Cultural Reflections on Porcelain in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands

Weststeijn, M.A.

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One of the 17th century’s greatest admirers of Chinese porcelain was Willem Kalf (1619–1693), some of whose paintings demonstrate meticulous attention to its material and optical properties. His 1662 Still Life, now in Madrid, features an extraordinary Chinese jar with representations of the Eight Immortals (Fig. 1).² Kalf, who probably had no understanding of Taoist iconography, may have been aware that this was not only an exotic object but also an antiquity of sorts, dating from a few decades earlier.³ As its material constitution was still unknown at the time, he could also have appreciated porcelain as a curious sample of the natural world, just like decorative tableware made from ostrich eggs or the nautilus goblets that also feature in his work. In this painting, moreover, the porcelain’s reflective sheen, rendered in meticulous detail with a scattering of dot-like highlights, is paired with other surfaces of various degrees of transparency: the drinking vessels, plate and half-peeled lemon.

Besides this very sophisticated example, porcelain features in hundreds of still lifes painted in the Northern and Southern Netherlands in the 17th century.⁴ In many cases, it may have been included as no more than a fitting container for the flowers or foodstuffs that artists wanted to represent, but it was also a subject in its own right among silverware, glass, and other precious goods. Assuming from the degree of connoisseurship that a work such as Kalf’s implies, one would expect there to have been some awareness among these paintings’ owners of the origin, history, and cultural significance of Chinese rarities. As the present book clarifies, uniquely for the Dutch situation, porcelain – either the Chinese original or a Dutch earthenware imitation that was also known as porcelyn – was a standard domestic good among all layers of society. Regardless of their social background, many Dutch people saw and handled it on a regular basis. Artists in particular lavished attention on its singular optical qualities. Moreover, potteries, especially in Delft, tried to recreate porcelain’s surface, which implied an even more accurate material knowledge; artisans then decorated the imitations of Asian ceramics with themes and styles that purportedly looked Chinese.

Even though – or perhaps because – porcelain was a common presence in Dutch houses, it was seldom discussed. In the light of the sheer volume of the China trade and the ubiquity of Chinese-style ceramics, references in literary sources are remarkably rare. Before the letters by Father François Xavier d’Entrecolles (1712–1722), a Jesuit missionary who visited the kilns in Jingdezhen to inspect the manufacturing process, European texts gave scant attention to porcelain’s origin, material, and shape, or to the decoration’s themes and styles. It is understandable that the Delft potters who had mastered ‘Chinese’ brushwork did not leave a written record – their imitations had to pass for authentic.⁵ Yet the contrast between the abundance of visual material and the paucity of written sources is without parallel in Dutch 17th-century culture, which was highly literate and developed a vibrant tradition of artistic theory. Oil paintings are therefore the most eloquent testimonies to the Low Countries’ fascination with porcelain.

This observation surprises all the more in light of porcelain’s many cultural and natural-historical associations. The artists’ interest seems to reflect the insight that Dutchmen handling a piece of Chinese ceramics would be touching a sample of the most
advanced chemical manufacturing that they would ever come across. They would have admired how the body, fashioned with extraordinary thinness, became transparent, resulting in a seemingly impossible combination of fragility and glittering hardness. Modern science tells us that ordinary steel cannot cut porcelain and that it is a great isolator of heat and electrical current. In pre-modern Europe, by contrast, porcelain was associated with magic and medicine. Recreating it presented a serious challenge to Dutch-trained artisans and natural philosophers. Porcelain was thus an essential ingredient, and in material and quantitative terms by far the most substantial one, of the ‘Chinese century’ in the Low Countries: from the first baptism of a Chinese sailor in Middelburg in 1600, to the closing decades when the VOC reduced its direct trading with the Middle Kingdom. These exchanges impacted on various scholarly disciplines. But it was the reputation of Chinese medicine, chemistry and technical inventions that provided the main framework for the appreciation of porcelain.

