshadows the birth of the modern museum. The Chinese magot becomes an object of universal appeal, a symbol of transcultural exchange that influences the aesthetic values and creations of other Asian countries such as India or Japan. The grotesque figure and its distorted, asymmetrical features no longer produce disgust or unease, but an atmosphere of spiritual exaltation that will greet any visitor of the antique shop situated in the heart of the French capital. The bizarre concept of aesthetic enjoyment through ugliness does not render the emblematic Chinese object uncollectible. On the contrary, as the 1842 articles reveal, the Chinese magot - although not following the trends of pomp and splendour observable in the fashion sense characteristic of Louis XV's reign - can be considered part of an extended family of decorative objects showcased on the mantel shelves of European fireplaces: *Le magot était frère de bien des groupes dans les ornements de la cheminée* (Balzac, 2006, p. 150). Such considerations dispel the myth that enchanting exotic objects cannot coexist in a close-knit relation with other material objects that reflect Western domestic realities; in fact, the former may have an aesthetic value that is curiously similar to the value of the latter.

In order to apprehend the origin of Balzac's need to integrate non-native objects of fantasy in his realist oeuvre and to suggest that they are worthy of serious consideration - despite their inherent property of exciting Western risible faculties - one must consider the role of Chinese artefacts in the closely interwoven yet sharply divergent Western visions of China in the nineteenth century. Among the most popular Chinese goods that travelled from Canton - and other port cities after the concessions made in the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 - to the West were porcelain, lacquerware, paintings, knick knacks made of wood, ivory or bone, wallpapers, and textiles. Porcelain, for example, was considered one of the greatest products of luxury imports from China, and the practice of bringing porcelain goods in Europe shaped Western ideas about taste, style, social status and collecting (Gerritsen and McDowall, 2012, p. 89). However, As Chu and Milam (2019, p. 2) remark, many of the popular products of the artistic exchange between China and the West - such as willow pattern plates, lacquer tea trays or Chinese export paintings - have been ignored by scholars of nineteenth-century artistic exchange between China and the West and classed as "minor art forms at best, unworthy of serious study". In this context, it is easier to grasp that a knick knack object such as the magot may have been neglected by art consumers in favour of porcelain or lacquerware - the latter

category of objects including the folding screens which Balzac playfully references in his articles.

The political tension observable in East-West relations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - due to the failure of European diplomats and missionaries to significantly change or influence China or The Opium Wars, for example - extended to the arts, turning the admiration of things Chinese into animosity. Although the playful mood and the idealised vision of China formed in the eighteenth century continued far into the nineteenth century through literary works, theatrical experiences or artistic expression, a more “realistic” or disenchanted vision of China was formed through travel accounts, paintings, book illustrations or even photographs. More negative aspects of China, such as crimes, cruelty, poverty, urban or moral squalour were brought into focus (Chu and Milam, 2019, p. 7). The highly visual forms of representation such as sketches, paintings, illustrations or photographs provided a sense of an extensive, panoramic field of vision. Photographic technology, even in its prototypical mode, offered the illusion of absolute, accurate knowledge, for it is a common belief that the camera eye can see and capture everything *as it is* during a particular moment in time. Notwithstanding this partially true principle, one must not forget that the appearance of things is fluid and constantly changing, due to particles in all states of matter being in constant motion. What the physiological or mechanical eye *thinks* it captured may no longer be the same in the next moment after the rendering process has been completed, it may also fluctuate and thus distort vision during the live recording of the subject or scenery. This paradox of representation is at the core of the Balzacian odd juxtaposition of stereotypes regarding China’s inferiority or the pointlessness of physical journeys, and his defensive, protective tone that brings into focus both the artistic merits of the Chinese, but also those of Auguste Borget - whose book on China and the Chinese aims to transpose into text and images the essence of China - as he was able to experience it.

*Dès que j'ai su positivement que monsieur A. Borget avait pénétré en Chine, une grande tristesse a donc pénétré mon âme. Ce sera, me disais-je, le second tome de Jacquemont... Rassurez-vous ! gens à imagination, rêveurs à qui l'infortune laisse assez de force pour enfoncer les portes d'ivoire de ce divin sommeil de l'âme appelé la Fantaisie : monsieur A. Borget n'est pas trop allé en Chine ! La Chine fantastique et drolatique nous reste. Grâce à la déclaration de guerre entre l'Angleterre et le Céleste Empire, ce voyageur n'a pas fait plus de huit*

*lieues de France en Chine ; mais c'est un garçon sincère, il les a faites, ce qui n'est encore arrivé qu'à nos missionnaires (...).* (Balzac, 2006, p. 119)

