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## “Rebellion in the Celestial Empire:” Sino-Irish Sympathy in Sydney Owenson’s

*Florence Macarthy*

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This article focuses on the relationship between China and Ireland in Sydney Owenson’s *Florence Macarthy* (1818). It takes as its starting point Peter Kitson’s formulation of an emergent “Romantic Sinology,” which finds its basis in the processes of intercultural transmission that took place between Georgian Britain and Qing China in the Romantic period. The article focuses on the interaction between China and Ireland within the wider context of Enlightenment formations of sympathy, suggesting that Owenson’s depiction of China is closely linked to the aesthetic of sensibility and its implied model of an emergent cosmopolitanism based on cross-cultural sympathetic identification. In doing so, it positions the novel within a body of writing about China and Ireland that includes John Wilson Croker’s *An Intercepted Letter from J– T–, Esq. Writer at Canton, to His Friend in Dublin, Ireland* (1804), exposing a number of shared concerns in the writing of Owenson and Croker which have hitherto been overlooked. Reading discourses of Sino-Irish cultural exchange in terms of Enlightenment models of sympathy reveals how depictions of China operated as a central component in the articulation and formation of British identity in the Romantic period, problematising and rearticulating established models of international cultural assimilation.

In their 1841 essay “The Hong Merchant’s Widow,” Thomas Charles Morgan and Sydney Morgan (formerly Owenson) declared that “[i]t never, till lately, has been doubted [...] that the Chinese are the most ancient and the wisest [...] of all the known nations of the earth.” They go on to remark that “in these latter peering times, doubt has followed inquiry, dogmatism is yielding in every point to suspicion, and the very fundamental proposition, that China is one among the known nations, has ranged among those Janus-like questions, whose two faces look in precisely opposite directions” (1). This acknowledgement of the Janus-faced post-Romantic formulation of China is deeply suggestive, not only in terms of China’s own complex and troubled identity but also of recent critical re-evaluations of Britain’s cultural relationship with China in the Romantic period. Critical studies by David Porter, Ros Ballaster, Robert Markley, Chi-ming Yang and Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins have explored

Britain's cultural engagement with China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, broadly locating the relationship between the nations within the context of a global economy commanded by China. Peter Kitson's *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange 1760-1840* (2013) traces the shifting dynamic of Sino-British interaction in the Romantic period as part of a critical tradition which rejects "the conventional historical notion of a rich but stationary and largely unchanging Qing China confronted by a dynamic and modern Britain" (3). Instead, Kitson proposes that emergent ideas of China in the period were "part of a process of "co-constitution" and intercultural encounter by which both Georgian Britain and Qing China, mirrors and inversions of each other, were formed in an already "globalised" eighteenth-century world order" (3).

If conventional binaries are thus destabilised by the cultural exchanges that took place between China and a newly-unified Britain in the Romantic period, then the relationship between China and Ireland is yet more nuanced and ambivalent. Not only do discourses of Sino-Irish cultural transmission negotiate the complex dynamic of East and West in the conventional sense, they also operate as a central component in the internal articulation and formation of British identity, problematising formulations of cultural assimilation and historical progress closer to home. This essay focuses on the relationship between China and Ireland in Sydney Owenson's 1818 novel *Florence Macarthy*. While Owenson's earlier engagement with Romantic Orientalism in *The Missionary* (1811) has been well documented, the role of Eastern culture in her later Irish novels has been entirely neglected.<sup>1</sup> The article locates Owenson's appropriation of Chinese culture in *Florence Macarthy* within the wider context of Enlightenment sympathy, suggesting that her depictions of China are closely linked to the aesthetic of sensibility and its implied model of an emergent cosmopolitanism based on cross-cultural sympathetic identification. In doing so, it positions the novel within a body of writing about China and Ireland that includes John Wilson Croker's *An Intercepted*

*Letter from J– T–, Esq. Writer at Canton, to His Friend in Dublin, Ireland* (1804). Despite their infamous hostile exchanges in the contemporary press, Owenson’s and Croker’s portrayals of China share a fascinating deconstruction of cultural assimilation that simultaneously examines the pervasive transmission of Chinese culture to Georgian Britain and offers a means of understanding the troubled relationship between Ireland and Britain in the post-union period.

The discussion that follows considers Croker’s and Owenson’s treatment of Sino-Irish cultural exchange within the context of Enlightenment theories of sympathy. The capacity of sympathy to unite those of different propensities has obvious implications in terms of cross-cultural identification. The recent body of scholarship on nationhood and sympathy emphasises the fact the Enlightenment formation of a widespread shared sympathy was central in both philosophical and public discourse in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a means of promoting national unity via “imagined communities,” as Benedict Anderson puts it (6; Gottlieb 9, 15). As Julia M. Wright points out, in many national tales “cross-cultural identification is enabled by developing recognition” of the “essential sameness” of sympathetic subjects (Wright [1] 19). However, for nations such as Scotland and Ireland this ‘sameness’ was highly problematic, given its tendency to efface national difference. This uneasy balance of difference and similarity is replicated in the cultural relationship between Britain and China in the Romantic period. In eighteenth-century moral philosophy, China functions as a persistent metaphor of “otherness”. If we accept Hume’s and Smith’s contention that proximity aided sympathetic identification, then it follows that China serves as an appropriate example of otherness, in terms not only of its Eastern exoticism but of its distant geographical location and its vast population of ‘strangers’. Eric Hayot has noted that China occupies a unique role in the history of culture and civilisation because “modern Europe encounters China as the first contemporaneous *civilizational* other it

knows, not as a “tribe” or nation [with a] comparative lack of culture, technology, or economic development” (9) Hayot’s notion of China as a means of emphasising the formations of “otherness” and ‘similarity” that were central to contemporary visions of international community provides a meaningful context within which to read the links between China and Ireland in the Romantic-period novel.

