Framing China: performativity and narrative in museum displays of Chinese porcelain

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CHAPTER 4 Fetishization: Stereotypes and Exoticism in China: Through the Looking Glass at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

To believe that the Orient was created—or as I call it, "Orientalized"—and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination, is to be disingenuous.

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*

Introduction: An Aestheticization of Orientalism

This chapter draws on the special exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass* (hereinafter referred to as *Looking Glass*) hosted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (hereinafter referred to as the MET) in 2015 to demonstrate how a misleading narrative design may lead to the exact opposite of the exhibition-makers' intent. This shows the potential gap between curatorial aims and the actual visual experience provided to audiences.

Looking Glass was curated by the Costume Institute in cooperation with the Department of Asian Art in the MET in 2015. The exhibition's unexpected juxtaposition of fashion garments with the sources of their inspiration—Chinese porcelain, silk, calligraphy, lacquerware, bronze, and so on—generated record-breaking attendance of more than 81,000 visitors. It was also the largest temporary exhibition hosted at the Met, occupying a series of Chinese galleries (Galleries 206-218), an Egyptian gallery (Gallery 132), and two galleries (Galleries 980-981) of the Costume Institute (**Figure 4.1**).[341] The exhibition had no definite visiting route through its thematically classified galleries, but allowed visitors to wander between them freely.

The juxtaposition of fashion with Chinese art does not merely create visual appeal; it also serves the Costume Institute's goal of seeing fashion not just as clothing but as an art form.[342] Although this blockbuster exhibition was praised as fascinating and seductive, with its captivating scheme of

[341] It was only in 2018 that both its size and attendance record were broken by the Costume Institute's new show *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, which had more than 1.6 million visitors.

[342] For more about the Costume Institute and its positioning, see Sarah Scaturro and Joyce Fung, "Ethics and Aesthetics at the Costume Institute Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York," in *Refashioning and Redress: Conserving and Displaying Dress*, eds. Mary M. Brooks and Dinah D. Eastop (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2016), 159-172.

juxtaposition, it was also widely criticized as an endorsement of Orientalism.[343] However, paradoxically enough, the exhibition had set out to be a deconstruction, not a fulfillment, of Orientalism. As the exhibition's curator Andrew Bolton notes: "I want [the exhibition to be] a sort of deconstructive stereotype."[344] So, what led the exhibition to just the opposite of its intention?[345]

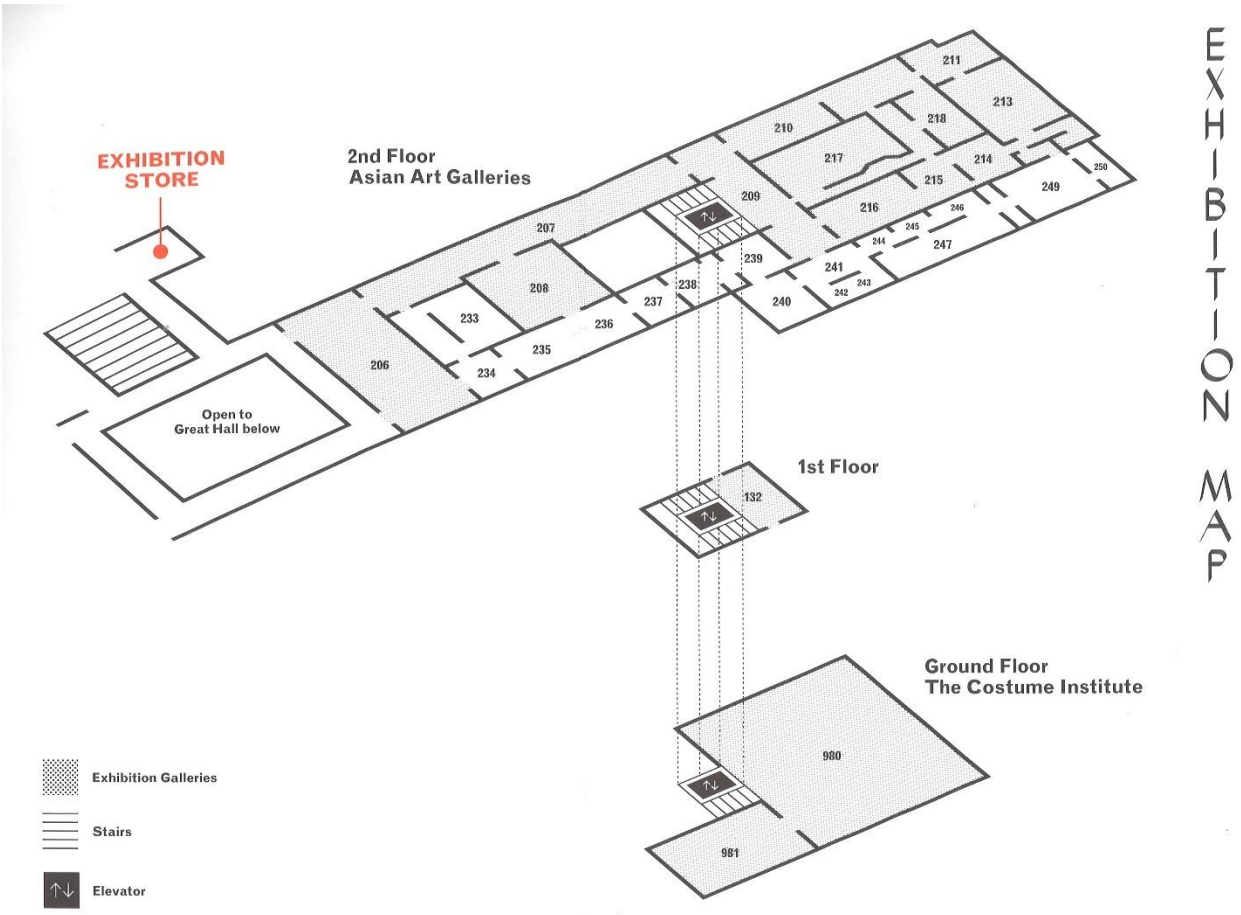

Figure 4.1 Floor map of *Looking Glass*. © The MET

Indeed, the nineteenth-century Orientalist paradigm that Edward Said describes in *Orientalism* haunted the exhibition all along. The exhibition *is* about Orientalism, as Bolton recognizes, but it attempts to recast this Orientalism in a "less politicized and more positivistic" light by mobilizing two dichotomies: an authentic China image versus a dream-like imagination of China and an aesthetic of surfaces versus

[343] See, for example: Zhang Ling 張泠, "Youan hahajing li de huayue liangxiao" 幽暗哈哈鏡裡的花月良宵 [The rhapsody in a Dark Distorting Mirror], June 5, 2015, https://www.artforum.com.cn/slant/8022; Connie Wang, "The Met's New Exhibit Is About Orientalism, Not China," *Refinery 29*, May 5, 2015, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2015/05/86838/met-china-orientalism; Robin Givhan, "The Fantasy of China: Why the New Met Exhibition is a Big, Beautiful Lie," *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/05/05/the-fantasy-of-china-why-the-new-met-exhibition-is-a-big-beautiful-lie/?utm_term=.c23bcdae8116; Rachel Silberstein, "China: Through the Looking Glass," *Caa.Reviews*, November 2, 2016, http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/2755#.W7oCYmgzaUk [Accessed January 20, 2021].

[344] See the documentary about the exhibition, *The First Monday in May* (2016).

[345] This chapter focuses on the Orientalist implications produced by the exhibition in its galleries and catalogue. It will not examine the 2015 Met Gala accompanying *Looking Glass*, as it lies beyond the focus of this dissertation.

an essence governed by cultural contextualization.[346] Regardless of whether it is possible to de-politicize a concept so deeply rooted in political ideology, these two binary relations are problematic in that they lead the exhibition to enact not a deconstruction—as the curator intends—but rather a resurgence of clichéd cultural stereotypes.

The first dichotomy, an authentic China versus a dream-like imagination of China, is expressed in the exhibition title. *China: Through the Looking Glass*, according to the curator, borrows from Lewis Carroll's fiction *Alice through the Looking Glass* to suggest that the exhibition is "not about China *per se* but about a China that exists as a collective fantasy."[347] The mirror as a metaphor for a make-believe world is also seen in its Chinese-version subtitle: *jing hua shui yue* 鏡花水月 [flowers in the mirror; moon in the water]: a Buddhist metaphor used to describe everything in the world as nothing but an illusion. The title is so vague that it seems to artfully circumvent the East-West binary.[348] Yet, China in such a syntax is implicitly positioned as a passive object to be looked at and inspired by.[349]

Perhaps even more problematic is that the very dichotomy between a real China and a fictional take on China can never really work as an approach to step away from Said's Orientalism. This is because, following Said, Orientalist discourse *never* really hinges on the misrepresentation of an authentic Orient:

> [T]he phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient. […] The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original.[350]

The internal consistency that Said calls attention to includes a European view of the Orient that is homogenizing, a "penchant for dramatizing general features, for reducing vast numbers of objects to a smaller number of orderable and describable *types*."[351] What is at stake in his Orientalist discourse, therefore, is how the process of Orientalization is inextricable from restructuring, artificiality, homogenization, and reduction. As the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha argues, "The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation."[352] This leads us to the second binary relation, between surface aesthetics and cultural contextualization, through which the exhibition sets out to disperse the reek of Orientalism.

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[346] Andrew Bolton, "Towards an Aesthetic of Surfaces," in *China: Through the Looking Glass*, ed. Andrew Bolton et al. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 17.
[347] Ibid., 20.
[348] In the 1990s, fashion exhibitions in the United States about how China becomes a stylistic reference for Western designers tended to be titled based on the East-West binary model. For example: *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress* (December 8, 1994-March 19, 1995, at the MET); *China Chic: East Meets West* (February-April 1999, at the Fashion Institute Technology Museum in New York).
[349] In total, there are over forty designers' works on display, and yet very few of them are Chinese; the majority are still Europeans. Most problematic of all, as I will explore further in this chapter, the works on display by the Chinese designers who are present, such as Guo Pei, Vivienne Tam, and Laurence Xu, generally reference China in ornamental terms, just like those of European designers.
[350] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 5, 21 (emphasis in original).
[351] Ibid., 119 (emphasis in original).
[352] Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983), 27.

The exhibition attempts to use the aesthetic delight of material surfaces as a justification to decontextualize the combination of European fashion and Chinese objects from the postcolonial discourse of Orientalism. The curator's apolitical manifesto reads:

> Postcolonial discourse perceives an implicit power imbalance in such Orientalist dress up, but designers' intentions often lie outside such rationalist cognition. They are driven less by the logic of politics than by that of fashion, which typically pursues an aesthetic of surfaces rather than an essence governed by cultural contextualization.[353]

Two primary strategies are employed in the exhibition to promote this so-called "aesthetic of surfaces." First, showpieces are placed adjacent to each other and accompanied by exquisite lighting effects that encourage audiences to take a close and comparative look at their visual designs and tactile qualities. Second, brief labels with only a list of designers, materials, and provenance maintain our focus on material beauty.[354] Not only is the amount of information small, but the lighting also makes these labels hard to read. Some labels had even peeled off by the time I visited the exhibition. The result is that the show was belittled as superficial eye candy, shying away from the deeper issues implicit in its subject matter.[355] This chapter, however, takes this aesthetic of surfaces seriously, arguing that it is not a cultural decontextualization as the curator intends, but a precisely cultural construction of otherness, taking the form of Western exoticism. More bluntly, it is the emphasis on an aesthetic of surfaces that makes the exhibition a perfect embodiment of Orientalism.

As is well known, exoticism is not an inherent quality to be found in certain people, places, or material objects, but is instead assigned to them from certain points of view. As anthropologist Bruce Kapferer points out: "Everything and anything is potentially in an exotic relation. Nothing is intrinsically exotic except through the relations into which it is drawn."[356] The aesthetic of surfaces that the exhibition calls attention to, I propose, serves to mystify material surfaces and, to emphasize the otherness of China.

