

## Representation of the Other in Desert de Retz as Reflections of French Enlightenment Thought

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**Abstract:** French picturesque gardens constructed during the last decades of the 18th century were a major vehicle to express the owners' artistic taste and world views, and offer a vantage point to observe the social, political and philosophical ideas of French Enlightenment. Current discussions on French picturesque gardens focus on their respect for nature and pursuit of "all times and places", yet not enough research has been conducted to examine the special representation of other in those gardens. This paper discusses the representation of other in both historical and geographical dimensions in a representative French picturesque garden Desert de Retz, and through architectural and hermeneutic reading of the garden, discussion on French art and aesthetic taste of the time, and examination of major works by representative philosophes, this paper exposes the different representation of the historical other and the geographical other in Enlightenment France, and argues that contrary to the fluid and dynamic image created for past stages in Western history, the image constructed for the Orient is completely divorced from its own context and history to become essentialist and static. The historical other is in fact still safely incorporated into the Enlightenment vision of a progressive development; only the Orient was the real other.

**Keywords:** Picturesque garden, representation of other, Desert de Retz, France, 18th century

### 1. Introduction

The latter half of the 18th century witnessed a marked change of style in French garden design. Thanks to the influence of English natural gardens and Chinese traditional gardens, the classical style was gradually losing popularity among French garden designers who now looked to natural gardens as more akin to their aesthetic taste. They especially favored the picturesque style, a branch of the natural style, and started a building frenzy in the last three decades of the century. These gardens were predominantly private gardens of the wealthy elites, who were also zealous disciples of Enlightenment thoughts. They transplanted the new garden style onto the French soil, highlighting aspects and adding features to mark a distinct French imprint onto their gardens. Thus analysis of the picturesque gardens and the ideas underlying garden design can shed light on the prevailing thoughts in Enlightenment France in the second half of the eighteenth century.

However, despite the importance of French picturesque gardens, recent research on the picturesque often focused more on English than French gardens (e.g. Brook, 2008; Fuentes, 2004; Ackerman, 2003; Liu, 2003; Stewart, 2002). For example, in Brook's (2008)

reinterpretation of the picturesque as appreciative of the wildness, in Liu's (2003) examination of the Chinese factor in the picturesque, and in Stewart's (2002) comparison between reality and the virtual worlds created in picturesque gardens, they all took the English picturesque as the focus of discussion. Of the few works on the French picturesque, Van Oostveldt (2010) discussed theatricality in French picturesque, but his concern was more about theory than practice. Brodey (2008) dealt with the ruination in French novel writing and garden design of the latter half of the eighteenth century, but his focus was more on literature than on garden.

In comparison, earlier researchers have conducted more research on the French picturesque. They especially highlighted two aspects of French picturesque gardens. The first is the emphasis on nature (e.g., DeLorme, 1996; Ross, 1987; Wiebenson, 1978). It is generally believed that the respect for real nature in picturesque gardens is antithesis to the reign of "la belle nature" in classical gardens. The picturesque style substituted symmetry and proportion with asymmetry and disorder to simulate nature and intensify the garden experience. Besides the love for nature, scholars have also discussed the pursuit of "all times and places" in French picturesque gardens (e.g., Hunt, 2002; Conroy, 1980; Adams, 1979). Different from Capable Brown and other English designers of the natural style, French designers were more inclined to use "fabriques", or small buildings, in picturesque gardens. These fabriques took motif from a wide variety of ancient and exotic civilizations, creating a surreal world transcending temporal and geographical boundaries. This pursuit of all times and places inevitably brought into view the representation of the other as a key designing element. However, up to now this aspect of French picturesque garden is still not fully discussed. To supplement academic understanding, this paper attempts to explore the representation of other by way of analyzing a representative French picturesque garden Desert de Retz, one of the most famed garden of its time and the best preserved picturesque garden today, discussing its representation of the historical other and geographical other, comparing the two others in terms of representational design and philosophical implication, and situating findings about this garden in the general cultural and political environs of the epochal period. This paper argues that different from the representation of the historical other which conceives of past stages of Western history as dynamic and progressively developing, the representation of the geographical other decontextualizes and dehistoricizes the Orient to become an essentialist and static imagery. It may be true that French garden designers loved to create gardens of "all times and places", as many scholars have convincingly argued, yet these were never wonderlands where civilizations from all times and places live happily ever after; rather, motifs about the East and the West were given different representations, which perfectly reflected the French conceptualization of the relationship between the East and the West. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to further dissect the gardens of "all times and places" that earlier scholars have finished with.

## 2. The Concept of the Other

The Other is generally used to refer to individuals, groups or cultures different from the user of the word. Initially explored by Hegel and later by theorists such as Lacan and Sartre, other is generally viewed as indispensable in the establishment of the subjectivity: as the entity against which construction of the self is conducted (Hegel, 1997), the misconception that the

subject wrongly identifies with (Lacan, 1998), or another entity that objectifies and competes with the subject (Sartre, 1997).