China is a particularly appropriate counterpart to Ireland in an economic sense and contemporary accounts of Irish and Chinese commerce are frequently linked to formations of taste and sensibility. Indeed, Robert Markley points out that discourse of civility was frequently associated with China in period, arguing that civility was used to “override linguistic and cultural differences” and to emphasise that “a basic sympathy of cultural, military, and economic interests exist[ed] between European merchants and Chinese and Manchu authorities” (Markley 62). Accordingly, China serves as an appropriate metaphor not only for the Irish potential for improvement through trade and manufacturing but also for the capacity of Ireland to assimilate within the model of Enlightenment taste and sensibility required for historical progress in Adam Smith’s stadial formation of social development through the stages of hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce. Certainly, contemporary philosophical discourse locates this process of historical progress within a developing international network of economic and sympathetic exchange facilitated by international sympathy. Commerce would bring about a sentimental reformation of society as the benefits of capitalism led to improved standards of living and refined taste and manners, forging a universalised nexus of civility.

## II

The metaphor of economic and sympathetic circulation as a means of Sino-Irish cultural exchange forms the basis of Croker’s anonymously-published *An Intercepted Letter from J-*

*T—, Esq. Writer at Canton, to His Friend in Dublin, Ireland* (1804). An Anglo-Irish Tory and Secretary to the Admiralty from 1809 to 1830, Croker was notorious as the acerbic chief reviewer of the *Quarterly Review* and the “ ‘sworn enemy of reform in every shape’ ” (Portsmouth xi). The *Intercepted Letter* can be read within this context, offering a surprisingly nuanced portrayal of both Chinese and Irish culture. My focus here is less on what the *Intercepted Letter* might reveal about Croker’s own politics than it is on the way that it interrogates the complexities relating to Sino-Irish cultural exchange that would be taken up by Owenson in *Florence Macarthy*. From the outset, the *Intercepted Letter*, which is ostensibly written from the city of Quang-tcheu or Canton and allegedly “entirely of *Eastern* extraction” but is in fact, by Croker’s own admission, a “lively and humorous satire on Dublin” (Croker n. pag.), simultaneously amalgamates and contrasts Irish and Chinese culture. The *Intercepted Letter* can be read against the backdrop of the emerging phenomenon of “Romantic Sinology.” First, the location of Canton is highly significant, given the fact that Canton was, between the 1760s and 1840s, “a place of global trade, negotiation, and exchange, economically, linguistically, and culturally” and “the location of the eighteenth-century global cross-cultural encounter *par excellence*” (Kitson 2, 81). The *Intercepted Letter* is self-consciously positioned within this context of linguistic and cultural negotiation between East and West. Its satirical epistolary form locates itself within the body of writing that informed the development of Romantic Sinology, which found its basis in empirical, first-hand accounts based on “authentic” cultural encounter (Kitson 15). Croker’s letter – which allegedly possesses “a consistency in Chinese names and manners, which nothing but the *truth* could have preserved” (ii) – emphasises its own unstable authenticity through a series of references to genuine historical sources that formed part of the linguistic transmission of Chinese culture to a British readership. It contains a number of footnotes to Sir George Staunton’s *Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the*

*Emperor of China* (1797). Croker also locates the *Intercepted Letter* directly within the context of first-hand correspondence from East India Company ships, referring to the publication in the French newspaper the *Moniteur* of letters intercepted on board the *Admiral Aplin*, which was captured by the French in Mauritius in 1804. He then goes on to claim that his own *Intercepted Letter* was found aboard the *Althea*, also captured by the French in Mauritius in 1804, declaring that “the letters of this collection, which relate to politics or commerce, are not, we think, very interesting” but that “[o]ne letter [...] which contains sketches of the Chinese character in a manners and politics, we have thought not unworthy a translation” (iv).

The letter is also placed firmly within a discourse that locates China within a global network not only of trade and commerce but also of Enlightenment models of sympathy, offering a profound insight into the role of moral sense philosophy in the formation of Romantic Sinology. The postscript to the letter is emblematic of the correlation between contemporary discourses of commerce, taste and sensibility. The writer states to his correspondent that

[a]s all your East Indian trade is transacted by the *merchants of London*, I have not wearied you with any commercial details but I have directed a small package for you to our friend S--- of Leadenhall street, containing a few of our Chinese rarities, of which I request Mrs ---s’s acceptance, [though] they are only *brittle* memorials of a very idissoluble [sic] regard.” (42)

The “*brittle* memorials” of imported material objects function not only as signifiers of sociability and sensibility, but also as an indication of the power of “Chinese rarities” to consolidate a collective elite and cosmopolitan form of British identity. More significant still

is the way that the global exchange of chinoiserie between China and Britain mirrors that of the economic circulation between England and Ireland, given that both the gift of porcelain and the profits of the economic transactions conducted by London merchants must presumably be re-circulated to the recipient in Dublin as part of an intra-national flow of wealth and luxury.

