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From Sacred Symbol to Exotic Image: Orientalism and the Reconfiguration of the Pagoda in China and Britain

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Abstract. This study takes the Nanjing Porcelain Pagoda and the Kew Great Pagoda as examples to explore how two architectural forms, though culturally distinct, share structural similarities, thereby analyzing how architectural forms are reinterpreted within cross-cultural contexts. While the Nanjing pagoda emerged from the system of Buddhist cosmology, imperial authority, and highly regulated craftsmanship in the early Ming dynasty, the Kew pagoda was produced within the intellectual, economic, and aesthetic framework of 18th-century Britain, shaped by Enlightenment knowledge systems and imperial expansion. Through a comparative analysis of historical context, decorative translation, particularly the transformation of dragon imagery, and construction logic, this study argues that the resemblance between the two pagodas does not indicate direct cultural continuity, but a process of selective reinterpretation and reconfiguration. The Great Pagoda of Kew is understood as a reconstructed form shaped by Western modes of perception, technical constraints, and representational desires. Methodologically, the study adopts Orientalism not as a fixed historical condition, but as an analytical lens through which to examine how architectural meanings are produced, transformed, and re-encoded. It demonstrates that architecture operates as a medium of cultural negotiation, revealing both the connections and asymmetries embedded in cross-cultural exchange.

Keywords: The Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing, The Great Pagoda of Kew, Orientalism, Cross-cultural Representation, Cultural Appropriation

1. Introduction

The Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing and the Great Pagoda of Kew both feature multi-tiered structures and are visually similar. However, they emerged from entirely different historical and cultural contexts, and the construction logic, cultural significance, and ideological foundations behind them are fundamentally distinct.

From a historical perspective, the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing was built during the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty (15th century). It was not only an important symbol of the legitimacy of imperial power but also a product of the high integration of Buddhist beliefs, national order, and craftsmanship systems. Its construction reflected the strict regulations of the Ming Dynasty's officialdom on architectural forms, material grades, and symbolic systems. In contrast, the Great Pagoda of Kew emerged in the social context of the British Enlightenment in the 18th century. Its

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appearance was closely related to imperial expansion, the encyclopedic knowledge system, and the aesthetic interest in Exotic Wonders. As a landscape structure in the royal garden, it did not serve religious functions but just stood at one end of the botanical garden in a form for visual appreciation. Therefore, the two seemingly similar buildings actually responded to completely different social structures, ideologies, and cultural needs. It is precisely this surface similarity but fundamental difference that this article attempts to explore how the two buildings were endowed with completely different symbolic meanings in different historical contexts and further explore the process of translation, reconstruction, and reinterpretation that architectural forms undergo in cross-cultural transmission.

The structure of this article is arranged as follows. It begins with the background discussions of the two contexts, and combine with the theory of Orientalism as a methodology supplement to the full text. Subsequently, the article begins to explore and focus on the decorative elements, especially the translation process of the classic symbolic image of dragon in the two pagodas, discussing how it undergoes semantic transformation and symbolic reconstruction in cross-cultural communication. The last chapter will integrate the previous discussions and arguments, reflect on the role of architecture in cross-cultural communication, and explore how aesthetics and power jointly shape the meaning of architecture, thereby summarizing the complexity and multiple possibilities of architecture in cultural exchange.

2. History background of two programmes

Both the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing and the Great Pagoda of Kew have unique historical contexts. The Great Bao'en Temple and Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing served as an important venue for Emperor Yongle to hold Buddhist ceremonies in memory of his parents and were a typical embodiment of the combination of Buddhist faith and political legitimacy. The Kew Gardens and Great Pagoda of Kew, on the other hand, were a typical representation of the integration of exotic imagination, natural order and imperial cultural taste in the context of the late Enlightenment period in 18th-century Britain. Therefore, both the historical background of the country will be mentioned in this part. Additionally, Orientalism, as the main background knowledge for the discussion of the Great Pagoda of Kew, will also be introduced in this paragraph, along with the European art forms under Orientalism.

2.1. The Jingnan Campaign and the relationship between Emperor Yongle and Buddhism

At the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, the Ming dynasty underwent a profound internal power shift. Between 1399 and 1402, Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan, launched the Jingnan Campaign, a three-year civil war, under the banner of 'punishing treacherous court officials', eventually overthrowing his nephew, the Emperor Jianwen, and proclaiming himself emperor as Yongle [1]. The civil war destabilized the legitimacy of the regime and exposed weaknesses in the centralized system of governance.

In response to the legitimacy crisis, the Emperor Yongle undertook a systematic program of cultural restoration. This included commissioning large-scale literary compilations such as the Yongle Encyclopedia in 1408 and Veritable Records of the Ming Taizu in 1411 [1]. The former was intended to commemorate his father and the latter aimed at reinstating the intellectual order of the empire. He also initiated the reconstruction of several major imperial temples, including the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing, which was rebuilt in memory of his late mother [2]. All these actions,

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while reflecting Emperor Yongle's filial piety, also demonstrated his own political considerations and highlighted the strength and spiritual devotion of the dynasty.