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[353] Bolton, "Towards an Aesthetic of Surfaces," 19. Bolton's proposition of "an aesthetic of surfaces" is reminiscent of what Zhang Xiaohong 張小虹, the scholar of feminism and cultural theories, calls "biaomian moshi 表面模式 [the surface model]." According to Zhang, the surface model refers to fashion as a de-politicized and de-historicized pure sign, which is empty, without substance. See Zhang Xiaohong 張小虹, "Xushi zhongguo: liuhang shishang sheji zhong de wenhua aimei" 虛飾中國：流行時尚設計中的文化曖昧 [Fabric-Ating China: Cultural Ambivalence in Fashion De-Sign], *Zhongwai wenxue* 中外文學 [*Chung Wai Literary Quarterly*] 29, no. 2 (2000): 26-46.

[354] For the Costume Institute, appropriating theatrical and cinematic elements—light, sound, and stage design with mannequins positioned in dramatic ways—for fashion displays has been a habitual approach to enhancing sensuous pleasure for audiences since 1960s, ever since Diana Vreeland, the former editor-in-chief of the fashion magazine *Vogue The United States*, became a special consultant at the Institute. Her emphasis on creating *mise-en-scène* in fashion exhibitions continues to be carried forward by Harold Koda, who was the former associate curator of Vreeland and became Curator-in-chief of the Institute between 2000-2016, and Andrew Bolton, who succeeded Koda as the Head Curator in 2016. See Harold Koda and Jessica Glasscock, "The Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: An Evolving Story," in *Fashion and Museums: Theory and Practice*, eds. Birgitta Svensson and Marie Riegels Melchior. (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 21-32.

[355] For example, the art historian Rachel Silberstein criticizes the exhibition in that "the absence of more historically or conceptually substantive moorings, the reliance of these juxtapositions upon patterns and palettes makes many of these pairings somewhat facile." Rachel Silberstein, "China: Through the Looking Glass."

[356] Bruce Kapferer, "How Anthropologists Think: Configurations of the Exotic," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 4 (2013): 815.

It provides a specific viewing experience in which audiences are encouraged to perceive the Chinese materials on display as "enigmatic objects" (a term used in the exhibition) with *fetishized surfaces*.[357]

I borrow the term fetishized surface from the art historian Kobena Mercer and his analysis of the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's engagement with the black male body.[358] Fetishizing here refers to the process through which Mapplethorpe's photos become cultural artifacts with the power to evoke racial otherness.[359] According to Mercer, "Mapplethorpe's camera-eye opens an aperture onto aspects of stereotypes," as his camera's point of view always leads viewers to "a unitary vanishing point: an erotic/aesthetic objectification of black male bodies into the idealized form of a homogeneous type."[360] Framed by such a fixed way of seeing, the black man's glossy and shiny skin is turned into a "fetishized surface [that] serves and services a white male desire to look and to enjoy the fantasy of mastery."[361] For Mercer, Mapplethorpe's overly-eroticized framing of black men's bodies stabilizes racial otherness, and thus articulates the process of fetishization at work in the colonial fantasy. This echoes Bhabha's claim that "[a]n important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness."[362] Seen from this perspective, I propose that *Looking Glass* fails to effectively disentangle Orientalism from its postcolonial anchor because of its mechanism of fetishization. The mechanism of fetishization is expressed in the exhibition's overemphasis of a surface-level beauty that transforms, or flattens, Chinese porcelain and other Chinese objects on display into a motley collection of fetishized surfaces, their patterns acting as stereotypical exotic imageries. In this way, the exhibition still maps out a fixed Self-Other relation in which China is the Other to be imagined; the complex matrix of meanings around Chinese objects and decorations are reduced to an overriding assemblage of surface patterns that are defined as exotic, mysterious, and yet representative of Chinese-ness.[363]

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[357] The terms Enigmatic Bodies, Enigmatic Spaces, and Enigmatic Objects are used by the exhibition catalogue to categorize the Chinese objects and fashion garments on display.

[358] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

[359] Fetishization refers to the process through which things are endowed with symbolic or even mysterious powers. In this process, the sociologist Tim Dant reminds us, the point is not whether the thing itself really possesses the symbolic quality or not, but to acknowledge the process as "a means of mediating social value through material culture." He thereby suggests: "the term fetishism can be extended to look at the way the social value of some object is 'overdetermined' as against the routine ways in which they are appropriated into culture." See Tim Dant, *Material Culture in the Social World* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), 42.

[360] Mercer. *Welcome to the Jungle*, 173-174.

[361] Ibid., 176.

[362] Bhabha, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," 18.

[363] The lighting installation and the juxtaposition of fashion garments with various Chinese objects in *Looking Glass*, as I will discuss at more length later, promote a sense of material beauty. This emphasis on the sensuous allure of the displayed objects is reminiscent of the concept of *sensuous surfaces* proposed by the art historian Jonathan Hay in his richly illustrated book *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2010). Hay examines the different ways human bodies interact with the textural richness of objects' surfaces, how visual and tactile experiences work together to elicit sensory pleasures. He treats the appearance and material properties of individual objects as a topography of sensuous surfaces. Thinking of decorative arts as sensuous surfaces enables Hay to highlight how distinct material qualities can be understood as a coherent whole providing rich sensory associations that appeal not merely to the eyes, but also to the hands and skin of a beholder (whether in physical or imaginative terms). In *Looking Glass*, a material object, indeed, might be perceived as a sensuous surface as its strategies of display do enable viewers to experience the surface/material details of the showpieces with tactile stimuli added further to the visual, at least in their imaginations. However,

In addition to the fetishized surfaces, stereotype-laden exoticism is also manifested in the exhibition through feminine gender-coding. This leaves the exhibition even less able to break free of the distasteful implications of Orientalist misrepresentation. Femininity as a primary signifier of exoticness and otherness is commonly in Orientalist narratives.[364] As an exhibition in which Orientalism is unavoidably central, *Looking Glass* is a medium through which gender becomes enacted: the porcelain body is the female skin; the Chinese domestic space is a sensual woman's boudoir; the Orientalist imagination of China speaks through the figure of either the Dragon Lady or the Lotus Blossom. The juxtaposition of Chinese porcelain with fashion garments in both the gallery and the catalogue seems to generate a metonymic relationship in which the porcelain body is analogous to the female body.

This chapter argues that the exhibition reflects an Orientalist fascination with the conflation between China (as a cultural entity)/china as well as excessive aestheticization and feminization. Even more importantly, it naturalizes such a conflation, making it inevitable, entrenched, and pervasive. Hence, my purpose here is not to criticize the Orientalist style upheld by fashion designers in Europe, China, or anywhere else, but to explore "the reductionism of the Orientalistic" performed in *Looking Glass*.[365] Obviously, the exhibition embraces the aesthetic taste fashioned especially in eighteenth-century Europe called *chinoiserie*, which, according to the art historian Catherine Pagani, "had very little to do with China per se but rather reflected an idealized and highly decorative concept of the Far East."[366] However, the exhibition is not anchored around this term (albeit one of the exhibition's galleries is called *chinoiserie*), but rather sought to de-politicize, or to aestheticize, such a politically-charged concept as Orientalism. This greatly complexifies the exhibition.

This chapter is composed of three sections. The first focuses on the exhibition catalogue because its layout, framing of photos, and design, without information-rich captions, make it an epitomization of the exhibition. Moreover, many images in the catalogue were posted on websites to advertise the show before it was unveiled, and in this way can serve to shape a sort of first impression. Based on a close reading of *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain*, the second and third sections explore how Chinese porcelain is exoticized and gendered feminine. The corresponding displays in other galleries and fashion exhibitions will be considered and compared as well.

4-1 Fetishized Framing: Ornamentalization and Feminization

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this chapter employs the term *fetishized surface* instead of the *sensuous surface*, because the idea of fetishization specifically contributes to unraveling the Orientalist implications (excessive exoticization, ornamentation, and feminization) embedded in the exhibition's promotion of an aesthetic of surfaces.

[364] Said considers the classical Greek tragedy *The Persians* by the poet Aeschylus (525/24–456/55 BC) to be the oldest extant example of the Orientalist attitude: "the Orient [in *The Persians*] is transformed from a very far distant and often threaten Otherness into figures that are relatively familiar (in Aeschylus's case, grieving Asiatic women)." Said, *Orientalism*, 21. More recently, the playwright David Henry Hwang in his famous work *M. Butterfly* (1988) articulates through the mouth of the Chinese male protagonist Liling Song: "I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man." David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (New York: New American Library, 1988), 83.

[365] Said, *Orientalism*, 169.

[366] Catherine Pagani, *Eastern Magnificence and European Ingenuity: Clocks of Late Imperial China* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 126.

Taken by the British photographer Platon, the photos in *Looking Glass*'s catalogue are framed to foreground an overabundant surface-beauty and femininity in two ways. First, an embodied engagement of viewers with material properties of objects photographed in close-up encourages a specific way of seeing. This way of seeing transforms the physical objects into the ornamental surfaces. The catalogue's spatial layout is also worthy of consideration: all these photos are printed in full-page format without any textual notes whatsoever (a list of the illustrations with brief information, such as the fashion designers, materials, and dates, is attached at the end of the catalogue). This design seems to encourage a close and undistracted eye on the visual (and tactile) interests of these photos. Second, these photos in the catalogue generate an intimate association between the object body and the female body through a metonymic reading of the photos' layout. In some cases, the associations made between the objects and the dresses are clearly derived from the exhibition's own invention, rather than the fashion designer's original idea. The catalogue acts as an epitomization of the exhibition, for its emphasis on surface beauty and femininity is equally seen in the exhibition's galleries, as I will show in later sections.

Platon is particularly well-known for his portraits of world-renowned politicians and celebrities. He uses detailed close-ups, in which a momentary facial expression is frozen, and post-modifications, such as increasing contrast and controlling tints, in order to capture and reinforce a flash of personality, and these tactics can also function to force our eyes to linger over the textural quality of material surfaces. His close-ups invite a haptic way of seeing with, as Laura Marks aptly describes, "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch."[367]

In the exhibition catalogue of *Looking Glass*, Platon's photos of a Valentino dress and an Eastern Zhou bell (early 5th century BC) are two manifestations of this haptic way of seeing (**Figures 4.2-4.3**). Compared to the archival image of the Chinese bell in the MET's collection database, it is clear that Platon enhances the bell's tonal contrast in order to bring out its texture (**Figure 4.4**). The rough and rusty surface of the bronze bell offers strong contrasts with the smooth and glossy surface of the satin dress. Platon's interest in texturing is even more evident in juxtaposed photos of another Valentino dress and a piece of Ming lacquerware (**Figures 4.5-4.6**). The MET's archival image of the lacquer dish shows us its wooden grain (**Figure 4.7**). In contrast, Platon accentuates the lacquer dish's luster so it becomes leathery, echoing the fabric of the floral dress.

