Gothic and Chinoiserie:
The interpretation of Gothic and Chinese architecture in mid-eighteenth-century England
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I. Introduction

The celebrated large blue and white Oriental China Cistern, on the Gothic carved pedestal in Strawberry Hill, is an unusual juxtaposition of "Chinese" and "Gothic". While the combination may be awkward to people today, the two styles were often placed together in eighteenth-century Europe. I endeavor to propose three reasons that lead to such vogue. First, artists in the mid-eighteenth century had a weak and distorted understanding of both Chinese and Gothic architecture which lead to their misbelief in the intersection between these two styles. Secondly, both styles were associated with an air of lightness and nonchalance of Rococo and were against the rigorous classical design. Finally, the period of England's garden design incorporated borrowings from different times and places.

I justify my arguments based on studying the origin of Gothic and Chinoiserie in England, analyzing the illustrations of Chinese Garden designs collected by artists such as Paul Decker, William Halfpenny, and Sir William Chambers, and investigating English Rococo gardens that embraced the unity of international architectural styles.

II. Linking Gothic and Chinese

The emergence of Gothic sensibility had its root in antiquarian research and Gothic poetry of the early eighteenth century. The fascination with ancient abbeys and medieval architecture design came from "proto-Gothic topoi from Spencer and Milter were refashioned into a new poetic style by David Mallet, Thomas Warton, and the Graveyard Poets."

The earliest architects who touched Gothic developed a distinct form, the Georgian Gothic. The style was termed by some nineteenth century art critics as "Rococo-Gothic"[9]. As suggested by Kenneth Clark, the romantic revival of Gothic forms in England was a distinctive type of Gothic design that incorporated motifs of medieval architecture but was displayed 'in other and more frivolous ways, producing a quantity of work which is not easy to classify. I have called it Rococo […] because it conveys a purely decorative style – something self-conscious, a little far-fetched, and not too serious".[1]

Chinoiserie is a French term coined to suggest early European interest in Chinese arts: interior design, architecture, pottery, and gardening. The fascination with Chinese elements began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the importation of luxury goods destined for the court from China. The vogue started in France and shifted to England in the eighteenth century, where it flourished.[2] An Englishman exclaimed in the World that "everything is Chinese, or in the Chinese taste; or, as it is sometimes more modestly expressed, partly after the Chinese manner. Chairs, tables, chimney pieces, frames for looking glasses, and even our most vulgar utensils, are reduced to this newfangled standard".[3]

For western Chinese lovers, the chinoiserie designs were associated with rococo air of lightness and frivolity, a delight in playful or romantic scenes, and a clear preference for capricious incongruities over naturalistic representation[4]. chinoiserie was prevalent in England because they were costly and elaborate, which touched the luxuriance of the ancient regime as being something outrageously expensive, exotic, and intricate. [5]

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[1] Clark, 50
[2] Hsai, 1
[3] *The World* No. 12 (January 13, 1787): 58
[4] Mayor, 116
[5] Mayor, 111

Just as the "Gothick", termed by Langley, is not a replication of authentic medieval architectures, "Chinoiserie" resembled some of the Chinese ornamental elements, but did not study the chore of Chinese arts nor the Chinese cultural history as pointed out in the *World*:

> Not one in a thousand of all the stiles, gates, rails [. . .] which are called Chinese, has the least resemblance to anything that China ever saw; nor would an English church be a less uncommon sight to a traveling mandarin, than an English pago".[6]

What artists and patrons admired in Chinese art was the stylized and exquisitely finished art that was more elaborate than that of Versailles and the fusion of Eastern and Western decorative elements, which is manifest in the distaste of ancient regime for the plain and coarse Chinese bronze. [7]

While the combination of Chinese and Gothic may sound strange to people today, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the two styles were often placed together and considered interchangeable.[8] Robert Lloyd, an English poet in 1770s, believed Chinese and Gothic were equivalent in his poem *The CIT'S COUNTRY BOX*:

> The trav'ler with amazement sees
> A temple, Gothic, or Chinese,
> With many a bell, and tawdry rag on,
> And crested with a sprawling dragon;[9]

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[6] *The World* No. 12 (January 13, 1787): 60
[7] Mayer, 112
[8] Chu, 162
[9] Lloyd, accessed May 10, 2019

Figure 1. Quatrefoil design on Chinese Window

Several reasons might result in the convergence between Gothic and Chinese. The exoticism and weirdness quality represented by the Gothic and chinoiserie, as both of the styles borrowed from the rococo an air of lightness and nonchalance, are against the rigorous order of earlier classical forms and explored the novelty and sensibility of new architectural style.[10] In addition, certain motifs are coincidentally shared by both traditional Chinese architecture design and Medieval architecture, such as heavily foliated tracery and quatrefoil (see figure 1).