The relationship between Emperor Yongle and Buddhism is also worth mentioning. During Emperor Yongle's childhood, he lived with his father, Zhu Yuanzhang, the Emperor Hongwu and founder of the Ming dynasty, who had previously experienced life as a Buddhist monk, which inevitably influenced Emperor Yongle [1]. After the Jingnan Campaign, he chose to use this 'foreign religion' to justify his political legitimacy rather than traditional Chinese Confucianism. Because according to the Confucian principle of primogeniture, he was, in any case, a usurper [3]. Moreover, his wife, Empress Xu, was also a devout Buddhist [4]. He loved his empress very much, and even after her death, he used Buddhist rituals to mourn his deceased wife, inviting eminent Buddhist monks to pray and offer blessings for the empress at Tianxi Temple, originally located on the site of the Great Bao'en Temple [5, 6].

2.2. The late age of Enlightenment and the trade in the British Imperial Expansion

From the early to mid-18th century, the Seven Years' War and the Treaty of Paris in 1763 established the British Empire as a major maritime and colonial power. Imperial expansion during this period enabled Britain to build a global network spanning the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, providing a stable space and institutional foundation for its subsequent trade and economic activities.

At that time, a large number of goods from China and other Asian regions, especially tea, porcelain, silk and lacquerware, entered British society through maritime trade and quickly integrated into the daily life of the upper class. After being introduced to Europe at the end of the 17th century, it gradually became widely consumed in Britain in the 18th century. It not only became a luxury for the upper class but also gradually spread to a wider range of social strata. However, from the 1730s, the British East India Company expanded its opium exports to China in order to address the trade deficit caused by the import of Eastern goods, despite the Qing government's official ban on opium as early as 1729 [7]. As a result, India, China, and the British Empire were subsequently incorporated into the same colonial trade system.

Parallel to the expansion of the empire, Britain in the late 18th century was also at a crucial stage in the development of the Enlightenment, which was at its peak. Reason, experience and systematic knowledge became important ways to understand the world. Natural history, botany and geography and other disciplines developed rapidly during this period. These disciplines emphasized understanding nature and the world as a whole through observation, classification and documentation. Against this backdrop, the world was regarded as an object that could be organized and described. The Orient gradually entered the British intellectual field of vision, but more often as an object of study and documentation rather than as a complete political system. This way of cognition provided an ideological basis for British society to understand the overseas world and also influenced the overall cognitive framework of nature, culture and space at that time.

2.3. Orientalism

Orientalism, as an indispensable background for the entire research, will be provided with a detail description in this section. The discussion will begin with an exploration of the term *Orient* itself, followed by an overview of the development of Oriental studies and Orientalism. Edward Said's Orientalism, published in 1978, and some of the critiques against it cannot be overlooked and will be mentioned in this paragraph. In this section, however, Said's theory and its critiques will be

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introduced descriptively rather than analytically. In addition, the discussion will consider how Orientalism has been manifested across various forms of artistic and cultural production.

2.3.1. Orient, Oriental study and Orientalism

The word Orient originates from the Latin word Oriens, meaning rising [8]. It originally referred to the direction where the sun rises, and later was extended to have a geographical meaning of The East. Initially, this word was used to denote the regions east of the Mediterranean or Southern Europe, which was the oriental world in the classical context. With the changes in historical context, the scope of its reference gradually expanded. It was often used to refer to East Asia, and sometimes it was also used to generally represent the Eastern Hemisphere, and it formed an opposing concept with Occident [9].

Oriental Studies, as an academic study, originated within the European knowledge system. It could be traced back to the Middle Ages when the Oriental Studies mainly served theology and focused on the study of texts in languages such as Hebrew and Arabic. In the 16th and 17th centuries, with the rise of humanism during the Renaissance and the expansion of European contact with the outside world, the Oriental Studies gradually shifted from theology to more systematic research on languages and history. By the 18th century, with the expansion of colonialism and the formation of global trade networks, Oriental Studies became institutionalized in European academic institutions, and its research scope expanded from the Near East to South Asia and East Asia [10]. By the 19th century, Oriental Studies had developed into a relatively mature academic system, closely intertwined with colonial administration, diplomatic practice, and the classification of knowledge, becoming an important knowledge framework for modern Europe to understand and construct the Eastern world.

During the formation of Oriental Studies, Orientalism gradually emerged as a style of representation through which Western artists, writers, and scholars depicted, imagined, and interpreted the Eastern world, especially East Asia, West Asia, and North Africa. It was not until 1978 that Edward Said conducted a critical historical examination and redefinition of this academic term in his book *Orientalism*. In his seminal work, Edward Said argued that Orientalism was not an objective study of the East, but rather a Western ideological construct shaped by imperial interests. As he contended, Orientalist knowledge functioned to define and control the 'Orient' by producing a system of representations that served Western political and cultural dominance. Orientalist imagination permeated not only texts, but also material spaces such as architecture, gardens, exhibitions, and urban ornamentation, eventually forming a distinct visual language of Orientalism within the European cultural sphere [11].

Undoubtedly, after Said's theory was published, it not only received support but also faced a lot of criticism. Most of these criticisms claimed that Edward Said had historical inaccuracies, changed the meaning in a semantic sleight of hand, or incited the current binary opposition between the East and the West [12-14]. Although most of the critics were raised in the 'western contexts' and had, in most cases, not lived for extended periods, or had only limited direct experience of the regions discussed in Orientalism.