In discussions on cultural interactions between the West and the East, other is also a powerful concept that enlightens understanding of the communication between civilizations. In the West/East dichotomy, the West is always the subject, the more enlightened and therefore the more powerful, whereas the East is the other, the backward and the powerless. For example, in his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel (1991) clearly has a ranking of cultures in mind when he comments that “the Orientals knew that One is free”, the Greeks and Romans “knew that Some are free”, and “we”, the Europeans of his time, knew “that All men ... are free” (p.121). In the East, all people except the sovereign are “mere accidents” (p. 123). It is in the German world that human Spirit is in “its perfect maturity and strength” (p. 126), so Germanic Europe is where history is heading to. Different from Western countries that are constantly changing and making progress, Eastern countries such as India and China are locked in ancient glory and are unable to make any progress due to their innate defects. The Orient is decidedly outside the discourse of world history which Hegel painstakingly constructed around Europe.

Such essentialist and static view of the East as the Other is brought under critical scrutiny since the 1970s when post-colonialists opened fire on Orientalism. Edward Said (2003) analyzes the Western interest in the Orient and argues that this interest is more about the European Self than the Oriental Other: the Orient is viewed as a “self-containing, self-reinforcing” and “closed system” (p. 70) despite its own diversity, history, and interaction with other civilizations. The Orientalist representation of the Orient as a “fact” is essentialist, since facts have to be knowable entities with core features, and de-historicized, since facts remain fundamentally stable and therefore static despite changes or transformations across time. This European construction of the Orient symbolizes what Europe is not, something that is always outside and should be brought under control. This interpretation of the West/East encounter in the self/other framework profoundly influenced people’s understanding of cultural interaction ever since. The Enlightenment period was of critical importance to the concept of other. In the 18th century, advances in archeology and navigation technology brought Europe into convenient contact with the antique and the exotic, paving the way for theoretical discussions on other in the 19th century. It was during the Enlightenment that Europe began to accumulate its experience with other on a massive scale and experiment with ways to properly deal with the other, so much so that Said (2003) identifies the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the beginning of modern Orientalism. Therefore, it is meaningful to explore the Enlightenment perception of other and its representation in the arts. In this paper, this exploration is conducted with a picturesque garden named Desert de Retz.

### 3. Desert de Retz

The history of Desert de Retz began in 1774 when Monsieur Monville started the construction of his private garden twelve miles from Paris. Construction of the Temple of Pan commenced the next year, though the first batch of fabriques, including the Chinese House, the Temple of Repose, a greenhouse, and an Obelisk, were not erected until two years later. The second wave of construction took place in 1781 when Monville finally decided on the arrangement of his

garden and finished the construction of most fabriques including the grotesque grotto entrance, the Pyramid Icehouse and the Broken Column. Monville was obviously satisfied with his new estate, as he moved his residence first to the Chinese House and then to the Broken Column.

In Desert de Retz two others were especially highlighted with emblematic references dotting the whole garden: the historical other, such as the mythological and philosophical Antiquity and the religious Middle Ages, which were earlier links in the western cultural tradition, and the geographical other, typically foreign civilizations such as Egypt, Turkey and especially China, which, until the eighteenth century, were too remote to be really meaningful in serious discussions. A major means to recreate the imagery of the two others was fabriques, which, with their physical and atmospheric resemblance to the artistic and intellectual imagination of the owner and his guests, offer convenient access to the ancient and the exotic for visitors, and provide an advantageous observation venue for later generations interested in the social thinking at this time. In the following sections, the paper discusses the French intellectual imagination of other preceding the Revolution by analyzing the historical other and the geographical other represented by the fabriques in Desert de Retz.

### 3.1. The Historical Other

Past stages in Western civilization were frequently evoked in Desert de Retz. Visitors encountered them in the Gothic Ruin, the Temple of Pan, and above all the Broken Column. The Gothic Ruin used to be a small chapel of the village of Retz located on the piece of land Monville purchased for his future garden. It was built in the 13th century, and by the time of Monville's purchase, it had long been deserted, crumbled by time and neglect, and taken over by wild grass. Monville negotiated with the clergy and leased the church to become one of his fabriques. However, he did not renovate the church or rebuild a new one, but preserved the ruinous walls in a quiet corner of the garden. The Temple of Pan was in the classical style, consisting of a semicircular colonnade with Tuscan columns. The central arch was the entrance whereas the two lateral arches housed two statues. An interesting feature of this temple was the incomplete form, which, according to Diana Ketcham (1994), had taken as model a reputed Roman ruin the Temple of the Sibyl at Tivoli (p. 44).

