

**THE PAGODA SYMBOL IN 17<sup>TH</sup>-18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CHINESE AND  
EUROPEAN PORCELAIN: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF  
CULTURAL FILTERING AND CULTURAL MISREADING**

**SIMBOLUL PAGODEI ÎN PORȚELANUL CHINEZESC ȘI EUROPEAN DIN  
SECOLELE XVII-XVIII: UN STUDIU TRANSCULTURAL AL FILTRĂRII  
CULTURALE ȘI INTERPRETĂRII CULTURALE GREȘITE**

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*This study analyzes the pagoda symbol in 17th-18th century Chinese and European porcelain to explore the roles of cultural filtering and cultural misreading in cross-cultural exchanges. The research finds that after the pagoda symbol entered Europe, it was not only imitated and adopted by artists but also underwent a significant transformation, reflecting the differences and fusion of Chinese and Western cultural mindsets. Unlike the religious and philosophical meanings of the pagoda in the Chinese tradition, European artists simplified and formalized the symbol, transforming it into an "exotic" emblem. The transformation of the pagoda symbol reveals the aesthetic collisions and cultural adaptation processes in cross-cultural exchanges, reflecting the multiple meanings and functional shifts of symbols in different cultural contexts.*

**Keywords:** Pagoda symbol, cultural filtering, cultural misreading, cross-cultural communication, porcelain, the 17th-18th centuries

*Această cercetare analizează simbolul pagodei în porțelanul chinezesc și european din secolele XVII-XVIII, explorând rolurile filtrării culturale și interpretării greșite în cadrul schimburilor trans-culturale. Studiul constată că, după ce simbolul pagodei a ajuns în Europa, nu a fost doar imitat și adoptat de artiști, ci a suferit și o transformare semnificativă, reflectând diferențele și fuziunea mentalităților culturale chineze și occidentale. Spre deosebire de semnificațiile religioase și filozofice ale pagodei în tradiția chineză, artiștii europeni au simplificat și formalizat simbolul, transformându-l într-o emblema „exotică”. Transformarea simbolului pagodei dezvăluie coliziunile estetice și procesele de adaptare culturală în schimburile trans-culturale, reflectând multiple semnificații și schimbări funcționale ale simbolurilor în contexte culturale diferite.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Simbolul pagodei, filtrare culturală, interpretare culturală greșită, comunicare trans-culturală, porțelan, secolele XVII-XVIII

## **Introduction**

During the 17th and 18th centuries, cross-cultural exchanges between China and Europe flourished unprecedentedly, with porcelain serving as a crucial medium between the

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two civilizations. The introduction of Chinese porcelain, particularly its exquisite decorations, sparked significant interest among European artists. During this period, the pagoda emerged as a quintessential Chinese symbol, frequently appearing in the decoration of Chinese and European porcelain. It not only carried the profound connotations of traditional Chinese culture but also underwent reinterpretation and transformation within the European cultural context. Porcelain was more than just a material commodity; it became a vessel for the interaction of artistic styles and aesthetic concepts during the early stages of globalization. This article aims to analyze the pagoda motif in Chinese and European porcelain from the 17th to the 18th centuries, exploring the roles of cultural filtering and cultural drift in cross-cultural exchanges. Specifically, it will examine how the pagoda motif was transformed, received, and recreated in the cultural exchange between China and Europe, shedding light on the aesthetic collisions and fusions within this process of cultural translation.

### **The Cultural Background and Significance of the Pagoda**

The pagoda holds profound significance within traditional Chinese culture. From a religious perspective, it symbolizes Buddhism and serves as a structure for housing Buddhist relics and scriptures. In Chinese philosophy, particularly in Daoist and Confucian thought, the pagoda is regarded as a unique pathway to connect with "Heaven." Its structure is often interpreted as a link between Heaven and Earth, embodying the concept of "the unity of Heaven and humanity".

Pagoda patterns on porcelain typically appear within landscape motifs. These motifs, also known as "landscape pavilion patterns" or "garden landscape patterns," primarily feature decorative elements such as pavilions, gardens, lakes, rocks, trees, mountains, and rivers. Their origins can be traced to the tradition of Chinese landscape painting, from which they were adapted [1 p. 1]. The origins of landscape motifs can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty, particularly in the Changsha Kiln (mid-8th to 10th century), where such patterns began to emerge. The characteristics of this period closely resembled the early landscape paintings of the Wei and Jin Dynasties (A.D.220-420), where landscapes primarily served as backgrounds for figure paintings. It was not until the Ming Dynasty that landscape motifs with truly independent significance began to appear.

