

What's Chinese about Chinese Export Wallpaper? Reflections on the Participatory Art and Research Project, *If Walls Could Talk*

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Introduction

This article examines the use of participatory art practice as a method for researching and interpreting Chinese export wallpaper. Reflecting on the project *If Walls Could Talk*, it considers how collaborative, community-led approaches can offer alternative readings of historic interiors, challenging dominant interpretations shaped by national identity and museum authority. The project centred on an augmented reality (AR) intervention in the East Bedroom at Harewood House, which took place between 8th September and 19th October 2025. Through this intervention the motif of the Chinese supermarket was introduced as a contemporary lens, linking the wallpaper to ongoing histories of globalisation, migration and intangible heritage. By juxtaposing the historic decorative scheme with present-day cultural references, the project sought to reposition Chinese export wallpaper within a broader, transnational context.

If Walls Could Talk emerged from an interest in interrogating the meaning of the British country house in a global context, particularly the 'Britishness' of the material culture within these sites. The focus on Chinese export wallpaper developed out of that initial interest, in recognition of the prevalence of Chinese artefacts in country house museums, and the relative lack of interpretation highlighting their role both in 18th century trade networks and in establishing a British country house style.¹

Supported by the Meryll Huxtable Bursary from the Wallpaper History Society, the project implemented an alternative research model through co-production with Chinese-speaking communities in Leeds. Participants included members of Lychee Red Chinese Seniors, Next Stop Cafe participants from Hong Kong, and students from Leeds Chinese Community School. Participants responded to questions arising from the wallpaper and its histories, drawing on lived experience as well as creative interpretation. These contributions were combined with historical research and digital technologies to produce a range of outputs, including the AR installation in the East Bedroom, AR postcards, a project publication and website, and a supplementary exhibition and symposium at the University of



Fig.1 Super/Market, East Bedroom

Photo: Louise Atkinson, courtesy Harewood House Trust

Leeds. Together, these outputs form the basis for analysing participatory practice as both a research method and an interpretive strategy within heritage contexts (Fig.1).

The history of Harewood House

Harewood House was built by Edwin Lascelles in the 18th century, on the estate of the former Gawthorpe Hall in Leeds. The Lascelles family were heavily involved in the transatlantic slave trade and Harewood was built and furnished from the proceeds of trafficking enslaved people.² After Harewood became a charitable educational Trust in 1986, the organisation began highlighting this legacy, both in the collections and through artistic interventions across the site.

Interventions included *Crop Over*, Sonia Boyce's carnivalesque response to plantation life; *What's in a Name?*, exploring actor David Harewood's ancestral ties to the Lascelles family through historic slavery; Chris Day's contemporary glassworks installed in All Saints' Church in the Harewood grounds; and Ashley Karrell's *Missing Portraits*, contemporary photographs of Afro-Caribbean cultural leaders displayed alongside paintings of members of the Lascelles family.^{3,4,5,6}

The interventions were underpinned by extensive work by archivists at the Borthwick Institute for Archives at the University of York to outline the trading activities of the Lascelles family in Barbados between the 17th and 20th centuries.⁷ The Lascelles' links to the transatlantic slave trade resulted from their positions of authority within the British East India Company. This provided them the wealth and networks to commission Chinese export wallpaper. In this way, the wallpaper is inextricable from the broader histories of Empire and colonialism.

The British East India Company controlled Britain's trade with China from the 17th to the 19th centuries, importing

commodities including silk, tea, porcelain and wallpaper. Chinese export wallpaper was not produced in the same volumes as other imported items, so was usually privately traded by Company officers, such as Edwin Lascelles' brother Henry.⁸ The log book of Henry's ship, *The York*, shows that he arrived back in England from Canton around the same time the Chinese wallpaper was installed at Harewood.⁹ Although there is no conclusive evidence that Henry imported the wallpaper currently installed in the East Bedroom, Chinese export wallpaper in other country houses in Britain can be traced back to family members in the British East India Company.¹⁰