While in one sense the *Intercepted Letter* endorses the international circulation of cultivated taste in the form of desirable commodities, Croker's depiction of China simultaneously conforms in many ways with the allegation that Qing China was politically and economically stagnant (Kitson 23). Indeed, Croker's reliance on Staunton's account – which had condemned the merciless nature of the Chinese legal system – places it firmly within this tradition. What is most striking in Croker's depiction of Chinese culture as primitive and static, though, is its emphasis on aesthetic interpretation. While the letter clearly appropriates the Enlightenment rhetoric of perception, it explicitly subverts the moral philosophic formations of Smith and Hume, in which sensory experience engenders sympathy in the spectator. Rather than reading Chinese culture as an exotic mirror capable of reflecting refined Western taste, the author of the letter adopts a distinct mode of “seeing” China as both a visual and cultural other, fundamentally separate from a British aesthetic consciousness. China is a nation dislocated from European standards of civility: the writer advises his correspondent that “you are not to expect that their common sense is the common sense of Europe” and that “every thing here is extraordinary to an [sic] European eye” (Croker 2; 1). In differentiating between Chinese and European ‘sense,’ Croker rejects the formation of a shared international consciousness - to put it another way, the process of sympathetic viewing by the “particular eyes” of impartial spectator in Smith's formation (I, 334) - in favour of collective vision that is explicitly Western.<sup>ii</sup> The letter emphasises the similarity of the Chinese, but they occupy the position of the mass of “hundreds of millions



of [the European subject's] brethren" that are "never seen" by the Western spectator (I, 335-36) in Smith's account of sympathy. Indeed, the dense population of Canton means that "200,000 of them must of necessity, be hurdled together in extreme filth and misery, which, in such a polished and charitable age and nation, it is absurd to suppose" (2-3). The poor condition of the Li-fee river "does not disgust a Quang-teheuse, but there is no disputing about tastes!" (3) In short, the sentiment of the letter writer is clear: "the Chinese are not yet as enlightened as we are" (13). Croker explicitly rejects the conflation of commerce, taste and sensibility that characterise Enlightenment models of international sympathy. The letter declares that "if we argue from what [their] shops profess to contain, they would appear to be the most elegant and tasteful, but the truth is, they are neither one nor the other" (22). The writer goes on to state that "though we must not dispute about tastes, it is a pity that money-brokers should meddle with the fine arts" (5): in a striking subversion of the Enlightenment model of stadial historical progress, in which commerce and civility are inextricably linked, Croker places economic power and aesthetic taste in direct opposition. Indeed, the tension between commerce and sensibility is such that the Chinese are rendered insensible to the basic impulses of human sympathy: "the harbour is so bad, that scarcely a winter passes without the loss of many valuable lives, and (what the Chinese feel more) many valuable ships" (6).

Croker's evocation of Confucian philosophy is also highly significant in terms of Kitson's conception of Romantic Sinology. In his criticism of the ineffectual and indulgent lifestyle of the mandarins, the letter writer wryly evokes Confucian philosophy, stating that "one must be *charitable* to the Ta-whangs [elders], and conclude that none of those [social responsibilities] are within their department, for "charity," (says Con-fut-ze or Coum-tze, whom we call Confucius,) "charity covers a multitude of sins." – Let us be charitable" (10). The parallels between the Chinese court and contemporary Ireland are obvious here, and are

best understood within the context of the historic relationship between Confucianism and Catholicism in British accounts of China: the strategy of one of the first Catholic missionaries to China – Matteo Ricci – to “promote a strategy of “accommodation” between the cultures of the Ming Confucian literati (*ru jiao*) and his own. (Kitson 28) The implication here of sympathy between monotheistic faiths, which would result in the Chinese being susceptible to conversion to Catholic Christianity, develops the agenda of cultural assimilation (Porter 81) and later writing on China also adopts the same approach in terms of emphasising similarity between Confucianism and Catholicism (Kitson 30-31). This conflation of Chinese and Irish religious culture is evident in Croker’s letter, which is expressed from precisely the British Protestant perspective of Thomas Percy’s Chinese translations, from which China “provide[s] a model for Britain to think about its native Anglo-Saxon literary heritage and its own literary past” (Kitson 31).

From here, it is no great leap to identify parallels in Croker’s perception of Irish culture: like the Irish, the Chinese occupy a conflicted and disparate religious position: “Are the Quang-tongese never to be at peace, that not contented with going to war about the earth, they must fight about heaven also? Will the miserable and besotted people never recover their senses?” (21). Implicit here is a condemnation of a culture that is not only fractured and divided, but also insensible and unfeeling, which must be contextualised in terms of Enlightenment formations of national and international sympathy. The writer observes that “the Chinese government is not indeed very willing to borrow the policy of other nations, perhaps they have not even heard of these instances” (28): China is plainly divorced from the global universalization of culture implied in models of cross-cultural sympathetic exchange. Likewise, Chinese theatre is condemned by Croker for its excessive aesthetic hybridity: “it has “music which is neither Italian nor German, French nor English, nor even Chinese, but it is all these together” (33). The lack of a defined cultural identity results in the spectator

becoming “an accomplice to the murder of sense, poetry, and taste” (32). Indeed, “one sees things quite as ridiculous as if, on our theatre, the same person should play Nell and Lady Macbeth, and that Banquo and King Duncan should appear in Spanish dresse” (32). This hybridity is, however, more than a mere contravention of aesthetic integrity: it implies a distinct lack of “public spirit” (39) and, by extension, coherent national identity.

