*Simulating Chinese architecture in Europe and the US: from the Chinoiseries to China City (1750s-1950s)*

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**Abstract**

This paper is about so-called Chinese pagodas, pavilions, temples, gates or bridges built in Europe and the USA between the 18th and the 20th century.

These simulacra were at first built in Western gardens during the second half of the 18th century, mainly in Northern Europe. These “Chinese” (but also “Japanese”, “Turkish” or “Egyptian”) exotic and eccentric follies had no other purpose but to ornate the garden and please the visitors and their taste for Chinoiseries and Rococo. These spectacular buildings were designed to be looked at and conspicuously fake, just as the Greek or Roman ruins often built in the same gardens.

A second kind of Chinese simulacrum was built later and in a very different context: in museums (such as Nathan Dunn’s Chinese Museum, Philadelphia, 1838 ; or John Peters’ Chinese Museum, Boston, 1845) and more systematically in large national or international fairs (such as in Paris [1867, 1878, 1889 et 1900], Philadelphia [1876], Chicago [1893], San Francisco [1894, 1915 et 1939], Saint Louis [1904], Seattle [1909), San Diego (1915], etc.). Usually, the exhibition included more than one building and simulated a street, and urban district or a village. The purpose of these simulacra had supposedly less to do with entertainment and more with education, and they often claimed to some authenticity. Visitors would not only look at the simulacra, but as well walk in or along, buy Chinese items, meet and talk with Chinese(-American) employees. As for the famous Street of Cairo and its famous belly-dancers, the visit to the Chinese exhibition was supposed to be a substitute for a trip to the “real” Orient.

The third kind of Chinese simulacrum appeared in US Chinatowns at the beginning of the 20th century. Prior to the 1900s, Chinese enclaves in such cities as New York, Chicago, San Francisco or Los Angeles had no exotic or picturesque appearance, and attracted slummers rather than tourists. San Francisco Chinatown being completely destroyed by the 1906 earthquake, the Chinese-American community had it rebuilt on the same location, but hired Western architects to give a Chinese look to the new buildings, so as to change the image of the district and attract tourists. They came *en masse* to walk the streets, eat Chop Suey and buy curios. The place was most likely not a simulacrum for the people who lived there, and, if it was one for the tourists, what was these Chinatown exactly simulating, and how? To answer this question, one should keep in mind that the tourists could in San Francisco visit no less than three Chinese simulacra : (i) the “real” San Francisco Chinatown, and, in San Francisco’s Panama-Pacific International exhibition, either (ii) the “Chinese Village” and Chinese Pavilions, which were supposed to duplicate the real China or (iii) “Underground Chinatown”, duplicating the opium dens and the white slavery supposedly found in Chinese-American districts.

A fourth kind of simulacrum is provided since the 1910s by Hollywood, where Chinese sets were built in the studios or outdoors to shoot the numerous movies taking place in China or American Chinatowns. Tourists were not concerned, except when visiting the studios.

China City, a district built in Los Angeles in 1938 and 1948, was an orientalist attraction built by Hollywood studios for Western visitors: a Chinese simulacrum and a tourist attraction. No one lived their, but all the employees were Chinese-Americans, many of them working as extras for the studio. On one hand, China City belongs to a long tradition of Chinese simulacra, and shares different elements with the four kinds of simulacra I have delineated. On the other hand, China City could be defined as a cinematic theme park anticipating Disney Land (1955) and Universal Studios (1964). As such, China City is a turning point in the history of the articulation of architecture, simulacra and tourism, and a significant study case allowing to raise important theoretical questions about the complex status and functions of touristic simulacra.

**Biography**

Jean-François Staszak received his PhD in Geography at the Sorbonne University. After serving asan Associate Professor in the Universities of Amiens (Northern France) and Panthéon-Sorbonne (Paris), he became a full Professor at the Geography Department of the University of Geneva(Switzerland), where he has lived and taught since 2004. His early research focused on the history and epistemology of Geography, and then with economic and cultural Geography. His most recent work addresses geographical imaginaries in the fields of art and tourism, analyzing the geographical othering process and especially the Exotic. His understanding of the articulation of geographical representations, practices, and realities owes much to deconstructionist theories and to postcolonial and gender studies.