*As soon as I knew positively that Mr. A. Borget had entered China, a great sadness penetrated my soul. I told myself that it will be an exact copy of the second volume of Jacquemont's book... Don't worry! People endowed with imagination, dreamers whose misfortune leaves them enough strength to break down the ivory doors of that divine sleep of the soul called Fantasy: Mr. A. Borget has not been to China too much! The fantastic, humorous, and farcical China remains to us. Thanks to the declaration of war between England and the Celestial Empire, this traveller did not roam more than eight French leagues on Chinese territory; but he is a sincere boy, he did travel these eight leagues, which has only happened to our missionaries (...)* (Balzac, 2006, p. 119, my own translation)



## Chapter III: China as a curiosity and European curiosity about China

La Chine des magots sur nos cheminées: between superfluousness and importance

The arrival of Chinese objects in the West made Europeans feel like they could visualise China in a more direct way. The sentiment that it was a country that one could hitherto reach only through the imagery created by travel narratives subsided, for collectors gained a new sense of possessing China through the very materiality of these objects. Chinese objects or *chinoiseries* were accumulated and displayed not for their utility, but for their curious quality: they represented and incarnated what was invisible prior to the opening of trade relations: exotic countries, different societies and cultures and their peculiar climates, behaviours, traditions and lifestyle. This desire to discover the unknown and acquire an almost scientific knowledge about it - without compromising the mysterious, enchanting aura of these objects - became visible in the substantiality of the cabinets of curiosities.

Cabinets ranged in size and varied from small pieces of furniture with multiple drawers and shelves to entire rooms exhibiting objects accumulated through long journeys to remote regions of the world. The objects functioned as souvenirs that could tell impressive stories about unbelievable adventures and inevitably led to fabricated anecdotes. The world was displayed in its diversity before the eyes of a public curious to decipher the objects' deepest secrets; however, this was understandably a phenomenon that reduced the world to a microcosm of material objects. These cabinets displayed objects pertaining to the natural world, such as fossils or stuffed animals, but they also housed a range of artificial objects - that is to say, items created by man, such as paintings, coins or porcelain. Despite providing access to objects taken from nature, the cabinets could not provide thorough scientific knowledge. Instead, they created a virtual space, a mini universe where owners or viewers of collections constructed their own personal versions of the world, as Giovanni Aloï (no date) notes.

Alayrac-Fielding (2016, p.105) notes that Chinese objects, whether original or imitated, symbolise the eagerness of collectors to possess exquisite and eye-catching

items to display their wealth, taste or erudition. They also represent the acquirers' desire to define themselves as imperial powers. By expropriating Chinese objects and appropriating the distinctive Chinese style in arts, crafts, architecture, landscape and interior design, Europeans could visually demonstrate their mastery over China - and implicitly over the world - for it often appeared to them as too big, too puzzling, too complex or too disagreeable. The English were particularly successful in trading exquisite Chinese goods such as porcelain or tea, and London's status, at the end of the eighteenth century, as a leading commercial centre was visibly expressed in still life paintings such as those of Pieter van Roestraten - a Dutch painter who worked most of his career in London. Such paintings depicting Chinese crockery and tea promote these goods for their elegance and for their health benefits respectively, but also suggest the vanity of material indulgence (Alayrac-Fielding, 2016, pp. 102-103). Ultimately, they help Europeans in constructing the myth of China as a subjugated nation, partially dispossessed of its cultural heritage. Through the prism of these considerations, it becomes easier to understand the background of Balzac's indignation at Great Britain's successful trade relations with China and the reason why he calls England "a drinker of Oriental treasures", comparing its insatiable appetite for exploitation to the caricature of John Bull, an imaginary figure who personifies the country as the cartoon of an overweight, always happy man. Coincidentally or not, the English national symbol can be compared, from the point of view of its physical depiction, to the national symbol of China - the magot, which, as it will become apparent in the final part of this chapter, does not merely represent a visual source of European gratified vanity, entertainment or amockery in Balzac's work.

The site where *chinoiserie* objects were placed was not insignificant. Alayrac-Fielding (2016, p. 107) notes that they occupied a central place on the mantel shelf of fireplaces because the latter represented the heart of the home and played the role of an altar of sorts, while the porcelain figurines or wares could be considered as gods guarding the house. Further, the owners of the house could display the markers of their good taste so that they were always visible - either during intimate family gatherings or larger reunions with friends and other guests. With knowledge of this information, it is easier to understand why Balzac focuses on the fireplace as a site of Chinese virtuality. In his 1842 review of Auguste Borget's sketches, Balzac claims that "there is no other China than the China of magots" and that seen from up close, during a physical trip, the

country may appear more fantastic to the observer than it would on “our fireplaces” at home, where one may get the sensation that China is at one’s fingertips due to the potency of decorative objects to project a visual and mental microcosmic Chinese world (Balzac, 2006, p. 121). A first, superficial reading of such a claim may focus on the reductive nature of the opinion that Chinese culture should only be understood in the West from the point of view of small household ornaments or decorative objects. However, if the reader takes the time to give the text a second look - to speak in Balzac’s terms of second sight - they may observe that China is reduced to its material and cultural productions in order to emphasise the monomania of collectors of such goods.

