

Beyond Imperialism: The 19th-Century Display of Chinese Art at the Musée Guimet

The late-19th century witnessed an unprecedentedly close but problematic cultural interaction between China and France. Some important collections of Chinese art were formed at the time, including that of the Musée Guimet. Today, much scholarship in the field is constructed under a post-colonial theory, regarding the imperialist context as an important framework to understand western cultural interpretations of the “East.” This research aims to investigate how Chinese artefacts were displayed in the Musée Guimet, and whether western superiority was a major effect of the representation. By examining 19th-century museum catalogues and Émile Guimet’s writings on Chinese culture, this article discusses various display elements one by one, including geographical location, architecture, division of space, classification and sequence, and interior decoration. It shows how Guimet largely shifted the common exotic approach to Chinese art to a scientific display in which he emphasised the richness of Chinese culture; and how French superiority in the ability to create knowledge about the East was softened by his demonstration of Sino-French historical and contemporary exchange.

Keywords: museum history/studies; Sino-French cultural interaction; 19th-century cross-cultural interaction; post-colonial theory.