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CANTONESE MODELS FOR THE GREAT PAGODA AT KEW

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In 1761, Sir William Chambers began to erect the Great Pagoda at Kew for Princess Augusta, which was completed the following year. By far the largest and most structurally ambitious chinoiserie building in eighteenth-century Europe, the Pagoda achieved instant and widespread fame (Fig. 1). Yet despite the significance of the tower, historians have largely ignored its accuracies in favour of its shortfalls, with John Harris memorably labelling Chambers' masterpiece as 'a child of rococo invention.'¹ Furthermore, very little effort has been expended in

establishing the origins of the Pagoda's design. As so many other 'Chinese' buildings in England were based on vague notions and elements derived from decorative paintings on imported porcelains, it is assumed that Chambers' tower is similarly inaccurate. Yet Chambers had, almost uniquely, travelled to China itself. For this reason the models for the Kew Pagoda are far more likely to be found in the Chinese city of Canton, which Chambers visited in the 1740s, than in the seventeenth-century literature on China, which is where most historians have sought them.



Fig. 1. The Great Pagoda at Kew, built by William Chambers in 1761–2.



Fig. 2. The Porcelain Tower of Nanking, published in England by Johan Nieuhof in 1669.

Despite correctly viewing Chambers's tower as 'the most scholarly pagoda to be seen in Europe', Hugh Honour assumed that 'it was not modelled on any particular oriental prototype.'² Where scholars are willing to name an historical model, they unanimously cite the Porcelain Tower of Nanking. This was the most famous Chinese building known to Europe, first described in Johan Nieuhof's *An Embassy from the East-India Company* (1669), where

it was accompanied by a detailed and impressive engraving (Fig. 2). Nieuhof described this pagoda as 'a high steeple or tower made of porcelane ... the outside is all glazed over and painted with several colours, as green, red, and yellow. The whole fabric consists of several pieces, which are so artificially cemented, as if the work were all one entire piece.'³ Patrick Conner is certain that Nieuhof's information formed Chambers' primary source:

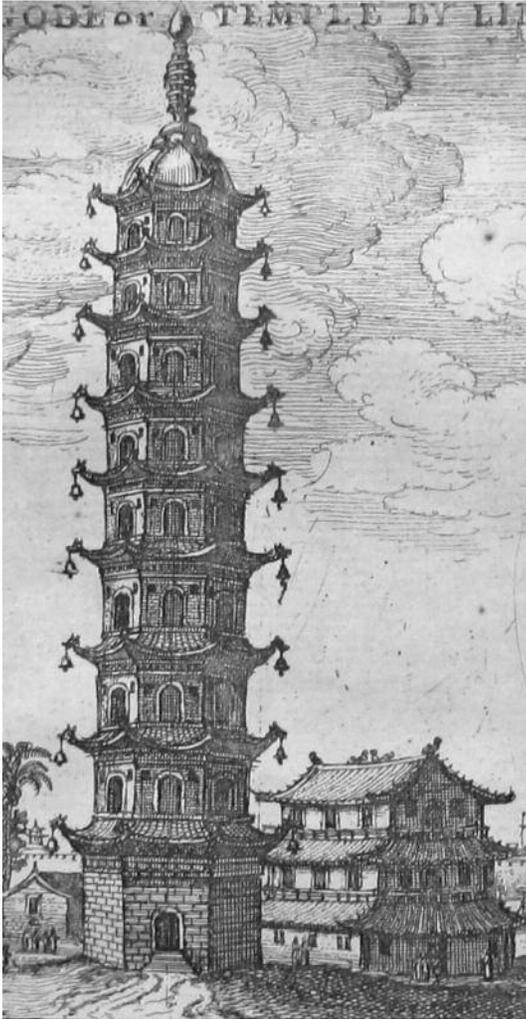


Fig. 3. The Pagoda at Lincing, published in England by Johan Nieuhof in 1669.

‘There can be little doubt that the Great Pagoda was inspired first and foremost by the so-called Porcelain Tower of Nanking ... It is true that Chambers would have seen several other pagodas in his travels, but the Kew pagoda bears a closer resemblance to the Porcelain Tower than to the pagoda near Canton which he reproduced in *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, or to any other pagodas illustrated in the English literature of China.’⁴

There are a number of problems with Conner’s view. Firstly, the Nanking pagoda was famous primarily for its astonishing materials. By contrast, although Chambers’s tower at Kew originally had colourful glazed iron tiles for the roofs, the main body exhibited a very plain appearance. ‘The walls of the building’, wrote Chambers with pride, ‘are composed of very hard bricks; the outside of well coloured and well matched greystocks, neatly laid, and with such care, that there is not the least crack or fracture in the whole structure, notwithstanding its great height, and the expedition with which it was built.’⁵ Therefore although Chambers might indeed have been ‘inspired’ by the popularity of the Porcelain Pagoda, differences in plan (Nieuhof’s engraving suggests more than eight sides), scale and materials, suggest it was not his actual model for Kew.