Similarly, the domestic space and its fireplace is associated with imaginary journeys to China in *La Peau de Chagrin*, in a passage where the protagonist reflects on his deliberate choice to lead a reclusive and ascetic life. Despite his natural attraction to temptations of “oriental laziness”, the protagonist claims he has worked diligently, refusing to taste the pleasures of Parisian life; despite his desire to travel to foreign countries, he has remained “seated” at his desk all his life, dedicating himself to writing and researching (Balzac, 1855, pp. 177-178). The protagonist does not deny the naturalness of his desire to physically travel and feel the gratification of activities that are incongruous with the lifestyle of a solitary individual, but he acknowledges the pleasures brought by acts of daydreaming and fantasising about distant places. Raphaël de Valentin associates the comfort and bliss one may draw from imaginary journeys to evening chatter, when one leaves their *foyer* to go to China:

*De tels rêves ne sont pas sans charmes : ne ressemblent-ils pas à ces causeries du soir, en hiver, où l’on part de son foyer pour aller en Chine. Mais que devient la vertu, pendant ces délicieux voyages où la pensée a franchi tous les obstacles ?* (Balzac, 1855, p. 179)

*Such dreams are not lacking in charm: do they not resemble those evening chats in winter, when one leaves one's home to go to China. But what happens to virtue during these delicious journeys when thought has overcome all obstacles?* (Balzac, 1855, p. 179, my own translation)

The fact that the French term *foyer* refers to a home or household, but also to a fireplace is highly suggestive of the idea that the fireplace was considered the

centrepiece of a dwelling where *chinoiseries* could be displayed in such a manner that it would convey the owner's good taste, status, and refinement, but also visually attract beholders and stimulate their imagination. In a manner akin to pseudoscientific understandings of *second sight*, hypothetical journeys can cross all boundaries of plausibility and the fireplace becomes the base station for imaginary travel.

The idea of substituting real voyages with imaginary ones was not an unaccountable caprice of fashion. On the contrary, collecting Chinese objects or *chinoiseries* allowed European women to feel the presence of China through objects that offered a visual and imaginary alternative to physical travel. An eighteenth century Chinese imperial decree attests that the Chinese government had a strict policy that interdicted foreign women from entering the country or sojourning in it (Alayrac-Fielding, 2016, p. 96). In *L'interdiction*, Balzac invents a protagonist that is so consumed by his interest in China and anything related to its moeurs, culture, history and traditions that he relates everything in his personal life to this country - or at least that is how his wife perceives and describes him. In this novella published in 1836, gender roles are switched: it is the wife, the Marquise d'Espard that initiates a legal suit - known in nineteenth-century France as a process of legal *interdiction* - against her husband in order to have him legally declared incompetent to manage his own affairs due to his monomania. As Counter (2017, pp. 24-25) notes, this is also a manner to deprive the Marquis d'Espard of his speech, for to be *interdit* in the French language is to be speechless or dumbfounded. In a sense, the wife's attempt may metaphorically suggest Western pursuits of silencing the Eastern Other through discourses that emphasise the latter's inferiority and backwardness. Balzac structured his novella in such a way that the legal investigation process prioritises others' views on the Marquis d'Espard's bizarre behaviour - the latter is physically absent from the narrative until the very end of the judicial probe. Although the Marquise complains about her husband's excessive spending on his projects related to China - such as the publication of an encyclopaedia on the picturesque history of China - she is no less guilty of extravagant purchases.

– *Si le marquis d'Espard est fou de la Chine, dit Popinot en montrant la garniture de cheminée, j'aime à voir que les produits vous en plaisent également. Mais peut-être est-ce à M. le marquis que vous devez les charmantes chinoiseries*

*que voici, dit-il en désignant de précieuses babioles. Cette raillerie de bon goût fit sourire Bianchon, pétrifia Rastignac, et la marquise mordit ses lèvres minces.* (Balzac, 2015, p. 70)

*- If the Marquis d'Espard is mad about China, said Popinot, pointing to the chimney piece, "It is good to see that you like its products as well. But perhaps it is from Mr. the Marquis that you acquired these charming chinoiserries," he said, pointing to some precious trinkets. This subtle irony about good taste made Bianchon smile, petrified Rastignac, and the marquise bit her thin lips.* (Balzac, 2015, p. 70, *my own translation*)

