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Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Elizabeth Chang

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This book traces the intimate connections between Britain and China throughout the nineteenth century and argues for China's central impact on the British visual imagination. Chang brings together an unusual group of primary sources to investigate how nineteenth-century Britons looked at and represented Chinese people, places, and things, and how, in the process, ethnographic, geographic, and aesthetic representations of China shaped British writers' and artists' vision of their own lives and experiences. For many Britons, China was much more than a geographical location; it was also a way of seeing and being seen that could be either embraced as creative inspiration or rejected as contagious influence. In both cases, the idea of China's visual difference stood in negative contrast to Britain's evolving sense of the visual and literary real. To better grasp what Romantic and Victorian writers, artists, and architects were doing at home, we must also understand the foreign "objects" found in their midst and what they were looking at abroad.

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