With a preference for shapes and curved lines, both Gothic and Chinese were considered suitable to picturesque English garden against Italo-French garden with its classical regularity.[11]

III. Pattern books

Steps towards combining features of Chinese and Gothic architectures were made in the 1750s, evident in prevalence of pattern books illustrating architectures with Chinese and Gothic taste. The designs in these books were not clearly Chinese or Gothic, but hybrids of multiple styles, e.g, early eighteenth-century Classicism, Rococo and Neoclassicism, which results from

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[10] Lippert, 116
[11] Chu, 163

the lack of systematized guidance to medieval architectures and the architects' attempt to show their authentic interpretations of different styles.[12]

The studying and designing of Gothic modes differentiated from Classical modes in the way that the Classical architecture was systematized by Vitruvius in *De Architectura libri decem* while Georgian architects and designers had no standard print of patterns, theories, and rules of proportion and ratio to refer to.*[13]* Because of lack of established canon of rules, architects and designers looked at existing medieval churches to select leitmotifs and recreated them based on their interpretations, which was often in non-Gothic fashion.[14] In this manner, designs were based on selective features of Gothic and invoked the idea of the medieval without a solid relationship with authentic medieval architecture.[15] This resulted in a variety of "Gothic architecture" because architects and designers interpreted medieval architecture differently.
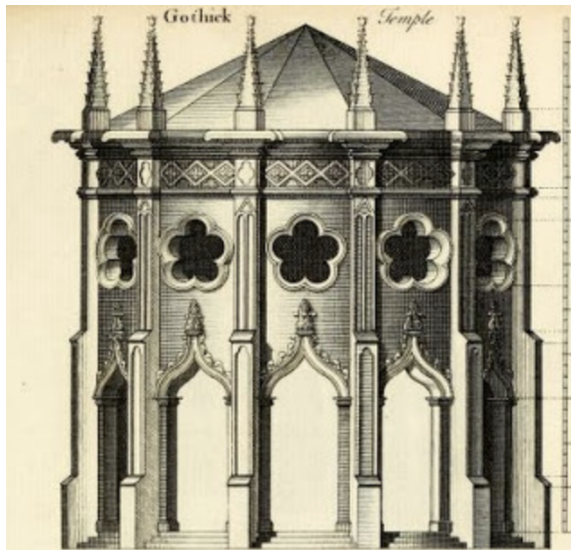

Figure 2. *Design for a Gothic temple*, Bratty Langley, *Gothic architecture, improved by rules and proportions* (1747)
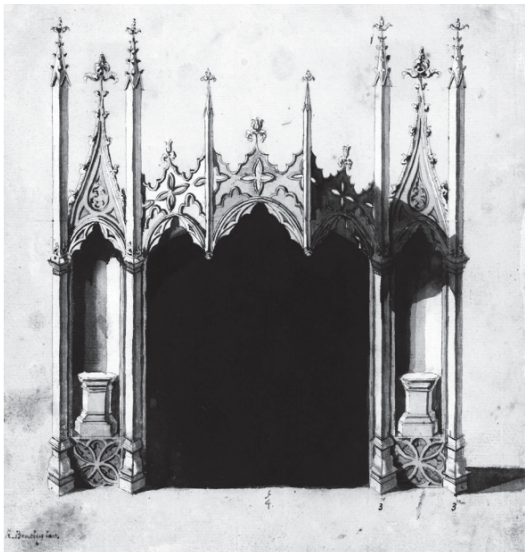
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[12] Lindfield, 17
[13] Lindfield, 9
[14] Lindfield, 12
[15] Lindfield, 12

Artist such as Bratty Langley applies Gothic motifs to the proportioned system of Classical architecture. This is evident in Gothic temples where Gothic motifs, such are mixed neoclassical symmetrical and stable design (see figure 2). The motifs that form the basis of Langley's style are "the trefoil, quatrefoil, ogee quatrefoil, cusped triglyphs, lancets, ogee arches, trefoil-cusped arches, intersecting arches, pinnacles, finials, crockets, clustered columns and crenellations".[16] The intersecting ogee arch or cinquefoil were repeated to form patterns that were used in structures relevant to the eighteenth-century society: "doorways, chimneypieces, windows, piazza arcades, Gothic colonnades, temples and pavilions" instead of religious churches and cathedrals.[17] Thus, to many professional and amateur artists, neo-gothic refers to applying decorative elements of medieval architecture to contemporary structures.

