

Through the Two Paintings "Prosperous Suzhou" and "the Ball at the Moulin De La Galette," to See the Society and Cultural Communications between China and Europe in the Early to Mid-Qing Dynasty

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I. Introduction

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Chinese society was under the Qing Dynasty, characterized by a high degree of autocracy and centralization in politics. Economically, thanks to the steady improvement in agricultural production and local governance, the era known as the "Kangxi and Qianlong Prosperous Period" emerged, showcasing a flourishing scene. This period represented a typical agrarian state with a small-scale peasant economy at its core, complemented by a rapidly emerging and rising commodity economy. In 1759, Xu Yang created "Prosperous Suzhou," also known as "Prosperity Breeds Prosperity Picture," depicting the city of Suzhou with dense buildings and bridges, bustling trade, and a harmonious and colorful market life, showcasing the prosperity of the Qing Dynasty at its peak. Meanwhile, in Europe, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, gradually forming a modern societal structure oriented around industrial production. Europeans actively explored the world through the seas to strengthen themselves. Accordingly, European lifestyles and aesthetics evolved towards integration and diversity under an expanding horizon. Housed in the Musée d'Orsay, "The Ball at the Moulin de la Galette" presents a modern, entertainment-filled joyous scene, profoundly reflecting this aspect. "Prosperous Suzhou" and "The Ball at the Moulin de la Galette" offer us distinctly different prosperous scenes from the East and West. Through these windows, we can glimpse the different aspects of China in the early to mid-Qing period and Europe at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, the term "Chinoiserie" has been increasingly mentioned in the historical academia in recent years, indicating that Europe had already begun to absorb Chinese elements in various aspects at the beginning of the industrial era, forming unique blends and innovations. Conversely, although Qing Dynasty China remained relatively closed for a long time, its exchange with the West was never completely interrupted. The contact between the East and West during this period was not only manifested in the flow of goods but also in the dialogue and conflict between Western culture, represented by the Christian Church, and China. This paper aims to outline the approximate appearance of the bilateral exchanges between Chinese and European societies about two hundred years before the outbreak of the First Opium War in 1840, as well as to analyze the real nature of the societies beneath the surface of social progress and prosperity that occurred almost simultaneously at both ends of the Eurasian continent, which ultimately led them towards different fates.

2. The European Industrial Civilization and the Chinese Elements in it

Housed in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, France, "The Ball at the Moulin de la Galette" is a masterpiece that depicts a scene of an outdoor dance party, indirectly reflecting the lifestyle and its changes among Europeans during the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. The Moulin de la Galette, located in the Montmartre district of Paris, was a famous social venue with a large indoor ballroom and a garden dense with trees. On holiday evenings, the place

buzzed with crowds of people drinking, making merry, or dancing gracefully. The characters in the painting, dressed in fashionable attire, with men in neat suits and women in elegant long dresses, dance in the shade of trees, surrounded by onlookers. Through bright colors and lively brushstrokes, the painting conveys a relaxed and joyful atmosphere, showcasing the leisure life of the middle class at the time.

This painting reflects how, with the advancement of the Industrial Revolution and the acceleration of urbanization, the social structure in Europe changed, and the rise of the middle class brought about new lifestyles and leisure habits. Parks, ballrooms, and other venues became important places for socializing and entertainment for the urban middle class, reflecting their pursuit and enjoyment of a good life.

"The Ball at the Moulin de la Galette" offers a mirror to the life of the people in the industrial era. Moreover, at that time, society had intricate connections with the "mysterious ancient country" of China, which is to say, around the 18th century, Europe's fascination with Chinese elements and culture reached an almost frenzied level, commonly referred to in historical research as Europe's "Chinoiserie."