Secondly, if Chambers did look to Nieuhof for a model, it would have been more practical to have chosen the engraving of a ‘Temple by Lincing’, with its octagonal structure, simple arched windows and seemingly plain facades (Fig. 3). Yet Conner is right to point out that the pagoda Chambers planned for Kew had very little in common with his engraving of a tower published in 1757 (Figs. 4 & 5).

Other than Nieuhof, the most obvious point of reference for Chambers’s interpretation of Chinese architecture is his own publication of drawings, which he claimed were based on the genuine buildings he had personally seen in the southern Chinese city of Canton on two separate voyages between 1743 and 1749. As Chambers was the first European visitor to China to make architectural, as opposed to topographical, drawings of Chinese structures, his book entitled *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils*, published in 1757, caused quite a stir in England and helped to secure for Chambers the patronage of Princess Augusta.

Yet Chambers’s publication, which focused on small pavilions that might sit well in an English garden, contained only one engraving of a pagoda.

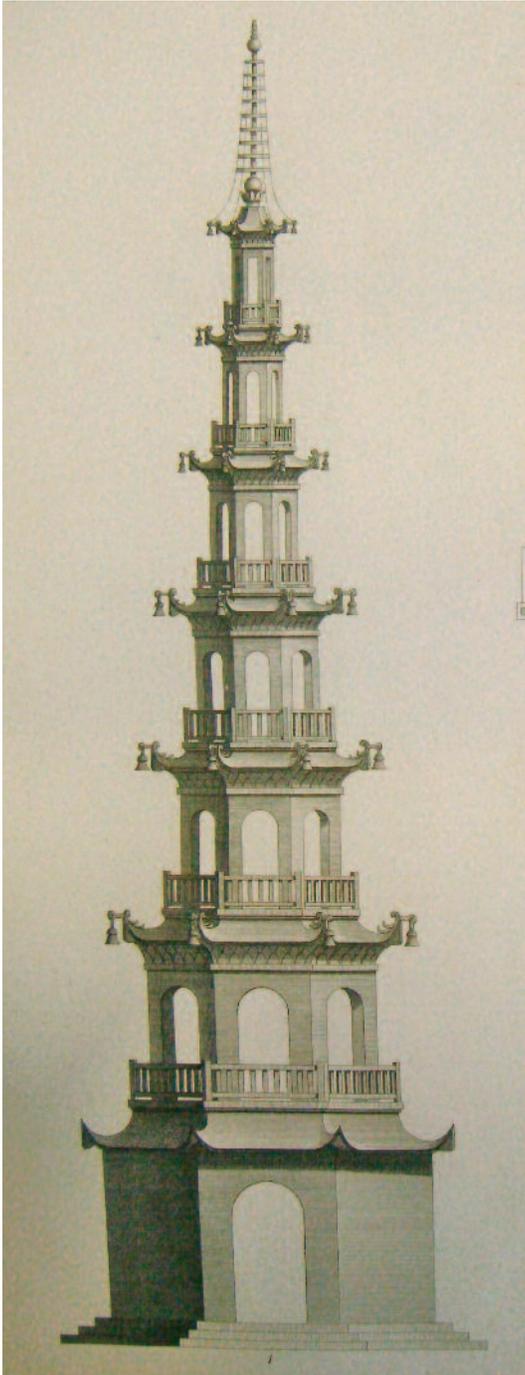


Fig. 4. Drawing of a pagoda published by William Chambers in 1757.