Richard Bentley, who worked with Horace Walpole to produce an array of Gothic designs for Strawberry Hill, also applied Langley's adaptation of Gothic in his design.[18]
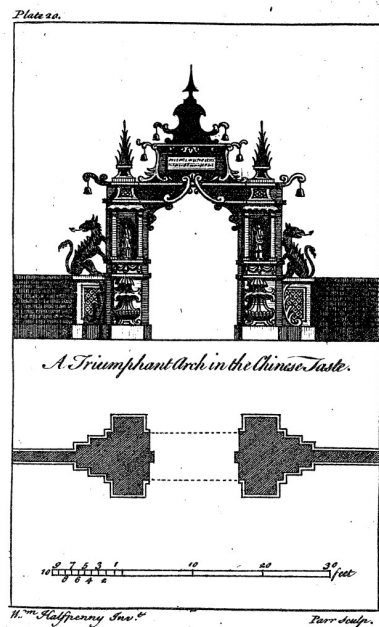

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[16] Lindfield, 16
[17] Lindfield, 17
[18] Lindfield, 93

Figure 3. *Chimney-piece for the Parlour,* Richard Bentley, Strawberry Hill, 1754

Bentley's chimney pieces for Walpole's Gothic villa are examples manifesting the incorporation of decoration and imaginative. Lindfield describes:

Equally playful are the executed chimney pieces in Strawberry Hill's Parlour (see Figure 3), and Yellow and Blue bedrooms; each is based upon a design by Bentley and is composed of a reconfigured vocabulary of Gothic ornament, including ogee arches, quatrefoils, reticulations, and buttress-columns. For the Parlour chimney-piece, Bentley applied quatrefoils to a bowed 'bridge' connected to the buttressed pier on either side. Not content with this bowed shape, the pinched quatrefoils are sheared so that they follow the profile of the arch. Although distinctly non-antiquarian, these chimney pieces are Gothic because of the selection of motifs.[19]

The treatment of Chinese elements is the same as that of Gothic elements for many Georgian artists who compared these two styles.

A Triumphant Arch in the Chinese Taste.

[19] Lindfield, 83

Figure 4. *Triumphal Arch*, William Halfpenny, *New Designs for Chinese Temples* (1751).

William Halfpenny was the first to propagate the fashion of chinoiserie in the form of architectural designs. He and his son John Halfpenny were London-based architects. Their books deal with country houses in the neo-Gothic and chinoiserie fashions. In 1751 he published *New Designs for Chinese Temples*,[20] containing illustrations of temples, bridges, garden seats, obelisks, and arches. However, in these illustrations, the 'Chinese' features, mixing with other styles, were to be found only in the decorative forms also mixing with other elements, and the structures themselves remained Western. In the illustration of a Triumphal Arch (see figure 4), he had a mixture of Chinese motifs such as dragons, bells, and Chinese figure statues and a Gothic ogee-arch. The design of the triumphal arch itself is Western, totally different from Chinese arch design.

Figure 5. *A Lodge or House of Retirement*, William Halfpenny, *Rural Architecture in the Gothick Taste* (1752), plate 12.
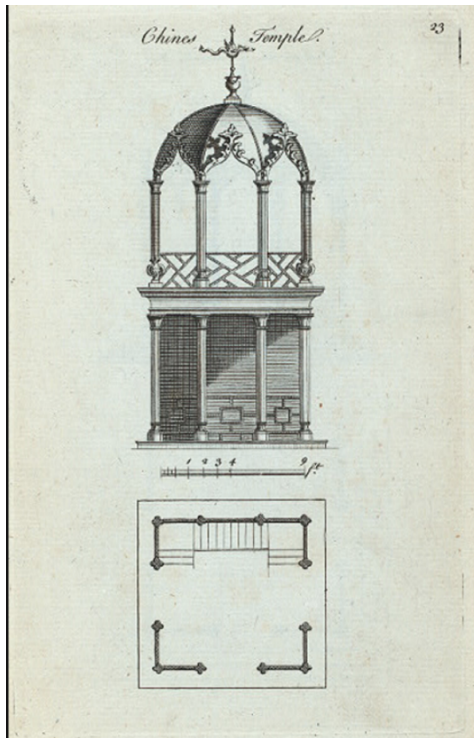
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[20] Halfpenny, published in 1751