Croker ends the letter expressing a characteristic Romantic ambivalence about China, that we see demonstrated in the other essays in this volume.

If you were to form your opinion of the Quang-tongese entirely from these facts, weighed in the scale of European reason, you would suppose them to be the most besotted and contemptible race that consume the fruits of the earth, -- and you would be mistaken. Their character indeed is marked with the extremest shades of folly and wickedness, but is also adorned by the purest blaze of virtue and wisdom. It is a moral riddle, and of the most perplexing kind (38).

His vision for the future depends on the uniting and assimilating power of “European reason.” He argues “reason is becoming, every day more and more a citizen of the world, she begins to speak every language, and every country on earth will soon be hers” (41). Thus reason will simultaneously be both a “citizen of the world” and in total possession of it. China likewise occupies a deeply ambivalent position in the *Intercepted Letter*. It is, on one hand, located firmly within the stagnant and ossified formation identified by Kitson in Croker’s insistence that, despite its economic power, it remains a dislocated aesthetic other, unable to conform to standards of enlightened European culture. However, fact that the letter is a satire of Dublin society repositions it within a framework of global transmission and

exchange: the act of exposing the affinities between Chinese and Irish culture reads very much like an endorsement of the “essential sameness” (19) that Wright posits as the basis for international sympathetic identification. The positioning of both China and Ireland as cultural anomalies not only serves to destabilise the conventional dichotomies of East and West, it operates as a means of understanding Britain’s own conflicted national identity in the Romantic period within the context of sympathetic identification.

### III

Scholarly accounts of the relationship between Croker and Owenson have tended to configure them as polar opposites; certainly, the hostile exchanges that took place between them in the contemporary press have been well documented. Owenson’s literary reputation and her status as the “darling of Dublin Whig society” (Belanger 9) made her an obvious target for the Irish Tory Croker. Their critical antagonism began with her response to his anonymously-published 1804 pamphlet “*Familiar Epistles, to Frederick J—s Esq. on the present state of the Irish Stage*” in her “*A Few Reflections, occasioned by the perusal of a work, entitled, ‘Familiar Epistles...’*” This would unfold in the correspondence printed in the *Freeman’s Journal* following the publication of *The Wild Irish Girl* in 1806 and in a series of scathing reviews by Croker of Owenson’s subsequent writing over the next decade, in particular of her travelogue *France*, published in 1817.<sup>iii</sup> It is understandable, then, that Owenson’s caricature of Croker as the unscrupulous and sycophantic social climber Con Crawley in *Florence Macarthy* has been read in terms of their critically antagonistic relationship; as Belanger points out, “Croker’s review of *France* in the *Quarterly Review* became notorious for its brutality, and in response Morgan placed much of Croker’s language from his review in the mouth of the fictional Crawley.” (12) In fact, while their ideological perspectives in their depictions of Ireland and China are in many ways fundamentally opposed, I want to suggest

that reading the *Intercepted Letter* and *Florence Macarthy* within the context of Romantic Sinology exposes a number of surprising shared concerns in the writing Owenson and Croker, which have hitherto been overlooked. The two texts can be read as a striking dialogue about the limitations of Enlightenment formations of international sympathy. If the *Intercepted Letter* suggests that both China and Ireland fail, as “uncivilised” and culturally incoherent nations, to participate effectively in the global transmission of taste and sensibility, *Florence Macarthy* rehearses the outcome of adopting Enlightenment formations of international cultural appropriation in order to facilitate the teleology of stadial historical progress.

The reception of *Florence Macarthy* was focalised in terms that specifically evoked these Enlightenment formulations of civility and historical progress. The newly civilised form of the novel was closely allied to sensibility; the aim of instruction in *Florence Macarthy* is explicitly articulate via the discourse of sympathy as a medium of promoting national conciliation (Belanger 197) within a context of geographical proximity.. Ireland’s geographical location was frequently evoked to support the case of both pro- and anti-Union campaigns (Connolly 55). In contrast, the Scottish peer and Governor General of India Lord Minto’s speech to the British House of Lords in 1799 argued that the union was in effect endorsed by geography, stating that “these two sister Islands, not merely contiguous, but lying apart from the rest of Europe, [are] as it were in the very bosom and embraces of each other, and reciprocally dependent” (Elliot 3). Minto’s attempt to foster a reciprocal cultural exchange between Ireland and Britain - which, it is worth noting, is articulated via a discourse of familial sensibility - is replicated in his sponsorship of the Chinese translations of missionary Joshua Marshman and his assistant Johannes Lasser (Kitson 61): both Ireland and China are positioned in contemporary discourse within a nexus of geographical, linguistic and cultural exchange with Britain.