At that time, China was viewed as a distant and mysterious civilization, its rich culture and historical traditions greatly interested European intellectuals and artists, who were full of imagination and longing for everything Chinese. Coupled with the maturity of maritime trade routes and European exploration of Asia, Chinese goods such as silk, porcelain, and tea began to flow into the European market in large quantities through ports along China's southeast coast. Due to their limited availability, these goods were favored by the upper classes as symbols to showcase their status, thereby sparking Europeans' curiosity and interest in China. Europe's "Chinoiserie" was reflected in various aspects of society, such as architecture, gardens, decorative arts represented by porcelain, and so on. Even the introduction of Chinese tea and tea culture to Europe immediately led to the creation of the "afternoon tea" culture in Britain, profoundly changing European aesthetics and living habits.

Europe's "Chinoiserie" also had an impact on political thought. Many Enlightenment thinkers supported and endorsed China's system, using it as a contrast to criticize the dark politics of Europe. For example, Montesquieu in his work "The Spirit of the Laws" highly praised the Chinese political system, considering China's monarchy to be a mild form, and emphasized the importance of law in governing a country. He admired China's moral education and administrative system, believing that the Chinese government could maintain order through morality rather than fear, aligning with his own political philosophy.

The phenomenon of "Chinoiserie" indeed suggests that Europe had already begun to absorb Chinese elements in various aspects at the beginning of the industrial age, forming unique blends and innovations.

3. The Prosperous Era of the Qing Dynasty as Depicted in the Painting "Prosperous Suzhou"

During the Qing Dynasty in China, especially during the reigns of Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong, Chinese society experienced a golden age that lasted for more than a century. It is undeniable that under the "Prosperous Kangxi and Qianlong Era," China's economy reached its zenith throughout its long history. During this period, China continued to uphold a system of absolute monarchy and a high degree of centralization. Additionally, the orthodox status of Confucianism solidified the pattern of "emphasizing agriculture over commerce," preventing any breakthrough in this area. As a result, the national economy was dominated by a natural economy that almost oppressively overshadowed the commodity economy. However, various economic factors in some towns in China were undergoing changes that were nearly revolutionary. The author will use Suzhou, as depicted in the "Prosperous Scenes of Suzhou," as an example to explore the social landscape under the "Prosperous Kangxi and Qianlong Era."

"Prosperous Suzhou," painted in the 24th year of Emperor Qianlong's reign, is a realistic painting that showcases the prosperity of Suzhou, the economic center of China at the time. The painting depicts a scene that starts from Lingyan Mountain, passes through Mudu Town to the east, crosses Hengshan and Shihu, goes through Shangfang Mountain, enters Gusu County between Lion and He Mountains, exits through Feng, Pan, and Xu gates to the outside of Chang Gate, turns at Shantang Bridge, and ends at Tiger Hill. According to estimates, the painting includes approximately 12,000 people, nearly 400 boats, more than 50 bridges, over 200 shops, and more than 2,000 buildings. Such a complex urban landscape vividly narrates the affluence of Chinese society during the Kangxi and Qianlong era. The farmlands outside the city are thriving, agricultural production is well-organized, merchants gather in the city, trade is bustling, and urban life is rich and colorful. Although the artist may have exaggerated the scenery for artistic reasons, a closer look still reveals the prosperity of this affluent area, as described by contemporaries saying "from Wu Chang to Feng Bridge, a continuous market stretches for twenty li" or "merchants gather from all directions, a myriad of goods jostling for space," clearly indicating the unparalleled prosperity of Suzhou at that time.

In the eyes of Xu Yang, the painter of "Prosperous Suzhou," Suzhou at that time had "unprecedented governance and prosperity, surpassing the Three Dynasties in terms of territorial extent and population density." Indeed, since the Song Dynasty, the economic status of the Jiangnan region, with Suzhou at the forefront, had been steadily rising. By the time of the Southern Song Dynasty, the economic center had shifted southward, and the saying "when Suzhou and Lake Tai are rich, the whole country is sufficient" had spread widely, showcasing its crucial role in national agricultural development. Starting from the mid-Ming Dynasty, Suzhou saw the emergence of large-scale "ji hu" (workshops employing wage labor), which not only replaced the traditional male farming and female weaving production model but also improved the efficiency of silk production, marking the sprout of capitalism in China. By the Qing Dynasty, Suzhou had become a highly developed metropolis in terms of handicraft industry, relying on its dense water network and the Grand Canal for convenient transportation, becoming the most important tax revenue and commodity production and processing center in the country, thus establishing the consensus that "the wealth of the southeast, Suzhou is the most significant." In summary, the