Figure 6. *Chinese temple (square with an upper story),* Charles Over, Ornamental Architecture in the Gothic, Chinese, and Modern Taste (1759).
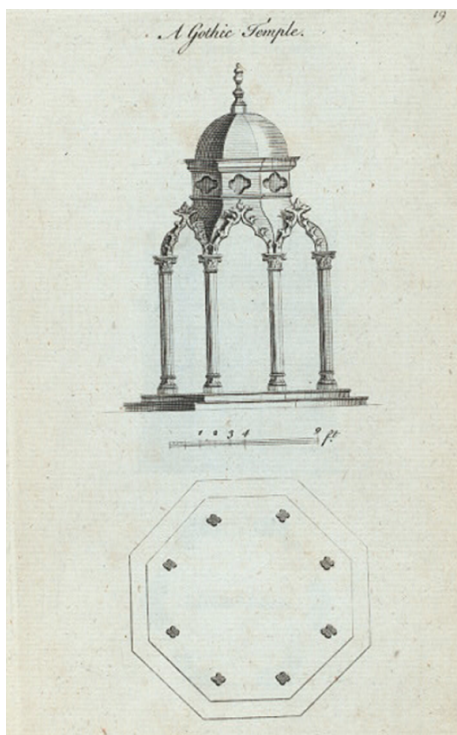

Figure 7. *Gothic temple,* Charles Over, Ornamental Architecture in the Gothic, Chinese, and Modern Taste (1759).

In the following years, he issued other two volumes entitled *Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste* [21] and *Rural Architecture in the Gothic taste*[22], in which he made a direct comparison between the two styles. Again, the structures of both Gothic and Chinese architectures are based on the highly symmetrical neoclassical and Palladian design, described by Lindfield, "which is based upon the central block of a Classically styled house with a bobbin-crested cylinder driven through the heart of its elevation"(see figure 5).[23] The sparing use of Gothic or Chinese decorations was sufficient for a structure to be considered Gothic or Chinese. Similar with Halfpenny's understanding of Gothic taste and Chinese taste, Charles Overs' illustrations of Chinese temples and Gothic temples are almost identical in regard to their overall structure (see figure 6,7).[24] Both consists of three trefoil-cusped ogee arches and the only

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[21] Halfpenny, published in 1752
[22] Halfpenny, published in 1755
[23] Lindfield, 21
[24] Over, published in 1759

reference to Chinese element is the geometric wooden railing.

Figure 8. *Alcove and Gallery in the Front of a Banqueting House*, Paul Decker, *Chinese Architecture, Civil and Ornamented*(1759).
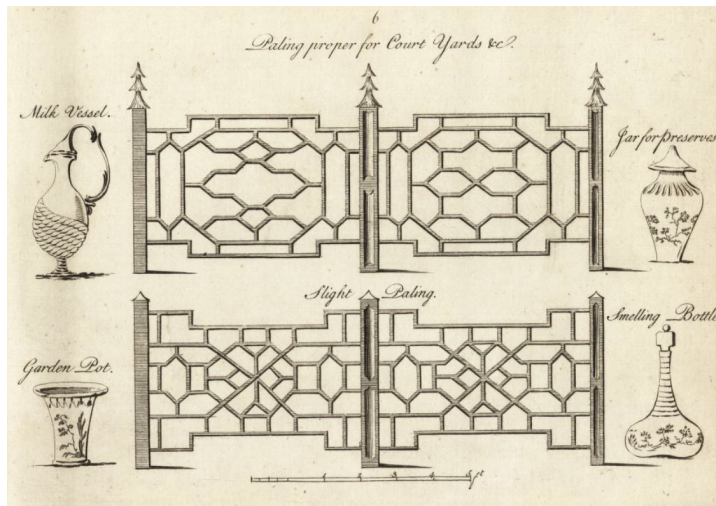