**EMBLEMS AND CLASSICAL SCHOLARSHIP**

Art history’s standard approach for establishing the meaning of objects, iconography, seems inadequate to decode the cultural associations that were connected to porcelain in the Dutch context. First of all, rather than the objects’ imagery, it was their material quality that attracted artists and, probably, buyers in general. Even emblem books, which usually tried to identify thematic symbolism, foregrounded porcelain’s materiality, as two of the century’s most popular authors exemplify. Jan de Brune’s (1588–1658) engraving (Fig. 2) shows a gentleman checking the quality of a bowl by its sound: porcelain rings beautifully when struck, something that no European ceramic could do. The material’s combined hardness and fragility could express a characteristic contrast in the Dutch moralists’ ideology that emphasised the transience of visible reality; Jan Luyken (1649–1712) described the vases in his image as without real substance, only catering ‘to the eye’s desire’ (Fig. 3). In the many still lifes that depict porcelain, such references are usually present only implicitly: perhaps
when combined with fresh flowers or fruit, such as Pieter Claesz’s (c.1597–1660) still life featuring spots of rot on the apples in a Wanli bowl, the association with transience was underscored (Fig. 4). Yet often it simply seems to have been the painter’s attraction to porcelain’s optical qualities that motivated his choices. When a Chinese ceramic object appeared in a more elaborate setting, such as Abraham Bloemaert’s (1564–1651) Lot and his Daughters (Fig. 5), Jacob Campo Weyerman (1677–1747) explained that it was included for its visual allure; he also highlighted its appropriateness in amorous adventures, as a gift for a female lover.9

Classical antiquity, which was the habitual basis for learned discussions, likewise failed to provide the right interpretive framework. Humanists were obviously at a loss when approaching the foreign objects from their erudite background. Around 1550 two renowned philologists, Hieronymus Cardanus (1501–1576) and Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484–1558), tried to relate porcelain to Pliny’s account of the ‘myrrhine vases’.10 In the Netherlands, Johannes Pontanus (1571–1639) and Bernardus Paludanus (1550–1633) took up this theme again. Pontanus, who famously noted in *Rerum et urbis Amstelodamensis historia* (1611) that the VOC had imported so much porcelain to Amsterdam that it seemed like an ordinary household good, addressed the *vasa myrrhina* and admitted a certain resemblance except in the matter of colours, wherein Pliny described the beauty and variety of hues, ‘and’, said Pontanus, ‘what Pliny calls colours are not seen on the porcelains of our time, which, so far as I know, have only blue mingled with white’.11

The inadequacy of emblematics and classical scholarship to discuss the Dutch reception of Chinese ceramics confirms that the materiality of porcelain, more than the shapes or decoration, conjured up new intellectual associations through its sheen, translucency and hardness. To understand these we should involve the artists’ interest in materials, in chemistry with its medical and even alchemical associations, and in porcelain as among the exotic creations of the natural world.
PORCELAIN: A CREATION OF NATURE OR ART?

We may begin our analysis with Jan van Kessel’s large series of the Four Continents (1664–1666), which features porcelain prominently as part of an encyclopaedic display of the world’s treasures. What first catches the eye is that Chinese ceramics do not occur in the context of the continent of Asia, but in relation to Africa (Figs. 6–9). The left-hand side of this polyptych’s central panel (Fig. 8) displays a set of related objects: a sizeable porcelain dish, a multi-fluted goblet in Venetian style in the foreground and a bottle containing a bright pink liquid. The juxtaposition of glass and porcelain may have referenced actual European experiments in recreating porcelain, which had initially taken place in 16th-century Italy: most of these involved glass making. Porcelain’s transparency made potters conclude that sand or ground glass was an essential ingredient. Venetian studios even produced a smoky kind of glass called porcellana contrafatta: it imitated porcelain’s colour and sheen but none of its hardness. In van Kessel’s composition, the putto brandishing an alembic and a barometer may furthermore have conjured up the association with chemistry in general.