economic and cultural prosperity of Suzhou during the mid-Qing Dynasty was unparalleled nationwide, to the extent that in Beijing, the royal garden of the Summer Palace even included a "Suzhou Street" to replicate the prosperous scene of Jiangnan; Suzhou's influence even persisted into modern times, with foreigners calling the Wusong River "Suzhou Creek" after Shanghai's port was opened, due to the waterway's connection to Suzhou for trade. The prosperity and influence of Suzhou in the mid-Qing Dynasty are evident.

Upon closer examination, "Prosperous Suzhou" can be seen as an encyclopedia of Qing Dynasty civilian life. On the one hand, the streets are bustling with a large number and variety of shops, dazzling to the eye. Among them, more representative ones include fourteen silk shops, twenty-three cloth shops, eight gold and silver jewelry stores, thirty-one food and beverage stores, and seven porcelain shops... Customers are plentiful and continuous, indicating the prosperity of the commodity economy. At the same time, the painting depicts the tobacco industry, pharmaceutical industry, lantern industry, clothing and hat industry, and stationery shops, showing the richness and diversity of urban life and the completeness and perfection of the types of daily urban necessities. At this time, Suzhou also developed a highly mature urban financial system. The fourteen pawnshops and banks depicted in the painting form a complete financial market, with services including currency exchange, loans, and deposits, symbolizing the gradual development of the credit system and financial economy.

"Prosperous Suzhou" is called the "Prosperous Era Fostering Picture" because it is an extremely important historical document that verifies the economic and cultural development breakthroughs of China entering the early and mid-Qing Dynasty. Indeed, the "prosperity" of the "Prosperous Kangxi and Qianlong Era" is reflected in its high degree of exploration of its own economic form as an agricultural society. It is undeniable that Suzhou had indeed become the leader of the national economy at that time and was at the forefront of economic and cultural development. However, the positive and negative feedback this brought to the development of the Qing Dynasty was extremely detrimental. On the positive side, the Qing government would further enhance its self-conceit of being the "Celestial Empire" due to the limitations of historical and geographical concepts, increasing its exclusion of countries outside the tribute system. On the negative side, faced with the contradiction between "prosperity and affluence" and "emphasizing agriculture over commerce," the Qing government ultimately chose to tacitly allow the establishment of new economic elements in cities like Suzhou. However, it continued to bind the people to the land through ideological indoctrination to achieve social stability. The wild growth of urban economies, lacking unified economic control and accumulation, ultimately did not benefit the reinvestment and further development of capital. Moreover, cities with significant economic discourse power in China were few and far between, still not breaking free from the framework of a small-scale peasant economy. As a result, the development of capitalism in Qing Dynasty China merely stagnated at the budding stage, stillborn.

4. The Collision and Conflict of Two Major "Centrisms" in

China: The Case of the Rites Controversy during the Kangxi Period

For early and mid-Qing China, external exchanges were greatly restricted by the government. This included maritime blockades on one hand and, on the other, maintaining the traditional tributary system to fulfill the Qing Dynasty's diplomatic needs. This invariably reflected the Qing people's "Sino-centric view." Geographically, China's relatively isolated position, which made it difficult for foreign invaders to penetrate, contributed to the concept that "all under heaven belongs to the emperor." Additionally, the abundance of natural resources and favorable climate facilitated the development of a more profound civilization. Historically, despite the presence of numerous ethnic minorities in the north and west of the Central Plains who invaded and occupied the Central Plains, the mature Chinese civilization could culturally assimilate these nomadic tribes without shaking the centrality of the Central Plains civilization. In interactions between Central Plains dynasties and other East and Southeast Asian countries, the Central Plains dynasties always maintained cultural self-confidence supported by political, cultural, military strength, and economic power. This internal confidence transformed externally into hegemony, forming a unique diplomatic model—the "tributary system" under "vassal relations." China was considered the center of the world, with its vassal states, such as Korea and Siam, being "marginalized." For Qing rulers, the Chinese emperor often appeared more grandiose than the leaders of neighboring countries. This meant that, in the pre-modern and early modern Chinese society of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the concept of "Celestial Empire" was deeply ingrained in people's hearts.