The East Bedroom

The Harewood wallpaper in the East Bedroom can be read as a composite image, assembling multiple sites of production as a continuous vista. The immersive panorama depicts the production of tea, porcelain, rice and silk, against a backdrop of hills, paddy fields, mulberry trees and rural buildings. Despite being hand painted, these wallpapers were serially produced, with individual artists specialising in elements like architecture, foliage or figures. Further

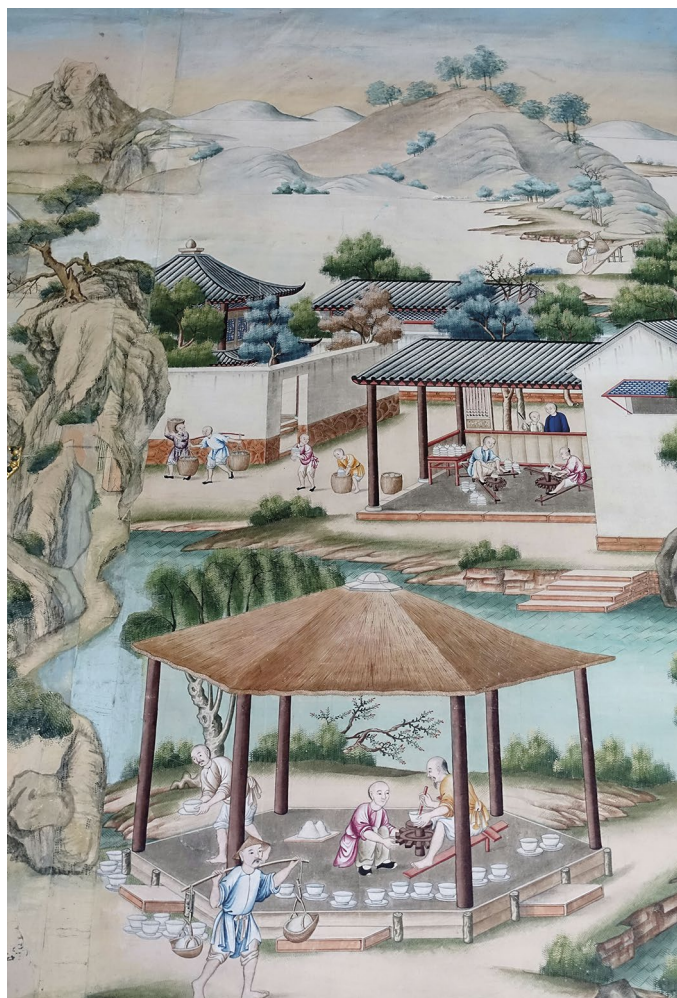


Fig.2 Scenes of porcelain production, Chinese export wallpaper, East Bedroom
Photo: Harewood House Trust

examples of this style can be found at Saltram House in Devon, Blickling Hall in Norfolk, and Coutts Bank in London, as well as in small paintings, pasted directly on the walls, at Erddig in Wrexham.¹¹

The Harewood wallpaper was purchased by Edwin Lascelles and installed in 1769 by Thomas Chippendale's craftsmen upstairs in the Chintz Bedroom, as part of an extensive chinoiserie scheme. However, sometime during the 19th century it was removed, rolled up and stored in an outbuilding until it was rediscovered in 1988. A period of research and conservation followed until finally, in 2008, the wallpaper was reinstalled in Harewood's East Bedroom on the House visitor route. Like many Chinese export wallpapers, the wallpaper at Harewood House was painted in watercolour on mulberry paper by skilled artisans in Canton (Guangzhou), before being exported to Britain.¹²