Figure 9. *Paling Proper for Court Yards.* Paul Decker, *Chinese Architecture Part the Second* (1759).
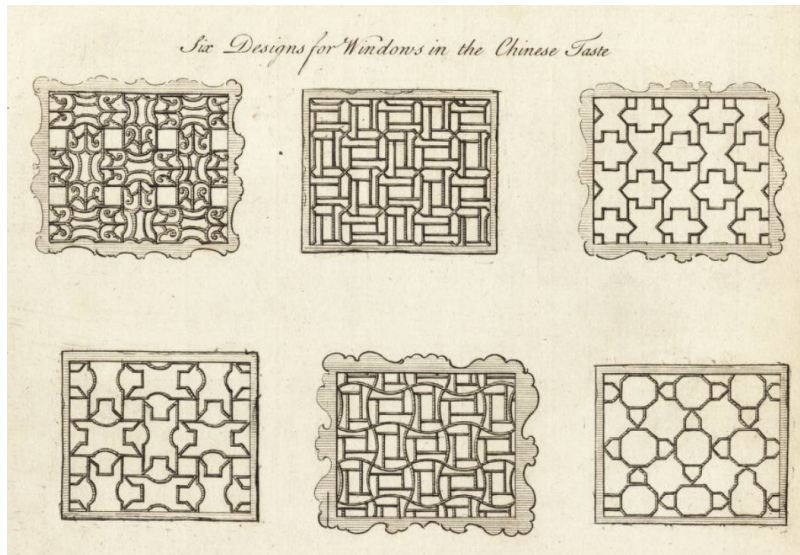
Figure 10. *Designs for Windows in the Chinese Taste.* Paul Decker, *Chinese Architecture Part the Second* (1759).
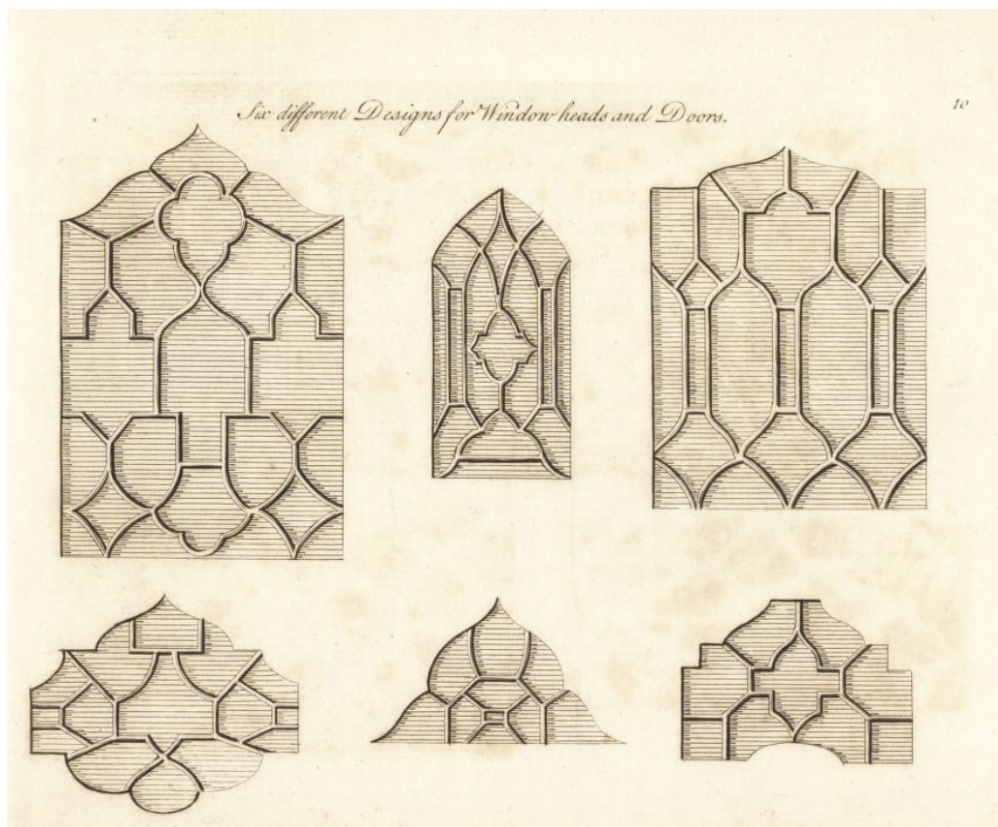

Figure 11. *Different Designs for Window Heads and Doors.* Paul Decker, *Gothic Architecture Part the Second* (1759).