On the image’s right-hand side, by contrast, various Chinese dishes are displayed among shells, gems, and coral (Fig. 9). This ensemble seems to refer to the etymology of the term porcelain that related its constitution to seashells, harking back to Marco Polo’s day when the term porcellana derived from a type of thin white shell resembling a piglet (porcellino). This contention, which was repeated in travelogues up to the 17th century, may explain why van Kessel associated porcelain with Africa and its beaches. Yet the inclusion of coral and gems reflects the much wider lexical field that the term porcelain could cover in early modern inventories, ranging from
mother-of-pearl and crystal to any kind of valuable ceramic.\(^{15}\)

In fact, the first contacts between Europeans and East Asians involved a profusion of theories about porcelain’s origin and manufacture. They are summed up in Thomas Browne’s (1605–1682) widely read work of popular science, *Pseudodoxia* (first ed. 1646), which depended on the reports of, among others, the Dutch explorer Jan Huygen van Linschoten (c.1563–1611).\(^{16}\) The book relates a number of common erroneous assumptions about porcelain, beginning with someone who had joined Magellan’s circumnavigation, Duarte Barbosa (c.1480–1521): it was supposedly made from ground seashells, eggshells, egg white and other materials that matured for a century underground, increasing in value with the years. According to the humanist Guido Panciroli (1523–1599), beaten eggs and gypsum were useful ingredients too. For a more reliable account, however, the *Pseudodoxia* referred to an envoy from Batavia to China in 1615, who identified a specific clay from the region of ‘Hoang’ as essential. Although he witnessed the production with his own eyes, he found that its details were a secret to be passed on from father to son: porcelain was ‘made out of earth, not laid under ground, but hardened in the Sunne and winde, [in] the space of fourty yeeres’. Only in 1665 were the Dutch informed in more detail on the origin and transport of the clay, when Johan Nieuhof’s (1618–1672) famous travelogue appeared.\(^{17}\)

If similar associations were indeed pertinent to van Kessel’s image, it presented porcelain as both a creation of artifice (related to glass making and chemistry) and a creation of nature (among shells, coral, and gems). This was not an incorrect characterisation: porcelain was on the one hand the result of the advanced stage of Chinese chemistry and ceramic industry; on the other hand, its main

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*Fig. 6*  
Jan van Kessel (1636–1679), *The Four Continents: Africa*, 1664. Oil on copper, 48.6 x 67.8 cm (central panel). Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 1912. © bpk | Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.
Fig. 7
Detail of Fig. 6 (central panel).
Fig. 8
Detail of Fig. 6 (central panel, detail of left-hand side).

Fig. 9
Detail of Fig. 6 (central panel, detail of right-hand side).
Fig. 10
Adriaen van Utrecht (1599–1652), Allegory of Fire, 1636.
Oil on canvas, 117 x 154 cm.
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, inv. no. 4731. © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, photo: J. Geleyns / Ro scan.
ingredient, kaolin, was only found in the region of Gaoling at the time. In Europe, collections of curiosities expressed this dual nature, as porcelain could feature among the artificialia as well as the naturalia, something confirmed by its presence in depictions of galleries.\(^{28}\) According to the classifications of natural philosophy, porcelain might be associated more specifically with the element of fire: one of van Kessel’s works depicted chinaware – or another kind of ceramic that imitated its blue-and-white aesthetic – in relation to this element, together with gold and silver vessels; and Adriaen van Utrecht’s (1599–1652) painting of the same theme (Fig. 10) featured three dishes of Chinese porcelain that attracted visitors even from abroad.\(^{29}\) In any account, the reputation of Chinese medical knowledge seemed to confirm the much older suggestion, dating back to the Middle Ages, that porcelain could have apotropaic qualities, in particular that it would break upon coming into contact with poison (cups were therefore set in metal mounts).\(^{18}\)

Unsurprisingly, the aforementioned Pseudodoxia expressed scepticism about porcelain’s alleged properties, only admitting its beneficial value in cases of dysentery:

> all food and drink that is served in porcelain acquires a better taste and delights the eye .... Conserves appear much shinier in a porcelain dish than in a silver one, and fruit acquires a new gloss by the porcelain’s celestial blue.