Each of the trades shown on the wallpaper is illustrated through a series of vignettes. The scenes relating to rice farming show men planting rice shoots and flooding the fields with water from the river, followed by harvesting and winnowing the grain. Images depicting the process of silk-making show women tending to silkworm eggs before feeding the larvae with mulberry leaves gathered from nearby trees. Further scenes illustrate the extraction of silk threads from the cocoons, dyeing the skeins red, weaving the fabric on a loom and, finally cutting the material to make garments. The porcelain production process is shown from the initial stage of digging up clay with the help of oxen, to delivering it to the potters to shape into plates and bowls. Beehive-shaped kilns depict the firing and glazing process, followed by the finished wares being packaged and priced for export (Fig.2). Finally, images of tea depict workers picking and drying tea leaves before compacting them into baskets for export (Fig.3). These four commodities represented the major agricultural and industrial activities of China's economy and international trade during the 18th and 19th centuries.¹³

Questions of cultural production were central to the ways that we interpreted the wallpaper, from the images of industry displayed on its surface, to how the wallpaper itself was created. Taking as our starting point the desire to avoid reproducing stereotypical readings of Chinese culture, we began by asking participants if there were any elements of the wallpaper that they recognised. Many of the participants had no previous experience of the wallpaper as it had been produced solely for export, however they identified the Qing-era imagery through visual markers such as hairstyles and clothing. They mentioned particular regions associated with the production of different foods and products, such as Jingdezhen, an area known for porcelain manufacture.¹⁴ We also discussed how the wallpaper might be updated with more contemporary references, with suggestions including night markets, festivals and gold ingots.

As the research progressed, we became more interested in the hybrid forms of cultural production that are particular



Fig.3 Scenes of tea packing, Chinese export wallpaper, East Bedroom. Photo: Harewood House Trust

to migration and globalisation. Far from trying to locate an 'authentic' reading of Chineseness, we instead hoped to highlight the heterogeneity of experiences within Chinese-speaking communities in Leeds. Comments from the project catalogue such as 'As a Hongkonger, I am influenced by Western and Chinese cultures. I value both for my diverse personality' and 'I look Chinese but I feel British', emphasised how identity is experienced in ways that exceed simplistic definitions rooted in nationality or geographical borders. Rather than positioning this work as a contemporary counterpart to a stable historical Chinese identity represented within the wallpaper, the research instead revealed a more complex visual field shaped by over 600 years of appropriation, diplomatic exchange and global circulation. This reframing disrupted earlier interpretations that located the hybridity of Chinese export wallpaper primarily in its encounter with British and European commissioners through trade networks.¹⁵

Pictures of Tilling and Weaving

The wallpaper imagery derived from a series known as *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* or *Gengzhitu*. First devised by the official Lou Shu (1090–1162) during the Southern Song Dynasty, the images were originally produced as a pair of handscrolls depicting scenes of agriculture and sericulture. Government officials are shown within the scenes, acting as intermediaries between rulers and labour, and making the structures of administration visible within

everyday processes of farming and weaving. Shaped by the introduction of the Imperial examination system, they reflected a model of governance based on scholarly merit rather than hereditary privilege. Lou Shu's accompanying poems acknowledged the hardship of rural life and criticised failures in governance, framing the workers as essential yet vulnerable.¹⁶

Following the Manchu conquest in 1644, the *Gengzhitu* was appropriated by the second Qing Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722). Seeking to establish the legitimacy of Manchu rule through a connection to visual tradition, Kangxi commissioned a new version of the imagery in 1696 from court astronomer and artist, Jiao Bingzhen. Known as the *Imperially Commissioned Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* or *Yuzhi Gengzhitu*, Kangxi's version integrated linear perspective and chiaroscuro, drawing on Jesuit scientific and visual methods which had been circulating in the Chinese court since the late 1500s (Fig.4).¹⁷ These techniques were used to clarify spatial relations and material processes in the imagery, and closely paralleled Kangxi's adoption of Jesuit astronomy to improve the accuracy of the Imperial calendar. The calendar carefully regulated agricultural rhythms, ceremonial life and religious observance, linking political authority to the ordering of natural systems. Kangxi's incorporation of Western knowledge or *Xīxué* into Chinese forms of representation was therefore a strategic act of hybridisation.¹⁸