2.3.2. The Orientalist imagination in multiple fields over the past three centuries

As mentioned before, Orientalism has gradually expanded from basic language translation to various fields in the changing of history contexts. Starting from *One Thousand and One Nights* (Or: Arabian Nights) (See *Figure 1.*) in the 18th century to the painting *Women of Algiers in their*

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Apartment by Eugène Delacroix in 1834 (See *Figure 2*), the account of artistic expressions with Orientalist features have gradually increased, although most of these works carry serious stereotypical influences that are imagined. This section will introduce the artistic expression process of Orientalism, which lasted nearly three hundred years, from aspects such as clothing, performing arts, royal gardens and domestic objects. Although these Orientalist works are richly varied under Western interpretation, they ultimately remain within European contexts. In the view of some scholars, their primary effect is little more than an exaggerated display of exoticism [15].

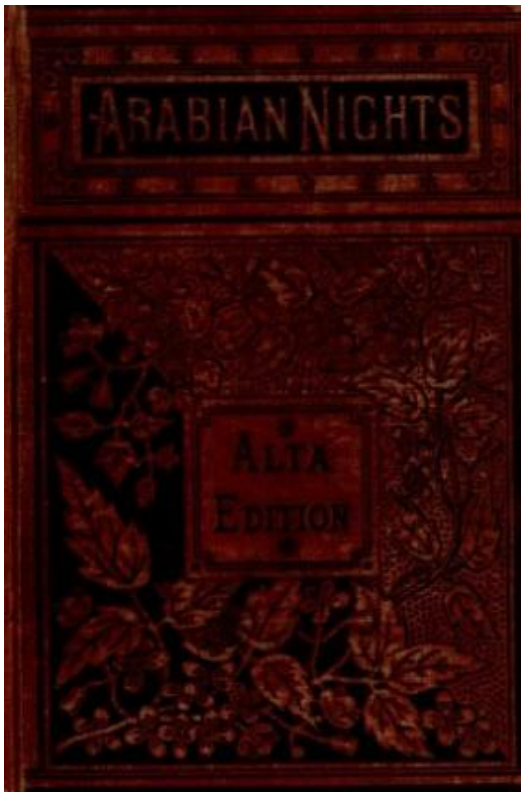

Figure 1. The Thousand and One Nights: or, The Arabian Nights' Entertainments, Philadelphia: Porter & Coates (published in 1890)

Figure 2. Femmes D'Alger Dans Leur Appartement, Eugène Delacroix (1834)

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Clothing has been greatly influenced by Orientalism over the past three centuries. From the 17th and 18th centuries, fabrics with Orientalist characteristics brought new patterns and possibilities to the Western clothing industry and quickly spread between Britain and France. At the first World Expo in Britain in 1851, Chinese silk clothing attracted the attention of Europeans (See *Figure 3.*). One such example of this hybridization can be found in a French-made and a Spanish-made cape in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which combine European forms with sixteenth-century Ming Dynasty velvet (See *Figure 4. & 5.*). These examples indicate that Orientalism in Western dress relied on selectively appropriated 'exotic' elements to enrich European fashion. While clothing carried political meanings, the circulation of textiles, which is rooted in Silk Road trade and later colonial networks, supported national wealth and expressed cultural and aesthetic values [15].

Figure 3. The Great Exhibition: China, 1851, Joseph Nash (1809–1878). Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 919956

Figure 4. Cape, France, second half 16th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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Figure 5. Cape, Spain, late 16th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Orientalism in performing arts, with the assistance of costumes, music and literary works, has presented the social entertainment of Europeans over the past three centuries. At that time, whether in courts or ballets, orientalism elements were incorporated (See *Figure 6.*). The costumes in these performing arts most directly demonstrated this feature, that is, almost any prominent part, whether it be hats, sleeves or collars, was called 'En Pagode' (See *Figure 7.*). This obsession with orientalism can be seen in Puccini's opera *Turandot* in the 20th century (See *Figure 8.*). The plot of *Turandot* is based on materials from the book *One Thousand and One Nights*, but it tells a story set in China and deliberately uses musical themes such as the folk '*Mo Li Hua*' (茉莉花, Jasmine Flower) from the Nanjing and Yangzhou region of Jiangsu Province.

Figure 6. Bal chinois donné par l'empereur une fois par an aux jours gras (Chinese Ball Given by the Emperor during the Carnival Season). France, c. 1780–1789. Engraving

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Figure 7. Chinois, dans Les Indes galantes (Chinese figure from Les Indes galantes). Engraving by Jean-Baptiste Martin, c. 1780–1789. From the series Ballets and dance scenes

Figure 8. Turandot, stage production at the Metropolitan Opera, New York. Photograph courtesy of The Metropolitan Opera. Source: The Metropolitan Opera, official website, HYPERLINK "https://www.metopera.org/season/2025-26-season/turandot/" https://www.metopera.org/season/2025-26-season/turandot/

Royal gardens, as the medium that best reflects the upper class, fully demonstrated the prevalence of Orientalism, reflecting the common trend among the upper class at that time of using foreign forms as decorative landscape elements. Not only the Kew Garden in London mentioned in this research, but also many aristocratic estates and royal gardens across Europe incorporated exotic-style pavilions such as Chinese pagodas, Turkish kiosks, and Arab arcades [16]. These structures were often placed at prominent or peripheral positions within the garden to serve as both

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visual landmarks and tangible expressions of a worldview. This trend was evident in sites such as Parc Monceau in France, and the Sanssouci Park in Germany (See *Figure 9. & 10.*).