Witsen had a great interest in Asia: by 1670 he had consulted another Chinese visitor for his book Noord en Oost Tartarye. He contacted the Chinese community in Batavia to translate an ancient inscription from his art collection, which in all probability also included porcelain.\(^{27}\) In any account, the reputation of Chinese medical knowledge seemed to confirm the much older suggestion, dating back to the Middle Ages, that porcelain could have apotropaic qualities, in particular that it would break upon coming into contact with poison (cups were therefore set in metal mounts).\(^{18}\)

The author admitted that porcelain’s failure to demonstrate medicinal qualities might have been due to the fact that the Chinese had severely limited the export of their finest dishes. By 1723, in any event, Weyerman held the less lofty view that porcelain contributed to the taste of the food:

> All food and drink that is served in porcelain acquires a better taste and delights the eye .... Conserves appear much shinier in a porcelain dish than in a silver one, and fruit acquires a new gloss by the porcelain’s celestial blue.

Weyerman’s writings on China were of a satirical nature: yet his many remarks on the medicinal properties of Chinese imports, especially tea and ginseng, probably reflect beliefs widely held in the early 18th century.\(^{19}\)

### CHEMISTRY

The range of associations connected with porcelain, even though not always helpful, may have contributed to the Dutch enthusiasm for its recreation. It was a German prince who funded the solution of the ‘secret’ of making porcelain, but collectors and artisans in the Netherlands had laid the groundwork. Various scholars seem to have intuited correctly that the use of specific clay was necessary. Indeed, Paludanus’s scientific collection already contained kaolin, if we
may believe Duke Frederick I of Württemberg who visited in 1592: inspecting two chests of all sorts of manufactured objects produced in India, China, and both Indies, he found the ‘clay from which porcelain is made’. Paludanus had personally met the Portuguese traveller Damião de Gois (1502–1574) who had described Asian ceramics ‘made of shells so expensive that one piece costs several slaves’, yet the Dutchman took a critical stance and emphasised that porcelain was merely a clay product. Johannes Blaeu’s Great Atlas (1655) likewise confirmed that, in contrast to popular beliefs, a certain type of clay ‘very clear and shiny like fine sand’ was the main ingredient of a procedure that was otherwise kept secret. Yet in their attempts to reconstruct the manufacturing process, the Dutch failed to locate the right materials. The VOC ultimately tried to import white clay from South Africa, which proved inadequate; Weyerman, in the early 18th century, still noted that kaolin was ‘as valuable as gold, pearls, and gems’. In the end, Delft studios bought inferior materials from Britain and the Spanish Netherlands to make the faience imitations which, in order to mimic the brightness and sheen of porcelain, had to be fired at least twice: in addition to a white tin glaze covering the brownish body, a transparent lead glaze protected the decoration. Yet mastery of these operations turned Delft into the capital of Europe’s ceramic industry. Unsurprisingly, two Dutch potters, Gerrit van Malsem (1682–1733) and his stepfather, eventually contributed to the solution of the secret of porcelain in 1708. They had been invited to Saxony to work with the young alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger (1682–1719) and the scientist Ehrenfried Walter von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708) who was himself schooled in Leiden and on friendly terms with eminent Dutch scholars.

Many historians have dwelled on the remarkable story of this team’s discovery, which was both a sophisticated feat of analytical chemistry and the result of an alchemist’s belief in transmutation. To relinquish the belief that glass was an essential ingredient, Böttger’s background was essential, in that he believed that simply by firing clay he could ‘transmute’ the raw material into something as transparent and valuable as porcelain (he intuited correctly that all clays turn vitreous once fired at a sufficiently high temperature). In fact, throughout the 18th century porcelain makers continued to emphasise that mastery of the ‘arcanum’, the procedure of porcelain manufacture, involved the broad range of experiments associated with alchemists’ studios. Potters’ marks, for instance, referred to the current symbols for chemical elements; a bowl from an 18th-century Danish porcelain factory, inscribed with an epigram extolling the material’s qualities, even depicted a Faustian figure in his laboratory, inspecting a distillation vessel. It is worth questioning to what extent the Dutch appreciation of Chinese porcelain was inspired by a similar interest in natural-historical experiments. The Middle Kingdom’s reputation for alchemy had been already discussed in the early 17th century. By 1685, Vossius extolled Chinese chemia (chemistry or alchemy), which he said had been evolving for 2,000 years if not the 4,600 that some had claimed for it, and he highlighted that it served the pursuit of longevity. In fact, one of the most conspicuous cultural parallels between 17th-century Europe and the Middle Kingdom was the shared interest in alchemy, The recognition of this parallel, however, actually hampered the exchange of information. The Jesuits were the main agents in the exchange of scientific knowledge between East and West, and the Low Countries played an important intermediary role by publishing and illustrating their writings. Yet the missionaries gave short shrift to chemistry, as they feared being associated with alchemy, which they sought to eradicate rather than promote as a superstitious practice. Thus the situation arose that while Tschirnhaus’s group frantically sought the formula for porcelain, of the Europeans who could do so none simply asked the Chinese. The Jesuits’ reticence, obviously, only contributed to the far-fetched scientific expectations that Europeans already tended to attach to porcelain.

