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“The Finest Fireworks in the World”:
Chinese Pyrotechnics
in Early Modern Europe

Fireworks originated in writing. Before there was paper in China, writing was done on green bamboo stalks, and dried over a fire to make the marks endure. In the fire, air-pockets in the bamboo stalks burst, making a cracking sound. In the second or third century A.D., the *Shen I Ching* explained how such cracking bamboo was cast onto a fire to scare away ten-foot tall mountain men (*shan shan*) and evil spirits. The first gunpowder fireworks were made to imitate these burning bamboos.¹

Despite many historians noting the ancient origins of gunpowder and fireworks in China, little attention has been paid to the place of Chinese fireworks in Western culture in more recent centuries. This essay explores the attitudes of Europeans to Chinese pyrotechnics between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and sets these attitudes within the context of changing European relations with and conceptions of China in this period. Historians have offered a variety of interpretations of such relations and their changing evaluations of Chinese politics, religion, and society.² I propose that judgements about fireworks followed their own distinctive trajectory, by considering what kinds of intelligence Europeans had about Chinese fireworks, and how this influenced European pyrotechnic traditions. I ask how Europeans valued Chinese fireworks, and examine the ways in which they compared eastern pyrotechny with their own. There was no uniform answer to these questions, and throughout

¹ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, vol. 5: Chemistry and Chemical Technology. Part 7: Military Technology: The Gunpowder Epic* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 130; on the history of gunpowder and fireworks in China, see also J.R. Partington, *A History of Greek Fire and Gunpowder* (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 237–97; Wang Ling, On the invention and use of gunpowder and firearms in China. *Isis* 37 (1947): 160–178.

² See, e.g., Basil Guy, *The French Image of China before and after Voltaire* (Geneva, 1963); Louis Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1964), vol. 1, pp. 11–80; Ho-Fung Hung, Orientalist knowledge and social theories. *Sociological Theory* 21 (2003): 254–280; Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent* (London, 1998).