Fig.4 Woodblock print from Imperially Commissioned illustrations of Agriculture and Sericulture (Yuzhi Gengzhi tu) by Zhu Gui after designs by Jiao Bingzhen c.1696 Image: Chester Beatty Library C 1717.1 via Wikimedia Commons

Although Kangxi first appropriated the imagery, it was under the reign of his grandson, the Qianlong Emperor (1735–1796) that the *Gengzhi tu* became canonical. Qianlong reinforced the imagery by reproducing it on stone steles so that ordinary people could create their own impressions of the scenes. As a result, images from the *Gengzhi tu* increasingly circulated beyond the court, facilitating their movement across media and geographies. By the 18th century, images of farming and weaving had appeared on porcelain, lacquer, ink sticks and export wallpaper, alongside scenes of tea harvesting and porcelain manufacture.¹⁹ The Chinese export wallpaper at Harewood House belonged to this later phase of circulation.

Hybridity within the *Gengzhi tu* imagery was therefore enacted both cross-culturally and intra-nationally, through the negotiation between Chinese and European epistemologies, and the reconfiguration of Han visual traditions by a Manchu ruling class. When elements of the imagery were later incorporated into export wallpaper, contemporaneous references such as the queue hairstyle were added, signalling submission to Qing rule by the populace, and further complicating global representations of 'Chineseness'.²⁰ These findings enabled us to interpret the wallpaper not only in relation to contemporary diaspora communities, but also historically as a site of continuously renegotiated cultural identity.²¹

Participatory practice as knowledge production

While a key aim was to provide Chinese-speaking participants in Leeds with opportunities to connect with heritage and to express their creativity, participants were also fundamental to the interpretation of the wallpaper through sharing lived experience and providing critical feedback. Our approach combined practice-based research with historical analysis. Practice was used not to illustrate research, but to generate knowledge through participatory making.

The project also engaged with questions of digital inclusion, particularly around immersive and extended reality technologies within museum contexts; responding to institutional interest in emerging technologies, while remaining attentive to how audiences actually understand, access and feel about using them. Considerations of language, age and confidence informed the decision to produce outputs which combined printed material with augmented reality elements. Using digital photography, collage, pattern design, animation, 3D scanning and augmented reality, participants developed creative confidence and digital skills while contributing to the co-produced digital intervention.

The groups undertook site visits to Harewood, engaging with recognisable motifs in the wallpaper and learning more about the history of the house (Fig.5). MA students provided translated versions of the workshops and house guides. Following the visits, the translations of the guides were provided to Harewood staff to make them available to Chinese-speaking members of the public. This not only enhanced language accessibility but also provided the students with valuable experience in heritage interpretation.

The central premise of hybridity was further addressed through visits to the University of Leeds' Treasures of the Brotherton Gallery to see the *Part of the Furniture* exhibition.²² This exhibition explored the influence of Chinese design on British decorative arts and how Chinese and British aesthetics have shaped each other throughout



Fig.5 Community participants in the Gallery at Harewood House Photo: Louise Atkinson



Fig.6 Ceremonial scene offering thanks for the silk harvest, Chinese export wallpaper, East Bedroom. Photo: Harewood House Trust

history. Inspired by the gallery visit, participants took part in a collage workshop, cutting out images from the Harewood wallpaper, photographs of personal objects, and references from Chinoiserie designs in the exhibition and the East Bedroom.

Outputs from the project included an augmented reality experience, AR postcards, a project catalogue, and a digitally projected wallpaper. To produce the outputs, we approached the wallpaper as a visual record of the different stages of agricultural work. Across its surface, tasks were arranged in sequences which unfolded over the course of the year. Images of rural labour were punctuated by ceremonial scenes, including one offering thanks for the silk harvest (Fig.6). The underlying visual structure of the wallpaper, as a calendar where agricultural cycles, festivals and celestial rhythms were superimposed, thus provided the basis for the augmented reality animation.