It is difficult to establish how precisely these associations contributed to artists’ interest in porcelain. Delft was the obvious focus point: according to Dirck van Bleijswijck (1639–1681), ‘nowhere in [the Netherlands] porcelain is made in a more subtle or refined manner as in this city, in which they appear to imitate the Chinese most successfully’. Delftware was called porcelaen and its dependence on Asian aesthetics was not something to be ignored: one of the potter’s studios was even named ‘China’. It is likely that this industry impacted the wider art world. Painters and potters shared a single guild and visited the same glassmakers to buy cobalt glass, the basis for the blue pigment of smalt. Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) himself, whose interest in the natural sciences, especially optics, is increasingly being recognised, had a demonstrable interest in Chinese ceramics. In his Girl with Pearl Necklace (1664), a large vase decorated in blue-and-white references authentic
Fig. 11
Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675),
Girl with Pearl Necklace, 1662–65.
Oil on canvas, 56.1 x 47.4 cm.
Chinese wares very convincingly and supports an intricate play of reflections (Fig. 11). The light falling through the window on the left bounces off the girl’s face and dress before hitting not just the mirror but also the porcelain vase. The vase’s left-hand side, furthermore, reflects the second window of Vermeer’s studio, which is to the left of the picture plane; the porcelain’s mirroring qualities thus help to widen the suggested space outside the frame, involving the viewer more completely. The painting is suggestive of the measure to which a Delft painter’s interest in optics extended to the experiments in artisan’s studios, attempting to recreate the reflective qualities of an unknown chemical substance.

One question that this association poses is whether painters would have imitated potters in their material experiments. One of the potters’ attempts required mixing ground Chinese porcelain through their clays. Replicating this procedure in oil painting would have been at least technically possible: artists often used silicate as a filler or preparatory layer. Yet this would not have contributed to the desired optical effects, as the refractory index of lead white (the most commonly used white) would have been so much greater than that of a silicate mixture. The pigment of smalt would have presented another, perhaps more obvious, parallel as it contained the cobalt used by both the Chinese potters and their Delft imitators. However, this cheap and unstable pigment seems to have been avoided in still lifes. As Arie Wallert’s research has revealed, depicting porcelain sometimes involved more expensive materials. Kalf, for instance, mixed ultramarine with verdigris to arrive at the right blue for a Wanli bowl in one of his still lifes (the purplish hue of the ultramarine was cooled with green) (Fig. 12). This comes as a surprise, as the cheaper azurite, already of the desired greenish-blue colour, would have been a logical choice. Kalf may therefore have chosen ultramarine, which was made from ground lapis lazuli, for its scientific associations. As argued above, porcelain and gems were deemed to be closely related as precious naturalia coming from Asia. Representing porcelain by using ultramarine would then have expressed a painter’s involvement in the scientists’ search for the origins of the foreign material.