Counter (2017, p. 29) views the Marquis' obsession with China and his judge's efforts to provide a purely objective report in order to make a wise decision on the wife's interdiction request as elements of an idealism that is irreconcilably with the demands of reality. Counter (2017, p. 37) defines the marks of idealism in Balzac's novellas as a refusal to accept the reality of things "as they were" and to aspire towards a better society and better morals, but indicates that, in the end, realism is the narrative mode that triumphs. Indeed, the Marquis d'Espard is presented as a mysterious figure who behaves as if he were a character in an idealist work of fiction. His lofty ideals to restore an inheritance that was not deservedly his to its rightful owners and his decision to live a simple, frugal life, dedicated to scholarly research on China and raising his two sons in a manner that, according to Kashiwagi (2018, p. 119), respects Confucian moral codes, is indeed opposed to the ostentatious lifestyle of nineteenth-century Parisian aristocracy. However, as Kashiwagi observes (2018, p. 119), the Marquis' aspiration towards an ideal of Chinese wisdom is not used in Balzac's novel for trivial or nugatory purposes, as Counter's article may suggest. The dénouement of the text is disenchanting indeed: despite the judge's decision to reject the wife's request of interdiction, the Marquise's powerful social influence and status defeats the probity of the legal system and replaces the adjudicator with a possibly more corrupt authority. The Marquis has no choice but to abandon his publication on China and to admit to a less lofty reality, namely that he is "not a Chinaman, but a French gentleman" (Balzac, 2015, p. 98, *my own translation*). Nonetheless, rather than considering the Marquis' avowal that he was working on a book on China because it was a profitable occupation as a confirmation that China has an arbitrary and trivial role in Balzac's work, one may understand this

disenchantment on the purposefulness of the protagonist's pursuits as a mark of the author's disillusionment with the decadence of nineteenth-century French society. As it is evident in the 1842 articles, Balzac was pleasantly surprised with Borget's accounts of Chinese people's ability to find happiness in a frugal lifestyle and he did not refrain from making derogatory remarks about French social organisation.

The fact that Balzac's references to China or the Chinese are pregnant with ambiguity is analogous to the double bind in which individuals interested in Chinese objects or *chinoiseries* would find themselves due to changing perceptions about China and its material culture before and during the nineteenth century. The Chinese magots the writer often refers to can be classified as pertaining to the category of the *bibelot* or knick knack - a category which Janell Watson (1999) analyses from the point of view of its symbolism in nineteenth-century novels, from Balzac to Proust. The paradox of this category of objects is that it includes items that are deemed precious or of high value, as well as cheap industrial kitsch. Watson (1999, p. 1) notes that the *bibelot* makes its first major canonical appearance in Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons* in 1847. At that time, the scholar claims that material objects could still be perceived as vehicles of information about their users and the outside world; however, until the end of the century, excessive description and references to objects - which no longer need to be defining of their owners or corresponding to reality - overtake literary plots and proliferate in literary texts as gratuitous objects, similarly to how objects with no apparent use-value (at least for some) circulated and multiplied in the marketplace and the domestic interior before and during the nineteenth century (Watson, 1999, p. 1).

As Gerritsen and McDowall (2012, p. 89) observe, scholars in the field of material culture have focused on the ways in which objects have been employed by their users to define the self, while less attention has been paid to the ways in which these same objects can be looked at to gain a perspective on the existence of the Other. In the light of this observation, it becomes obvious that there is a present need to explore the nexus between foreign goods - or goods imitative of foreign innovation - and local perceptions of their producers in literary intermingling with material culture. In order to better understand how Balzac's insertion of Chinese or Chinese-style objects into his works has not only the role of defining the French or European self, but also that of stimulating a review of Western perceptions of Chinese people as producers of material

culture, it is necessary to evaluate the iconography and reception of Chinese and *chinoiserie* objects in French and European societies in the nineteenth century, but also antecedently, for the trend of *chinoiserie* had its inception in the seventeenth century.