Augmented reality as form and concept

The augmented reality intervention, *Super/Market*, opened with an arch modelled on the entrance to a local Chinese wholesalers and restaurant, its title conflating global histories of trade with the routine nature of daily shopping activities. Throughout the animation, foods connected to four different Chinese festivals appeared underneath the arch, one for each season. Related objects, including hanging banners and lanterns, were displayed alongside the food. Circling the arch, the sun and moon rose and set in succession. The Chinese arch was both a visual and symbolic threshold, echoing historic ceremonial gateways while grounding the work in a contemporary commercial setting. It also functioned as a speculative structure, alluding to a proposed Friendship Gate (友谊门) intended to mark the Leeds-Hangzhou sister-city relationship, but never realised.²³ Historically, Chinese ceremonial gates, or *Paifang*, acted as thresholds that signalled arrival and welcome, marking entry into shared civic or cultural space rather than serving a purely structural function.²⁴ Responding to the absence of

the proposed gate, the virtual arch reimagined this threshold in digital form, aligning with the museum as a place of invitation and encounter.

In addition, augmented reality operated on a conceptual level. Print culture has always been central to the history of Chinese export wallpaper. It developed out of and through images circulated in pattern books, rubbings and agricultural manuals. Thus, the digital overlay extended the logic of reproducibility, through contemporary forms of circulation, such as mobile phones and internet servers. In this way, the use of augmented reality aimed to complicate assumptions about technology and modernity. While the wallpaper is framed through an agricultural narrative, it has been described as one of the first scientific textbooks.²⁵ Responding to this premise through augmented reality highlighted how these types of didactic images represent forms of technology, even when they are not recognised as such. The wallpaper's distinctive bird's-eye perspective, historically criticised for its spatial distortions, appeared strikingly contemporary when viewed through the lens of drone imagery and surveillance.²⁶ This reflected broader questions about how modes of seeing are produced, contested and naturalised.

The repetition and circulation of print culture referenced in the augmented reality intervention also informed the production of the project postcards. Four postcard designs were created, depicting supermarket ingredients used to prepare the dishes shown in the animation (Fig.7). Each postcard included a recipe on the reverse, alongside a QR code linking to an augmented reality overlay of the postcard which revealed the finished meal. The ingredient imagery was also repurposed as a projected wallpaper. The intentional reuse of images across the postcards, projection and augmented reality intervention emphasised reproducibility and recontextualisation across print and digital outputs in a post-internet context.²⁷



Fig.7 AR postcard showing the ingredients for Tang Yuan. Photo: Louise Atkinson

Capturing the process

A central question at the outset was why the project focused on Chinese-speaking communities given that few of the participants had prior knowledge of the wallpaper. The decision was not based on any presumed knowledge of the object, but rather that the wallpaper was positioned as 'Chinese' while being separate from the contemporary lives, languages and communities with whom that label is often associated. Participants therefore did not function as representatives of a singular cultural position but provided individual insight and feedback on what a contemporary response to Chinese wallpaper might include and, perhaps more importantly, what it should avoid. They also identified the partiality of the wallpaper imagery and its focus on a specific region and historical moment, introducing alternative references drawn from their own knowledge and experiences. The catalogue reflected this by presenting the project as structured through workshops, exchanges and participant commentary rather than as a single interpretive account.

The workshops had the effect of welcoming new people into the museum while recognising and valuing the language diversity already present within the student population and local communities. This was reflected in the participants' nationalities and linguistic repertoires. Participants and support staff came from a range of backgrounds, with some who had migrated to the UK several decades ago and others who had arrived in recent years. These included connections to mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, as well as those with Chinese-British heritage. English, Cantonese and Mandarin were spoken across the groups, alongside references to regional variations such as Hokkien. The coexistence of multiple spoken languages and scripts highlighted the extent to which 'Chinese' functioned as a broad and provisional label. The Chinese Community School participants extended this further, representing a range of nationalities brought together not through a shared heritage but a common interest in Chinese languages and culture. Differences in spoken language across the workshops also indicated areas for further development in the project, as sound remained absent from the current outputs. Its inclusion in a future phase could provide a means of registering linguistic variation and offer additional ways of accessing the work.