The artifact A-699, Blue-and-white dish with a riverscape (*Figura 1*), currently housed in the British Museum, was produced in Jingdezhen during the Xuande reign of the Ming

**Figura 1.** *Blue-and-white dish with a riverscape*  
1540-1600 China



Source: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A\\_PDF-A-699](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_PDF-A-699)

Dynasty. The center of the circular dish depicts a “two shores along one river” landscape scene. In the foreground, located in the lower right corner of the composition, there is a seven-story pagoda and a partially visible rooftop of another structure, surrounded by alternating layers of rocks and trees. The central area of the scene uses blank space to represent the water body, where a small boat with two figures is depicted—one rowing and the other seated in contemplation. The distant shoreline mirrors the foreground, featuring rocks and trees, with additional flying birds added to enrich the composition. The entire scene combines movement and stillness, blending void and substance, embodying the composition and aesthetic atmosphere typical of Chinese literati landscape paintings.

### **The Reception of the Pagoda Motif in Europe**

In the mid-17th century, Dutchman Joan Nieuhof, a member of the Dutch East India Company, travelled to China. During his stay, he visited the renowned Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing, an imposing and exquisite nine-story glazed structure that left a profound impression on him.

**Upon returning to Europe, Nieuhof introduced the pagoda to European society through his book, *An Embassy from the East-India Company*, which combined text and illustrations to vividly depict this architectural marvel (Figura 2).**

In fact, as early as the 16th and 17th centuries, information about the Porcelain Pagoda had already been transmitted to Europe through various Western missionaries and diplomatic missions. However, it was the publication and widespread circulation of Nieuhof's book that

truly ingrained the recognition of the pagoda as a symbol of China in European consciousness. Nieuhof not only used a combination of text and images to provide Europeans with a detailed portrayal of the pagoda but also frequently included depictions of other pagodas across China. He emphasized that nearly every Chinese city boasted of a beautiful pagoda, thereby reinforcing the association between pagodas and China. The decorative patterns on export porcelain from the Ming and Qing dynasties are typical cultural symbols with a dissemination attribute. These symbols were formed through interactions between various ethnic groups and societies, possessing strong cultural symbolism and representativeness. As Ernst Cassirer stated, all externalized forms of culture are essentially symbolic expressions [2 p.101]. From this point forward, the pagoda began to symbolize China in the European imagination, forming the semiotic structure of "Pagoda = China." Consequently, the pagoda became a representative motif in Chinoiserie designs, seamlessly aligning with the European fascination with Chinese aesthetics [3 p. 22].

### **The Transformation of the Pagoda Motif in European Porcelain**

Once the referential meaning of the pagoda motif was established, it began to appear frequently in decorative patterns on porcelain. Due to differences in cultural contexts, the transformation of these decorative motifs had to take into account the aesthetic psychology of the receiving culture. Unlike the subtle and indirect expressions found in Eastern cultures, Westerners are accustomed to more direct expressions of thoughts and ideas. The portrayal of the pagoda hidden within a landscape scene did not resonate with Europeans. Instead, the centralization and prominence of the pagoda motif better aligned with European aesthetic preferences. Therefore, artisans emphasized the central image of the pagoda when designing decorative patterns. This process was not just a formal adjustment but also a cultural adaptation, resulting in a fusion of two cultures on the visual-symbolic level.

At that time, Europe had two ways to acquire porcelain and ceramics: local ceramic manufacturing factories and imported foreign-export porcelain, including custom-made pieces. For example, as shown in *Figura 3*, a Ming Wanli period blue-and-white porcelain dish with a pagoda motif.

The central design features a seven-story pagoda with a pair of phoenixes in front and a pavilion further in the foreground. From the pattern and composition, it is clear that this is an export porcelain piece. This composition style was not popular in the domestic Chinese market, where blue-and-white porcelain emphasized meaning and blank space. In contrast, the porcelain exported to Europe emphasized fullness and decoration. This aesthetic difference is fused in this Ming Wanli period blue-and-white pagoda-patterned dish, which retains the delicacy of Chinese art while satisfying the European demand for complex decoration.