These discussions of union in terms of the geographical-sentimental body politic offer a neat demonstration of the troubled relationship between Ireland and England as simultaneously “united” and “separate” national bodies. Just as Minto’s speech locates a united Britain within a larger international geo-political system, so the Ireland of *Florence Macarthy* is consistently framed in terms of its sympathetic relationship with the wider international community, in which the “separate bodies” of China and South America are particularly prominent. Owenson’s appropriation of Chinese culture in *Florence Macarthy* is best understood if read in terms of Kitson’s assertion that Romantic Sinology sought to replace the “chinoiserie fantasy” of the Enlightenment with “another ‘real’ China that was both knowable and substantial, but increasingly the locus of illegitimacy and stagnation” (15). The novel’s depiction of the international transmission of Chinese culture to Ireland offers an interrogation of knowability and legitimacy as they relate to the role of the nation within a wider socio-political system: China, then, serves as central context for the formation of British identity in the post-union period. Indeed, both the *Intercepted Letter* and *Florence Macarthy* engage with notions of illegitimacy and forgery in a number of ways. In one sense, the process of identity formation in Georgian Britain is itself a manufacturing and a forging of national culture, as reflected in Lisa Colley’s influential employment of the term in her study of British identity in period, in which the notion of forging was “intended to convey both a process of making and that element of counterfeit and invention that has characterised all nations at some point” (Colley 5). The writing of Croker and Owenson shares a preoccupation with this process of forging national identity within a wider international context, engaging with ideas of illegitimacy and cultural forgery. Croker’s letter is, in the most obvious sense, self-consciously counterfeit and inauthentic, as evidenced in his wry assurance of a “consistency” in its account of Chinese manners “which nothing but the *truth* could have preserved” (Croker ii). It also functions as a fascinating document of cultural

hybridity which suggests a permeability of boundaries not only in the metaphor of the epistolary form within a global nexus of material circulation but also in its fusing of Chinese and Irish national identity, serving to destabilise discrete national boundaries. While Croker suggests that both China and Ireland are somehow illegitimate bodies in the global network of circulation, possessing geographical and commercial advantages but ultimately failing to conform to the civilised aesthetic of the modern global economy, Owenson interrogates this notion of cultural forgery in a different way. *Florence Macarthy* fictionalises Irish conformity to the international formation of Enlightenment civility, exposing this conformity as a type of illegitimate cultural forgery and suggesting that permeability of national boundaries within the context of cultural assimilation serves to efface the national character of Ireland and make it vulnerable to imported systems of despotism and corruption. Instead, Owenson proposes a form of Irish national identity founded on knowledge and understanding of its unique culture and a model of Romantic cosmopolitanism based not on Enlightenment models of stadial progress and civility but on an international community dependent on genuine and heartfelt sympathetic bonds.

Beginning with the hero Commodore Fitzwalter's return to Ireland from the South American wars against the Spanish, the novel charts the reintegration of Fitzwalter into Irish society, before he is revealed in the final volume as the rightful heir to the Fitzadelm estate. Fitzwalter's identity remains unknown to the reader for much of the novel and he finds his parallel in the figure of Lady Clancare, who adopts a variety of disguises and identities before she is exposed as the eponymous Florence Macarthy. Just as in her previous novel *O'Donnel*, the progression of the fortunes of the hero and heroine are set against the backdrop of Anglo-Irish aristocratic society, yet *Florence Macarthy* is the first of Owenson's novels to offer a detailed fictional account of Irish land agents in the form of the unscrupulous and corrupt Crawley family. Owenson's burlesque of the ascendancy is closely allied to representations

of China in the novel: the association of the agent class with the Qing dynasty simultaneously parodies the contemporary political discourse of international sympathy and assimilation while marking the ascendancy as an insidious other that threatens Irish culture from within. Owenson's appropriation of Chinese culture makes a powerful comment on this dynamic as it relates to England and Ireland. Ireland and China operate as cultural mirrors which are at once other and not-other, as in Homi Bhabha's conception of colonial mimicry in which the colonised other is "almost the same, but not quite (Bhabha 86)." The ascendancy and the agent class in Ireland in *Florence Macarthy* are, for Owenson, much like Croker's description of the Chinese "Fou-quen," or governor, of whom Croker states "[n]othing can be more ridiculous than the appearance of most of those *temporary mandarines*; for the laws that confer this high rank, have not been always found to bestow the education and manners, by which it should be adorned" (8-9). As a result, the Fou-quen is "generally a very good sort of underbred person," "not remarkable for much more, than wearing in public a tasteless and inconvenient dress [and] above all, eating very heartily at festivals" (9). The configuration of the Crawley family as figures of the Chinese court aligns them with a ceremonial power that is fundamentally lacking in taste, intellect and national understanding. Furthermore, their attempts to mimic "high" sophisticated culture emphasises the anxiety that assimilation to an international community of civilisation necessarily implies an effacement of authentic Irish culture. Owenson inextricably links this mimicry to sensibility and politeness; the local agent Derby Crawley is "a close copyist of the sentimental jargon and foreign slip-slop of his sister" (2, 41-2) but also of the aristocratic ideology of cosmopolitanism. The first appearance of the Crawleys directly aligns them with the pomp of military ceremony: "Mr Crawley, accompanied by his sons, (the two elder and himself in full uniform)" approaches the watching crowd "riding at the head of the Dunore yeomanry cavalry" (2, 139). The response of Lord Frederick Eversham, a fashionable and satirical friend of Lady Dunore, on perceiving



this spectacle makes a specific connection between this militarism and Chinese culture: “ ‘By Confucius [...] here is the whole armed militia of the celestial empire, led on by the chief mandarin of the province, issuing forth to meet us on our imperial progress, with gongs beating, and colours flying. This is too much!’ ” (2, 140) Lord Frederick’s configuration of the Crawleys as Chinese - in their military uniform that has much in common with Croker’s depiction of the “tasteless and inconvenient dress” of the Fou-quen -- marks them out as cultural interlopers at odds with their Irish identity. That they are evidently not authentically Chinese draws attention to the gap between their Irishness and their “Chineseness” and, in doing so, draws attention to the contrast between their self-constructed cosmopolitan identity and legitimate and “authentic” Irishness.