The most dramatic "ruin" in Desert



Figure 1. Broken Column in Desert de Retz

de Retz was undoubtedly the Broken Column. Its appearance was the most eye-catching among all fabriques. The Broken Column simulated the bottom part of a gigantic white column, rugged at the top and fractured in the body. Fifteen meters in diameter and twenty meters in height, the imposing appearance of the Broken Column suggested an unbelievably ambitious project of the original building: according to the usual architectural proportion between the base and height, this column would have been 120 meters high if it had not been “broken”; and with the huge size of its columns, the immensity of the temple supported by these columns could only be left to imagination. Such appearance was highly evocative of a disastrous destruction that reduced a supposedly colossal construction to ruins. Despite knowledge of its modern creation, speculations on the cause of this “disaster” had always been an inviting endeavor for those who lay their eyes upon it. A most popular guess was that this destructive force was of a divine nature, when men’s silly challenge incurred heavenly wrath and was subsequently snuffed out before its completion. The charm of the Broken Column also lay in the fact that it was actually lived in. Pavilions and fabriques were commonly used in gardens, yet Monville was genius enough to combine the two in his garden, one in the Broken Column and the other in the Chinese House. Inside this “destructured” Roman column were luxuriously decorated rooms where the owner and his friends discussed politics, appreciated the arts, and conducted scientific research. No wonder the Broken Column was reputed as one of the best fabriques of its time.

Several features can be observed from the above introduction to these fabriques denoting the historical other in Desert de Retz. The first was that in representing the historical other, these fabriques did not reproduce the full architectural splendor of the past but instead adopted a deliberately imperfect form of ruins. It was already rare for a real ruin to exist in a garden without any artistic rendering, and it was certainly extraordinary that newly built fabriques also took the form of ruins. This could not have been attributed to the lack of knowledge; in the 18th century, ancient temples and Gothic churches were widely present both in reality and the arts. Yet still, Monville chose to use ruins instead of complete buildings to commemorate the past in his garden. Besides their ruinous appearance, another feature of these fabriques was their marked functional difference from the original models. The Gothic Ruin had obviously lost its practical function to become a mere decoration. The Temple of Pan was no longer a dedication to that mythological god but a simulation of ancient temples that had regained popularity in France since the archeological excavations in the mid 18th century. The Broken Column could never be used as a real column to support any building but served as the owner’s residential place. A third feature of these fabriques denoting the historical other was that with the decreasing degree of their similarity to the original was the increasing level of importance in the whole garden. The Gothic Ruin, the remains of a real church, was an ordinary fabrique hidden behind a wall of trees in the lower part of the garden; the Temple of Pan, an artificial creation modeled after antique temples excavated in Italy, was situated on top of a small rise overlooking the whole garden; and the Broken Column, more a work of ingenious imagination than a recognizable Tuscan column, was the central building and activity hub of the estate.

As a matter of fact, when Monville designed his garden at the suburbs of Paris, he was only following the trend of garden design in the decades before the Revolution, which was characterized by liberal and sometimes reckless attempts at creating ruins in picturesque gardens. For example, the Temple of Modern Philosophy at Ermenonville looked like the ruins

of an unfinished ancient temple, the Naumachie at Parc Monceau was a pond surrounded by a semi-circle of ruined Corinthian columns to simulate naval battlefields in ancient Rome, and the Ruined Tower and Bridge at Berz put people in mind of medieval fortresses. So the ruins in Desert de Retz were but excellent demonstrations of a popular love for ruins in the new garden style. But why was there such a preference for ruins in French picturesque gardens? What had caused the unique epistemological features of these ruinous fabriques? And what designing principles and aesthetic and philosophical ideas were behind these fabriques? Answers to these questions lie in the epistemological connotation of ruins as well as the teleological orientation of French picturesque gardens.

There are several layers in the signification of ruins: they could be remnants of a real past, through which later generations could reconstruct that lost glory and admire that particular civilization; they could also be metaphorical memorials of a past nation and culture which signified both a real past existence and a distillation of the past in general. In the second half of the eighteenth century in France, the signification of ruins took on a third philosophical dimension, one that transcended cognition of the past to enlighten understanding of the present and future (Brewer, 2008, p. 184-188). In the Enlightenment discourse of progress, the past was not to be understood as mere records of dead people and events but a crucial link in the progressive movement of human civilization. The past prepared for the birth of the present, and the present would ultimately become the past. Consequently, in Enlightenment France, the past was no longer understood alone but always with reference to its significance to the present. In this intellectual context, ruins took on a highly important symbolization as bridges linking the past with the present: they recorded fragments of the past without replicating its full glory; consequently, they could be used to introduce the past into the discourse of the present in spite of historical reality.