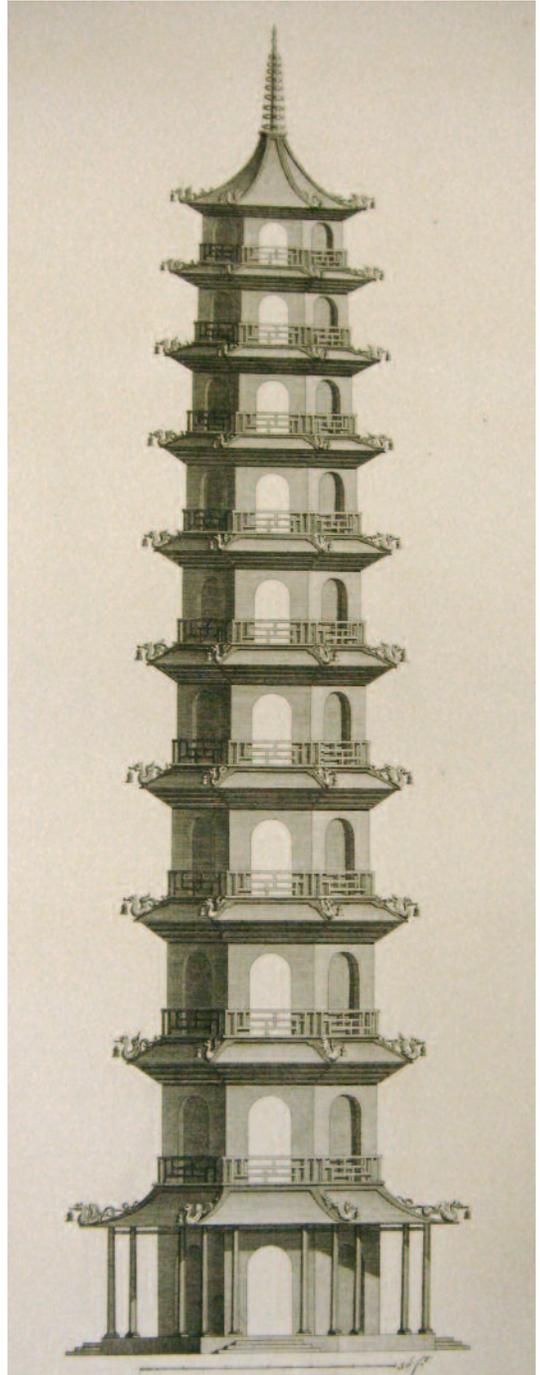


Fig. 5. Chambers' design for the Great Pagoda at Kew, published in 1763.

It is odd that the tower should be among the least detailed of his designs, considering that in Europe this was the most famous form of Chinese building. Furthermore, it is an obviously flawed proposal for a building, where a person entering the lower storey would barely get their head into the upper room. Surely anyone familiar with Nieuhof's engravings of monumental towers would have recognised a glaring dissimilarity between them and this needle-like structure?

It does not seem likely that Chambers could have forgotten what the pagodas he had seen in China looked like during the years that elapsed between his last visit in 1749 and the publication of *Designs* in 1757, although this has been suggested. It would rather seem that the most likely explanation for such a poor and diminutive design would have been practicality. After all, the heavily classicised designs of Chinese buildings that Chambers published were intended as viable models for imitation in Europe. Despite claiming in the preface that the publication offered mere 'toys of architecture', the possibility of commissions (which did indeed follow at Kew), would have remained a strong motivating factor to the fledgling architect.⁶

In this context, a tower with significantly smaller and lighter upper storeys could be built without danger of collapse. Indeed, the design was copied fairly successfully by Gontard in 1771 for the 'Dragon House' at Sanssouci, Potsdam, although only four of its six storeys were achieved. The much larger centrepiece of Catherine the Great's Chinese Village at Tsarskoe Selo, which was also based on Chambers' drawing, only managed three storeys (Fig. 6).

It is one of the primary purposes of this article to dissociate Chambers' 1757 drawing of a pagoda (Fig. 4) from the genuine pagodas of Canton, upon which he claimed it was based. According to Chambers, his design was 'copied from one of those towers, that stands on the banks of the Ta-Ho between Canton and Hoang-pou.'⁷ This description gives us an area only three miles in length, stretching



Fig. 6. The Dragon House at Sanssouci, Potsdam, built in 1771.

along the Pearl River between the city of Canton and the village of Whampoa, located on Whampoa Island in the river. Whampoa was the main anchorage for ships trading with Canton, and only the senior merchants would travel on to the city itself, usually in less threatening boats. Therefore it is likely that Chambers, as a supercargo, would have spent the majority of his time around Whampoa Island. Here he would have had a very good view of two pagodas, one on the island itself, the other within answering distance upstream on the southern bank of the river.



Fig. 7. The Chigang Pagoda, on the south bank of the Pearl River, Canton (Guangzhou).