Seventeenth-century European travellers were astonished by the craftsmanship of the Chinese, particularly because they did not yet possess the knowledge of how to manufacture porcelain of a similarly high quality to that of Jingdezhen - the largest centre of production of Chinese porcelain. However, from the eighteenth century onwards, Europeans managed to learn the techniques or “secrets” required for the reproduction of Chinese porcelain or other luxury goods, and their perception of China changed as they realised they could become independent manufacturers (Gerritsen and McDowall, 2012, p. 91). After this realisation, they were more inclined to become irritated at and disdain China’s principles of manufacturing, orienting their attention, for example, to negative aspects of Chinese industry, such as labourers’ degrading working conditions. This change of attitude is redolent of the phenomenon of disenchantment observable in French society in the nineteenth century, following the increment of mindsets promoting scientific knowledge. From this point of view, Balzac’s association of Chinese figurines with Daguerre’s photographic portraits can be interpreted as a symbol of a French society oscillating between enchantment and disenchantment, if one considers the fact that the French government provided Daguerre with a lifetime remuneration in order for the latter to reveal the secret of his technology to record an image and preserve the memory of a place, of people or that of a historic period. The switch in European considerations of China as a locus of artistic invention to that of China as a locus of artifice and falsehood can be associated with the omission of detail and the seemingly deliberate choice to refrain from elaborating on the various contingents in between these two poles of perception in the 1842 Balzacian articles.

European travel accounts of pre-nineteenth and nineteenth-century China are inextricably linked to interpretations of material culture, because they conventionally examine the ability of Chinese people to produce commodities, and implicitly evaluate Chinese identity based on the technical expertise demonstrated by this nation. However, it must be noted that European travellers defined Chinese identity or “Chineseness” according to their own understanding of Chinese material culture. Balzac’s attention to

objects pertaining to the material culture of China or Asia is a reflection on how the material world comes into being, how its objects are seen and used, how they travel across the world and how their value and meaning change depending on their place of arrival and the predilection of their users. His 1842 articles are structured as an itinerary of sorts, taking the reader on an imaginary trip, and aiming to reach a consensus on the foundation of Chinese reality as a final destination. The issues of reality versus fantasy, actuality versus virtuality, immobility versus mobility, modernity versus antiquity, and originality versus imitation are subjects of cogitation and milestones to be reached on this journey. The very notion of Chinese reality or virtuality is questioned from the point of view of a French or European imaginary. Nonetheless, the readers are not equipped with a detailed map that may guide their understanding of the conflicting information on China presented to them. Symbols of the longstanding cultural exchange between the East and the West are sketched-out in front of them, and it is the readers' duty to make sense of the intermediate space between a China that is technologically and culturally advanced, morally superior, a real geographical area that has been reached by travellers - who have been treated with lavish hospitality - and a China that is backward, immutable, despotic and tyrannical, directed towards artificiality and falsehood, an industrial and cultural wasteland that is not worth visiting and that is substantially more interesting seen from afar.

Despite certain notions of Chinese or *chinoiserie* objects as signifiers of gratuitousness and worthlessness, these objects cannot be considered mere commodities, for, as Pierson (2012, p. 12) states, that is a one-dimensional view on the worldwide movement and consumption of Chinese items. The assumption that there was no interest in the place of cultural origins of these collectibles, that is, China, would be a gratuitous and arbitrary assumption in itself. In fact, antiques and collectibles originating from China or copying Chinese craftsmanship and patterns were a form of cultural and economic exchange, permitting individuals to experience a foreign culture and to become aware of it. In this process of simultaneous discovery and projection, they were able to develop notions of self-identity and otherness or alterity. Moreover, as Fuglerud and Wainwright (2015, p. 1) note about the role of objects in cultural imagination, the "movement of people, objects and images across space and time allows individuals and groups to overcome space-time distances through material extensions of themselves". Taking note of such reflexions, it is easier to understand the reasoning



behind Balzac's apparent reduction of Chinese culture to mere decorative objects and their visual imagery, as well as his interest in the dichotomy between movement and inertia in Orientalist attempts to elaborate on the bedrock of Chinese culture. Balzac's attempt at defying his father's common sense in regards to the studying of Chinese culture and the son's claim that the Chinese were *exactly* as they were represented on either original or reproduced ornamental items can be understood as a contestation of the general association of vision with truth in material culture. As Fuglerud and Wainwright (2015, p.6) observe, visual representations of otherness may conventionally be considered more direct and more accurate than written records, lending visual representation the semblance of a certain givenness, facticity or realness, but also leading to essentialism and stereotyping.