On the other hand, in the last decades of the 18th century, French garden designers were preoccupied with several concerns when designing fabriques in gardens. The first was the creation of scenes. The very name of the picturesque style suggested its interest in the creation of picture-like scenes. Though French garden artists quickly pointed out that picturesque garden design was more in common with the theater than painting (Watelet, 2003, p. 36), the importance it attached to presenting moving and vivid scenes was obvious. Yet delighting the viewers' eye was but the first step in garden design: it should also consider the atmospheric effect of the scenes. Designers of picturesque gardens also considered the intellectual and subjective aspects of their projects, creating the symbolic space besides the physical one (Etlin, 1994, p. 18). Care was taken to excite resonance with viewers' feelings and inspire intellectual meditation from sensitive minds. A third concern for garden designers was the expression of ideas. Gardens were more than pure artistic works; they constituted an important part of the private and social lives of the owners and their circles and therefore carried cultural, social as well as aesthetic significance. Owners often took an active part in the design and construction of their gardens and left upon the gardens imprint of their own, or in this context the Enlightenment, understanding of the country and the world. Therefore, for French designers of picturesque gardens, history was to be used to build landscape scenery, to create romantic melancholy, to excite philosophical thinking, and to demonstrate the progression of human civilization.



Ruins, with their epistemological connotations in relation to the past, were the perfect vehicle to satisfy the needs of French garden designers. Ruins were remnants of the past, and were designed in picturesque gardens like Desert de Retz to provoke sweet melancholy and profound thoughts about themes such as the passage of time, the vicissitude of glory and the almightiness of nature. Moreover, cloaked under the natural dimension of such garden experience was a highly cultural core. These fabriques were more metaphorical and philosophical than physical, bridging the subjectivity to a fantasy world that transcended the actuality of their nominal origin. In Desert de Retz, identicalness with past models was actually downplayed to give place to ingenuity in imagining the past. The epistemological emphasis lay not on the faithfulness of fabriques to the original but their faithfulness to the prevalent imagery of the past and their interrelationship that contemporary world view assigned to them. Selected here were representative moments of the past recast in the Enlightenment mold to satisfy the contemporary eye and mind. They were random fragments of history that stood centuries away and were otherwise unrelated were it not for the designer's particular arrangement. Of concern was not replication of the past per se, but incorporation of the past in the present and a foreseeable future. The past was to be commemorated, but in ways decided not by the past but by the present designer. Of importance here was the embedment of the past into narratives of the present, so that the past did not exist except in the re-constructed imagery, with some of its features erased and others magnified. Clearly, with their associative connotation with the past, ruins were in fact more conducive to the smooth flow of thoughts and sentiments of the designer than a faithful but somewhat rigid simulation of the past. This explains the unapologetic liberty which designers of Desert de Retz took in their imagination of the past and the salience they gave to Broken Column, the most whimsical ruins of all.

The above analysis of the preference for ruins in picturesque gardens can help us understand the social ethos of Enlightenment France. Ruins had been a favorite motif in other French arts of the same time. The effort to present the imperfect state was already noticeable in Rococo paintings, such as those by Watteau and Boucher, whose romantic imagination was arrested by desolate gardens that the bankrupt French government was unable to maintain, and who transformed the silent yet powerful metamorphosis of nature in these gardens into dreamlike scenes of romance and solitude. Such romantic taste influenced painters of later decades, who were provided with more temporally distant objects to depict by archeological discoveries around mid century and managed to blend the transformed sentiment into new motifs. Hubert Robert, the most successful of all, skillfully depicted tumbled buildings, overgrown vegetation, and an air of hazy melancholy in his ruin paintings, and his popularity attested to the growing public appreciation of sensitive and romantic representation of antique ruins. Art critics also loved ruins. In his Salon of 1767, Diderot (1875) excellently summarized the special appeal of ruins when talking about the excellence of Robert's paintings.

*L'effet de ces compositions, bonnes ou mauvaises, c'est de vous laisser dans une douce melancolie. Nous attachons nos regards sur les debris d'un arc de triomphe, d'un portique, d'une pyramide, d'un temple, d'un palais, et nous revenons sur nous-memes. Nous anticipons sur les ravages du temps, et notre imagination disperse sur la terre les edifices memes que nous habitons. A l'instant, la solitude et le silence regnent autour*

de nous. Nous restons seuls de toute une nation qui n'est plus. [The effect of these compositions, good or bad, is to leave you in a sweet melancholy. We attach our regard on the debris of an arc of triumph, of a portico, a pyramid, a temple, a palace, and we retreat to ourselves. We contemplate the ravages of time, and in our imagination we scatter over the ground the rubble of the very buildings where we live. In that moment, solitude and silence prevail around us, and we are the sole survivors of an entire nation that is no more.] (p. 227)