Clearly, the juxtaposition of Chinese objects and fashion garments intend to foreground their visual resemblance, to show how the latter is inspired by the former. It should be noted that, however, some of the juxtapositions shown in the catalogue indicate associations that are actually invented by the exhibition makers, not fashion designers. An example is found in the grouping between a handle-shaped jade blade and a Madeleine Vionnet evening gown (**Figures 4.8-4.9**). Compared to the MET's archival image of the jade blade, it is obviously that the toning and composition of Platon's photo make the jade blade look alike the green silk dress (**Figure 4.10**). However, according to the Musée de la Mode de la Ville in Paris, the museum where this Vionnet dress is now collected, the pattern of the dress is actually inspired by the classical Greek logos designed by the Italian artist Ernesto Thayaht in 1919.[368]

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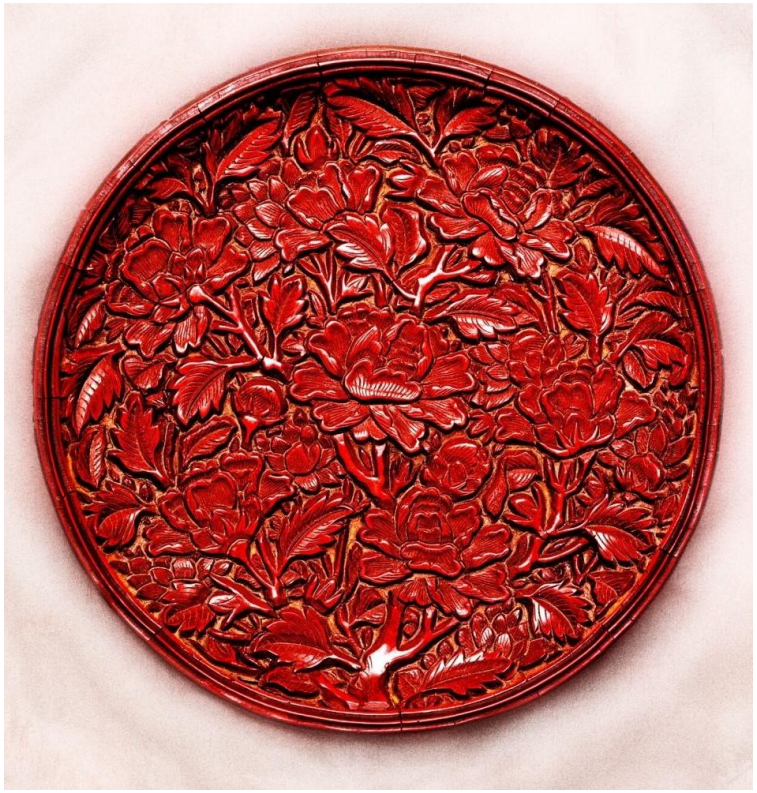
[367] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 162.

[368] For the information of this Madeleine Vionnet evening gown, see: https://www.palaisgalliera.paris.fr/en/work/evening-gown-madeleine-vionnet [Accessed January 20, 2021].

Figures 4.2-4.3 Eastern Zhou bell (left) and Valentino dress (right). Photographed by Platon for the *Looking Glass* exhibition catalogue, pp. 198-199

Figure 4.4 Bell. Bronze. Early 5th Century BC. Size: High: 38.3 cm; width 24.4 cm. Collected in the MET. Accession Number: 1988.20.7



Figures 4.5-4.6 Ming lacquerware dish (left) and Valentino dress (right). Photographed by Platon for the *Looking Glass* exhibition catalogue, pp. 206-207

Figure 4.7 Dish with flower. Carved Red Lacquer, late 14th century. Diameter: 15.2 cm. Collected in the MET. Accession number: 2015.500.1.30a, b



Figures 4.8-4.9 (left and middle) Western Zhou handle-shaped blade and Madeleine Vionnet evening gown. Photographed by Platon for the *Looking Glass* exhibition catalogue, pp. 196-197
Figure 4.10 (right) Western Zhou handle-shaped blade. Jade. 10th-9th BC. Length: 26.1 cm. Collected in the MET. Accession number: 1985.214.96

In addition to emphasizing (invented) visual connections between Chinese objects and fashion dresses, the layout of the catalogue's photos promotes an intimate association between objects and dressed female bodies. Take, for instance, the pairing of a Qing hexagonal vase and a Chanel evening gown made of white silk organza and embroidered with blue, white, and crystal beads (**Figures 4.11-4.12**).[369] The Qing vase and the Chanel dress share very similar hierarchical differentiations and a decorative motif consisting of elegant scrolls, flowering branches, and bands meandering around their necks and waists. Not only are their appearances alike, but the way they are framed and put into vignettes by Platon also makes their silhouettes allude to each other. Such a meaningful analogy is also seen in another pairing, a Ming enameled vase and a polychrome printed dress by Mary Katrantzou (**Figures 4.13-4.14**). Their photos are cropped to highlight the resemblance between the gourd-shaped porcelain vase and the curvy female body.

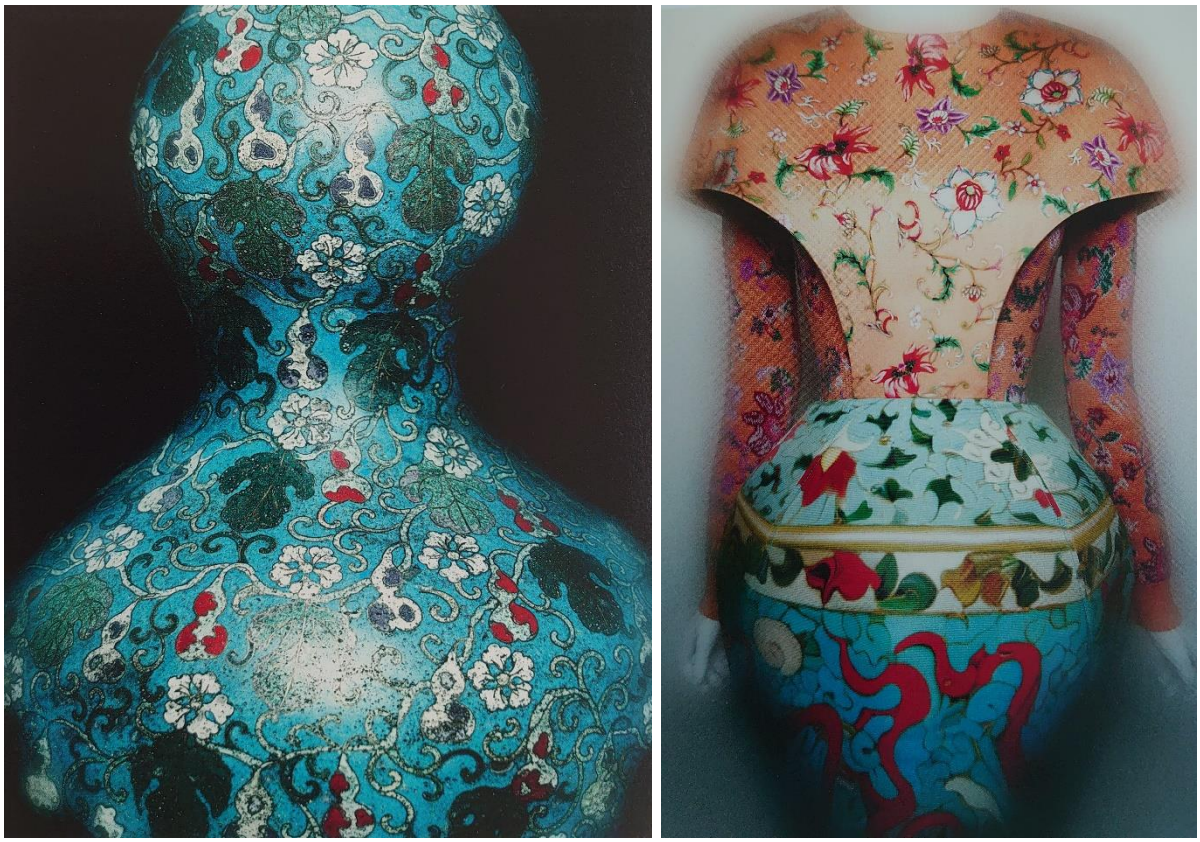
The association between the female body and porcelain body is presented even more corporally by a gourd-shaped Qing vase paired with an Alexander McQueen evening dress (**Figures 4.15-4.16**). The dress is full of visual and tactile contrast. Its bodice consists of blue and white porcelain shards which closely fit the contour of the body, while its skirt is made of softly colored layered organza which is fluffy and blooming. Between the vase and the dress is a sheet of translucent vellum with a close-up of *Beijing Memory No. 5*, a dress made of Ming-Qing porcelain shards by the contemporary Chinese artist Li Xiaofeng. Its surface is magnified to allow one to see in detail how the shards are sewn together with metal threads, evoking a rugged tactility. The placement of this close-up image is meaningful in that it creates a narrative flow: the gourd-shaped vase was deformed into shards and was then transformed into a female torso with a narrow waist similar to the vase. Read metonymically, then, the layout of these three images can be interpreted as follows: the porcelain shards *are* the female flesh; the female body is shaped by, or fragile as, porcelain.

[369] Before *Looking Glass* was unveiled, *Vogue The United States* published a photo of the Chanel evening gown with an interesting caption: Porcelain Doll. See Leslie Camhi, "From Chanel to Valentino, a First Look at the Dresses in the Met's 'China through the Looking Glass'," *Vogue The United States*, April 23, 2015, https://www.vogue.com/article/china-through-the-looking-glass-met-gala-2015 [Accessed April 20, 2021].

The catalogue also includes close-ups shots of fetishized female body parts, as if to advocate that the erotically charged female body plays an indispensable role in forming "an image of China that exists in the Western imaginations."[370] In these images, Platon vitalizes the inanimate mannequins by cropping their whole bodies into partials sections, which eroticizes the act of looking, seducing our eyes into ever more intense explorations. As we can see, a close-up of a French chiffon dress lets our eyes penetrate its translucent fabric to the female body and its slim waist (**Figure 4.17**). The silk dyes the torso with a layer of seductive pink. The embroidered dragon pattern moves our vision along with its meandering body, downwards, until a butterfly blocks our voyeuristic gaze. Similarly, the body below the tear-shaped neckline of a cheongsam-inspired dress by Yves Saint Laurent dominates our vision (**Figure 4.18**). The photo invites us to look closely at its fabric: the light-reflecting quality of the layered polychrome sequins turns the surface of the dress into a dark lake glistening, reflecting the moonlight and carrying the falling flowers. However, one's eye might be mesmerized by her faint bosom, her bodily enchantment underneath. The composition of this photo keeps the head of the (perhaps headless) mannequin out of frame, thereby enabling an imagination that the luminous bronzed skin belongs to a sensual female body. These photos suggest a process of fetishizing female body parts, in that chest, waist, and torso are all invested with the power to evoke erotic fantasy. The eroticized femininity as an Orientalist motif is also perceivable in the exhibition's galleries, which I will discuss in the third section of this chapter. The excessive ornamentation and femininity expressed in the juxtaposition between fashion garments and Chinese porcelain are equally seen in the exhibition's galleries, to which I will now turn.

Figures 4.11-4.12 Qing vase (left) and Dior evening dress (right). Photographed by Platon for the *Looking Glass* exhibition catalogue, pp. 176-177

[370] Cited from the transcript of the video *China: Through the Looking Glass—Gallery Views*, https://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/video/collections/ci/china-looking-glass-gallery-views [Accessed January 20, 2021].



Figures 4.13-4.14 Ming gourd-shaped vase (left) and Mary Katrantzou dress (right). Photographed by Platon for the *Looking Glass* exhibition catalogue, pp. 192-193

Figure 4.15 Qing gourd-shaped vase and *Beijing Memory No.5* (detail). Photographed by Platon for the *Looking Glass* exhibition catalogue, pp. 184-184v

Figure 4.16 *Beijing Memory No.5* (detail) and Alexander McQueen evening dress. Photographed by Platon for the *Looking Glass* exhibition catalogue, pp. 184v-185

Figure 4.17 (left) Callot Soeurs Dress. Photographed by Platon for the *Looking Glass* exhibition catalogue, p. 85
Figure 4.18 (right) Yves Saint Laurent Evening dress. Photographed by Platon for the *Looking Glass* exhibition catalogue, p. 115

4-2 The World of Myth: Surface Patterns as Signifiers of Exoticism

Most pieces of Ming porcelain showcased in the *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain* section of the exhibition came from the Department of Asian Art's semi-permanent gallery: *Gallery 204 Chinese Ceramics*. Such a displacement happens to inform us of how Ming porcelain is moved from one fetishized locus to another: from the presentation of commodity fetishism to the one of Orientalist fetishism.