Figure 9. Parc Monceau, Paris' Romantic English Garden, France

Figure 10. Chinese House, Potsdam, Germany

The influence of Orientalism deeply permeated the lives of Europeans in the 18th and 19th centuries. Decorative or household items such as porcelain, wallpaper and furniture all featured design elements with an oriental imagery to showcase the fashion level of exotic taste. In Britain, the wallpapers often depicted robed Chinese ladies, flying cranes, pagodas, and stylized landscape gardens, from 17th to 19th century [17]. In France, chinoiserie ceramics and lacquerware flourished, adorned with imagined Chinese scenes and figures, while in Vienna, Austria, porcelain factories likewise produced large quantities of wares in the Chinese style (See *Figure 11. & 12.*).

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Figure 11. Panel of Chinese wallpaper, unknown maker, about 1750 - 1800, probably Canton, China. Museum no. E.3944-1915. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Figure 12. Service set: a tray and two jugs, Kaiserliche Porzellanmanufaktur in Wien (1744 -1864)

In Orientalism, China's existence is quite unique because it was never conquered or became a fully colonized country. In many narratives in 17th and 18th century, China is often depicted as a country with beautiful scenery and magnificent architecture. This might be one of the reasons why

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many Europeans who were passionate and obsessed with Orientalism at that time attributed many Orientalist features to China.

A French journal commenting on the 1867 Paris Exposition remarked that people no longer need to travel to the East, for the East has come to them [18]. As the previous sections have shown, the various forms of Orientalism across different cultural fields increasingly flourished alongside the expansion of global trade. At this point, Orientalism had already departed from its original association with scholarly Oriental studies and instead evolved into a constructed commodity, an imagined Orient, shaped by the intertwined forces of politics, trade, regional identity, and cultural identity, within which forms of psychological discrimination and colonial domination began to take shape.

3. The reinterpreted dragon: iconographic translation between China and British

In the architectural analysis between the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing and the Great Pagoda at Kew, the transformation, or reinterpretation, of roof ornaments, especially the image of the dragon, reveals a significant case of cultural reinterpretation. The Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing incorporated a wide range of auspicious beasts, such as phoenix-riding immortals, dragons, phoenixes, lions, and lotus-bearing white elephants. These figures embodied the cosmological principles of Buddhism and the hierarchical symbolism of imperial authority. However, in the Great Pagoda of Kew, this multiplicity was reduced to a singular form: the Western-style dragon with wings and fire-breathing features. This shift was not reflected a deeper process of architectural compression and cultural reframing. When 'exotic' elements are appropriated into a Western context, they are often visually unified and semantically simplified, transforming religious and hierarchical symbols into decorative patterns for aesthetic purposes. It demonstrates how, under the imperial gaze, cultural specificity can be reconstructed into a generalized representation of the 'Oriental image'.

This argument further explores how decorative figures, particularly the dragon ornaments, were transformed in their journey from the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing to the Great Pagoda of Kew in London. It analyzes the material and visual characteristics of the original ridge and eave beasts, examine how their symbolic plurality was compressed into a singular, exaggerated Western form, and discuss how this shift reflects a broader pattern of reinterpretation in cross-cultural architectural translation. It will consider both historical context and recent preservation techniques, such as 3D printing, as evidence of how reinterpretation continues to shape our understanding of the 'Orient' in Western design traditions.

3.1. Material and symbolic representations of dragons in two pagodas

In the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing, the dragon was far more than an isolated decorative motif, it functioned as an integral symbol embedded within a broader religious and imperial semiotic system. A notable example is the relief-carved glazed brick featuring a walking four-clawed dragon, measuring 58 by 47 centimeters and composed of two fan-shaped ceramic pieces fired at high temperatures. The dragon is portrayed with round staring eyes, long upturned horns, a lotus held in its mouth, a dorsal fin along its back, and a flower-like tail, which all features emblematic of auspicious power and protective divinity. This wingless form is consistent with the traditional Chinese image of the lucky, or benevolent dragon, associated both with Buddhist guardian spirits and imperial authority in the Ming dynasty. Significantly, these dragon bricks were not merely applied surface ornamentation, they were structurally embedded into the body of the pagoda, forming part of its glazed ceramic envelope.

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In contrast to the symbolic complexity of Nanjing's dragon bricks, the dragons adorning the Great Pagoda of Kew present a markedly different cultural and architectural character. Positioned at each eave corner of the pagoda, these fire-breathing dragons are gilded wooden sculptures, posed in a swooping motion with protruding tongues, wings, and exaggerated features reminiscent of the monstrous dragons found in Western mythology. These figures carry no explicit religious or historical significance; rather, they operate through a repetitive and unified visual vocabulary to project an imagined 'Oriental' exoticism. Structurally, they are not part of the load-bearing system but standalone ornamental elements affixed to the roof corners. During recent restoration, all of these dragons were replaced with lightweight 3D-printed versions that replicate the original forms.

3.2. Interpretation: cultural implications behind the phenomenon

3.2.1. Unprecise duplication and unified figure

This paper argues the simplification of the original, richly varied system of auspicious beasts into a single fire-breathing dragon on the Great Pagoda of Kew can be first understood as a form of aesthetic strategy. For 18th-century British aristocratic viewers, there was little familiarity with the religious symbolism or cosmological logic embedded in traditional Chinese roof decorations, nor was such understanding required. Instead, they were presented with a unified and dramatical visual emblem that catered to their expectations of an 'exotic spectacle'. The fire-breathing dragon, with its exaggerated posture and Western form, heightened visual drama and condensed a complex decorative language into a more straightforward, memorable, and expressive icon. Within this context, simplification became a tool to render Eastern architecture more 'readable' in terms of architectural interpretation.