Furthermore, the militaristic metaphor aligns them with the imperial power of the ascendancy. Owenson makes this link with oppressive colonial rule still more specific by configuring the Crawley family as a microcosmic parallel to the Irish government. Lord Frederick’s impression of Irish culture recalls to him:

....something he had heard or read of the formal puerilities which distinguish the government and court of China; and from the moment he discovered the similitude, Ireland was to him the *celestial* empire, the castle of Dublin, TIEN SANG, or the HEAVENLY SPOT; and secretaries, chiefs, and subs, aides-de-camp, and officers of the household, were *chop-mandarins* of every coloured button in the prismatic scale (2, 172).

Owenson’s arch footnote, which declares that from the “ ‘heavenly spot’ ” of Dublin castle, “all that is good and great is supposed to emanate” (2, 172), and Lord Frederick’s observation that “a court without government, a representative of majesty without power, patronage, or

influence, seemed [...] to him an incongruous combination” (2, 172), emphasises the ineffective and unstable nature of colonial rule. Even more specifically, Owenson’s construction of the assumed ceremony of the Crawley family is explicitly aligned with the “formal puerilit[y]” (2, 172) of the kowtow, an act of ritual prostration which provoked extreme aversion in British commentators on China in the early nineteenth century (Kitson 154). Owenson explicitly appropriates this correlation of rigid ceremonialism with despotism in her representation of the Crawleys in Lord Frederick’s complaint about “his exile to the CELESTIAL EMPIRE” and of the “ceremonies of the *yellow-skreen*, and Castle Ko-tou” (2, 178). The reference to the ceremony of the yellow screen is striking when read within the context of Enlightenment philosophies of cultural assimilation. It refers to the practice of prostration before a screen of yellow silk that served to represent the emperor and was frequently depicted in contemporary accounts of Chinese culture, most famously in Henry Ellis’s account of the Amherst embassy. Owenson’s reference to this ritual offers a striking reminder of the threat that practices of imitation pose to “authentic” national identity. For Ireland, the excess of ritual and civility and the attempt to mimic the civilised practices of the Chinese court represents an appropriation of international culture at the expense of the interests of Ireland. Furthermore, the yellow screen operates as a corrupt simulacrum of absentee landowners: administrative power in the hands of agents such as the Crawleys is condemned as a dangerous political mechanism that perpetuates despotism and inequality.

While Enlightenment models of cultural assimilation imagined a universal international culture based on sympathy, the Oriental mimicry of the Crawleys is linked specifically to corruption and self-interest. In response to hearing the false rumours of insurrection initiated by the Crawleys, Lord Frederick remarks,

“Are the reports we have heard of incipient rebellion in the celestial empire really true, or are they only got up by the chop-mandarins for their own special purposes? I dare say that [...] Duke Conway Townsend Crawley, of the peacock’s feather, is at the bottom of all this; or my own ching-foo, of the yellow button, is amusing himself with a plot” (2. 255-56).

This is a striking reversal of Burke’s anxiety that cosmopolitanism, in its promotion of identification with foreign nations (namely France), could lead to political unrest in Ireland. Here, cosmopolitanism serves not as means of uniting disparate nations in shared human concerns -- as it might in the formations of Hume or Smith -- but as a mechanism for reinforcing political and social hierarchies. The manipulation of the Irish population by the Crawleys in order to consolidate their own power underscores the way that their self-fashioning as members of the cosmopolitan aristocratic classes is entirely at odds with sympathy for the local Irish community. Owenson suggests that colonial intervention in Ireland has, through the attempt to foster an international sameness between Ireland and Britain that reinforces colonial power, fundamentally destabilised Irish national identity. What remains is an unnatural, incoherent and anachronistic hybridity in the Irish national character that inhibits improvement and progress. The sensibility of the Crawleys is not only illegitimate and inauthentic, it is designed to further their own influence through mimicry of the ascendancy; as a result, the Irish populace are condemned as a brutalised and primitive “other” in their own nation.

The expression of this cultural otherness via a conflation of Chinese and Irish culture is never clearer than in the remarkable scene in which the vapid and trivial Lady Dunore ponders the most suitable guests to invite to tea at Dunore Castle. She declares:

“Oh, you may let in who you like [...] I shall not in the least object, if there are cups and saucers and things for the Irish ladies, who are monstrously particular I hear; and provided they won’t expect me to go to them in return, they may come and welcome [...] But mind, I won’t have any *circulars*; I won’t have those Chinese hieroglyphics, with their tails in their mouths, that is, the serpents. What is it, Lord Frederick, about eternity you know? The Chinese Mandarin? You have no idea how that word “*eternity*” ennuies me. Now come, Lady Clancare, do speak: who shall we have? Is there no one at Balbec, at Ballydab, I mean?” (4. 42)

Lady Dunore’s discourse functions as a striking indicator of that way that both China and Ireland are culturally illegible in British Romantic constructions of nation. As Porter has argued, consumers and collectors of Chinese goods in the period had no desire “to render legible its vast universe of endlessly perplexing signs,” preferring instead to “enjoy a delicious surrender to the unremitting exoticism of total illegibility” (134). Indeed, in John Barrow’s scathing and dismissive and scathing review of Marshman’s translation of the works of Confucius, he states that

[i]t is, indeed, peculiarly unfortunate that the mysticism, if we may so call it, of the squares, circles, and polygons of the venerable Fo-shee’s teapots should have formed, in the very threshold, the great stumbling-block of almost everyone who has attempted to enter on the study of Chinese philology. Indeed we are quite persuaded that those lines never had the least relation to language, but were mere devices for ornamental purposes (*Edinburgh Review* 11 [1814] 334).