Lastly, the project addressed the limits of producing a coherent artwork which risked flattening the linguistic and cultural variation represented by participants. This became particularly evident through discussions of recipes, where regional differences made it difficult to establish a representative selection. In response, the focus shifted away from reflecting an arbitrary range of food and festivals associated with China, and instead concentrated on the Chinese celebrations and recipes that were particular to Leeds' diaspora communities.

Next steps: class, excess and polycrisis in the country house

If Walls Could Talk foregrounded the relationship between food, migration and cultural identity in Chinese export wallpaper, but it also brought into relief the extent to which contemporary consumption is increasingly divorced from ecological cycles. The supermarket, as both infrastructure and metaphor, enables year-round availability while obscuring the conditions that maintain it. Seasonality is thus encountered symbolically rather than materially.

Building on these existing narratives, the next phase of the project aims to incorporate aspects of class and climate through the framework of polycrisis, defined as multiple, distinct crises which occur simultaneously and interact in ways that amplify each other. However, rather than positioning polycrisis solely as a contemporary condition, the project will explore how historically disproportionate systems of labour, mobility and agriculture have shaped our society today. The industrial espionage involved in the transfer of tea plants from China to India and Sri Lanka illustrates one such moment, in which ecological knowledge and environments were reorganised to serve Imperial markets. Enabled by the British East India Company, these practices were dependent on indentured and itinerant labour, embedding the legacies of Empire within everyday commodities.²⁸

Chinese export wallpaper provides a visual register through which these entanglements can be traced, with scenes reflecting already complex systems of labour and hierarchy. Designed for elite interiors, the wallpaper embodied notions of excess; its display normalising forms of abundance sustained by colonial trade and overseas extraction. At the same time, the materiality and imagery of the wallpaper draws attention to the interdependent relations in which different industries support one another. Cultivation, harvesting and manufacture appear in close proximity. The overall image does not isolate individual sites of productivity but situates them within a wider network of activity, connected to seasonal cycles and environmental conditions.²⁹

Approaching the wallpaper through an ecological lens therefore offers a means of reflecting on how such systems are made visible or obscured. By recognising this interdependence, the project creates space to think critically about how contemporary processes of production and consumption might be organised with greater attentiveness to planetary limits and labour conditions, as well as extending the focus beyond questions of cultural identity.

Conclusion

If Walls Could Talk contributed to existing scholarship by questioning interpretations of Chinese export wallpaper as culturally bounded. Rather than approaching imagery in the Harewood wallpaper as an expression of an essentialised 'Chineseness', it was reframed as the product of successive processes of appropriation, translation and adaptation,

from Kangxi's Imperial reworkings of Song era imagery, to its later circulation as an export product. Throughout the project, artworks and reflections by participants expanded the research beyond superficial or stereotypical notions of Chinese identity. Introducing personal and culturally-specific objects foregrounded the ways meaning is derived from everyday items, while participants' experiences of migration highlighted shared and diverse histories. These contributions resisted attempts to stabilise identity, instead emphasising hybridity and plurality.

Food became a particularly effective means of articulating these ideas. Drawing on the wallpaper's depictions of rice and tea, workshops extended these themes alongside shared meals. Food functioned as an accessible point of connection, while drawing attention to its role as a form of intangible heritage, shaped by memory and tradition. Participants took pleasure in explaining the cultural histories embedded in specific dishes, such as the association between Zongzi and the Dragon Boat Festival in commemorating the poet Qu Yuan.³⁰ Creative processes such as collage and pattern design translated these discussions into visual form, with colour palettes and motifs developed in the workshops directly informing the imagery and narratives in the augmented reality animation and postcards. Collectively, these approaches reinterpreted the Chinese export wallpaper not as a stable cultural artefact, but as a transnational assemblage produced through mobility and exchange.

More information about the project can be found at www.ifwallscouldtalk.org.uk

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