Furthermore, the appearance of the fire-breathing dragon can also be understood as a response to the cultural demand of 18th-century European Chinoiserie, or Orientalism. At its core, Chinoiserie was less concerned with accurate reproduction of Chinese architectural details or cultural contexts, and more invested in producing a mysterious, exotic, and controllable image of the East. Although the fire-breathing dragon had no relation to traditional Chinese architecture, it perfectly fulfilled the Western public's fascination with the spectacle of the Oriental other. Its exaggerated form and fantastical character conveyed an imagined Eastern narrative, functioning visually as a focal point within the garden structure. These reconfigured decorative elements were not genuine cultural inheritances but products of cultural projection and selective consumption, revealing not a deeper understanding of China, but rather a construction and commodification of the exotic.

Moreover, the adoption of the fire-breathing dragon can be understood as a subtle form of cultural dominance and symbolic reinterpretation of power. In Western cultural traditions, dragons are often portrayed as threatening creatures, yet ones that can be conquered and controlled. Accordingly, transforming the Chinese roof beasts, originally intended to symbolize imperial authority and Buddhist guardianship, into Western-style fire-breathing dragons on the Great Pagoda of Kew enacts a silent shift in power semantics. These once-sacred emblems are absorbed into the aesthetic logic of the British landscape, recontextualized as ornamental figures for visual consumption. This shift is not merely a detachment of symbolic meaning but a visual translation of sovereignty itself, which is turning 'Eastern authority' into a controllable exotic image under Western perspective, and thus exemplifying how imperial vision reconstructs foreign cultural codes.

Naturally, the reproduction of architectural ornamentation is often constrained by the builder's cognitive framework and the available craftsmanship. As a representative of 18th-century British timber architecture, the Great Pagoda of Kew was conceived and constructed within the structural

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logic and technical language familiar to local workers. Lacking knowledge of Chinese bracket (dougong) systems and the high-fired ceramic techniques required to produce multicolored glazed finishes, the craftsmen turned to carved wooden fire-breathing dragons gilded with gold leaf, which is a relatively feasible and visually striking substitute. In contrast to the complexity and precision of traditional Chinese architectural practices, this solution better matched local resources and aesthetic expectations, further highlighting a translational approach that prioritized visual impact over symbolic meaning.

3.2.2. Viewing cultural inheritance from the perspective of a 3-dimensional printed dragon

In the absence of original components, 3D printing has emerged as a key method for recreating the visual memory of architectural heritage (See *Figure 13.*). However, what this technology reproduces is not the authentic image of the source culture, but rather an imaginative reconstruction shaped by 18th-century British visions of Chinese architecture, which is an image already visually simplified and semantically restructured. As such, this act of replication serves more as a continuation of a pre-existing historical misreading than as a renewal of cultural understanding.

It is worth noting that the use of 3D printing has indeed allowed the once-destroyed wooden dragon sculptures to reappear in a new material form, and it has contributed to increased awareness and study of architectural history. At the same time, however, this replication process materializes and preserves the result of a historical misreading within a digital age, subtly reinforcing the reproduction of specific cultural imaginations in the present.

Therefore, this technological practice can be understood both as a form of 'visual preservation' of exotic architectural heritage and as a reinterpretation within the broader process of cultural representation. What has been preserved is not the East itself, but the East as seen through the eyes of the West, an Orient shaped by historical context, aesthetic preferences and power structures.

Figure 13. 3-dimensional print dragon

4. Architecture across cultures: different cultural systems behind construction logic and technology

In the comparative study between the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing and the Great Pagoda at Kew, it becomes essential to examine not only symbolic translations but also the material and structural systems that enabled these architectural expressions. While much attention has been paid to ornamentation and visual motifs, this section turns the focus toward the construction logics and technological conditions that shaped the final forms of the two pagodas. The Porcelain Pagoda,

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constructed over seventeen years with imperial patronage and advanced ceramic craftsmanship, represented the culmination of China's long-standing architectural system, rooted in masonry, glazed tile technology, and symbolic modularity. In contrast, the Great Pagoda of Kew was designed and completed within a single year using a British timber-framed construction approach, reflecting 18th-century priorities of efficiency, visibility, and structural legibility.

These fundamental differences in construction timeframes, material systems, and technical traditions suggest that the two architectural systems were meant to be technically interchangeable. The Great Pagoda of Kew, as a reinterpretation articulated through British construction language, was never expected, nor realistically able, to replicate the full intricacies of its Chinese prototype. Under the material, technological, and cultural constraints of 18th-century Britain, the result was a partial imitation that resembled neither the structural logic nor the symbolic coherence of the original, ultimately producing a hybrid form detached from both traditions.

This argument will analyze the implications of such divergence across three interconnected aspects: first, the differing structural principles embedded within Chinese and British architectural traditions; second, the striking contrast in construction duration and process management; and third, the limits of cross-cultural reproduction posed by available material knowledge and craftsmanship. Together, these three facets reveal that architectural translation is shaped not only by visual aspirations but also by the technological feasibility and craft logic of its builders.

4.1. Incompatible logics of construction traditions from different worlds

The Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing exemplifies the sophisticated unity between craftsmanship and symbolism in Chinese architectural tradition. While its structural core relies on brick masonry, its defining features lie in the intricate assembly of glazed ceramic components, especially the bracket systems (dougong) constructed from kiln-fired porcelain. These brackets, modeled after traditional timber joinery, were fitted at every corner tier, serving both structural and ornamental functions. Such construction methods are deeply rooted in the accumulated experience of Chinese timber architecture, embodying the long-standing principle that structure is decoration.