Based on the establishment of global maritime routes, distant Europe gradually intersected with China in the late Ming period. European interest in the early global trade era was more about acquiring trade hubs and transit stations, paying less attention to the inland and focusing on coastal ports and islands. The real stimulus for Europeans to venture into China's inland was the 16th-century Protestant Reformation's impact on Catholicism. To expand Catholic territories, many missionaries came to China to spread Christianity. In other words, Sino-Western cultural exchanges in non-coastal areas of late Ming and early Qing China began with interactions with missionaries.

The arrival of early Catholic missionaries in China marked the beginning of the "westward spread of Western learning." Figures like Matteo Ricci, an Italian missionary of the late Ming dynasty, represented the Catholic Church in China. They not only spread religious beliefs but also introduced Western science and culture, such as the creation of the "Kunyu Wanguo Quantu" and the translation of "Euclid's Elements." These provided a window for Chinese scholars to gain a preliminary understanding of the West, promoting cultural exchange. However, the spread of Catholicism was not smooth in China, facing many setbacks, especially during the "Rites Controversy" in the Kangxi era, which pushed the conflict between Chinese and Western cultures to a climax.

The "Rites Controversy" refers to the debate during the Kangxi era of the Qing Dynasty over whether Chinese Christians could continue to practice traditional Chinese ancestor worship and Confucian rituals. The core of this debate was the Western missionaries'

understanding and acceptance of Chinese traditional rituals, and whether they were willing to respect and integrate Chinese culture in their missionary work. This controversy significantly hindered the spread of Catholicism in China and led to a "century-long ban on Christianity" by the Qing Dynasty.

Focusing on the "Rites Controversy," its trigger was the Catholic Church touching upon traditional Chinese concepts, which was intolerable for the "Celestial Empire" mindset of Qing China. As Emperor Yongzheng expressed regarding Catholic missionaries: "China has its teachings, and the West has its own; the teachings of the West need not be practiced in China, just as Chinese teachings cannot be practiced in the West." In a sense, the Catholic Church's missionary efforts and cultural infiltration shook the Chinese "centered view," leading to a trend where the public's thoughts shifted from a singular traditional Chinese ethical system towards a more diverse perspective that includes both Chinese and Western teachings.

From the Church's perspective, the restrictions on Chinese Christians' practices of ancestor worship and honoring Confucius were manifestations of Catholicism's monotheistic "centered view." Initially facing the challenge of missionary work in China, Matteo Ricci adopted a more amicable attitude, actively learning the Chinese language and integrating Chinese culture into Christian doctrines, using existing Chinese terms like "Shangdi" for easier cultural understanding by the Chinese public. This respect and understanding for Chinese culture were later summarized as the "Ricci Method," but it fundamentally failed to resolve the deep-seated conflicts between religious doctrines and traditional Chinese philosophy. With more missionaries coming to China, differences arose on how to handle the relationship between Catholic doctrines and Chinese traditions. Based on misunderstandings, the Pope's intervention in the "Ricci Method" due to intolerance of "superstition" contaminating Christianity ultimately led to a strong collision between the "Christ-centered view" and the "Sino-centric view." This collision sparked intense friction within China, signaling the failure of Western missionaries' religious spread in early and mid-Qing China and the stagnation of the "westward spread of Western learning." Consequently, China lost a valuable opportunity to understand Western countries.