It is true that admiration of past glory is common throughout Western history. However, before the Enlightenment its expression had rarely been so dominantly in a form that focused on remnants of past magnificence instead of the magnificence itself. In comparison, only a few centuries ago Renaissance artists also demonstrated revived interest in the Antiquity, but their works were more about the realist spirit, the diversified motifs and expressive techniques they observed from ancient models. Da Vinci's "Last Supper" is a meticulously painted masterpiece which captured the fateful moment and the inner activities of each character, and Michelangelo's "David" presents an ideal youth that echoed the antique love for human body and announced the power, passion and confidence of man. However, such endeavor to resurrect and develop past glories for contemporary admiration was noticeably absent from French Enlightenment art works. Instead, artists were more drawn to an incomplete version of that splendor. For philosophes, the charm of ruins lay not so much in their existential form but the mixed feelings and reflections on nature and the subjectivity that these ruins could induce and intensify. As Brewer (2008) put it, "The realm of the ruin is not the real, where archeology and history claim to know it, but the imaginary, where the ruin is involved in the production of poetic subjectivity" (p. 186). The fabriques in Desert de Retz could inspire thoughts on the natural decline of glory and the smallness of humans in the face of natural powers. They could also foster a historical perspective through which these past remnants were converted to parts of a continuous process of becoming, and were critically linked with the present as the very material, cultural and metaphysical flesh and blood from which the present had evolved. The continuous course of development both connected the present with the past, as now they were intertwined into a grand vision of the world, and freed it from the past, as present existence of the past was mostly in broken rubbles locked in the passage of time and unable to exert any concrete influence upon the present. The present might dissolve into fables in the future, just as the past had been rewritten into narratives of the present, but this ill fate might be compensated by the condolence that this process was primarily a progressive movement, with the later stage building upon the predecessor towards greater welfare of the society.

However, even though the historical other is often times misrepresented to be a surreal version of the real past in the eighteenth-century French conceptualization of the world, it is nevertheless acknowledged to be historical, fluid and dynamic. In comparison with the historical other, the geographical other is not only twisted in the representation, but entirely pulled out from its context and history to become an unrecognizable monster.



### 3.2. Geographical Other

Apart from early stages of Western civilization, exotic civilizations were also a haunting motif in Desert de Retz as embodiment of the designer's ideas about the geographical other. Residents in the Broken Column could see the Pyramid Icehouse outside their windows, bump into the Tartar Tent when boating around the Isle of Happiness, or be lured to the edge of a lovely pond by the oddly charming Chinese House. Different from fabriques denoting the historical other that were primarily in the form of ruins, this group of fabriques were presented in their complete forms and were lavishly decorated. The Pyramid was a qualified model of architectural satisfaction, the colorful Tartar Tent was obviously intended to indicate an idealized exotic life, and every detail of the Chinese House testified to the elaborate planning of the designer.

However, the complete forms of the fabriques did not translate into more faithfulness to the original than the incomplete form of ruins discussed in the previous section. The Pyramid Icehouse had an additional elevated platform at the bottom of the triangular structure that real pyramids normally did not have, and the Tartar Tent was more fancily decorated than the usually modest-looking tent that Tartars used for residence. The sharpest contrast between the real model and the recreated fabrique was offered by the Chinese House. Experts with knowledge of real Chinese gardens had observed that despite its name this fabrique was in essence more French than Chinese (Siren, 1950, p. 118). Given the variety of exotic civilizations used in picturesque gardens, this paper mainly focuses on the most important country, China, as a representative case in the analysis of geographic other.