The glazing technique adopted here, as a form of craftsmanship inheritance, has constantly been closely linked with aesthetic values, imperial power symbols, Buddhist cosmology and religious ritual uses. From the precise recipe of the ceramic glaze to the tolerances in bracket jointing, every detail depended on a mature, locally embedded craft system. This intricate and symbolic coherence makes the pagoda exceptionally difficult to replicate in foreign contexts with different material cultures and technical lineages.

In contrast, the Great Pagoda at Kew embodies the platform-based timber construction logic that had matured within 18th-century British architecture. This structural approach originated in the layered floor systems of 17th-century English domestic and garden architecture and emphasized the stable stacking of horizontal elements and the repetitive use of standardized components. With the growing separation between workshop fabrication and on-site assembly, architecture in Britain increasingly embraced modularity and pre-fabrication, enhancing efficiency and reinforcing a construction culture grounded in rational order and speed.

The Great Pagoda of Kew makes full use of this logic: timber floor plates, vertical posts, and surface cladding were all assembled from prefabricated units, allowing the pagoda to be erected in a remarkably short timeframe. Decorative components were crafted using familiar carpentry and finishing techniques, aiming for visual clarity and immediate recognizability, though a weakening sense of decoration is a trend in the development of Western architecture. While this system could not replicate the complex brick-and-ceramic integration of Chinese pagodas, it nevertheless reflected

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the internal coherence and efficiency-oriented principles of British construction practices during the period.

4.2. Crafting speeds and material choices

The construction of the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing reflects a distinctly Chinese logic in which extended construction time serves as a signifier of architectural luxury. Initiated in the third year of the Yongle reign (1405), the project took seventeen years to complete, with certain decorative components undergoing continued repair and augmentation even after its formal completion. The long-time construction of the Porcelain Pagoda resulted from the interplay of multiple forces. Firstly, its top-level materials and craftsmanship were sourced from across the empire and gathered in Nanjing, demanding extraordinary logistical and technical effort. Secondly, the Ming dynasty's layered bureaucratic review system imposed formal procedural delays. Finally, at a spiritual level, slowness itself embodied ritual dignity and the imperial sanctity of Buddhist devotion.

The structure incorporated a vast array of glazed ceramic dougong brackets, decorative roof tiles, and zoomorphic ornaments, each requiring specialized artisans for production, transport, and installation, procedures governed by strict divisions of labor and hierarchical approval. As such, the building process resembled a ritual enterprise more than a utilitarian project. Slowness and continual refinement formed the core of this architectural logic, embodying a broader Chinese tradition where accumulated craftsmanship and ritual symbolism were integral to the construction of sacred space.

In contrast to the ceremonial and time-intensive logic behind the construction of the Porcelain Pagoda in Nanjing, the building process of the Great Pagoda at Kew Gardens reflects the high degree of organizational efficiency that characterized 18th-century British architectural practice. According to historical records, the Great Pagoda of Kew was completed in just six months, reaching a total height of approximately 50 meters over ten brick-and-timber levels. This rapid construction was largely enabled by Britain's systematic advancements in material prefabrication, site coordination, and project scheduling. Also, in terms of structure, each floor of this pagoda adopts a uniform design and is mainly constructed with bricks and wood, thus eliminating the cumbersome processes of firing high-temperature glazed tiles and carving complex components. Decorative elements such as fire-spitting dragons are also mass-produced using standardized molds. This modular and standardized approach yields two distinct outcomes compared to the iterative and hierarchical review procedures in Chinese imperial architecture. The rapid construction of the Great Pagoda of Kew reflects an engineering mindset that prioritizes speed and rationalized production, aligning with the garden architectural tradition that values spectacular display over cultural accuracy.

Thus, the contrasting construction rhythms of the Porcelain Pagoda and the Great Pagoda of Kew not only reflect the fundamental differences in organizational structure and temporal logic between Chinese and British architectural systems, but also reveal the practical limitations of cross-cultural architectural reproduction, particularly the challenges of accurately replicating material and structural systems under restricted knowledge and unfamiliarity with the original. The rapid completion of the Great Pagoda of Kew may not signal a disregard for the Chinese original, but rather a reinterpretation shaped by Western building practices and available resources. This practical reality helps explain the formal alterations and translated details found in the resulting structure.

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4.3. Limits of craftmanship and cognition

The architectural intricacies of the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing are the product of a long evolution between traditional Chinese craftsmanship and ritual symbolism. Elements such as dougong brackets, glazed tiles, and roof-ridge beasts are not only technically sophisticated but also deeply embedded within a specific cultural and religious framework. Their forms, combinations, and chromatic schemes were often subject to dual guidance: imperial protocols and Buddhist canon. This produced a highly codified architectural language that cannot be detached from its original context. Therefore, even though the Great Pagoda at Kew attempted to replicate some of these features, or perhaps even adopting certain technical aspects, it lacked access to the underlying symbolic systems. As a result, its translation of ornamentation became more of a surface-level reproduction than a culturally embedded reinterpretation. The untranslatability at the cultural level eventually leads to inevitable displacement of symbols and semantic drift in such cross-cultural replications.