In *Le Cousin Pons*, Balzac links his characters to deceptive theatrical figures, comparing the cunning nature of people such Rémonencq - a *chineur* - with Molière's demagogic characters (Greene, 1995, p.18). The term *chineur* - etymologically linked with China by suggesting a calling for collecting antiques of potentially exotic origins - refers to the occupation of dealers of second-hand artefacts. Laélia Véron (2018, pp. 9-10) defines the verb *chiner* an act of travelling from place to place in order to find opportunities and close good deals with inexperienced possessors of such items. Mozet (2001, p. 84) analyses Balzac's preoccupation with characters seized with the mania of collecting to his very interest in serialisation as a writer and creator, for nineteenth-century publishing is defined by a focus on "collections" of works, so that that buyers would be kept anticipating and constrained to come back for more. Mozet (2001, p. 84) also observes that the novelist and the collector are both "originals", in the sense that they only obey their own rules and the rules of the market. They are able to flaunt their best finds due to a combination of chance and a persistence in their obstinacy as treasure-hunters. However, they are also prone to mechanical and monotonous repetition due to this inclination towards endless accumulation, and Mozet (2001, p. 84) reasons that the only way to extinguish this burning passion for accretion is to decease or to make an arbitrary choice to stop. China's material culture and the modes in which it has been received and perceived in the West inspires Balzac to expose the pleasures and dangers of compulsive accumulation of wealth, as well as to reflect on the gifts of writers as creators and the burden of their aspiration to universal, boundless

knowledge and representation. The act of creation and originality is inextricable from redundancy and reiteration.

As Situ's (2001) study on the Chinese magot as a treasure of Chinese symbolism in French culture reveals, eighteenth-century painters and draughtsmen Watteau and Bucher notably introduced *chinoiserie* symbolism in French art. The Chinese personas painted by Watteau have been classified in a manner that is redolent of the typology of social classes present in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*. Archetypal Chinese men or women and their distinct clothes are minutely detailed; however, physically, they are depicted in a manner that evokes European physiognomy rather than Chinese, and Situ (2001, p. 13) believes that they look more like disguised European subjects who wear typical Chinese accessories. Such considerations are perhaps key to reading the passage in the 1842 articles in which Balzac deems that the "Chinese have painted themselves" a thousand years before the French have represented themselves through the illustrations and written content as part of the nineteenth-century publication concerned with the study of typical French characters. If one considers Situ's comprehension of Watteau's paintings of Chinese personages, then, the French attempt to depict the Chinese ironically ultimately fails as a camouflaged and adorned representation of themselves. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Situ (2001, p.17) considers that Watteau's works depicting exotic landscapes succeed in their rendition of an impression of movement, of airiness characteristic to Chinese aesthetic principles; they transpose nature onto canvas in a manner that invites viewers to wander across valleys and mountains, to discover the limitless character of Chinese perspective, to be touched by the poetical power of copying nature and forget about the limits imposed by the restricted dimension of classical European painting. After all, as Balzac notes, "China is extremely poetic, in the sense that there is no regularity" in any of its visual aspects (Balzac, 2006, p. 165, *my own translation*). One should not hurriedly judge Balzac's association of China with fraudulent Mesmerist practices as an indicator of China's superfluous or trivial role in his predominantly realist work; the writer's notions of *second sight* and of a transcendent perspective on humanity corresponds with Chinese views on the essence of art.

Despite the European or French fashionable craze for anything that visually portrays Chinese taste and style and magically brings China into their domestic spaces,

as Situ (2001, p. 79) notes, the essence of Chinese art, embodied by the magot and its iconography, was widely misunderstood in the West. The iconography of the magot, which is most often represented through the figure of an overweight smiling monk, has been wrongly interpreted in the West as a symbol of well-being and eternal carefreeness; however, as Situ shows, in Chinese thought, this Buddhist monk does not incarnate a crazy and monstrous figure designed to provoke laughter. Instead, his prominent stomach represents “everything that is hard to bear in this world” and his smile indicates kindness and wisdom, for he laughs at all the ridiculous people in the world (Situ, 2001, p.79). Likewise, I argue that there is a certain passage in *Le Cousin Pons* in which Balzac seems to address the gulf between French and Chinese outlooks on the symbolism of magots:

*Sous ce chapeau, qui paraissait près de tomber, s’étendait une de ces figures falotes et drolatiques comme les Chinois seuls en savent inventer pour leurs magots. (...) Cette laideur, poussée tout au comique, n’excitait cependant point le rire. La mélancolie excessive qui débordait par les yeux pâles de ce pauvre homme atteignait le moqueur et lui glaçait la plaisanterie sur les lèvres.* (Balzac, 1855, p. 9)

*Under this hat, which seemed about to fall off, lay one of those dull and droll figures such as the Chinese alone know how to invent for their magots. (...) This ugliness, pushed to the point of comedy, did not, however, excite laughter. The excessive melancholy which overflowed through the poor man's pale eyes touched the mocker and froze the joke on his lips.* (Balzac, 1855, p. 9, my own translation)