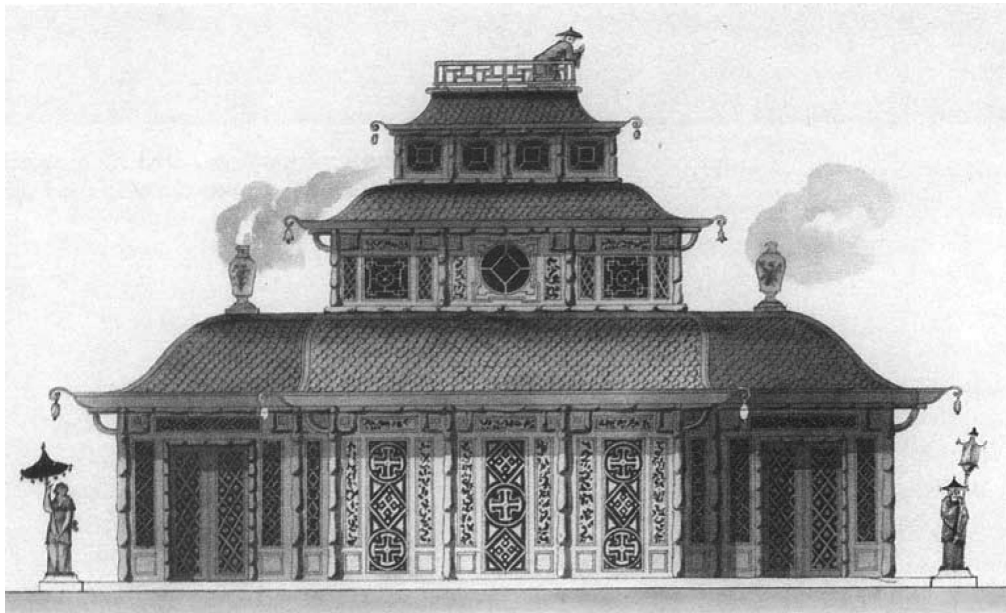


Figure 2. Chinese House in Desert de Retz

When designing the Chinese House in his garden, Monville might consult several sources. First, he must be very familiar with ornamental drawings commonly found on utensils and furniture from China. Given his interest in gardening, he might have conducted some research and read descriptions of Chinese gardens found in various French and English sources: Jesuit Fathers such as Jean-Denis Attiret, Benoist Michael and Pierre-martial Cibot all wrote passionate letters about the royal gardens in Beijing, and in the 1750s William Chambers had published his major works on Chinese gardens that did not wait long to be introduced to the French readers. It is also fair to conjecture that given Monville's sensitivity to fashion and intellectual novelty, he might have had convenient access to some basic knowledge of this distant country. However, these limited sources decided that his knowledge of Chinese gardens and architecture was fragmented and superficial.

Monville's Chinese House was different from real Chinese gardens in a number of aspects. One difference is the over-elaborate treatment of the walls. Literally no walls of the Chinese House were left un-carved into some Chinese patterns, bracketed bamboo pillars or Chinese characters. It is true that those elements were all commonly used in Chinese buildings, but the cultural symbolization and epistemological arrangement of these elements were noticeably absent from the Chinese House. Bamboos, for example, were hailed as one of the "four plant gentlemen"<sup>1</sup> as their upright stems symbolized unbending integrity of intellectual gentlemen. Such cultural connotation was missing from the Chinese House, which used bamboo patterns to support the roofs beside the complicatedly-patterned walls, burying the important symbolism in decorative patterns. Also, name plaques and couplets often appeared on Chinese facades to express the owner's understanding of life. They were always used together, with the name plaques pointing out the theme and the couplets offering explanatory clues. Unfortunately, the Chinese characters on the Chinese House had lost these implications: they were written in Chinese-like characters that did not make any sense both in French and Chinese. Such characters were more reflections of the owner's curiosity in an exotic civilization than expressions of his intellectual aspirations. Besides the "innovative" re-arrangement of Chinese traits, the Chinese House also possessed features that were totally whimsical. One example was the balcony on top of the house, which could never be seen in real Chinese houses. Equally astonishing were the two vase-shaped chimneys sending out clouds of smoke that would have offended Chinese architects as a functionless encumbrance to the view. Also, different from the white and grey color universally found in Chinese private gardens, the Chinese House in Desert de Retz was painted in purple and red (Cendres & Radiguet, 1997, p. 55). The effect of such dramatic colors on the strangely exotic building would have rendered viewers speechless.

It is therefore evident that Monville had taken the liberty to follow his own ideas about China, patching together real Chinese features that particularly appealed to the European perception and false Chinese features from his imagination to form an exciting but uneasy collage, in which the false were delegated credibility, and the real were plucked from their cultural roots and reduced to decorative and at times garish embodiments of exoticism. As

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<sup>1</sup> The "four plant gentlemen" are plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum, symbolizing four virtues, i.e. elegant pride, pure character, unbending integrity and satisfaction with simplicity, that traditional Chinese intellectuals treasured dearly.

a result, the flaunting Chinese House lost the elegant modesty that was the core of Chinese private garden buildings.

Similar treatment of China could be found in other arts as well. The most successful tribute to China might be Voltaire's *Orphan of China*. This play took its plot from a 14<sup>th</sup> century Chinese play *Orphan of the Zhao Family* based on a family saga during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.E.) After comparing the narrative structure and thematic dramatization, Huang Huaijun concludes that despite the overt similarity in story, the two plays are promoting different ideas through different channels (Huang, 2002). Voltaire moved the time setting from the Spring and Autumn Period to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and the hero's main adversary from insidious courtiers to the wise invader Genghis Khan. By writing a story in which the barbarous conquer was ultimately prevailed by the civilized conquered, Voltaire aimed to demonstrate that "the victorious Tartars did not change the manners of the nation vanquished; they protected all the Arts established in China; they adopted all its laws. This is a striking instance of the natural superiority of reason and genius over blind and barbarous force" (Voltaire, 1756, p. 8). This unequivocal promotion of Confucian morality as the antithesis to barbarism and religious dogma was evidently absent from the Chinese play, which eulogized virtues of humanistic benevolence and sacrifice for ultimate righteousness in a story about court struggle and family revenge. Although Voltaire was a huge fan of China, he was not really appreciative of Chinese arts. In the same dedication to Duke Richelieu where Voltaire (1756) poured his praise for China, Voltaire also passed the following judgment on Chinese arts:

The Chinese, like the other Asiaticks, have stopped at the first elements of Poetry, Eloquence, Physicks, Astronomy, Painting, known by them so long before us. They begun all things so much sooner than all other people, never afterwards to make any progress in them. They have resembled the ancient Egyptians, who having first instructed the Grecians, were afterwards incapable of being their disciples. (p. 11-12)

In old China, artists were first of all intellectuals long nurtured in traditional Chinese culture, and their works reflected ideas of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism that collectively shaped the Chinese culture. Voltaire's failure to appreciate the beauty of Chinese arts suggested his inability to really appreciate the ideas and beliefs behind these arts that had delegated them their aesthetic appeal and philosophical profundity. In *Orphan of China*, Voltaire did more than take the spirit of Confucian morality out of the specific words of the Chinese play and apply it to the French scenario: he reinvented a China, piecing useful Chinese features together with his own moral and political ideals to create a model for his fellow citizens. Like Monville's Chinese House at Desert de Retz, his play was much more French than Chinese, promoting Enlightenment ideas with evidence from a remote country of which the audience had only limited knowledge. His protagonist always talked about the power of reason and equality, which were more Enlightenment key words than familiar Chinese concepts. The conflict between personal sentiments and ultimate righteousness was not solved in the Chinese way of self sacrifice for righteousness, but by a wise king visionary enough to make the right decision and achieve peace and prosperity. Particular Chinese elements were singled out and others created according to practical needs, and both were collaged at will to signify an idealized, or

French, image of China.

Given the salient role subjectivity played in his re-invented Chinese-ness, it was understandable that reaction to the Chinese House was mixed: Monville's contemporaries, such as renowned art connoisseurs Prince de Ligne, Comte de Ganay and Le Rouge, praised the creation as a work of genius (Connolly & Zerbe, 1962, p. 150-1), but it soon lost favor with later critics, as Diana Ketcham (1994) effectively summarized that passion for the whimsical representation in Desert de Retz "did not survive the Revolution" (p. 5). Different from the Broken Column which was still hailed one of the most interesting fabriques in Europe, the Chinese House gradually became a typical example of aesthetic failure. For example, the influential art critic during and after the Revolution, Alexandre Laborde (1971) reserved his admiration for the Broken Column but criticized the Chinese House as a typical example of "bad taste that reigned at the time" (p. 61-2). Similarly, Thomas Blaikie (1931), a Scottish garden designer who made his name in France with his role in the design of several famous gardens such as those at Bagatelle, Monceau and Le Petit Trianon, was also not favorably impressed by the Chinese House. Both the Broken Column and the Chinese House were products of wild imagination, yet the former was rooted in the West whereas the latter in the Orient. The former was created to be part of the progressive development of the Western self, whereas the latter an exoticized and essentialist Eastern other. The fact that most fabriques in the Chinese style in other gardens did not survive beyond the 18th century was testimony enough to the swiftly changing attitude towards the Chinese motif in garden design. These individual experiments with the Chinese image were bold attempts at new aesthetic and functional possibilities, but their appeal had come primarily from the imagination of passionate subjectivity than the profundity of Chinese culture, and became easy targets of criticism when their once novel ideas became obsolete. Voltaire's *Orphan of China* was unanimously hailed as a success, but one has to take into consideration the relatively early time of the work's appearance, when the affection for China was still vigorous, and Voltaire's almost reverent place in the Enlightenment movement.

The changed attitude in the reception of the Chinese House among French art critics typified the fate of China in Enlightenment France. Early in the century, with Jesuit reports of a large, rich and well-ordered country, interests in this remote country gained momentum, first in the religious realm and then the intellectual and political realms. Translations of Chinese historical and philosophical works flourished from the late 17th century, and by 1735, the introduction of China to Europe had culminated with Du Halde's voluminous *Description of the Empire of China* presenting an encyclopedic survey of Chinese history, culture and society. By the end of the 1760s, authors talked about an almost compulsory desire to admire China (Reichwein, 1996, p. 78-9). Interest in China soon spilled over to the social and political arenas, as Encyclopedists rejoiced at finding a state that practiced what they envisioned for their own country all along and achieved order and prosperity under a wise king. Especially to their liking was Confucius, whose teachings about active involvement in civic life echoed their desire for immediate action and change (Reichwein, 1996, p. 77). China became the antithesis to the deplorable situations in France and was frequently invoked by Voltaire and others in their fight against Church corruption and state oppression. In the last decades of the 18th century, China also became a model which France could follow to renovate its shaky political and economic system. Physiocrats such as Quesnay and Turgot borrowed the general principle

as well as some policy details from China (Tan, 1992). Oppositions to physiocrats' proposals were always raised, and schism undercut their influence, but this was nevertheless the peak the Chinese influence could reach in French politics.

