

## FREN 878 East meets West. Representations of China in 18th-century French Text and Image

Professor Diane Fourny M 2:30-5:00pm  
207 SMA Line #82482

FREN 878 is part of a coordinated effort with the Franklin D. Murphy Seminar in Art History (HA 898), organized to examine the encounter of art and literature between Europe and China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this course we will trace the historical and intellectual foundations of what becomes the eighteenth-century's craze for China. Beginning with European missionary outposts to the Asian continent, established at end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the huge body of Jesuit letters and travel memoirs describing China—widely translated and read throughout Europe—radically reoriented early modern European inquiry, focused on larger questions of history, civilization, and human nature. Secular thinkers as well as Jesuit fathers offered new, speculative theories on the origins and nature of human civilization—religious and political institutions, manners, and morality—confronted as they were by a Chinese civilization as old as, if not more ancient, than classical Antiquity of the Romans and Greeks. While missionaries sought



Christian conversion of the Asian soul, many European secular thinkers and writers underwent a symbolic conversion of their own, embracing the notion of superior Chinese social, political, and philosophical models. By mid-eighteenth century, this overwhelming enthusiasm for China would betray itself as an all-too-obvious propaganda war led by Enlightenment *philosophes* against the abuses of Church and State. Whether presenting Chinese “enlightened despotism” or “enlightened “atheism,” French Enlightenment thinkers, in particular, played heavily upon the myth of “the wise and noble Chinese.”

The Enlightenment's *engouement* for all things Chinese was in no way limited to the intellectual classes: a true wave of “sinomania” takes hold across Europe, particularly among the moneyed classes and royal courts whose taste for *chinoiserie*



permeated everything from décor to theatre to dress and garden landscape. However, like any craze, the China effect would run its course. During the second half of the eighteenth century, subsequent writings published by new travelers to the East, the suppression of the Jesuit order, and the expulsion of Europeans from many Chinese cities by the Chinese authorities, ended in tarnishing the pristine image of the Asian continent by the end of the century. Our task will be to trace the influence of China—or its representation through text and image—upon the life and thought of *ancien régime* France.



Jean-Baptiste Pillement  
“A Chinese Market Scene “ (1764)

### Selected Readings:

**Matteo Ricci**, *Journal*(1601-1610)

*Lettres édifiantes et curieuses des Jésuites de Chine* (1702-1776)

**Voltaire** (François Marie Arouet) *L'Orphelin de la Chine / The Orphan of China* (tragedy, 1755) *Essai sur les moeurs / Essay on Universal History, Manners, and spirit of Nations* (history, selections, 1754)

*Le Siecle de Louis XIV / The Age of Louis XIV* (history, selections, 1752)

*Lettres chinoises, indiennes et tartares à M. Paw* (fiction, selections, 1776)  
Selected poetry

**Diderot**. Selections from the *Encyclopédie*, “De la philosophie des Chinois” essay)

**Marquis d'Argens**. *Lettres chinoises /Chinese letters. Being a philosophical, historical, and critical correspondence between a Chinese traveller at Paris, and his countrymen ...* (novel, 1741)

**Sonnerat**, Pierre. *A Voyage to the East-Indies and China; performed by order of Lewis XV between the years 1774 and 1781. Containing a description of the manners, religion, arts ....* (translated from the French, selections, 1788-89)

**Paintings and engravings by Francois Boucher and Jean-Bapiste Pillement**