Whereas there is little doubt that porcelain’s optical qualities attracted masters such as Vermeer and Kalf, the association with chemistry and alchemy (which were not separate disciplines of knowledge at the time) is also worth considering. On a metaphorical level, painters sometimes thought of themselves as alchemists and of their art as ‘transmuting’ materials into precious figures: this had actually been commonplace in texts about painting since Giorgio Vasari had attributed Jan van Eyck’s invention of oil paint to alchemical experimentation. Hendrik Goltzius’s well-documented activities as an alchemist were even part of his artistic identity. Perhaps the repute of Chinese alchemy, and the idea that the manufacture of porcelain would be the outcome of an alchemical process, contributed to the attraction that this foreign material exerted on painters in the oil medium. Masters who focused on representing intricate reflections and surface textures, harkening back to van Eyck’s reputation, may have looked at porcelain with similar associations in mind.

Alchemy was by no means an out-dated ambition by the late 17th century; yet among some, including Tschirnhaus’s patron Augustus the Strong, the desire to make gold was gradually replaced by the desire to make porcelain.

CERAMICS AS EXOTICA

In van Kessel’s image, as we have seen, porcelain was associated with Africa rather than Asia: this may have been for stylistic as well as iconographic reasons. Black people were not infrequently paired with porcelain in Dutch art. Juriaen van Streeck (1632–1687), for instance, made a series of fulsome works featuring two categories of ‘commodities’ from the Republic’s trade: slaves, who were exported from West Africa to the Caribbean and porcelain, which was imported from Asia. Besides exposing the reach of the Dutch seaborne empire, the artist seems to have appreciated the visual contrast between the soft darkness of the black slave’s skin and the porcelain’s reflective sheen (Fig. 13).

As these images suggest, the porcelain trade was a main element of the incipient global commerce that had one of its main hubs in the Low Countries. As early as 1520, Albrecht Dürer acquired three pieces of porcellana from a Portuguese merchant in Antwerp. Confirming Pontanus’s statement that porcelain featured prominently among the goods imported by the VOC, a satirical poem by Simon van Beaumont (1574–1654) underscores the ubiquity of goods from the East and West in Amsterdam, describing a rustic visitor shopping for luxury items including ‘satin, damask, Turkish carpets, Milanese under-stockings, beautiful porcelain’, who ended up with

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Fig. 12
Willem Kalf (1619–1693),
Still Life with Silver Jug and a
Wanli Bowl, 1655–1660. Oil on
canvas, 73.8 cm × 65.1 cm,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam,
inv. no. SK-A-199.
its taste for things Chinese. At times decorated with fake characters. By the turn of the century, the apparently widely popular taste for Chinese calligraphy, painting, and porcelain was ridiculed in satirical journals such as Haagse Mercurius and Amsterdamsche Hermes. This data suggests that porcelain may have conjured up more general associations than the scientific ones outlined above.

We may attempt to sketch this broader outlook on the Middle Kingdom among the lettered collectors of Chinese art.

PORCELAIN AND THE CHINESE UTOPIA

The trade in Asian goods inspired some to develop a highly positive view of Chinese civilisation. Among all imports, books would have been only the tip of a far larger pyramid that included applied art, fabrics, ceramics, spices, and tea. Even though no one except the odd Asian visitor was able to read these texts, the suspicion that the Chinese had older written sources than the Europeans proved an irresistible source of speculation to some Dutch scholars, who engaged in Chinese chronology, This topic ultimately inspired Vossius to doubt the validity of the biblical account, as according to the Chinese texts, their history spanned 5,000 years, antedating the Great Flood.

Others emphasised Chinese excellence in technical and scientific discoveries, such as Ten Rhijne, who wrote that ‘among the Chinese frequent examples are to be found of discoveries, especially in the arts, which other nations made independently whereas the Chinese had come upon them long before.

Eventually, Johannes Blaeu’s (1596–1673) work on Europe’s first detailed maps of China and Jacob Golius’s (1596–1667) seminal attempt to print the characters were just two expressions of an exceptionally vivid public debate on China in the Dutch Republic, thus the first European translation of Confucius was into Dutch (1675, by Pieter van Hoorn) and the first European tragedy set entirely in China was Joost van den Vondel’s Zungchin (1667), followed by Johannes Antonides van der Goes’s Trazil (1685).