Fig. 8. The Pazhou Pagoda, standing on what was Whampoa Island, Canton (Guangzhou).

These are the Chigang and Pazhou Pagodas. The oldest of the pair is the Pazhou, or Whampoa Pagoda, constructed between 1597 and 1600 (Fig. 7). Nineteen years after its completion, the Chigang Pagoda was erected to mirror it and form a twin, according to the auspicious principles of Feng Shui

(Fig. 8). They are both between 160 and 200ft high, built of brick and stone, and share an octagonal plan with the various storeys diminishing only gradually as they rise. Both are now utterly swamped by the sprawling suburbs of modern-day Canton (now called Guangzhou), but the Chigang Pagoda was



Fig. 9. The Great Pagoda at Kew.

sympathetically restored in the 1990s, and the newly-landscaped environs of the Pazhou Pagoda indicate that a similar treatment will soon follow.

It should come as no surprise that the tower Chambers constructed at Kew upon his return to England should closely resemble those that he saw at

first hand near Canton (Fig. 9). There is no question that Chambers would have had a clear view of both the Chigang and Pazhou Pagodas while sailing along the Pearl River from the Chinese coast to the city of Canton. His ship would have been anchored for the majority of its stay at Whampoa Island, where the prominence of both towers is well illustrated by an engraving after Thomas Allom, c.1841 (Fig. 10).

At a height of one hundred and sixty three feet (including the finial), Kew's tower is within three metres of the height of the Chigang Pagoda, with which it shares its proportions extremely closely. Furthermore, neither Cantonese tower employs wooden bracketing beneath the roofs, but rather bricks are laid in rows, each projecting out above the other to meet the eaves of each roof. This gives the same appearance, in profile, as the rows of wooden boards used by Chambers at Kew. The Pazhou Pagoda even shares with Kew roofs that do not curve at all, but are straight (Fig. 11).

Chambers would have seen a further prominent tower in the heart of the city of Canton itself. This is the Liurong Pagoda, which still survives, and can be clearly seen in the background of Nieuwhof's engraving of 'Kanton', published in 1669 (Fig. 12).⁸ The Liurong Pagoda was built in 1097 (rebuilt in 1373), and is of the same essential construction to the later towers along the river (Fig. 13).

Although, at 57 metres tall, it would have been distantly visible from the European trading factories along the river, I am wary of asserting that Chambers would have found a suitable position to draw this tower undisturbed. This is because one cannot be certain that Chambers ever gained access to the city of Canton itself, and indeed all of the buildings he engraved for his *Designs* were located in the suburbs, rather than within the city walls. Chambers himself admitted that it was 'a matter of great difficulty to measure any publick work in China with accuracy, because the populace are very troublesome to strangers, throwing stones, and offering other insults.'⁹ The honesty of this statement is verified by



Fig. 10 (above).
Engraving of
Whampoa Island by
Thomas Allom, c.1841.
Fig. 12 (left). Engraving
of Canton published in
England by Johan
Nieuhof in 1669.





Fig. 11. The straight roofs of the Pazhou Pagoda, with rows of bricks forming the projection.

George Henry Mason's account of 1805, which related how 'Insult is the common lot of those foreigners who extend their walk beyond the few yards appointed for their temporary residence. Ill treatment may be expected if they approach the city walls; and either imprisonment or an arrest is the general consequence of passing through its gates.'¹⁰

There may, however, have been less stringent rules in the 1740s. The prosperity of the 'Hong' (harbour) merchants, who controlled all the trade with Europeans, depended on good relations with the foreign traders. Therefore they frequently entertained westerners at their villas, to which Mason was invited in 1790. These were, for the most part, located outside the city walls, upon the island of Honam in the river, just opposite the city. It seems likely from the highly detailed engravings of the exterior and interior of a merchant's house published by Chambers in 1757, that he was accorded the same hospitality. From this island, where he also claimed to have visited the large Honam Temple, he would have had the same view as that illustrated by Nieuhof.

It is also intriguing to note that the memoirs of Matteo Ripa, an Italian priest who had lived in China in the early eighteenth century, seem to indicate that



Fig. 13. The Liurong Pagoda inside the walls of Canton (Guangzhou).

in the early eighteenth century, access to the city itself might also have been a possibility. At a dinner party in London in 1724, Ripa attempted to prove to his English acquaintances the vastness of Canton's population. He thus 'proceeded to question Mr Fazacalei in this manner: "Have you ever seen Canton from the top of the great tower?" "Yes, I have," he answered.'¹¹ It would therefore seem that both these gentlemen had succeeded in ascending

the Liurong Pagoda, but if Chambers had achieved the same he would certainly have boasted the fact, rather than making excuses about stone-throwing.