4-2-1 Porcelain in Shop Window: The Presentation of Commodity Fetishism

Gallery 200 through *Gallery 205*—all titled *Chinese Ceramics*—are set up along the second-floor Great Hall Balcony, introducing the development of Chinese ceramics and porcelain in a roughly chronological order. If we step back a little bit from the wall cases in these galleries to consider the porcelain in tandem with the architectural characteristics and spatial layout of the Great Hall Balcony, one of china's interesting meanings—as a signifier of privilege—comes to the fore.

The display techniques and interior décor in the Great Hall Balcony evoke those typically used in the department stores to create an impression of luxury.[371] The Great Hall Balcony has immense domes and a mosaic-marble floor. Bathed in soft light from above, the colorful pieces of Chinese porcelain lined up as if luxury items in a series of glass cases from one end of the Balcony to another (**Figures 4.19-4.21**). Visitors in this viewing environment become like window shoppers. The architectural style and layout of the Great Hall Balcony seems reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Paris arcades as seen through the eyes of the philosopher Walter Benjamin: "a center of commerce in luxury items," "temples of commodity capital," or "forerunners of department stores."[372] As the nineteenth-century *Illustrated Guide to Paris* that Benjamin would later quote describes:

> These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops…[373]

The pieces of Chinese porcelain behind glass lure our eyes in a way akin to how the French novelist Balzac so beautifully portrays the scene in arcades: "the great poem of display chants its stanzas of colour from the Church of the Madeleine to the Porte Saint-Denis."[374] The world of the Paris arcades is a world of commodity fetishism, "where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to the fore."[375] It is a place in which the fetishistic character of the displayed

[371] Department stores and museums borrowed display techniques from one another after the mid nineteenth century. See Michelle Henning, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education, 2005), 30-35.
[372] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999[1982]), 3, 37.
[373] Ibid., 3.
[374] Ibid.
[375] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1989), 81-82.

commodities—not just the exchange but also the symbolic values of the objects on display—are magnified. Specifically, Chinese porcelain in the Great Hall Balcony becomes a fetishistic object not only because of the spatial form and the display techniques shared with the department stores, but also because of spatial function: The Great Hall Balcony, at a specific time of day, will turn into a place of restricted, commodified access.

Figure 4.19 View of Great Hall Balcony. Photographed by the author in 2016

Figure 4.20 (left) View of Great Hall Balcony with Chinese porcelain. Photographed by the author in 2016
Figure 4.21 (right) View of the Benjamin Altman Collection of Chinese Qing Porcelain adjacent to the Great Hall Balcony. Photographed by the author in 2016

The Great Hall Balcony embodies what the geographer David Harvey calls the "porosity" of the boundary between public and private spaces.[376] Every day, from 10 a.m., when the museum opens its

[376] David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 43. In describing how the boundaries between public and private spaces became porous in nineteenth-century Paris, David Harvey takes the arrival of the new cafes as an example: "The public space of the new boulevard provides the setting, but it acquires its qualities in part through the commercial and private activities that illuminate and spill outward onto it. The boundary between public and private spaces is depicted as porous. […] The café is not exactly a private space either: a selected public is allowed in for commercial and consumption purposes. The poor family sees it as a space of exclusion, internalizing the gold that has been taken from them." Ibid., 215.

doors, until the afternoon, museum visitors can enjoy coffee, salad, sandwiches, and snacks in the Great Hall Balcony Café centered around *Gallery 204 Chinese Ceramics*. Moreover, every Friday and Saturday, from 4 p.m. until 8:30 p.m. (just half an hour before the museum closes), the Great Hall Balcony Bar welcomes customers with beer, cocktails, wine, appetizers and live performances. The seats of the Great Hall Balcony Café and Bar are placed along the rim of the Balcony, so audience members who do not want to spend five dollars on a cappuccino can still stroll within the gallery space (**Figures 4.22-4.23**). They can appreciate porcelain close-up, although it may make one a bit uneasy to walk around in front of a group of people dining. As long as you are willing to consume, you are allowed to have a seat with a vantage point, overlooking the downstairs clamor, and to symbolically possess the pieces of Chinese porcelain on view for a moment. In a sense, the Great Hall Balcony Café and Bar sells not only things that can fill your stomach, but also, and perhaps more importantly, feelings that can fill your heart, feelings such as taste, elegance, and style. From the point of view of beholders, perhaps, the pieces of porcelain on display become signifiers of privilege, and the Great Hall Balcony becomes a place where commodity fetishism and conspicuous consumption triumph.

The movement of Ming porcelain from *Gallery 204 Chinese Ceramics* to *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain* in *Looking Glass* indicates a shift from signifier of privilege to a signifier of exoticism. On the face of it, *Gallery 213* is designed to evade any culturally informed interpretive practice by seducing the eyes of viewers with the material beauty. However, a close reading of the display reveals its Orientalist tendencies.

Figure 4.22 (left) View of the Great Hall Balcony Bar with the performance of a concert. Photographed by the author in 2019

Figure 4.23 (right) View of the Great Hall Balcony Bar with a red stand on the table reads: "Welcome to the Great Hall Balcony Bar. Please wait for the host to be seated." Photographed by the author in 2019

4-2-2 Flowing Patterns across Materials: The Presentation of Orientalist Fetishism

The space of *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain* is filled with interplays of light and darkness. Originally, the gallery was used to display Chinese painting, calligraphy, and a few pieces of furniture in a warm light

(**Figure 4.24**). The exhibition team of *Looking Glass* did not keep much from the original light arrangements. Instead, they set up a cobalt-blue lighting installation (**Figure 4.25**). The color echoes the pigment of porcelain, immersing the gallery in an atmosphere of night. Additional spotlights make the mannequins' skin glisten from the dark, and make the black acrylic stages under their feet appear like a sparkling pond, on which pleating hemlines resemble floating lotus leaves. The showcases and the acrylic stages are designed in a way that allows audiences to take a closer look at the surface textures of material objects on display, with their bodily contours foregrounded by the light distribution.

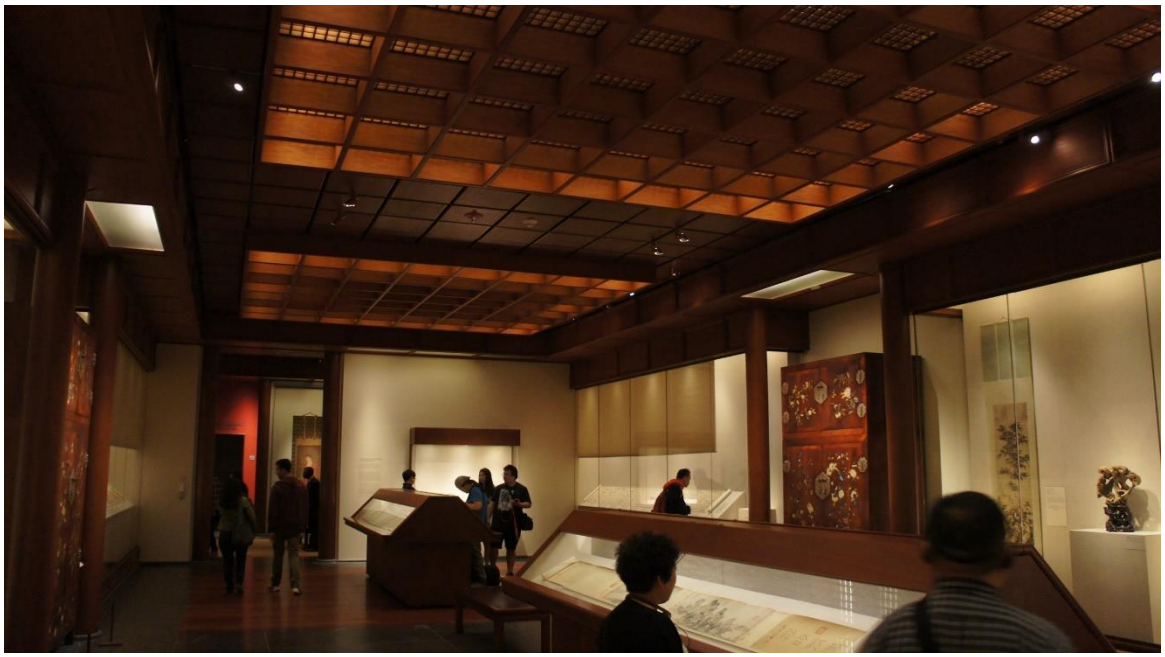


Figure 4.24 View of *Gallery 213 Chinese Painting and Calligraphy*. Photographed by the author in 2016

Figure 4.25 View of *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain* in *Looking Glass*. Photographed by the author in 2015

Flowing within this atmospheric gallery layout is one surface pattern after another. Consider the dragon totem, one of the most auspicious motifs of Ming China. Five pieces of Ming porcelain decorated with five-clawed dragons—the symbol of imperial power in China, indicating that these porcelain pieces were made for imperial use—are framed by black acrylic and the lighting installation make their glossy, light-reflecting surfaces even more eye-catching (**Figures 4.26-4.27**).[377] Staged in front of the group of Ming porcelain with dragons is a stunning evening gown by Roberto Cavalli (**Figure 4.28**). A four-clawed dragon occupies the satin surface, as if it was flying through the color of the night, from the glossy vase to the smooth dress, with a claw left behind. What this dragon loses is not only a claw, but also its identity as an emblem of imperial power and masculinity. Instead, the dragon is mobilized by the Italian designer as a signifier of mysterious exoticism with its meandering body inhabiting and accentuating the female body.

Compared to the dragon motif, the flowing of floral motifs across material surfaces of different kinds is manifested in a more compelling way in this gallery. The floral patterns on the pieces of Chinese porcelain in the showcase demonstrate rhythm and continuity accompanying smooth tactility. In contrast, the floral patterns on the irregular blue and white fragments of the porcelain dress *Beijing Memory No.5* are composed incoherently, like a misassembled puzzle in which the visual languages that used to be readable are now unreadable (**Figure 4.29**). The porcelain dress is positioned in a way that invites viewers to appreciate its texture in detail from the front and the side. Hence, its shattered surface stitched with metal sutures can be seen clearly, with a sharp and uneven tactility made palpable as our eyes is pierced by its jagged edge. Distinct from this broken topography, the McQueen dress has a bodice consisting of floral-patterned porcelain shards that are sliced into smaller pieces with a more regular shape (**Figure 4.30**). A smoother surface is made, which nonetheless remains cracked by dense fissures. Moving on, the Chanel evening dress in a porcelain-vase shape shows a topography without being splintered. Decorated with leafy and floral branches gracefully curving upward, the dress is textured by crystal beads, giving it a glittering graininess (**Figure 4.31**). Placed nearby this dress is an evening gown by Guo Pei, decorated with lotus and tailored in a very specific way (**Figure 4.32**). In contrast to the streamlined contour of the Chanel dress, the blossoms flourishing on the dress by Guo Pei unfolds a pleated topography that strikingly reshapes the female body. In short, the combination of porcelain and fashion dresses enthralls audiences through the flowing of surface patterns across materials with rich and diverse tactile properties.

As an interface where the surface textures of different materials are associated with each other through the fluid visual intersection of particular motifs, the gallery space attempts to map out a cultural exchange in fashion. This is seen in that the gallery also includes a group of Delft blue and a set of fashion dresses that riffle on Delft blue (**Figures 4.33-4.34**). This arrangement echoes the curatorial statement that the exhibition attempts to "reimagine the relationship between East and West not as one-sided mimicry or appropriation, but rather as a layered series of enfolded exchanges."[378] This lofty claim is, however, greatly weakened by the gallery design: neither the wall caption nor object label here reveal to audiences how a seemingly Chinese-inspired garment may actually be Dutch-influenced. As such, it is reasonable to

[377] The five-clawed dragon was restricted to imperial use in the late Yuan dynasty. See Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Catalogue of late Yuan and Ming Ceramics in the British Museum* (London: The British Museum Press, 2001), 54, 56.