For Lady Dunore, both China and Ireland are constrained within a discourse which, to use Porter's term, has no desire to render either culture legible. Her aversion to Chinese "hieroglyphics" (itself expressed through incorrect terminology relating to another "foreign" culture) and the symbolic meaning of Chinese iconography represent a profound indifference to processes of cultural translation. Likewise, her explicit desire to engage with Irish society but never to enter into the fully-fledged cultural exchange that is represented by a return visit is neatly encapsulated in her inability to express Irish place names with accuracy when she substitutes the French-sounding "Balbec" for the Irish town of Ballydab. In *Florence Macarthy*, China and Ireland are not only unknown and untranslated cultures, they are appropriated by the ascendancy in what amounts to an act of cultural forgery.

This account of Irish cultural identity in *Florence Macarthy* can be read within the context of cosmopolitanism and colonial assimilation in the Romantic period. Esther Wohlgenut emphasises two distinct facets of nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism. The first is "the notion of heterogeneity or asymmetry as it applies to the internal structure of the nation: the concept of the nation as a non-unified identity;" the second has to do with fact that "the internal integrity of a nation depends – paradoxically – on something outside itself" (Wohlgenut 3). This notion of a nation's individual identity as based on external factors recalls the problems inherent to sympathy as a means of facilitating the cohesion of a global community because of the potential effacement of individual national identities. In *Florence Macarthy* cosmopolitanism is linked to the teleological model of stadial history in a way that configures it as a colonial threat to Irish national identity: the importation of other ancient and civilised cultures, such as that of the Mandarin court, represent an effacement of authentic and local Irish culture. Owenson rejects the international structure implied by British discourses of union and calls instead for a renewed focus on the internal state of Ireland, offering a model of Irish national identity that fuses cosmopolitanism and nationalism,

emphasising the cosmopolitan ethos of a sympathetic international community and sentimental local attachment. Her appropriation of Chinese culture in the novel, then, simultaneously enforces and destabilises national and international boundaries. Ireland is, in Wohlgenut's terms, a "non-unified identity": at once a nation of permeable borders which is part of an international network of sensibility and a nation whose identity rests firmly on local community and domestic responsibility. Cosmopolitanism, Owenson suggests, in the form of an international community based on genuine feeling, can in fact supplement local attachment instead of eliminating national difference. *Florence Macarthy* is insistent upon the need for a localised Irish national culture that is sympathetic to needs of the Irish community.

A sympathetic network of international cultures has much to offer the individual nations within the system, but it must be based on genuine and deeply experienced shared feeling. The cosmopolitanism discourse Owenson appropriates does not attempt to assimilate Irish national identity within the British colonial teleological of civility and politeness; rather it serves as a means of emphasising Ireland's oppression and, by identifying with other nations, resists a British-centred identity. Fitzwalter, as a man who "belong[s] to the world" (I, 5), rather than to a specific nation, is best placed to implement this sympathetic cosmopolitanism in Ireland. He links the plight of Ireland to the oppression he has witnessed during his military career, lamenting the "oppression and cruelty of the colonial legislatures" in Spanish America, "which have so long bathed the richest country of the world with the tears and blood of her children" (3, 131) and stating that "whatever be the colour of man struggling against oppression, the language of energetic minds is still the same" (3, 136). His vision of freedom and liberty is couched in cosmopolitan terms: he argues that "whatever region [man] inhabits" holds "a fearful and an humiliating history" (3, 139) but that we should

“take him when we can, in his best aspect, free and enlightened; so blessed by singularity of temperament, so formed of happy elements, that, like the mild Peruvian, he performs the rites of the heart, whose incense smells to heaven, and heaping on his sunny altars the fruits and odours of his luxuriant soil.” (3. 139-40)

Fitzwalter’s vision is based on the idea of a fundamental international sympathy based on the “rites of the heart” rather than an appropriation of civilised culture that perpetuates internal differences and hierarchies.

Florence Macarthy – under the identity of Lady Clancare, which itself aligns her with sympathy for the local community – provides a sentimental counter to the Crawley family, using the principles of sensibility and assimilation on a local level to raise the condition of the inhabitants. Like Fitzwalter, her own cosmopolitan upbringing is configured by Owenson as a means of increasing her sympathetic capacity: she has been brought up in Ireland by her Irish grandfather, forced by her mother to enter a Spanish convent, travelled to a “distant land” with her father in a “military life” (2. 275) and then finally returned to Ireland, alone and in poverty. Florence declares that, through her work and application, “ ‘I do much in giving an example of constant and ceaseless industry and activity to my people. When I am not writing, for I write for bread, I am planting potatoes, or presiding over turf bogs; or I am seated with my wheel in a barn’ ” (3. 269-70). Unlike the Crawleys’ appropriation of Chinese culture, here the politics of mimicry and imitation are configured as a constructive force that will encourage improvement on a local level, as opposed to absorbing the Irish people into the civilised cultural nexus of British culture. Florence hopes that that her own Irish identity will enable her integration within the local community, for she has been “born and reared among them, speaking their language, and assimilating to them in a thousand ways” (3. 270). Her

linguistic fluency is an explicit marker of her ability and intention to render Irish culture legible and knowable in way that the ascendancy have no desire or capacity for.