In conclusion, the multiple differences between the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing and the Great Pagoda at Kew, across structural systems, construction pace, and craft cognition, not only reflect the divergent technical paths of Chinese and British architectural traditions, but also reveal the deeper limitations faced by 'architectural reproduction' in cross-cultural contexts. The difference between the 'slow and ritualistic' construction logic of Chinese architecture and the British reinterpretation approach that emphasizes prefabricated materials and construction efficiency is not merely a matter of stylistic choice. It reflects more profoundly the cognitive differences in architecture that have emerged due to long-term geographical isolation and the independent development of architectural systems. When these two completely different architectural logics met in the colonial context of the 18th century, the 'distortions' and 'reconstructions' that occurred might be understood as reasonable adaptations within their respective systems. The Great Pagoda of Kew is a materialized embodiment of this adaptation process, a product of the interaction between technical feasibility and cultural imagination in the collision of two architectural cognitive systems. Therefore, from this perspective, the Great Pagoda of Kew may not be a culturally disrespectful replica of the Porcelain Pagoda, but rather a product born from the fusion of 18th-century British construction logic and imagined Eastern imagery, a built response shaped within the dual constraints of technical feasibility and cultural imagination.

5. From sacred object to decorative symbol: cultural appropriation and semantic shift

Based on the previous argument on the transposition of the dragon and structural craftsmanship, this section further explores how the Great Pagoda of Kew transcends mere symbolic translation or visual decoration to become a form of cultural appropriation through aestheticization. This argument does not merely focus on misinterpretation or stylistic imitation, but rather emphasizes how Eastern architectural forms, which is once sacred, practical, and closely tied to specific environments, were transformed within a Western ideological framework into consumable visual symbols.

This transformation reveals a triple logic of appropriation. Firstly, the act of gift-giving reframed the pagoda as a token of imperial power, not spiritual devotion. Secondly, its architectural form was visually preserved but semantically emptied, becoming a spectacle of exoticism. Thirdly, through aestheticization, Eastern architecture was rendered voiceless and re-coded within Western cultural narratives. Together, these shifts reveal how architecture served as a soft yet effective mechanism of cultural possession and symbolic control.

These aspects suggest that architecture, especially when removed from its original context, can no longer be regarded as a culturally neutral form. Rather, it becomes a site where aesthetic pleasure

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and political discourse interweave, displacing its original cultural specificity. What was once embedded in a local and ritual framework is now redefined through the lens of imperial imagination, making the act of construction not merely artistic, but a mechanism for symbolic appropriation and asymmetrical cultural production.

5.1. The politics of gifting and display

As Sir William Chambers put it, the Great Pagoda of Kew was regarded as 'a gift to Princess Augusta' [19], which made the Chinese pagoda a symbolic exchange in the imperial symbolic system from the moment it entered the British context. The act of presenting a building from a non-Western cultural background as a 'gift' to a member of the royal family was far more than an appreciation of exotic aesthetics. It was a display of power. In the aristocratic system of the 18th century, possessing and presenting objects from 'other' cultures not only demonstrated a broad knowledge base but also indicated one's status and loyalty within the power network.

Once incorporated into the context of 'gift-giving', it once again proved that the original religious significance and context of the pagoda were stripped away, and its identity transformed from a sacred Buddhist symbol to a ceremonial one, re-embedded in the exchange system of Western courts. At this point, the 'gift' no longer pointed to the original culture itself, but became a redefinition of Eastern cultural symbols by Western power.

Therefore, when Eastern architecture was incorporated into the royal gardens as a gift, it ceased to be a carrier of a certain culture and instead became a tool for institutionalized and semantic display. Its true significance did not lie in the dissemination of Eastern culture, but rather in reaffirming the West's cultural sovereignty and symbolic control over the non-Western world, transforming the act of 'giving' into the cultural colonialization.

Moreover, this recontextualization allowed architecture to assume a dual role. On the surface level, it signaled cultural openness and curiosity toward exotic aestheticism, but on a deeper level, it reinforced a hierarchical world order through symbolic control. The more visibly 'foreign' an object appeared, effective it was in performing empire's ability to assimilate, aestheticize, and domesticate the distant other. Within this ideological framework, oriental style structures, especially pagodas here, were unconsciously embedded into the spatial logic of European royal gardens. Like exhibits in a museum, they were used to represent specific geographical regions, cultural sceneries, or ideological imaginaries. While these architectural components became subsidiary individuals in the empire's world complicated yet chaotic knowledge map, with each exotic element being endowed with the function of showcasing global diversity, but this diversity was named and framed through a Western perspective.

5.2. Architectural translation as cultural shift

Based on the previous analysis of the architectural details and cultural symbols of the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing and the Great Pagoda of Kew in London, this section further argues that the building was not merely translated as a spatial container, but underwent a profound reconstruction at the level of the language system and cultural intention. In the Chinese context, the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing is not only a form of Buddhist architecture but also a symbol of political rituals. Its components and overall layout are closely embedded in the semantic system interwoven with Confucianism and Buddhism. Each layer's stacking and every decorative component are materialized expressions of the hierarchy of etiquette, religious cosmology, and the will of the royal.

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Therefore, such buildings not only carry functional uses but also serve as encoders of cultural narratives, and their language cannot be simply transplanted without the original social structure.