[378] Bolton, "Towards an Aesthetic of Surfaces," 18.

assume that, for audiences who are not familiar with fashion history, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish which dress follows the designs of Ming porcelain and which plays a homage to Delftware; they all seem to be Chinese-inspired.[379]

Figure 4.26 View of the group of Ming porcelain with dragons. Photographed by the author in 2015

Figure 4.27 Ming Dish with five-clawed dragon amid waves, Xuande period (1426-1435). Diameter: 20.6 cm. This porcelain piece was displayed in *Looking Glass*. Collected in the MET. Accession number: 1975.99

[379] The exhibition received many reviews and comments. Yet almost no one recognized that some dresses displayed in *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain* are actually inspired by European ceramics rather than Chinese porcelain.

Figure 4.28 Evening gown by Roberto Cavalli. Photographed by the author in 2015

Figure 4.29 (left) *Beijing Memory No.5* by Li Xiaofeng. Photographed by the author in 2015
Figure 4.30 (right) Alexander McQueen Evening Dress. Photographed by the author in 2015

Figure 4.31 (left) Chanel evening dress. Photographed by the author in 2015
Figure 4.32 (right) Evening gown by Guo Pei. Photographed by the author in 2015

Figure 4.33 View of the group of Delft tin-glazed earthenware. Photographed by the author in 2015

Figure 4.34 View of the group of dresses inspired by Dutch Delft blue, including two evening gowns by Valentino (two pieces on the left), a coat by Giambattista Valli (middle), an evening gown by Dior (right). Photographed by the author in 2015

Generally, the exhibition's emphasis on surface-level material beauty transforms all the displayed Chinese objects into fetishized surfaces: that is, their material qualities are highlighted, and their surface configurations are exoticized, transformed into a series of enigmatic graphic signs that cannot be

deciphered, but can only be fascinated with. "There is no room in the Orientalist imagination for national, ethnic, or historical specificities," as the literary scholar Anne Aline Cheng aptly describes: indeed, "China [in *Looking Glass*] equals ornament."[380] This process of exoticization and ornamentation is seen in many galleries of the exhibition in addition to *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain*. For example, in *Gallery 210 Opium and Chinoiserie*, the garden pavilions are extracted from the narrative scenes engraved on a Chinese unfolded lacquer screen, ornamentalized and retextured by plastic sequins and gold beads (**Figure 4.35**); in *Gallery 214 Calligraphy*, the meaningful graphic language of a Tang calligrapher complaining about his painful stomach is ornamentalized into the meaningless exotic patterns on the Dior silk dress (**Figure 4.36**). Especially in this gallery on calligraphy, the processes of mystification and ornamentalization are clearly indicated by the wall caption: "Because [Chinese graphic] language is seen as 'exotic' or 'foreign,' it can be read as purely allusive decoration [for European fashion designers]."

Significantly, as I have noted in the previous section, some of the analogies between Chinese objects and fashion dresses are actually invented by the exhibition's makers, instead of designers. An example is seen in the juxtaposition of a Tang silver mirror and a silk dress by Lanvin in *Gallery 207 Ancient China* (**Figure 4.37**). According to the MET's collection database, the beautiful roundels decorating this Lanvin dress resemble either "embroidered Manchu court badge motifs or the glinting scales of Mongol armor interpreted in Western embroidery."[381] However, its combination with the Tang mirror forces the latter to project an exotic aura. The problem here is that it is quite challenging for audiences to understand what they are looking at is actually mirrored by, or mirroring, the curator's own fantasy.

Figure 4.35 Showcase with a Qing folding screen (1689-1690) by Feng Langgong and two evening coats by Chanel in *Gallery 210 Opium and Chinoiserie*. Photographed by the author in 2015

[380] Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 88.
[381] See the MET's collection database: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/81462?&searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=C.I.62.58.1&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=1 [Accessed January 20, 2021].


Figure 4.36 (left) Showcase with Dior dress and *Du tong tie* 肚痛帖 [*Letter about a Stomachache*] by Zhang Xu (ca. 675-759), nineteenth-century rubbing of a tenth-century stone carving, in *Gallery 214 Calligraphy*. Photographed by the author in 2015
Figure 4.37 (right) Showcase with dress by Lanvin and a Chinese Eastern Han mirror (1st-3rd century) in *Gallery 207 Ancient China*. Photographed by the author in 2015

The techniques of display used in *Looking Glass* bring us to a critical point: recognizing that attempts to refer to or position the exhibition as "culturally and historically decontextualized" seem to be untenable.[382] Regarding this point, how the exhibition galleries are categorized is equally thought-provoking. The exhibition's makers unify most of the exhibition's galleries, including the galleries discussed above, under the theme of *Empire of Signs*, after the French philosopher Roland Barthes' *Empire des Signes* (1970).[383] However, as I will now argue, compared to *Empire des Signes*, the exhibition is perhaps more pertinent to what Barthes describes as the process of myth-making in his earlier writing *Mythologies* (1957), a semiotic treatise and the counter-text of *Empire des Signes*.

4-2-3 Essentializing: The Effect of the Real

In *Empire des Signes*, a semiotic treatise written following his journey to Japan, Barthes perceives his fictional Japan as a system of empty signs. As the bond between signifier and signified is ruptured, there

[382] Bolton, "Towards an Aesthetic of Surfaces," 18.
[383] *Looking Glass* is comprised of two categories: *From Emperor to Citizen* and *Empire of Signs*. The former includes three galleries: *Gallery 980 Machu Robe*, *Gallery 981 Hu Die*, and *Gallery 132 People's Republic of China*. The latter includes the remaining thirteen galleries: *Gallery 209 Anna May Wong*, *Gallery 206 Wuxia*, *Gallery 207 Ancient China*, *Gallery 208 Guo Pei*, *Gallery 210 Saint Laurent and Opium*, *Galleries 211-212 Perfume*, *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain*, *Gallery 214 Calligraphy*, *Galleries 215-216 Export Silk*, *Gallery 217 Moon in the Water*, and *Gallery 218 Ming Furniture*.

is no need to search for deep significances. The Japanese bow is only "a graphic form [of] two bodies which inscribe but do not prostrate themselves;" Japanese *haiku*, compared to French classical writing, is not "embellished with significations, with moralities."[384] Obviously, Barthes's observation is not based on any Japan in reality, but on a Japanese image forming in his mind during travel. As he clarifies:

> Orient and Occident cannot be taken here as 'realities' to be contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically. I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence—to me the Orient is a matter of indifference.[385]

Looking Glass draws on this perspective as a desirable underpinning to disentangle aesthetic pleasure from the Saidian paradigm of Orientalism. As Bolton notes: "Like Barthes, the designers who engage in dialogues with these enigmatic signifiers do not feel the need to go beyond their surfaces."[386] Such an analogy, however, risks omitting the critical thrust of Barthes' work: namely, a reflection on the excessiveness of the symbolic order in Western society. The result of this omission is that, it seems to me, the link between signifier and signified is not obliterated in *Looking Glass* but rather made more obvious; the exhibition enacts not Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, but rather his *Mythologies*. [387]

Mythologies aims to uncover modes of signification attached to physical objects. It exposes and criticizes the process of mystification by demystifying and re-politicizing the (seemingly) purified myth.[388] "All the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness," Barthes argues, and the process of mystification is to naturalize, to depoliticize speech "so as to make it suitable for communication."[389] This suggests that, with myth there is always some purposes; in the process of mystification, the sign is not free-floating, but rather floating centripetally towards a privileged cultural connotation. As a result, Barthes argues, the signified can have several signifiers, and the world that myth organizes for us is "a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something

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[384] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982[1970]), 68, 82. A *haiku* is a Japanese poem consisting of three short, un-rhymed lines, which was well-developed by the sixteenth century. The *haiku* Barthes cites in Empire of Signs includes the work by the famous poet Matsuo Bashō:
"The winter wind blows
The cats' eyes
Blink." Ibid., 82.

[385] Ibid., 3.

[386] Bolton, "Towards an Aesthetic of Surfaces," 19.

[387] *Empire of Signs* can be seen as a companion volume to *Mythologies* not only because of their similar form (both consist of small, thematic essays) but also and more importantly, because some cases in the former found their antithesis in the latter. Take wrestling for instance. The Japanese wrestling presented in *Empire of Signs* is only "the sign of a certain hefting [that has] no crisis, no drama, no exhaustion." Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 40. In comparison, the French wrestling portrayed in *Mythologies* is much more "an immediate pantomime," with "the gesture of the vanquished wrestler signifying to the world a defeat." Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972[1957]), 14, 17.

[388] One famous example Barthes offers here is a cover photo of a French magazine, showing a young black man dressed in a French uniform and saluting, probably, a French flag. In Barthes's view, what the image signifies to him is a myth that "France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors." Ibid., 115.

[389] Ibid., 108 (emphasis in original).

by themselves."[390] This homogeneous world without contradiction and diversity, I argue, is exactly the world that *Looking Glass* mirrors to its audiences.

The exhibition transmutes what is culturally constructed into something that appears to be a transparent fact, a natural reality. It amalgamates a variety of selected surface patterns—blue and white flowers, dragons, pagodas, pavilions, gardens, bridges, and so on—presenting them in a way that makes them a group of signifiers referring to exoticism. Ornamentation with these graphic signs is *essentialized* as the sole way to make a dress Chinese-style in the exhibition. The technique of display here, therefore, embodies what Mieke Bal criticizes as the "visual rhetoric of realism," or creates what Roland Barthes calls the "effect of the reality," a mode of interpretation through which things are described as simply out there, serving a certainty of reality.[391]

In *Looking Glass*, there is not much difference between the calligraphy-inspired dresses of Dior and those of Chanel, or between the porcelain-inspired gowns by Roberto Cavalli and by Guo Pei, or between the lacquerware-inspired garments of Chanel and Valentino. In general, these selected costumes put on display all employ their graphic signs in similar ways—destructing, restructuring, deforming, and transforming patterns on the level of surface—to suggest the overarching theme of an Orientalist fantasy of China. The documentary about the exhibition, *The First Monday in May* (2016), provides an example in this respect: The French fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier misidentified a blue and white gown by Guo Pei (see **Figure 4.32**) as by John Galliano. Indeed, it is hard to tell what exactly the intrinsic differences are between the dress by Guo Pei and those by the European designers in this gallery, or which dress embodies a more respectful appreciation, or which ones constitute disrespectful appropriations. They all refashion Chinese motifs and palettes of blue and white in line with a European silhouette. Thus, what we see in the exhibition—and what is highlighted by the exhibition's techniques of display—is a double-sided decontextualization: not only are the rich meanings of Chinese decorations reduced to a set of surface patterns that can only evoke exoticism, but the potentially complex process through which fashion designers are inspired by Chinese artistic elements is also reduced to pictorial imitation, collage, and transformation. The exhibition shows almost no design drafts, interviews, or other materials that might help audiences to understand *how* exactly the designers are inspired by Chinese objects.[392]

By comparison, the Costume Institute's 1995 exhibition, *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western dress*, which included some costumes also displayed in *Looking Glass*, was more informative in that its object labels indicated more about exactly which part of the costumes took inspiration from Chinese design and imagery. To give but one example, an evening jacket by Lanvin collected in the MET is seen in both exhibitions (**Figure 4.38**). In the 1995 *Orientalism* exhibition, its label reads:

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[390] Ibid., 143.

[391] See Mieke Bal, "Telling, Showing, Showing Off," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (1992): 562; and Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986[1984]), 141-148.

[392] The only exception is seen in a series Yves Saint Laurent's creative sketches for the fragrance *Opium* (1977) shown in *Galleries 211-212 Perfume*.

> By the 1930s, the sleek silhouette of the cheongsam had come to represent a modern Orientalism, but the fantasy of Genghis Khan and the feudal extravagance of the Ch'ing [Qing] court under the last Dowager Empress, Ts'u-his, provided opportunities for more dramatic manifestations of a Chinese style.