It is likely that this debate on the Middle Kingdom was grounded implicitly on the physical presence of Chinese material culture in Dutch households. The interplay between material culture and intellectual discussions comes to the fore most literally in Vossius’s Variorum observationum liber (1685). Besides
Fig. 13
Juriaen van Streeck (1632–1687), Still Life with a Moor. Oil on canvas, signed, 90.5 x 80 cm, formerly with art dealer Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam.
his positive accounts of Chinese medicine and chemistry, Vossius also discussed ceramics and their decoration, the ‘small containers and vessels’, ‘pottery dishes’, and ‘simple household wares’ that despite being rusticus (plain, for everyday use) were outfitted with imagery that surpassed the Western tradition. ‘Those who say that Chinese paintings do not represent shadows, criticise what they actually should have praised’, Vossius contended, arguing at length that the draughtsmanship of the Chinese was so much more subtle than that of the West that, even without using strong shadows, it managed to evoke depth and atmosphere. This was, in fact, a unique standpoint in a European context. Previously Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), founder of the Jesuit mission, had criticised Chinese brushwork for its lack of lifelikeness and his remarks were repeated by Nieuhof, whose artist’s sensibility should have made him a keener judge. Up to the early 18th century, d’Entrecolles, who had observed the hou pê (porcelain painters) from close up, remained extremely dismissive of them:

save some of them, in Europe they could only pass for apprentices of a few months. The entire knowledge of these painters, and in general of all Chinese painters, is based on no principle at all and consists only in a certain routine helped by a very limited imagination.

When an English visitor, Sir Francis Child (1641/2–1713), saw the factories in Delft in 1697, he even stated that the Delft potters ‘paint better than the Chinese’ when decorating their ‘porcelain’, failing only in imitating the thinness of the ceramic body.

In fact, Vossius’s positive statements about Chinese ceramics and its decoration can be explained by his more general utopian vision of China. Not only did he state that the Chinese excelled in art and music, literature and science, but also he saw their civilisation as altogether superior: a realisation of a Platonic Republic in which the Emperor responded to the judgment of philosophers, who in turn responded to the people. It was in all aspects a stark foil to the European situation, which was riven by wars and religious disagreements during Vossius’s lifetime.

This Chinese Utopia, connecting ceramics to philosophy, foreshadowed the fashion for chinoiserie that would evolve in the 18th century, up to Voltaire’s philosophical sinophilia: by that time, the images on applied art, representing leisurely Chinese in paradisical gardens, seemed to confirm the idea that these people lived happier lives than the Europeans. In the later Dutch Republic, however,

Vossius’s Chinese preferences all but disappeared from public debate, in tandem with a general waning of the scholarly interest in the Middle Kingdom. When the Amsterdam philosopher Cornelis de Pauw (1739–1799) returned to China’s claims of scientific, intellectual, and political prowess, his statements on porcelain were negative, perhaps implicitly reacting to Vossius. De Pauw tried to debunk European admiration for the secret of porcelain manufacture, about which the Chinese had kept just as silent as they had about gunpowder. He denied any relation to the vasa myrrha, contrasting the Chinese wares’ low prices with the prodigious amounts mentioned by Pliny. Ultimately he even criticised technical aspects, stating, for instance, that a firing method intended to create patterns of craquelure (called yao-pien) reduced the decorative process to chance rather than artistic intention.

De Pauw’s stance was in turn contested by a Chinese Jesuit, Aloysius Ko (Gao Leisi, 1734–c.1790), who had studied physics, chemistry, and industrial technology in France.

One thing this final controversy seems to confirm is the integrated nature of ideas on material culture and on Chinese civilisation and philosophy in general. It was only in the Dutch Republic that imported ceramics were so ubiquitous that China was physically present in an incontrovertible manner. Since European reports about Chinese society could obviously be dismissed as coloured by the translation and transmission process, and even the images represented on porcelain wares were distorted by the ambition to cater to European buyers, there was but one presence that was unmistakably Chinese: the material itself. In Dutch households, this material was seen and handled on a regular basis. In most cases, this probably occurred without much thought being given to its Asian origins; but it is nevertheless likely that the presence of material culture must be understood as the implicit basis for the topicality of China in intellectual discussions. Without the many porcelain dishes on the chimneypieces of Amsterdam, the first European translation of Confucius might well not have been in Dutch.
NOTES TO CHAPTER X-XI