The revised model of nationalism represented by Florence is based less on civility and progress than on communication and sentimental communion with the local people. She takes on the role of “the idol of popular feeling” (3. 64) and, when she is taken prisoner by Mr Crawley, “[h]undreds of wild, but strong affectioned persons, had gathered for her protection and rescue” (3. 64). Likewise, when the crowd rebel against the arrests of Florence and Fitzwalter later in the novel they become a wild “mob” (4. 235), directed by contagious emotion. The civil institutions of the military and the clergy are unable to calm the crowd; it is only when Florence addresses them in Irish but “neither in command nor supplication” (4. 235) that any effect is produced: as she speaks a “new impulse seemed to be given to the susceptible feelings of the auditory she addressed” (4. 235-36) and they draw back and drop their weapons. The genuine sympathy and sensibility of the Irish Florence and Fitzwalter are thus revealed as the only viable means of consolidating unity amongst the Irish population: as the novel closes we are told that “they acted, with their accustomed energy and perseverance, upon the dictates of experience, and illustrated, by their example, the truth of a maxim now more generally felt and admitted, that: IRELAND CAN BEST BE SERVED IN IRELAND” (4. 281-82).

In *Florence Macarthy*, Owenson constructs a model of Irish nationhood that embraces hybridity. Gottlieb suggests that the construction of an international sympathy that may efface individual national identity breeds a desire for ‘smaller communities [...] to retain an independent existence in their respective *gemeinschaften*, rather than become the anonymous subjects of a larger *gesellschaft*’ (57). *Florence Macarthy* does not go as far as to propose a unified and insular form of Burkeian nationalism; rather, Owenson posits a more unified model of Ireland which rejects the fragmented social structure in which the aristocracy, agent



classes and peasantry all exist in opposition to one another. However, she resists the construction of an inward-looking Ireland by configuring it as a nation of associations and attachment that are at once local and cosmopolitan. The novel suggests that the cultural assimilation implied by international communities based on modernity and civility are fundamentally damaging to Irish national identity: the fashionable De Vere's declaration that "all countries are alike: little masses of earth and water; where some swarms of human ants are destined to creep through their span of ephemeral existence" (1. 11) is a bleak vision for the Irish nation. For Owenson, the value of affect can be found in a genuine and "authentic" Irish sensibility that can consolidate national identity and bring about improvement from within. Patriotism based on feeling, as outlined in Burke's model of nationalism, cannot function in an Ireland ruled by a Protestant ascendancy: sensibility must be allowed to promote identification and eliminate hierarchy rather than endorse the Enlightenment philosophy of stadial progress which legitimises British colonial rule.

#### IV

"The Hong Merchant's Widow" serves to underscore Owenson's scepticism about cultural assimilation within an Enlightenment context. The essay notes that, despite the existence of a pervasive British interest, "[f]ew, however, cared to go as far as China in defence of an hypothesis, or to establish a fact, on the evidence of their own senses" (1). Instead, British understanding is based on that fact that "we know the Chinese, through tea-cups, josses, and caricatures in the print shops [and a] great deal of knowledge is often presumed on much slighter grounds" (2). Britain and China both operate within an already established global world order but this does not necessarily imply a functioning network of cultural transmission that promotes sympathetic identification. Indeed, in different ways both Croker's *Intercepted Letter* and Owenson's *Florence Macarthy* interrogate the notion that cultural practices can be

seamlessly assimilated and translated. In doing so, they encapsulate the highly complex and ambivalent contemporary understandings of China, which functions at once as a desirable model of civilised taste and as a signifier of ossified and static ritualism and despotism. Contemporary configurations of China frequently insist upon its exclusion from an explicitly Western form of aesthetic and sentimental perception: Barrow describes the Chinese citizen as “a mere automaton, whose every motion is regulated and adjusted with the nicety of a piece of clock-work,” arguing that the “spring and elasticity of mind which, by operating on the animal machine, occasions all diversity and irregularity that characterize its movements in our western hemisphere, will in vain be sought for in a Chinese” (Barrow 338). This offers a neat demonstration of the conflicted position of China in the British Romantic consciousness: Barrow prizes “diversity and irregularity,” but only within the seemingly impermeable boundaries of Western civilisation. For Owenson, however, it is less the existence of fundamental differences in national character than it is a lack of knowledge and perception – in other words, the inability “establish a fact, on the evidence of [the] senses” – that prohibits shared international sympathy. *Florence Macarthy* offsets the complacent appropriation of seemingly meaningless and illegible Chinese cultural signifiers against genuine attempts to know, translate and understand Irish culture. Union between Ireland and Britain cannot be accomplished via an involuntary process of cultural appropriation and assimilation: it can be achieved only through authentic and mutual sympathetic exchange.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> For a discussion of *The Missionary* and Orientalism see Lennon (143-55) and Wright (“Introduction”).

<sup>ii</sup> See Elizabeth Hope Chang for a fuller discussion of the role of vision in British representations of China in the nineteenth century.

<sup>iii</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the Morgan-Croker critical relationship, see Belanger (9-14).