The label explains why the jacket is defined as Chinese-inspired. The same jacket is equally seen in *Looking Glass*, but the label here only describes the jacket's materials: "Black silk taffeta embroidered with green silk and silver metallic thread, and synthetic pearl, silver, black, and gold beads and paillettes; silver lamé and ivory silk tulle embroidered with metallic silver thread." In *Looking Glass*, the jacket is juxtaposed with a Chinese bronze vessel, encouraging audiences to compare their horizontal-line decorations (**Figure 4.39**). This, again, is an association invented by the exhibition based on its own ornamental vocabulary.

Figure 4.38 (left) View of *Gallery 2 China* in the Costume Institute's 1995 exhibition, *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress*. Photo, 1995. A: Evening jacket by Jeanne Lanvin. Collected in the MET, object number: CI.66.58.1
Figure 4.39 (right) Showcase with evening jacket by Lanvin and a Chinese Western-Zhou bronze vessel (early 9th century BC) in *Gallery 207 Ancient China*. Photographed by the author in 2015

Looking Glass does not just depict an image of China that is ornamentalized, reduced to layers of beautiful and timeless patterns, but, more fundamentally, the exhibition makes it self-evident. The overwhelming purpose of the exhibition is to represent Chinese exoticism through a set of fetishized material surfaces. The exhibition suggests a monolithic treatment of the style called Chinese-ness, as there seems to be no Chinese aesthetic in the world of fashion other than an aesthetic of surfaces. As the art historian Rachel Silberstein argues, "Bolton's choice of mainland Chinese designers is carefully curated to avoid [including those Chinese designers who] position themselves against a Western-defined 'Chinese' aesthetic."[393] From this perspective, what is asserted as a collective fantasy of China is selective. Perhaps, such a selected framework of representation conforms to what Said describes in Orientalism as

[393] Silberstein, "China: Through the Looking Glass."

"an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness."[394] The so-called culturally and politically decontextualized pure fantasy that the exhibition asserts might be perceived by Barthes as an act of purification: "Myth is depoliticized speech. […] it purifies [things], it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact."[395] It is in this sense that the literary critic Jonathan Culler refers to myth as "a delusion to be exposed."[396] The exhibition mirrors the image of China as enigmatic, exotic, ornamental and, as I will argue in the next section, feminine. The exhibition provides no critical reflection on the socio-cultural values interwoven in the Orientalist imagination of China, but presents them as if indisputable and thereby essentialized.

So far, I have exposed how the aesthetic of surfaces the curator proposes is not as culturally decontextualized as it might appear at first glance. On the contrary, it is a cultural artifact. Chinese porcelain and other objects on display are presented as fetishized surfaces with their patterns acting as stereotypical exotic imageries. There is yet another layer of meaning attached to china here—a feminized object—that the exhibition adds by reinforcing the bodily intimacy of both porcelain and femininity based on a metonymic process. This meaning is reminiscent of the gender-specific chinoiserie style and Orientalist discourse.

4-3 Gender-Coding: The Overt Association of china/China with Femininity

How does an object become a medium through which the idea of gender is communicated? It is already well-known that gender is not a natural fact but a social and cultural construction.[397] Similarly, an object *per se* hardly has inherent masculine or feminine qualities (or both simultaneously) without being associated with a particular cultural and historical setting. This is to say that objects becoming gendered are always contextualized. The association between objects and gender, according to the archaeologist Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, might be based on

> some objects' ability to provide physical embodiment of culturally held views of what constitute feminine and masculine. This refers to the ability objects have of being the material expression of qualities such as fragility or robustness.[398]

Sørensen makes an example of the drawing-room in late nineteenth-century England, how its design, aiming at elegance, cheerfulness, and lightness, was deemed to be ladylike by the interior design manuals of the time. This made the drawing-room an embodiment of idealized femininity, in contrast to the

[394] Said, *Orientalism*, 6.
[395] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 143.
[396] Jonathan Culler, *Roland Barthes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 33.
[397] Sex, as a biological facticity, is distinguished from gender, as a historical construct and a cultural interpretation. See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.
[398] Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, *Gender Archaeology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 83.

dining-room which was strongly associated with masculinity.[399] In addition to their visual and physical forms, objects are involved with gender through the practices associated with them. An example Sørensen provides is swords during the European Bronze Age which were bound up with masculinity as they were frequently found with men in graves.[400] To think about how objects are gendered is to think about the physical presence of objects, how they interact with people and are engaged in people's daily lives to produce meanings.[401]

Below, I will discuss how Chinese porcelain and a China that exists as a cultural Other subjected to the European imagination are gendered feminine in *Looking Glass*. Specifically, the connection between femininity and China/china needs to be explored by considering its cultural substrate, since what meant to be feminine is always culturally specific. As the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern reminds us: "What it means to be a woman in this or that situation must rest to some extent on the cultural logic by which gender is constructed."[402] In the case of *Looking Glass*, its gender-coding of china and China recalls feminine images rooted in cultural contexts of chinoiserie, Aestheticism, and Orientalism.

4-3-1 The Porcelain Body and Female Body

Porcelain and ceramics are often characterized using anatomical terms analogous to those for the human body: lip, mouth, neck, shoulders, body, and foot. Notably, such a bodily projection is more commonly identified as feminine than masculine.[403] The metaphorical representation of femininity is equally attested to by Chinese porcelain. Research on material culture has shown how the porcelain body and female body were recurrently linked to one another through a close metaphorical relationship in the vogue of chinoiserie in eighteenth-century Europe.[404] The sensual seduction of Chinese porcelain often relied on its visual and material qualities of whiteness, glossiness, ornamentation, and fragility, which were deemed to be like those of women.[405] As the literary scholar Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace points out: "The

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[399] Ibid., 83-84.
[400] Ibid., 92.
[401] Pat Kirkham and Judy Attfield, eds., *The Gendered Objects* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 4. This book focuses on the contemporary gender-coding of things in daily use. These things are diverse in kinds and functions, such as the washing machine and bicycles. With these various objects, Kirkham and Attfield demonstrate that "[t]he degree to which gendered objects are part of, and inform, wider social relations are exemplified at every level of daily life." Ibid., 5.
[402] Marilyn Strathern. "Culture in a Netbag: The Manufacture of a Subdiscipline in Anthropology," *Man* 46, no. 4 (1981): 683.
[403] For an extensive study of the association between ceramics/porcelain and femininity, see Moira Vincentelli, *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 254-255.
[404] For more about the intersection of chinoiserie and femininity, see Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Stacey Sloboda, "Porcelain Bodies: Gender, Acquisitiveness, and Taste in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Material Cultures, 1740-1920: The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, eds. John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 19-36; and Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding, "'Frailty, the Name is China': Women, Chinoiserie and the Threat of Low Culture in Eighteenth-Century England," *Women's History Review* 18, no. 4 (2009): 659-668; and David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[405] A famous example of this is in the poetry *To a Lady on Her Passion for Old China* (1725) by the English poet John Gay (1685-1732), in which he attributes the whiteness and refinement of porcelain to "the types of woman-kind."

very utility of china as a trope for femininity seems to have stemmed from its property as surface."[406] Working through associations of likeness, the material properties of china became a metaphor for not just physical but also moral qualities that were viewed as feminine in the eyes of eighteenth-century European men. In addition to these physical properties, the gender-coding of china was also engraved in certain contexts of use, especially tea-drinking.[407] Whether through its physical properties or its associated activities, Chinese porcelain, as Kowaleski-Wallace notes, "made it possible for [European] people to talk about women and their qualities in a particular way."[408]

Implied in the particular association of china and femininity in the context of chinoiserie is the production of difference. To gender an object is not only to anchor it into a static categorization of feminine or masculine but also to generate the differentiation based on a specific cultural logic and thus to define identity.[409] The chinoiserie style was considered a combination of femininity and foreignness (signified by both china and China), two elements that were both defined in terms of otherness in a European-male dominated discourse.[410] This corresponds to the Orientalist gender paradigm in which the Orient is feminized, serving to produce difference and to self-define Western masculinity. Interestingly, this stereotypical gendering of Chinese porcelain is recollected in *Looking Glass* by virtue of spatial continuity as metonymy.

The porcelain body and the female body are intimately correlated in *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain*, and this becomes clear through a metonymic reading of the way the gallery's objects are laid out. Moving from the grouping of Chinese porcelain, to the porcelain dress *Beijing Memory No.5*, (see **Figure 4.29**) and finally to the McQueen dress (see **Figure 4.30**) with porcelain bodice, this walking tour creates a metonymic link through which china becomes clearly established as a metonymy for female skin and flesh. This metonymic relation is anchored by two verbs: breaking and reshaping. If one walks from the grouping of Chinese porcelain to *Beijing Memory No.5* showcased nearby, a spatial narrative might be conjured up: the pieces of porcelain are broken into fragments, a deed of aggression, and are then reshaped into a female-body-like dress. The narrative continues to unfold if one continues to walk from *Beijing Memory No.5* towards the McQueen dress: the porcelain shards are broken down even smaller, and are now used to reshape the female torso represented by the exhibition mannequin, giving it a mosaic-like texture.

Placing *Beijing Memory No.5* directly opposite the McQueen dress is particularly enthralling and significant, as it embodies a process in which the porcelain body is becoming more and more incorporated into the female body. *Beijing Memory No. 5* is not entirely a material object, nor a female body: the porcelain shards are amalgamated to make up a dress, with her breasts brought to the fore. The texture of the dress makes it appear like armor, with sharp protruding edges taking on a boundary function to protect its (now

[406] Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 54. What also cannot be overlooked is that the delicate texture of porcelain was frequently used to signify the moral fragility of women while also alluding to their insatiable passion for purchasing china. See Alayrac-Fielding. "'Frailty, the Name is China'," 666-667.
[407] See Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 19-36.
[408] Ibid., 53.
[409] Kirkham and Attfield, *The Gendered Objects*, 4.
[410] Alayrac-Fielding, "'Frailty, the Name is China'," 667.

absent) female wearer from the ambient environment, as if the dress is her defensive *second skin*.[411] In comparison, the crackle porcelain body of the McQueen dress is so skintight that the boundary between torso and cloth becomes unclear. This makes porcelain not so much a fabric of the bodice as a tissue of the body (**Figure 4.40**). Thus, in the gallery context, Chinese porcelain refers to female skin not by way of metaphoric substitution, but by way of metonymic transfer.

Figure 4.40 A model dressed in the McQueen porcelain evening dress walks the runway during the Alexander McQueen Autumn/Winter 2011-2012 show. This image shows how the porcelain shards fit the model so tightly that they look just like tissue of her body. © *Vogue The United Kingdom*

[411] Clothing is often regarded as a second skin, as it acts like an extension of the human body, a skin-like barrier protecting the body inside from the environment outside. See Ingrid Loschek, *When Cloths Become Fashion: Design and Innovation Systems* (Oxford and New York: Berg 2009); and Stella North, "The Surfacing of the Self: The Clothing-Ego," in *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Sheila L. Cavanagh, Angela Failler and Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

In *Looking Glass*, the bodily connection between woman and porcelain is also performed by referring to the nineteenth-century American Aestheticism. Two paintings with their artists associated with the Aesthetic style are picked out by the exhibition's makers to collocate with its porcelain display: *The Blue Jar* (1913) by William McGregor Paxton (1869-1941) and *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864) by James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) (**Figures 4.41-4.42**).[412] *The Blue Jar* is reprinted in the exhibition catalogue. The visual representation of *Purple and Rose* is projected onto the wall of *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain*. Both paintings portray the female gaze at and touch on Chinese porcelain, showing how touch, arguably "the most intimate sense," closely bounds together the porcelain body with female body.[413] Permeated by soft light, the young woman in *The Blue Jar* gently touches and uncover the ginger jar that seems to invite the viewer to sense its roundness and smoothness with her fair and tender flesh. The physical intimacy is equally represented in *Purple and Rose*. The model there reclines in a chair placed within a tableau the artist has set up for her.[414] She wears a Chinese robe with brightly colored flowers, and is surrounded by a variety of objects that were considered essential for building a stylish interior that embodies the ideals of Aestheticism, including a lacquer tray and circular fan from Japan and some pieces of Chinese blue and white porcelain.[415] Her left hand hangs down gently, holding a porcelain vase.