However, even at the height of sinomania, not everyone was ready to accept the utopian endorsement of China. Montesquieu, for example, still labeled China as a despotic country in his *The Spirit of Laws*. Different from other Encyclopedists who obtained knowledge of China mainly from works of Jesuit fathers who primarily intermingled with officials and intellectuals in China, Montesquieu was more inclined to believe in the reports of traders, whose major contacts were cunning Chinese traders and narrow-minded bureaucrats of the customs (Elisseeff-Poisle, 1991, p. 158), and arrived at a very negative view of the Chinese in general. As Voltaire's ardent passion for the Chinese experience finally became almost tiresome, Montesquieu's more reserved assessment of China began to gain currency. Rousseau's dislike of China was even more obvious. Since his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau (1997) had argued against the evil and corruptive effect of social establishments and customs, so it was not surprising to find him hypercritical of a country which viewed the observance of rites vital to the prosperity of an empire. The glamorous achievements in China were not viewed as fruits of the pursuit of virtues but signs of weakness and decay. China's long history was reinterpreted in the Rousseauian framework as a history of men losing their innocence to the evils of social forces. Therefore, talks about the Chinese glory should always be listened to with suspicion.

Montesquieu and Rousseau offered a more reserved approach to the prevalent Sino-mania which was, as discussed earlier, a fancy collage of supposedly Chinese characteristics pieced together to serve Enlightenment purposes. However, their questioning of this willful creation of a symbolic China did not guarantee the truthfulness of their own assessment. Both Montesquieu and Rousseau, and other critics of China such as Grimm and Fenelon for that matter, were no better informed about the essence of the Chinese society and culture than those admirers of China, and were highly selective of the evidence they used in their arguments against China. In the case of Montesquieu, the frustration he experienced when trying to incorporate China into his system inclined him to discredit Jesuit reports in favor of the traders' accounts. In the case of Rousseau, His theoretical edifice would collapse if China's achievement was recognized and its experience appreciated. Therefore, what other Encyclopedists were overjoyed to find in China became fake splendors suggesting backwardness and decay. Therefore, it is fair to say that the grey picture Sinophobe depicted was in essence another imagined collage of the concept of China similar to the rosy image painted by Sinophile. Just as Monville used the Chinese House to realize his imagination of the exotic in his *Desert de Retz*, the philosophes used Chinese morality and its political and social system to substantiate their political claims and reformative plans, though, given the difference in their teleological ideas and empirical needs, the specific usage of China differs from person to person.

#### 4. Conclusion

The above discussion of "other", both the historical and geographical, reveals important findings about the French Enlightenment. The first is *philosophes'* tendency to recreate new



images of other times and places to serve purposes which were of importance here and now. French *philosophes* took great liberty in twisting others to fit into present narrative. Ruins were the preferred form of souvenir from the past, for they provided a nostalgic glimpse into the past instead of a close view too clear to be comfortably appreciated. The exotic proved an easier job, for although knowledge of other countries was greatly enriched, it was still beyond the means, and probably desire as well, of most Europeans to actually verify the truthfulness of claims about these countries. Fragments of the past and the exotic were thus taken liberally into the current discourse, and imagination filled in the blanks between them so that they could be molded into whatever shapes the subjectivity desired according to the needs of its project. With such liberty at re-creation and the unapologetic manner in which the re-creation was conducted, the real historical and geographical others vanished in the rumblings of the many battles *philosophes* fought on the political, social, moral and cultural fronts, and out of the smoldering ashes were born specious symbols that were hardly recognizable of the deconstructed original.

However, even though the historical other and the geographical other were both twisted in the representation, the images thus constructed were distinctively different for the historical other and the geographical other. Past stages in Western history were imagined to be links in an ever changing process, and their cultural, religious and philosophical implications were given full respect in the construction of their new image. Different from this dynamic and contextualized image, the image of the Orient was rather fixed and comprised of what were thought to be key features of the civilization under discussion. It is believed that there safely existed an essence of the Orient ready to be recognized and appreciated. Moreover, the Orient was never understood within the local context and historical development but was instead talked about in a vacuum. The social, political and intellectual conditions which had led to specific artistic expressions and cultural features were hardly of real interest to French intellectuals, as they were primarily drawn by the exoticness of things Oriental and their potential to argue for Enlightenment ideas, but they would not bother with either the things themselves or the stories behind them. Consequently, the reconstruction of the Orient became highly essentialist, decontextualized, and exoticism. In this sense, the historical other was not an other in the real sense of the word, as it was in fact part and parcel of the West and was incorporated into the progressive development envisioned by the West; the only real other for the West was the Orient.

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