Accordingly, under the dual background of imperial expansion and the Enlightenment, royal gardens gradually developed into important cultural spaces in 18th-century Britain. Beyond their aesthetic and recreational functions, these gardens began to incorporate plant species and architectural forms from different regions, becoming venues for showcasing overseas knowledge and worldviews. The appearance of exotic plants, foreign architectures and landscape elements in the gardens reflected the way British society perceived global spaces and its cultural context at that time. So, when architectural languages such as that of the Porcelain Pagoda were translated into the garden context, the embedded semantic system often underwent unavoidable dislocation. In the design and construction of the Great Pagoda of Kew, what was retained was largely the 'form' of Chinese architecture, not its 'meaning'. The fire-breathing dragon atop the roof, for example, replaced the original bestiary of spiritual beasts, while handrails and eaves structures, though visually inspired, were detached from any ritual or religious logic. This process of 'iconographic disembodying' marks the transformation of architectural decoration from a socially coded symbol to a purely visual motif, incorporated into the spectacle of exoticism within European garden aesthetics. The architecture should have been a vehicle for cultural transmission but turned out to be a rather imagined expression of the 'Orient' within Western discourse.

With the change of architectural context, the term 'pagoda' seems to have been gradually redefined in the Great Pagoda of Kew, transforming into the more general 'tower'. This linguistic shift is not merely a simplification at the translation level but also implies a disconnection between the building's function, form, and symbolic meaning. 'Pagoda' in an oriental context refers to a specific Buddhist space and ritual function, but here it is gradually endowed with visual attributes of height, exoticism, and spectacle, although it is still named 'pagoda'. The unchanged name suggests that the architectural language, which originally carried deep cultural connotations, has been safely transformed into a manageable and consumable landscape component, thus completing a quiet cultural re-encoding.

5.3. Possession through aestheticization

In contrast to the exercise of 'hard power' through military conquest or legal enforcement, architectural reproduction under Orientalist discourse reflects a subtler form of cultural possession, an appropriation grounded in soft power. This process is not merely a matter of aesthetic appreciation; rather, it involves the re-coding and redistribution of architectural language under conditions where the 'Other' is unable to articulate its own cultural context. This aestheticized approach, seemingly respectful and affectionate on the surface, actually reflects a kind of 'degradation' in discourse, that is, only when Eastern architecture is stripped of its power and complex semantics can it enter the mainstream visual aesthetic system of the West. This translation, seemingly neutral, actually reshapes the power relationship between architecture and culture in an imperceptible way, returning the right to express the 'other' to the viewers themselves.

Ultimately, the prerequisite for architecture to be 'loved' in the West is that it has completed the process of visual taming and discursive stripping. These forms with Eastern connotations are packaged as consumable cultural images, becoming visual symbol reserves in the European cultural system, serving the needs of the imperial era's imagination of the exotic and self-construction. As a result, the form of architecture is no longer neutral but deeply embedded in the implicit logic of discourse reproduction within the global cultural structure.

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6. Conclusion and evaluation

This study does not view the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing and the Great Pagoda of Kew as two isolated buildings, but rather as aesthetic products of two distinct cultural systems shaped by different political, technological and ideological conditions. Through a comparative analysis of their formal composition, material logic, construction process and symbolic function, this study aims to demonstrate that architectural similarities do not necessarily imply continuity in the culture level. On the contrary, the superficial similarities between the two pagodas reveal a complex process of translation, reinterpretation and reconfiguration. By placing these two buildings in their respective historical, technological and ideological contexts, this study argues that the Great Pagoda of Kew should be regarded as a form of architecture that has been 're-shaped' under the influence of specific Western ways of seeing and power structures.

The differences between these two buildings are not only in style but also in system. In China, this pagoda-type buildings are regarded as a cosmological and ritual device, where material, form and meaning are inseparable. However, the British reinterpretation prioritizes the external observer's understanding of visual clarity, spatial grandeur and symbolic meaning. Through the transformation of structural elements, decorative patterns and construction methods, the Great Pagoda of Kew has converted a deeply rooted architectural language into a clear but essentially altered visual form. This process reveals that when architectural forms cross cultural and cognitive boundaries, they undergo selective reinterpretation, which is more influenced by the aesthetic logic and ideological expectations of the receiving culture.

Architecture, as a highly visible form of cultural expression, is inevitably influenced by its social, political and geographical environment. Therefore, this study adopts a cultural perspective, focusing on how architectural forms are perceived and reinterpreted in different contexts, rather than their technical or constructional logic. However, this approach also has certain limitations. Existing research on Orientalism and the Great Pagoda of Kew is mostly based on European academic achievements, while the Chinese perspective is relatively limited and often indirectly reflected through the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing. Moreover, most historical records of the Ming Dynasty were compiled during the Qing Dynasty, and the actual knowledge of the craftsmen is difficult to fully restore. However, this asymmetry in sources and perspectives reveals an imbalance in the production of architectural knowledge. This further proves that in cross-cultural communication, architecture is continuously re-encoded through constantly changing interpretive frameworks.

Ultimately, this study shows that architecture is not a neutral or purely aesthetic product, but a medium through which cultural meanings are negotiated and transformed within specific frameworks of interpretation. The pagoda, once embedded in systems of religious cosmology and imperial order, is reconstituted as a visual form through processes of reinterpretation and recontextualization. In this transformation process, architecture reveals a dual capacity: while it appears to connect cultures through shared forms, it simultaneously reinforces the boundaries and hierarchies it seems to transcend. In this sense, Orientalism is understood not as a fixed historical condition, but as a methodological perspective and a part of a broader historical framework, through which such transformations can be examined. It reveals how architectural forms are continuously re-encoded through shifting systems of knowledge and interpretation.

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