Balzac’s main character, Sylvain Pons, an unsuccessful artist but an affluent collector, is depicted as a physically repulsive character whose physiognomy and figure are suggestive of the grotesque form and shape of Chinese magots. Such objects are conventionally associated with drollness and humour in the French construal of the visuality of chinoiserie objects. However, any person that may want to mock and ridicule the grotesqueness of Pons will be so struck by the excessive sadness reflected in his eyes, that they will not dare to laugh at the seriousness of Pons’ condition. The word *falote* associated with Pons’ figure and with that of Chinese magots to connote a drab expression is equally suggestive of the unfair representations of China and the Chinese in the Western imaginary, for it may refer to a pleasant, cheerful, or even

slightly mad individual, but it also signifies something that vacillates, that is inconsistent, flickering or wavering and that is barely perceivable. The latter meaning is redolent of the unsteadiness and variability of European perceptions of China and of Balzac's vacillation between positive and negative outlooks on China expressed in his own texts. In the end, the reader can navigate the Balzacian labyrinth of incongruent representations through the medium of visual and material culture studies on the relations between China and France to acquire a fresh perspective on the importance of the iconography of chinoiserie objects such as screens, magots or vases in Balzac's work and their unexpected subtle critique of French or European amorality and incapacity of seeing things from another perspective.

This chapter has reviewed the key aspects of European reception and perception of chinoiserie objects and the way in which Balzac's works do not merely reflect the existent contemporary sense of the superfluousness of such objects or their risible properties, but instead may lead the reader to reflect on the French flawed perception of the Chinese as visual artists or producers. Ultimately, the French curiosity for anything related to China is defined by both negative and positive understandings of Chinese objects as curiosities. As it is observable in the differing perceptions on the study of Chinese language, history, customs or politics in nineteenth-century Paris, the notion of curiosity translated into both genuine interest and serious engagement with sinology and a sense of derision at ideas of Chinese bizarreness. As Fabre's study (2017, p. 173) shows, between 1814 and 1900, conceptions of the Chinese language in Paris varied. As one of the main centres of sinology, Paris offered its inhabitants an increased number of opportunities for encounters with the Chinese language. Fabre (2017, p. 183) distinguishes between two types of "Parisian Chinese" that the city dwellers could experience: scholarly Chinese and profane Chinese. They were able to come into contact with the first type of language through the works of an increasing number of sinologists, the collections of national libraries and the establishment of institutions dedicated to the study of Chinese culture. However, only the intellectual elite had real access to this type of language. The rest of the population was generally able to gain a rudimentary knowledge of the language, through samples of spoken Chinese from the rare and mainly temporary Chinese visitors - the number of such visitors only increased towards the end of the century - but also from occasional posters, art objects or building facades. One may notice a general tendency of learners of scholarly Chinese to treat

the study of this language as a serious endeavour, thus as an object of science, and an inclination of learners of profane Chinese to ridicule the language or regard it as a primitive, notoriously difficult language. However, as Fabre (2017, p. 188) argues, perceptions of the Chinese language gravitate between two poles of admiration and disregard in nineteenth-century France - similarly to the case of perceptions of Chinese culture on a larger scale. The different Parisian conceptions of Chinese as a language are defined by a moving, fluctuating character, for they vary according to the motivations of individuals. Sinologists do not categorically deny the ridiculousness of their object of study, while non-experts are aware that the language at which they laugh is an object of study, even if this may only be because of the representation of Chinese characters as bizarre forms of writing and the creation of ludicrous caricatures this bizarreness may inspire.

## Conclusion

Balzac gives a partial representation of China and the Chinese in his writing, in a manner that is concordant with the incompleteness of nineteenth-century European written and visual sketches, but also with the fragmentariness of everyday life in France or Europe, affected by the rapid changes inherent to processes of modernisation, globalisation, imperialist expansion and capitalism - albeit in their incipient stage. However, a lack of detailed analysis of Chinese culture and the writer's over-reliance on Borget's own text about his adventures in China does not necessarily mean that Balzac uses the topoi of China and the Chinese as gratuitous references which can provide a valid excuse for the writer to deflect away to issues of French or European identity. Rather, his writing encompasses a panoramic vision of French and Chinese cultural issues, some of which are closely intertwined - such as the re-invention, re-production, reception, or imagining and re-imagining of cultural artefacts; the differences and similarities between Western and Eastern concepts of aesthetic principles and enjoyment; or the links and disconnections between French and Chinese visual culture.