Yet while Chambers' eventual construction at Kew successfully reflected very closely the appearance of the various Cantonese towers, it remains conspicuously unconnected to his 1757 drawing in *Designs*. Besides the motivation of practical reproduction described previously, it is possible that Chambers had a more personal reason to publish a deliberately bad depiction of a pagoda in the year prior to his employment at Kew. It is quite plausible that in 1757 Chambers had already discussed with Princess Augusta the possibility of erecting large Chinese buildings at Kew, and certainly the dedication of *Designs* to his future patron suggests that her favour was already practically secured. If this was the case then it would have been senseless to have made public detailed designs of what was to be his greatest achievement in those soon-to-be-famous gardens. Chambers would surely not have risked having his ambitious plans pre-empted on the Continent.

This would not be the only seed of deliberate confusion sown by Chambers during his publishing career. The architect's love of deception is well known from his *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening*, published in 1772, in which he refused clearly to separate fact from fiction. Furthermore, significant doubt has been cast over a statement within *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew* (1763), the impressive celebratory folio of his work there, concerning the authorship of the House of Confucius. Although this large Chinese pavilion is generally believed to have been built to a design supplied by Chambers in the 1740s, and does indeed bear the inscription 'W. Chambers Architectus', Chambers' accompanying text evasively declares that it was 'built, I believe, to the designs of Mr Goupy' (Prince Frederick's painter).¹² This odd discrepancy in an otherwise meticulous publication led John Harris convincingly

to propose that Chambers had become embarrassed by this earlier building.

It is only with the full opening up of China in recent years that we are able to confirm that Chambers' drawing of a Cantonese pagoda published in 1757 was false, but that his models for Kew were indeed sourced from that city and not from the pages of Nieuhof. Once the striking resemblance of the Kew Pagoda to the real Cantonese towers is fully appreciated, it is difficult to continue to accept suggestions that Chambers was presenting some Europeanised version of the Porcelain Tower of Nanking. Nor does it seem fair to suggest that he was acting in the spirit of rococo invention. I have attempted to show that this elegant tower had its roots firmly in accurately-observed Chinese principles of design.

There is no question that the Great Pagoda was the *pièce de résistance* of Chambers' achievements at Kew. That the pride of England's most celebrated royal garden should have been a Chinese building serves to remind us that chinoiserie was a fashion of great power and durability. It is hoped that the Great Pagoda can now be rehabilitated as a monument to Chambers' introduction to England of Chinese architecture in its most accurate, sensible and measured form.

NOTES

- 1 John Harris, 'Sir William Chambers and Kew', in John Harris and Michael Snodin, *Sir William Chambers: Architect to George III* (New Haven and London, 1996), p. 65.
- 2 Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie* (London, 1961), p. 155.
- 3 Johan Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces, to the Grand Tartar Cham Emperour of China ... Wherein the Cities, Towns, Villages, Ports, Rivers, &c. in their Passages from Canton to Peking, are Ingeniously Described, by Mr John Nieuhof, Steward to the Ambassadors...* (2nd edn. London, 1669), p. 84.
- 4 Patrick Conner, *Oriental Architecture in the West* (London, 1979), p. 82.
- 5 Chambers, *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew in Surry, the Seat of Her Royal Highness the Princess Dowager of Wales* (London, 1763), p. 4. See John Harris, *Sir William Chambers, Knight of the Polar Star* (London, 1970), pp. 5–6.
- 6 Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils Engraved by the Best Hands from the Originals Drawn in China by Mr Chambers, Architect* (London, 1757), p. 3.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 8 Oliver Impey suggested that it may be 'ancestral to the Kew Pagoda' but says nothing further. *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration* (London, 1977), pp. 145–6.
- 9 Chambers, *Designs*, p. [1], footnote.
- 10 *Ibid.*, Preface.
- 11 Matteo Ripa, *Memoirs of Father Ripa: during thirteen years' residence at the court of Peking in the service of the Emperor of China : with an account of the foundation of the college for the education of young Chinese at Naples / selected and translated from the Italian, by Fortunato Prandi* (London, 1844), p. 34.
- 12 Chambers, *Plans, Elevations*, pp. 33–4.