Figure 4.41 (left) *The Blue Jar* (1913) by William McGregor Paxton. Oil on canvas. High: 76.5 cm; width 63.8 cm
Figure 4.42 (right) *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864) by James McNeill Whistler. Oil on canvas. Height: 93.3 cm; width: 61.3 cm. Collected in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Museum number: Cat. 1112

[412] For more about these two artists and their relationship with the Aesthetic movement, see Doreen Bolger Burke et al. *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986).
[413] Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 41.
[414] Linda Merrill, "Whistler and the 'Lange Lijzen'," *The Burlington Magazine* 136, no. 1099 (1994): 683.
[415] For more about the association between Chinese porcelain and the interior design in the vogue of nineteenth-century Aestheticism, see Anne Anderson, "'Chinamania': Collecting Old Blue for the House Beautiful, c. 1860-1900," in *Material Cultures, 1740-1920: The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, eds. John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 123-136.

It seems not a coincidence that both paintings demonstrate the visual achievements of the artistic movement known as Aestheticism. Evolved from the design reform ideas in nineteenth-century Victorian Britain, the American Aestheticism, also called Aesthetic Movement began to emerge as early as the 1830s, and reached its heyday in the second half of the nineteenth century. Embracing the concept of "art for art's sake," the Aesthetic movement proposed that the aesthetic value of art should be foregrounded above all deeper meanings.[416] The exhibition's makers choose these two paintings, perhaps, to create a parallel between the cult of beauty and pure sensuous pleasure that the Aesthetic Movement embraces and the aesthetic pleasures of surfaces that the exhibition sought to present. However, it has already been recognized that Aestheticism was never itself entirely ideologically innocent. As the art historian Roger Stein argues, "The vocabulary of art for art's sake partially masked the degree to which this stylistic appropriation was indeed a form of cultural appropriation, particularly over the non-Western regions of the Near East and the Orient."[417] The Aesthetic movement sought to bring visible beauty into life. Yet, its artificial combination of various artistic elements taken from other cultural contexts into "an 'aesthetic' unity" to fashion an ideal Self inevitably makes it a suspect of cultural appropriation.[418]

Moreover, the ideological issue of the Aesthetic movement also lies in the movement's drawing of the parallels between the female body and *objet d'art*. Chinese porcelain was at the time collected, displayed, and depicted as a purely decorative art, served as inspiration for its collectors or other artists. The female figures portrayed in *The Blue Jar* and *Purple and Rose* are represented as an ornamental element just like the pieces of porcelain they fondle: in *The Blue Jar* we can see how the ornament of the ginger jar—the blossoming plums—resonates with the blue and white fabric set behind the young woman, who wears a blouse that also has patterns in blue and white; and in *Purple and Rose*, the woman gently holds a blue and white vase decorated with elongated female figures whose slender body shapes look just like hers. The woman in *Purple and Rose*, according to the art historian Kimberley Wahl, "is a collected object as much as anything else on display in this work."[419] Both paintings are indeed "pictorial representations of ideal aesthetic womanhood" in that the feminine figures became as exquisite and displayable as the alluring *objet d'art* with which she is bodily connected.[420] As the art historian Roger Stein poetically describes: "The women hover on the borderline between being merely beautiful objects in elegant displays and being lonely human beings, lost thought and isolated in space."[421] The entrenched association in Aestheticism

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[416] For a general discussion of the historical and cultural background and development of the Aestheticism, see Roger Stein, "Artifact as Ideology: The Aesthetic Movement in Its American Cultural Context," in *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement*, Doreen Bolger Burke et al. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 22-51.

[417] Stein, "Artifact as Ideology," 27.

[418] Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 25. The art historian Anne Anderson notes that the nineteenth-century Aestheticist vogue for collecting antiques, including Chinese blue and white porcelain (the Old Blue china), was rooted in an "aristocratic linkage […]; through ownership of antique objects the aesthete could connect with a past that was not his." This symbolic genealogy of connoisseurship enables a form of self-aggrandizement. See Anderson, "'Chinamania'," 112-113.

[419] Kimberley Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting: Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013), 65.

[420] Anne Anderson, "Aesthetic Woman: The 'Fearful Consequence' of 'Living Up' to One's Antiques," in *Bodies and Things in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, ed. Katharina Boehm (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 189.

[421] Stein, "Artifact as Ideology," 42.

between china (as an exotic collectible) and the feminine (has her body dressed in exotic fashion and represented as an *objet d'art*)—both serve as the focalized objects under the gaze of male artists—recalls the Orientalist gender paradigm.

In addition to Chinese porcelain, in what follows, I discuss two other representative examples—Chinese space, and a China that exists as a cultural other subjected to the Western imagination—to illustrate how femininity is enacted in other galleries of *Looking Glass*. Expanding the discussion from the porcelain gallery to other galleries helps reveal how pervasive the specific gendered imagery—Orientalized womanhood—is mobilized in the exhibition.

4-3-2 *Exotic and Erotic Womanhood*

Nearby *Gallery 213 Blue and White Porcelain*, the exhibition's *Gallery 218 Ming Furniture* is a space coded as feminine. Originally, the gallery was an adjoining period room, the Ming Room, of the Astor Court (Gallery 217), featuring Ming hardwood furniture (**Figure 4.43**). The Astor garden court is modeled on a scholar's garden called *wang shih yuan* 網師園 [the Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets] in Suzhou, China. The Ming Room is based on a small study room within the garden called *tien chun yi* 殿春簃 [the Late Spring Studio]. The garden was first built in the twelfth century by a Song scholar-official who called it *yu yin* 漁隱 [The Fisherman's Retreat]. Inspired by the pure and solitary lives of Chinese fishermen depicted in philosophical writings and poems, the garden was built as a place for the literati to study and pass time undisturbed. Adopting the designs of the garden and the associated Late Spring Studio, the Astor Court and the Ming Room opened to the public in 1981, showing audiences once private places where Chinese elite men sought their inner peace.[422] By contrast to this, however, the Ming Room is re-gendered as feminine in *Looking Glass*: it is immersed in a sensual red, giving off a sort of red-light district connotation, that transforms the meaning of the gallery space from a man's studio to a woman's boudoir.

Gallery 218 Ming Furniture is overwhelmed by the multiple significances of the color red (**Figure 4.44**). The gallery's wall caption explains the metaphorical meaning of the color: "In Chinese culture, the color red, which traditionally corresponds to the element of fire, symbolizes good fortune and happiness. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, red also came to represent the communist revolution." Indeed, the strong association between red and China is manifested in the garments displayed here. The mannequins dress in red, see-through tulle gowns that all come from Valentino's 2013 *Shanghai* collection. Red is a signature color of Valentino. It is also considered by Valentino as the symbolic color of China, as the creative director of Valentino Pierpaolo Piccioli mentions: "The red in this manifesto collection is the colour of China in our imagination."[423] The scarlet backdrop of the gallery, therefore, can

[422] The project of building the garden court and the Ming Room in the MET was conceived by the museum trustee Brooke Russell Astor. Astor spent part of her childhood in Beijing, China. In her opinion, a garden courtyard could provide the museum visitors "a place of repose in the midst of conventional galleries." See Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong, "The Astor Garden Court and Ming Room," in *Period Rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Amelia Peck et al (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 297.
[423] See the report: Ng Yi Lian, "Red Letter Day," *Harper's Bazaar Singapore*, March 1, 2014. Online at: https://www.pressreader.com/singapore/harpers-bazaar-singapore/20140301/281547993816781; see also the review in *Vogue Italia*: https://www.vogue.it/en/shows/show/no-season/valentino [Accessed January 20, 2021].

be seen as echoing this idea. However, if we consider the mannequins that are posed sensually in this interior setting in association with one of the film clips played here, *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) by Zhang Yimou, the red becomes a signifier of the women's boudoir, an unsettling place where eroticism and exoticism are bound together (**Figures 4.45-4.46**).[424]

Gallery 4.43 View of *Gallery 218 Ming Room*. Photographed by the author in May 2016

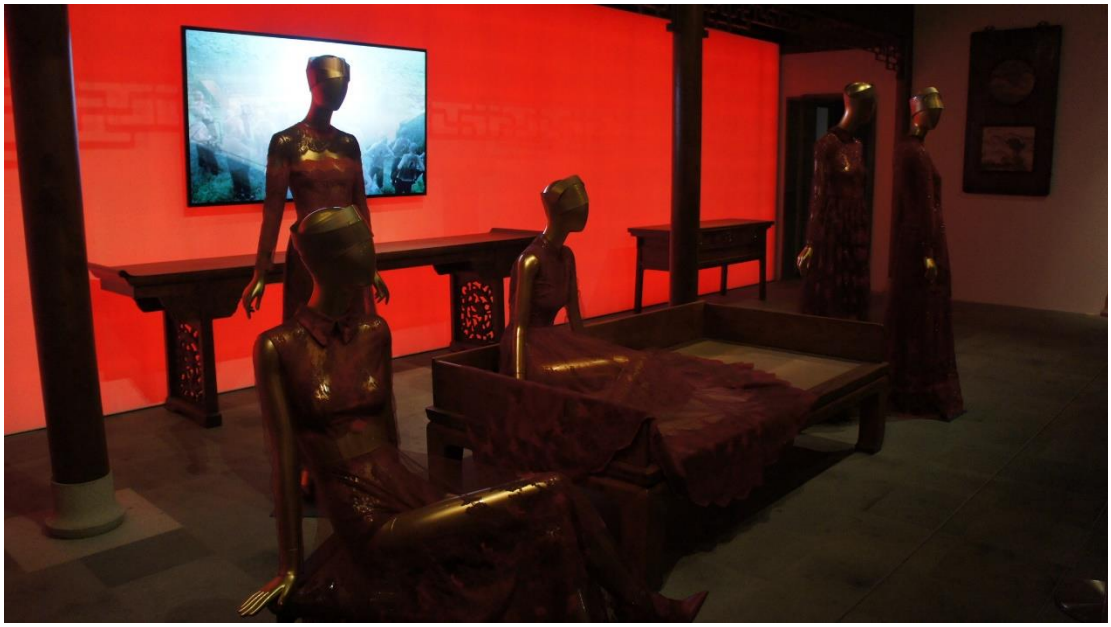

Figure 4.44 View of *Gallery 218 Ming Furniture* in *Looking Glass*. Photographed by the author in June 2015

[424] There are four edited film clips played in *Gallery 218 Ming Furniture*: *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) by Yimou Zhang; *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) by Kaige Chen; *Mei Lanfang's Stage Art* (1955) in China Film Archive; and *Two Stage Sisters* (1964) by Jin Xie. While the first relates to women's boudoirs, the latter three show costumes from Chinese operas, echoing the fashion dresses displayed in *Gallery 217 Moon in the Water*, which are inspired by Chinese performing arts.