For China, the potential value of the West was weak. Inside the Forbidden City, Western musical instruments, clocks, and decorative items were abundant, yet the spread of "foreign religions" was banned nationwide. This proved that Western technological achievements were relegated to the realm of entertainment and leisure by the rulers. In fact, in a self-aggrandizing closed environment, despite the prosperity of the Kangxi and Qianlong era as depicted in "Prosperous Suzhou," China gradually widened the gap with Western countries, missing the enormous economic leap and social progress brought by the industrial civilization.

In the short term, no one denies the overwhelming victory of the "Sino-centric view" over the "Christ-centered view" in the "Rites Controversy," alleviating the rulers' worries about the impact of Western new ideas on traditional Chinese ethical concepts and ideological indoctrination. However, just as Matteo Ricci reshaped the worldview and ethical perspective of Chinese scholars like Xu Guangqi, missionaries also served as spokespersons for Western democratic and industrial societies, carrying the potential

to break through China's existing development state and social concepts. Yet, they were entirely expelled, representing a loss of development opportunities and possibilities from a long-term perspective. A closed China rejected the spiritual baptism of the West, halting the "westward spread of Western learning" for most of the early and mid-Qing period and gradually heading towards an irreparable decline.

Additionally, it's worth noting that although missionaries in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties worked hard on various propaganda and cultural exchange efforts, their impact was extremely limited, confined to a portion of the scholar-official class, which was just the tip of the iceberg in Chinese society. The unwavering faith of the common people in traditional ethics was difficult to shake. While missionaries were the main force in Sino-Western cultural exchanges, they were not a reliable large force. At the time, progressive reforms proposed by the astute government to enhance public enlightenment were the fundamental driving force for social progress. However, the Qing government's indifferent attitude and its reversal of progress were disheartening.

V. Conclusion

By comparing the two paintings "The Ball at the Moulin de la Galette" and "Prosperous Scenes of Gusu," we can observe the different facets of Western and Chinese societies in the 17th and 18th centuries from an artistic perspective, along with the deeper cultural and socio-economic factors behind them. During this period, Europe was in the midst of rapid capitalist industrial development, while China had reached the peak of its agrarian society, appearing strong externally but with internal issues. These two distinctly different societal forms showed close interaction and exchange, as well as collision and conflict, within the same historical period.

In Europe, the fascination with China manifested as "Chinoiserie," with Chinese porcelain, tea, silk, and other items becoming popular cultural symbols among the European aristocracy. Chinese-style architecture, furniture, and artworks were prevalent in European courts and streets. On the other side of the Eurasian continent, China chose to avoid significant cultural exchange with the West. However, the stark contrast between Europe's open and inclusive cultural attitude and China's closed and exclusionary stance is not the key point as concluded, but rather the hidden historical details that merit reflection.

We cannot deny that the houses in the Palace of Versailles filled with the scent of porcelain and tea, and the corners of the Forbidden City where the sound of Western clocks chimed, are essentially no different at their core—during the Ming and Qing dynasties, China's upper class did not lack an appreciation for Western culture and specialties. Wealthy merchants often decorated their private gardens with uniquely European colored glass, traces of which can still be seen today in places like the Humble Administrator's Garden and the Lion Grove Garden in Suzhou. This is very similar to Europe's "Chinoiserie" and can be attributed to an interest and longing for each other's cultures in terms of craftsmanship, material goods, and entertainment.

However, what differs is that the center of view in Europe underwent a significant transformation. As an era of great change, Europe experienced the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution, all of which aimed to break the ideological monopoly of the Christian Church and the monotheistic "center of view" through advancements in science and the "disenchantment" of ideas. After the weakening of religious power, the emerging social forms could not eliminate the existence of the "center of view." Instead, this "center of view" was replaced by a new international order established under the European-led colonial system, judged by the military and financial strength of nations and the objective state of colonial oppression. This is markedly different from China's "Sino-centric view," which ignored objective realities and was blindly arrogant. As a result, the diverging destinies of the two became increasingly clear, with China's decline and Europe's impact becoming inevitable.

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