Although his 1842 articles are published as part of *feuilleton* columns - which actively engage with anecdotal accounts, clichés, and chatter about anything that is deemed exotic, bizarre and of a curious nature, constantly aiming to maintain readership loyalty through sensationalism and incompleteness - and strikingly promote the idea of imaginary voyages as a superior way to visualise and know the Other, they do not invalidate the argument for physical journeys. For example, Balzac's appreciation of Borget's sincerity in regards to the facts of his real, palpable incursion into Chinese territory suggests that, from certain points of view, China can or should be depicted as a familiar, recognisable and appealing place. The motifs of China or *chinoiserie* objects are inseparable from the theme of collection in Balzac's works, and the latter symbolises Western attempts at classifying, displaying, accumulating, and imitating Chinese objects, but also the serialisation inherent to journalistic articles as outlets for travel writing. The European sketch writer or artist feigns humbleness in order to mask his mercantile pursuits, thus, by placing Balzac's articles in the context of European journalism, the reader may realise that Western accusations of Chinese hypocrisy or treachery are equally applicable to French society.

The Balzacian references to China and the Chinese can be read by the modern reader as conversation openers on the relationship between Orientalist discourses and the role of visual and material culture in acquiring knowledge on the Other. Understandably, this knowledge is illusory and distorted, but perhaps this is why Balzac presents us with a panoptic view of China: to suggest the unreliability and inconsistency inherent to ideals of holding the key to the mysteries of a foreign culture. Having been “staged” as a richly suggestive verbal sketch, the text calls for literal *second sight* or *second reading*, for an exploration, beyond surface level, of the role, usage, consumption, significance and symbolism of Chinese art objects in the West.

Analysing Balzac’s references to China and the Chinese in correlation with the pre-nineteenth- and nineteenth-century focus on visual cognition gives the reader a better understanding of the reasons behind the writer’s ambivalent stance towards physical journeys to China: the country’s visibility and invisibility; its simultaneous presence in and absence from the French imaginary or from French material collections and spaces such as the home or the fireplace; its placement at the threshold between entertainment and education, between scientific explanation and magical realism, between lowbrow, mass-market, popular mediums and highbrow, scholarly means of representation; between commercial interest and pure aspiration towards encyclopaedic knowledge; all these elements are inextricable from the fragmentary yet totalising views promised, simulated or actually provided by visual and textual mediums of representation.

Notions of mobility and immobility fluctuate in Balzac’s text, which allows the reader to consider how these two notions are reflected in the social imaginary of both France and China. By presenting the reader with a conflict between China as a culture that is static, conservative of past traditions and reclusive and China as an enigmatic, puzzling but appealing culture that has motivated the journeys of European missionaries, artists, diplomats or merchants, the birthplace of ingenious art forms and commercial intelligence - with its inevitable crafty or scheming ways of achieving success -, the Balzacian article leaves room for reflection on how the themes of mobility and immobility interweave when it comes to ideas of unchanging, trite artistic techniques or fixed, narrow-minded perceptions of the Other. His sentences, full of ambiguity and paradoxes, can create in the readers’ mind an effect that is opposite to the uncritical judgement inherent in the formation of standardised mental images on the Other : that of questioning the validity of these clichés, of deciding on which side they place themselves in the discourse of European superiority towards the East, of reflecting more

deeply on delicate questions on China's essence and existence which often have no fixed answer.

If writers and readers are intrigued by the idea of China's virtuality, it is due to the very connotations of the word virtual, which can refer to something that exists or results in essence or effect, but not in actual form, fact, or name or to something that exists solely in the mind and is a product of imagination. In their quest for absolute knowledge on China's essence, thinkers and travellers have encountered the blockades of cultural, racial, and personal bias, which distorted their visual and written representations of China to the extent of questioning the actual existence of the country as a geographical, real space; the facts of its history and the lifestyle of its inhabitants, or the very appellation of the country was a tempting prospect.

The trope of screens in Balzac's articles engages with the idea that the Chinese are skilfully able to scam foreign visitors, and it can be associated with artfulness and deceptive appearances. This is suggestive of the differing Western perceptions of China in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. When circumnavigating the world, travellers and their companions were overwhelmed by a sense of Chinese propensity for artifice, fraud or extortions aimed at visitors. The Balzacian metaphors of Chinese visuality and visibility through cultural products such as screens and maggots can lead to a reflection on the differences between observation and perception. While observation can be understood as the action or process of seeing, noticing, hearing and eventually registering the information in a detached, objective manner, perspective can be understood as the act of seeing or understanding more than something *is* in reality. Perception can be fluid, ever-changing, as one may switch perspectives in order to see and understand the same thing from multiple perspectives. This would not be possible without relying on supplementary information from personal identity, experience, taste, interest, or prejudice. The influence that perspectives and observations may have on concepts such as reality or fantasy in the depiction of China needs to be explored by readers of Balzac's texts, in order to comprehend how they may have affected European or Western opinions of China and its virtuality, whether this virtuality refers to the country and culture's true essence or to its immaterial essence and potentiality - as imagined by the French.



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