1. For this chapter I am indebted to Suzanne.
The same Wanli bowl features in two of Kalf's huisraad (1712): ‘De boeddhistisch-boerse, des te dragen, ... Maar dienen enkel 't welbehaagen,/
deel 2
De subtilitate,
aarn den Rijn: Canaletto, 1982, p. 355 (Letter of en mededelingen over de porseleinfabricage uit oude F. X. d'Entrecolles, Amsterdam: Kloppenburch, 1624, Emblem XXIII Tot Oogen lust en Pronkery’

7. Of course, they may also have wanted to keep his still lifes, for which he selected only authentic Chinese wares, usually of a very refined sort, suggest that he had acquired a sophisticated taste.


4. Of course, they may also have wanted to keep studio secrets for themselves.


6. ‘De man kan, wijst zijn reden an Wat de man kan, wijst zijn reden an

7. ‘T Zyn Vaten, doch zy doen geen nut,/Om Spyze op den aarde... De Conspuren zijn veel verglaasd in een schotel van porcellae, dan in een schotel van alver, en het fruit kracht een nieuw waessem door het herlijk hemelsblauw van het porcelyn’, J. C. Weyerman 1723 (op. cit. note 8), p. 356.


12. In 1653, Jan van Riebeeck sent samples of white- firing clay from the Cape to Batavia, to see whether it could be used to make porcelain. It could not.

13. ‘Enge behalve Aarde ... die in een gelt geaat met het Goud, met de Paaren, en met de edele Gestennten’, J. C. Weyerman 1723 (op. cit. note 8), p. 365.

14. See J. D. van Dam, Delftse Porcelaine. Dutch Delftware 1620–1850, Zwolle: Waanders, 2004, on the technical details of the production and the import of marl (clay with high lime content) from Tournai and Norwich, which the Delft potters added to their mixtures.

15. J. Berger Hochstrasser, Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 148, also notes the seminal role
of early Dutch experiments in red stoneware. Tschirnhaus, for instance, visited Ary de Milde’s workshop in Delft.


41. According to d’Entrecolles lapis lazuli was also used in the decoration of Chinese porcelain. D’Entrecolles 1982 (op. cit. note 19), p. 360–362.


44. Around 1657, Augustus the Strong even had an entire set of tableware made from enamelled solid gold that mimicked porcelain; see J. Gleeson 1998 (op. cit. note 39), p. 80.


48. Compare the candlesticks made c.1650–1700 by Adrianus Knox’s studio, presently in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (or the candlestick, illustrated as Fig. 10 of Chapter 13 of this book), and the polychrome tile panel made in Delft c.1690–1730 (inv. nos. BK-1955-72-A/B) which, curiously, features black-skinned figures against a Chinese backdrop), also in the Rijksmuseum.


50. According to d’Entrecolles lapis lazuli was also used in the decoration of Chinese porcelain. D’Entrecolles 1982 (op. cit. note 19), p. 360–362.

51. On the Dutch export of ceramics to Suriname and plants.


4. For transcriptions of the estate inventories of the potteries De Metaalz Pot (1691) and Het Jonge Moraiaasbouw (1692) see M. S. van Aken-Fehmers 1999 (op. cit. note 1), pp. 194–197, 210–211 and for overviews of production range and price lists Appendices 1–2.

29. For Kraak porcelain and the Delft imitations see M. S. van Aken-Fehmers, op. cit. note 4, pp. 67–77.


32. For a polychrome dish from the delftware pottery Het Moraiaasbouw, 1680–85, decorated with figures from Dapper’s Beschrijving des Keizerryks, see R. D. Aronson, S. M. R. M. van Aken-Fehmers, Dutch Delftware, including selections from the Collection of Dr. F.H. Fentener van Vlissingen and a rare group of I.W. Hofstee’s drawings (Hogenhout, 1987, pp. 13, 142. For imitations in textiles see F. Ulrichs, ‘De landelijke pottenopbrengst van vermelde firma’s in de 17e eeuw’, Het Nieuwe顾荷, 1988, no. 258).