Figure 4.45 (left) *Raise the Red Lantern*, 1991 (This scene was projected in *Gallery 218 Ming Furniture*)
Figure 4.46 (right) Gong Li in *Raise the Red Lantern*, 1991 (This scene was projected in *Gallery 218 Ming Furniture*)

Zhang's *Raise the Red Lantern* is set in 1920s China. It describes how an educated woman is forced to marry into the wealthy Chen family, becoming the third concubine of her older husband, Master Chen, whose face is never shown during the entire movie. Every concubine has a red lantern raised at the doorway of her room. Whoever Master Chen chooses to spend the night with, has her red lantern lit. The red lanterns are hence symbolic: their lighting and extinguishing indicate each mistress's irresistible fate; and the red colour signifies power struggle, sexual dominance, and women's oppression under the patriarchy of the Chinese feudal system personified by a domineering older man.[425] For some critics, the visual appeal of Zhang's film—strong colors and the close-ups of female faces and body figure—leads to the film an exemplification of the self-exoticization, an attempt to please the eyes of the foreigners from the West.[426] Seen from this perspective, the glowing red light becomes the trope of both eroticism and exoticism. Back to *Gallery 218 Ming Furniture* in the exhibition, this colour of desire is overflowing from the screen set in the background and, in this way, the whole gallery space is metonymically linked with the rooms of the concubines; the gallery *is* a woman's red boudoir. The erotic sense is further heightened by the sensual poses of the dressed female bodies in the gallery. Potentially, this makes the Valentino dresses a signifier of lust and seductiveness and induces audiences to imagine that they are intruding accidentally into a private feminine space. This imposition of the erotic significance of the dresses recalls what Roland Barthes identifies as the activity of myth-making, which I have discussed in the previous section.

An erotic femininity is also manifested in the film clips projected in other galleries of *Looking Glass*. For example, *Gallery 981 Hu Die* shows the modern cheongsam (qipao, a typical Chinese dress of Manchu origin), most were made between the 1920s and the 1930s. Here, a label indicates that, "The modern qipao emerged as a sartorial signifier for China in the 1920s." However, if we consider the film clips played at this gallery, it seems that the modern qipao is further used as a signifier of female sensuality. These film clips include: *The Goddess* (1934) by Wu Yonggang; *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) by Richard Quine; *In the Mood for Love* (2000) by Wong Kar Wai; *The Hand from Eros* (2004) by Wong Kar Wai; and *Lust, Caution* (2007) by Ang Lee. The themes of these films are all related to erotic desires and are particular known for their capturing of the sensual properties of the body-hugging qipao and the Chinese femininity as beautiful

[425] See Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
[426] See Jane Ying Zha, "Excerpts from 'Lore Segal, Red Lantern, and Exoticism'," *Public Culture* 5, (1993): 329-332; and Dai Qing, "Raised Eyebrows for Raise the Red Lantern," *Public Culture* 5, (1993), 333-337.

and beguiling. Especially, the film *The World of Suzie Wong*, a story of a British artist and a Chinese prostitute who fall in love, has been considered purveying a romantic Orientalist enchantment.[427]

Clearly, the Orientalist imagination of China mirrored in *Looking Glass* is a feminized one. The most direct manifestation of this is found in *Gallery 209 Anna May Wong*. As the first Chinese-American actress in Hollywood to achieve stardom, Anna May Wong (黃柳霜, 1905-1961) struggled between the lotus blossom and dragon lady archetypes. The lotus blossom, also known as the China doll or Madame Butterfly, refers to a passive and submissive female character who is eager to please a white male figure, who abandons her, leading to her suicide.[428] The dragon lady, on the contrary, is associated with seduction, predatory and treacherous; she is dangerous, tempting the white male protagonist away from his "civilizing 'mission' and reducing him to naivety."[429] However, the power of good ultimately triumphs over the power of evil, and the dragon lady's inevitable fate is also death. The wall caption of the gallery indicates how Hollywood cinema made China speak through the figure of either the Dragon Lady or the Lotus Blossom, two most enduring, "opposing stereotypes of the Enigmatic Oriental," the caption reads. The wall caption shows an attempt to deconstruct these two stereotypical modes of representing femininity. Ironically, however, the fantasy of Orientalist femininity is reenacted in the gallery. Here, each showcase contains a fashion garment decorated with blooming flowers or meandering dragons, and photos of Anna May Wong wearing dresses with similar patterns are projected above (**Figures 4.47-4.48**). By having viewers shift their focus from the garments to the images of Wong, a metonymic link is established between the two. Thus, the sartorial patterns are made emblems of otherness; the dragon on the black garment *is* the Dragon Lady, and the blossom on the pink dress *is* the Lotus Blossom.[430]

The curator has claimed that the design of *Gallery 209 Anna May Wong* aims to deconstruct Saidian Orientalism.[431] Indeed, the black acrylic in this gallery is used as a black mirror to produce some inverted images that might be regarded as producing a mirror-image metaphor for tendentious Western visions of China (see **Figure 4.48**).[432] However, since the exhibition does not specifically inform audiences the metaphorical overlay of these installations (also, it is quite hard to convince audiences that what they are looking at is not authentic, only an illusionary reflection of China in the Western imagination), the display device produces more a melodramatic stage effect than a metaphorical symbolism. Consider, for example, these two photos: the setup in *Gallery 980 Manchu Robe* in *Looking Glass*; and the display in the 1991 exhibition *China Chic: East Meets West* in the Fashion Institute of Technology Museum in New York (**Figures**

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[427] See Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril:" Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993).

[428] See Lisa Funnell, *Warrior Women: Gender, Race, and the Transnational Chinese Action Star* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 10.

[429] See Yasmin Jiwani, "The Eurasian Female Hero[ine]: Sydney Fox as Relic Hunter," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32, no. 4 (2010), 184.

[430] There are five film clips with Anna May Wong projected in the gallery, showing the stereotypical images of the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom: *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) by Chester M. Franklin; *Piccadilly* (1929) by E. A. Dupont; *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931) by Lloyd Corrigan; *Shanghai Express* (1932) by Josef von Sternberg; and *Limehouse Blues* (1934) by Alexander Hall.

[431] See Laia Garcia, "Meet Andrew Bolton, the Man behind the Costume Institute's Genius Exhibitions," *Yahoo Style*, February 17, 2015, https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/meet-andrew-bolton-the-man-behind-the-costume-111231491233.html [Accessed January 20, 2021].

[432] Reflective surfaces such as black acrylics and mirrors are extensively used in *Looking Glass*.

4.49-4.50). Their arrangement appears to be similar; that is, it seems challenging to assert that the mirrors and black acrylics in *Looking Glass* makes the exhibition more self-reflective or contemplative than *China Chic*. Making such "a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient," as Said might put it, visible, the display in *Looking Glass* seems to be strengthening, rather than deconstructing Orientalist stereotypes.[433] This seems especially true if one considers the gallery's lack of self-reflexivity around this dichotomous framing produced by a Western cultural view of the Other. Ultimately, the Orientalist metonymy supersedes the de-Orientalist, looking-glass metaphor.

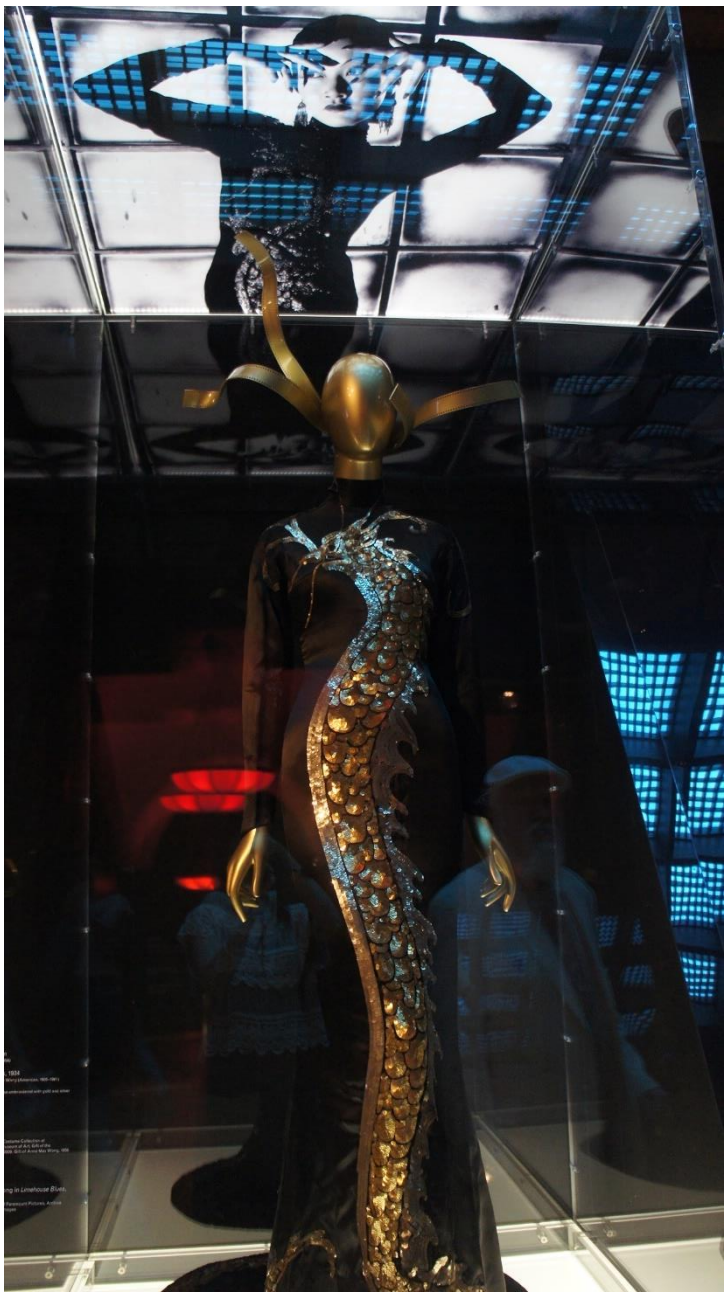

Figure 4.47 Showcase in *Gallery 209 Anna May Wong*. Black silk dress by Travis Banton and photo of Anna May Wong for *Limehouse Blues* (1934), courtesy of Paramount Pictures. Photographed by the author in June 2015

[433] Said, *Orientalism*, 21.

Figure 4.48 Showcase in *Gallery 209 Anna May Wong*. Dress by Paul Smith and photo of Anna May Wong by Paul Tanqueray. © The MET

Figure 4.49 (left) View of *Gallery 980 Manchu Robe* in *Looking Glass*. Photographed by the author in 2015
Figure 4.50 (right) View of *China Chic: East Meets West*. © The Fashion Institute of Technology Museum

Conclusion: The Misleading Looking Glass

In this chapter, I took the curatorial statement "towards an aesthetic of surfaces" as a point of departure and proposed that the aesthetic pleasures the exhibition provides are not simply a culturally decontextualized celebration of superficies. Rather, the visual and tactile pleasures that the exhibition privileges suggest an image of China as enigmatic, ornamental, and feminine. The exhibition invites audiences to see how Chinese motifs are readily appropriated and retextured by both European and Chinese designers (albeit some associations seen in this exhibition are actually invented by the curatorial team, not the fashion designers), and this may seem to be a way for the exhibition to evade Orientalist dichotomies. However, undertones of Orientalism still linger, and not only because the surface aesthetic that the exhibition valorizes risks simplifying and mystifying Chinese imagery. The gender-coding of Chinese porcelain, Chinese space, and the Western imagination of China is recognizable here. The perspective of the exhibition, as Said might criticize, "depends more on the West than on the Orient."[434]

In the postscript to *Orientalism*, written in 1995, Said mentions that "one of the great advances in modern cultural theory is the realization, almost universally acknowledged, that cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous."[435] *Looking Glass* sets out to rethink Orientalism, and yet it shows a china/China gendered feminine and reduced to a series of beautiful but homogenized surface patterns connoting appealing exotic charm. The exhibition, therefore, acts more like a resurgence than a deconstruction of stereotypical othering.

Looking Glass provides an example of how exploring the performativity of museum exhibitions (how exhibitions *act*) helps to assess whether their display strategies sustain their curatorial aspirations. As shown in this chapter, the exhibition's design seems not so to embody the conceptual underpinnings—a deconstruction of Orientalism—of the exhibition. In the next chapter, I focus on an arguably more controversial case study, the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. The history of the Chinese collection in the museum is entangled with the complicated historical relations between China and Taiwan, and this means that in order to explain the performativity of the museum's display, we need to peer through a broader socio-political lens.

[434] Ibid., 22.
[435] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003[1978]), 348.