**Figura 3.** *Ming Wanli Blue-and-White Porcelain Plate 1573–1619*



Source: Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna

**Figura 4.** Inkstand, The Bow Porcelain Factory, 1750.



Source: [https://m.fx361.cc/news/2019/0712/14560941.html?utm\\_source=c](https://m.fx361.cc/news/2019/0712/14560941.html?utm_source=c)

In the process of cross-cultural communication between China and Europe, the phenomenon of cultural filtering is particularly evident in the transformation of the pagoda motif. Cultural filtering refers to the process through which symbols, ideas, values, and forms from the source culture are selected, interpreted, and recreated when they enter the target culture. This concept emphasizes that intercultural communication is not a simple "copy-paste" process, but rather a dynamic, selective, and adaptive one, often accompanied by the reconstruction of meaning and the variation of symbols.

*Figura 1* is an inkstand made by the Bow Porcelain Factory in England in 1750. The body of the piece features a simplified four-tier pagoda, and its design reflects the abstract understanding of the pagoda form by European artists.

From the image, the pagoda's design conveys its multi-layered, conical structure through just a few brushstrokes.

However, these strokes do not communicate the deep religious, philosophical, or symbolic meanings of the pagoda in Chinese culture. In this process, Europe's interpretation of the pagoda symbol was constrained by its framework for understanding Eastern cultures. This interpretation was more based on the imagination of "exoticism" than on the profound connotations of the symbol in Chinese culture. In traditional Chinese culture, the pagoda, as a symbol of Buddhist architecture, carries religious and philosophical significance. However, in cross-cultural transmission, these rich cultural backgrounds are often simplified or overlooked. The pagoda symbol was viewed by the West as an exotic visual symbol, with its multi-layered and spire-like form becoming the only elements captured and reproduced. This is an example of cultural filtering in cross-cultural communication.

In 1768, the ceramic brand Elizabeth Berkley produced a punch bowl (*Figura 5*), depicting a decorative scene titled "The Chinese Emperor's Audience with the Great Tatar." In the background, a four-tiered pagoda is visible, accurately represented in its form. However, Chinese pagodas traditionally have an odd number of tiers, as odd numbers are considered auspicious in Chinese culture. The pagoda depicted here, with its four tiers, deviates from this norm, reflecting a misunderstanding of Chinese cultural traditions by European designers.

As an architectural form rich in Eastern symbolism, the pagoda in Europe was not only used as a decorative motif but also attracted the attention of architects. A typical example is the *Pagode de Chanteloup* in France (*Figura 6*). Built between 1775 and 1778, this tower

**Figura 5.** *Punch Bowl*, Elizabeth Berkley, 1768  
*Ming Wanli Blue-and-White Porcelain*



Source: [https://m.fx361.cc/news/2019/0712/14560941.html?utm\\_source=c](https://m.fx361.cc/news/2019/0712/14560941.html?utm_source=c)

**Figura 6.** *La Pagode de Chanteloup*  
1775-1778



Source: <https://www.pagode-chanteloup.com/catering/?lang=en>

incorporates Doric columns and other classical decorative features. Apart from its conical shape and multi-tiered structure, it no longer retains the essential characteristics of a traditional Chinese pagoda. From a Chinese perspective, this transformed European pagoda no longer qualifies as a true pagoda. The fusion of the pagoda's form with European classical architectural elements reflects a compromise in cultural exchange. This blend and conflict of cultural styles not only show the selective adoption of Eastern forms but also demonstrate how European architects found a "compromise" between Eastern elements and Western classics. Furthermore, European architects did not fully comprehend the cultural meaning of the pagoda in Chinese tradition, instead transforming it into an exotic symbol. This misreading occurred due to a disregard for the cultural context and a superficial interpretation of its form.

### **Conclusion**

This article explores the role of cultural filtering and cultural misreading in cross-cultural exchanges through an analysis of the pagoda symbol in the 17th-18th century Chinese and European porcelain. The study reveals that, upon entering Europe, the pagoda symbol was not only imitated and adopted by European artists but also underwent significant transformation and re-creation, reflecting the differences and fusion of cultural psychology between China and the West. The way in which Europeans received and represented the pagoda symbol differs markedly from its profound religious and philosophical significance in Chinese culture, highlighting the prominent effects of cultural filtering. Western artists reinterpreted the pagoda through simplification and formalization, neglecting its deep cultural meanings and transforming it into an exotic symbol. The transformation of the pagoda symbol also reveals the aesthetic collisions and fusion in cross-cultural translation. In the process of acceptance and re-creation, both Chinese and Western artists not only altered the visual form of the symbol but also, through cultural adaptation and aesthetic reconstruction, imbued the pagoda symbol with different meanings and functions in the two cultures. Ultimately, this cultural misreading and reconstruction represent not only the evolution of an artistic symbol but also the complex interactions inherent in cross-cultural communication.

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