Despite the general indifference to showing readers authentic Chinese architecture, there are, however, a number of designers who endeavored to convince their readers the authenticity, though most of their images still do not immediately present as Chinese. In 1759, Paul Decker published a volume entitled *Gothic Architecture Decorated.*[25] And another entitled *Chinese Architecture, Civil and Ornamented.*[26] The volumes contain no text but simply illustrations for garden pavilions, hermitages, and ironware. In *Chinese Architecture*, he put architecture in natural settings with human figures in Chinese clothing interacting with the architecture and its surroundings, which suggests his reflection on the practical aspects of the architecture (see figure 8). Besides, juxtapositions of illustrations of porcelains and paling design suggest how he might copy the patterns from the potteries (see figure 9). He also made a direct comparison between Chinese window patterns and Gothic tracery to show his study of these two styles (see figure 10, 11).

William Chamber also endeavored to convey a sense of accuracy. In 1757, Chambers published *Designs of Chinese Buildings* after his expeditions to the East between 1740 and 1749.[27] The short narrative accompanying his images reported Chamber's visit to China with attention to architecture. The travel writing helps Chambers persuade his readers to accept the authenticity of the visual images he presents.[28]

Chamber tried to rectify the errors and show the public the authentic Chinese images that he witnessed in China as he presents, "These which I now offer to the public are done with sketches and measures taken by me at Canton some years ago, chiefly to satisfy my own

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[25] Decker, published in 1759
[26] Decker, published in 1759
[27] Decker, published in 1757
[28] Zhang, 81

curiosity".[29] Yet, to those familiar with traditional Chinese art and architecture, the images in Chambers's Designs do not immediately present as Chinese.

Regardless of his enthusiasm for his expeditions in China, he was humble about whether to adopt Chinese styles in architectural design:

> "I may therefore, without danger to myself, and it is hoped without offence to others, offer the following account of the Chinese manner of Gardening, which is collected from my own observations in China, from conversations with their artists, and remarks transmitted to me at different times by travellers. A sketch of what I have now attempted to finish. [..] Whether the Chinese manner of Gardening be better or worse than those now in use among the Europeans, I will not determine: comparisons is the furest as well as the test of truth; it is in every man's power to compare and to judge for himself".[30]

He conceded the artistic originality of the Chinese architecture, but also confirmed the superiority of European architecture. Thus, he never designed a Chinese taste architecture for its own beauty, but he thought 'Chinese taste' would be acceptable in large-scale parks with a variety of scenes. His design of Chinese tower in Kew garden manifests his beliefs, which I discuss in next section.

These pattern books revealed that most of artists had little understanding of Gothic and Chinese architecture and their visual identities.[31] However, there are artists questioned the reinterpretation of medieval and Chinese architecture, and the juxtaposition of these two styles. Horace Walpole, who designed Strawberry Hill House with Bentley, hold conflicting ideas with him. While Bentley was interested in imaginative reinterpretation of medieval decorative elements, Walpole was more into antiquarianism and archaeological accuracy,[32] as they argued about the design of the eight black chairs, "I shall have very little satisfaction in them, if I am to

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[29] Chambers, *Design of Chinese Buildings,* first page of the preface.
[30] Chambers, *A dissertation on Oriental Gardening, 5*
[31] Lindfield, 22
[32] Lindfield, 84

Invent them! My idea is, a black back, higher, but not much higher than common chairs, and extremely light, with matted bottoms"[33]

Walpole also questioned the authenticity of Langley's Gothic temple as he wrote on visiting Painshill (see figure 1):

> "Went again to Mr Charles Hamilton's at Payne's hill near Cobham, to see the Gothic building & the Roman ruin. The former is taken from Batty Langley's book (which does not contain a single design of true or good Gothic) & is made worse by pendent ornaments in the arches, & by being closed on two sides at bottom, with cheeks that have no relation to Gothic. The whole is an unmeaning edifice. In all Gothic designs, they should be made to imitate something that was of that time, a part of a church, a castle, a convent, or a mansion. The Goths never built summer-houses or temples in a garden. This at Mr Hamilton's stands on the brow of a hill – there an imitation of a fort or watchtower had been proper".[34]

Moreover, he displayed discernment in the link between "Chinese" and "Gothic" when criticizing the handling of Gothic at Latimer House:[35]

> "The house has undergone Batty Langley-discipline: half of the ornaments are of his bastard Gothic, and half of Hallet's mongrel Chinese. I want to write over the doors of most modern edifices, *Repaired and beautified, Langley and Hallet churchwardens*" [36]

Indeed, the weak understanding of the visual identity of both medieval architecture and Chinese architecture revealed in these pattern books misled the artists to believe that Gothic and Chinese were interchangeable.

III. Garden Design

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[33] Walpole, Horace Walpole's Correspondence, vol. 35, pp. 180–81
[34] Toynbee
[35] Lindfield, 23
[36] Walpole, Horace Walpole's Correspondence, vol. 35, pp. 223

The intersection of Gothic and Chinese architecture was represented in two different manners in eighteenth-century garden design in England. First is the mixture of Gothic motifs and Chinese motifs in a single structure, and the second is a juxtaposition of Gothic and Chinese architecture in a large-scale garden.

Figure 12. *A View of the Chinese Pavilions and Boxes in Vauxhall Gardens,* Thomas Bowles, 1751. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

In the first case, the Chinese Pavilion in Vauxhall Gardens was an important Gothic structure that had Chinese features (see figure 12). Being open from the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, Vauxhall gardens was one of the leading venues for public entertainment in London. The Chinese Pavilion was "domed and connected by volute scrolls to a bowed colonnade, included a central, large and cusped Gothic arch, which, in turn, was flanked

at colonnade level by two trefoil-cusped ogee-arches".[37] It was adorned with Stars, Pinnacles, wreathed Columns, and a great variety of other rich Gothic Ornaments. It also shows traits derived from Chinese origins, such as the fire-shaped decorations on the roof line referring to the spines of Chinese dragons.

In the second case, the model of such gardens was established by William Chambers in his design of the Kew Garden. At Kew (1757-63), in England, the Scottish-born architect Chambers created for Princes Augusta, the widow of Frederick, Prince of Wales, the most royal and impressive of all English Rococo gardens. It included a monumental Chinese pagoda, a House of Confucius, a Gothic cathedral, a Mosque, an Alhambra, a Roman Ruins, and a number of classical temples.[38]

View of the Wilderness &c.

[37] Lindfield and Margrave, 20
[38] Millam, 121

Figure 13: William Marlow, *View of the Wilderness at Kew*, 1763. The Metropolitan Museum
The mosque Alhambra, the palladium bridge, and other decorative buildings have

disappeared but the Chinese pagoda has survived, fortunately. The octagonal structure is 163 feet

tall nearly 50 meters, and at the time it was built, it was the tallest reconstruction of a Chinese

building in Europe. It is a ten-story tower with stripy green and white graceful curved roofs,

flesh-colored balconies, and red color on the roofs and on some of the flashings. The original 80

dragons that existed on the Pagoda in 1760 were placed on each angle of the octogonal roof,

looking down at the viewers in a dominant and horrifying manner. It was removed in 1788, and

the committee reconstructed its forms based on Marlow's illustration in 1763 (see figure 13).

Chambers Chinese garden design in Kew was not well received among his

contemporaries.[39] William Mason composed the poem *An Heroic Epistle to Sir William

Chambers* that satirized Chamber's garden design. In the poem, Mason straightly expressed his

distaste for the Chinese architectural elements by saying "the poet shows that European artists

may easily rival the Chinese gardenists".

The Gothic Cathedral was designed by Johann Heinrich Muntz, who had previously

worked for Horace Walpole. The structure is symmetrical with statues of saints in recessed

niches, traceries on the windows, towers and numerous pinnacles.[40]

Kew is the prototypical example of the Rococo gardens' incorporation of borrowings

from various times and places, which emphasized the exchange between art and nature, and the

mix of cultures and styles.[41] They created a space that was not constrained from rigorous rules

and expectations of refined social behavior. Just like the architects escape from the systemized

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[39] Zhang, 87
[40] British Library, "Plan and elevation of the Gothic Cathedral", accessed May 10, 2019
[41] Milam, 121

rules of Classical architecture, visitors could experience freedom from courtly behavior and the aesthetics of exotic fantasies.[42]

This mode of gardens flourished in England, Ireland, France, and Germany between 1740 and 1780, and had a significant impact on English Garden design.

By examining the pattern books in the 1750s, the accounts of significant Gothic revivalists, and the English Gardens, I show the origin and reasons for the juxtaposition of Gothic and Chinese by architects in mid-eighteenth century. Though the Gothic and Chinese design was not authentic, the Georgian Gothic and chinoiserie were important in English Art History.

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[42] Millam, 121

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