Chinese Influences on English Silver 1550 – 1720

BY PHILIPPA GLANVILLE, M.A., F.S.A.

'The goldsmiths work pretty well and commonly cheaper than in our country (Sweden) but they do not think it inconsistent with their character to cheat. In silver snuff-boxes plates of lead have been found, not to mention other frauds . . . the Europeans get buttons, heads of canes etc. made, in which manner part of the silver comes again to Europe after the Chinese have wrought it.' Peter Osbeck, Chaplain of the Swedish East India Company, on his visit to China, 1751.

By the mid-18th century, as the Swedish visitor's comment shows, Chinese goldsmiths were readily supplying the needs of the Western market in gold and silversmiths' wares and there were even small communities of Chinese goldsmiths in the Western trading towns of Malaya and around the coast of India. The trade in Chinese export silver of the second half of the 18th century and later is well understood, especially in the United States where there has been considerable interest and where there are large collections of Chinese export silver, but three-quarters of a century earlier there was a previously unrecognised phase in the Chinese goldsmiths' response to the Western market, a phase which is only now coming into focus, since the products of Chinese goldsmiths are so rare and their Western imitations small and scattered through public collections and on the collectors' market throughout Western Europe and America.

Chinese goldsmiths' work had not formed a regular item of trade, either with the Far East or with the West, before the 18th century. Goldsmiths ranked fairly low in the hierarchy of craftsmen, certainly well below the makers of porcelain and the weavers of silk, and few goldsmiths' names are recorded, but the Chinese were avid consumers of silver and gold, both as dress accessories and jewellery, and for drinking vessels; Matteo Ricci recorded drinking hot rice wine from silver cups in the early 17th century and there are a handful of indisputably Chinese pieces in Western collections, such as a Ming ewer in the Carl Kemp Collection in Stockholm and a Kanhsi box in the Art Institute of Chicago. The Chinese themselves set no great store by old silver and virtually none survives in its 17th century form in Chinese collections. However, a hoard discovered some years ago at Tung Dao, deposited about 1647, which included shaped plates, wine cups and saucers, demonstrates that the features regarded as distinctively Chinese, shaped borders, chasing, ring matting to provide a textured background and so on, which had been typical of Chinese silver certainly since the 12th century if not long before, were still to be found in the 17th century. This is a crucial link in the chain of evidence since it is the sudden appearance of these features on English and Dutch silver of the 1680s and later which can only be explained in terms of Chinese work in the precious metals suddenly arriving in Europe at this period.[1]

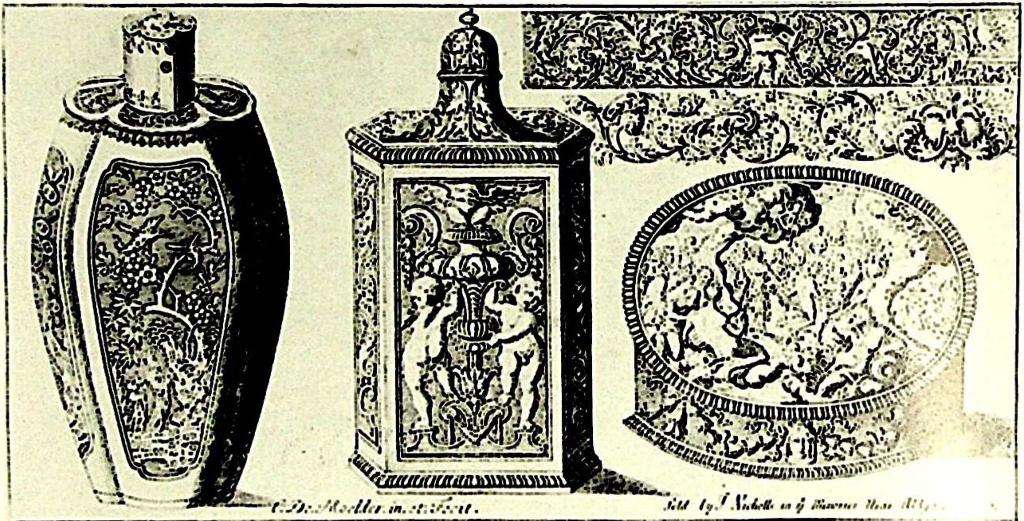
The lack of interest among Europeans in Chinese metalwork, as evidenced by its absence from the cabinets of curiosities of the 17th century, and by the lack of references in the Dutch and English East India Company records, offer further support to the assumption that before the 1680s work in the precious metals was not considered an item of trade. Cardinal Mazarin, that assiduous collector of 'China and Japan

rarities', had no work in the precious metals, nor did the Danish collectors, nor was there any in Brandenburg. The best-known of our native cabinets of curiosities, that created by the Tradescants father and son, also had no Chinese metalwork. Given the extremely advantageous price of silver in China it is hardly surprising that manufactured wares in the precious metals were not traded until the Europeans with their demands for locally-made accessories and table wares arrived to negotiate face to face with the merchants of Canton.

Given the immense European appetite for Chinese and Japanese manufactured goods, an appetite first stimulated in the 1580s by the English capture of Portuguese carracks laden with porcelain and spices and silks (a theme to which I will return later), the lack of metal-ware is striking, but the Northern European merchants trading in the Far East were, until the 1670s, unable to make direct contact with the Chinese mainland. Chinese merchants came to Bantam to trade but Japan was considered a much better potential market until the 1670s.[2]

After the Manchu conquest and the enthronement of Emperor Kang-hsi, foreign merchants could place orders directly with the Chinese Hongs and the outside merchants, as those dealing in the minor manufactured articles were termed, and it is in the thirty years following this that the true origins of Chinese export silver are to be found. The presence of Chinese-manufactured silver and goldsmiths' wares in Europe by 1700, if not ten or fifteen years before, is indisputable. While it must be admitted that no one piece can be proven as yet to have arrived in Europe before 1700, we have the evidence both of English and Dutch copies of Chinese metalwork (copies which reproduce those features mentioned above as characteristic of Chinese work of the 17th century), and an engraved design issued by a goldsmith in 1694 (plate 1). This is one in a suite of designs published by De Moelder in London and perhaps also in the Netherlands.[3]

As with so many designs for goldsmiths' work, the objects depicted are already old-fashioned and could have been produced any time in the preceding decade. The jar, with its recessed panels, ring-matted background and typically Chinese disposition of the subject matter within the panel, is quite clearly derived from a Chinese original. It has been suggested that the source could be porcelain but no relief porcelain of



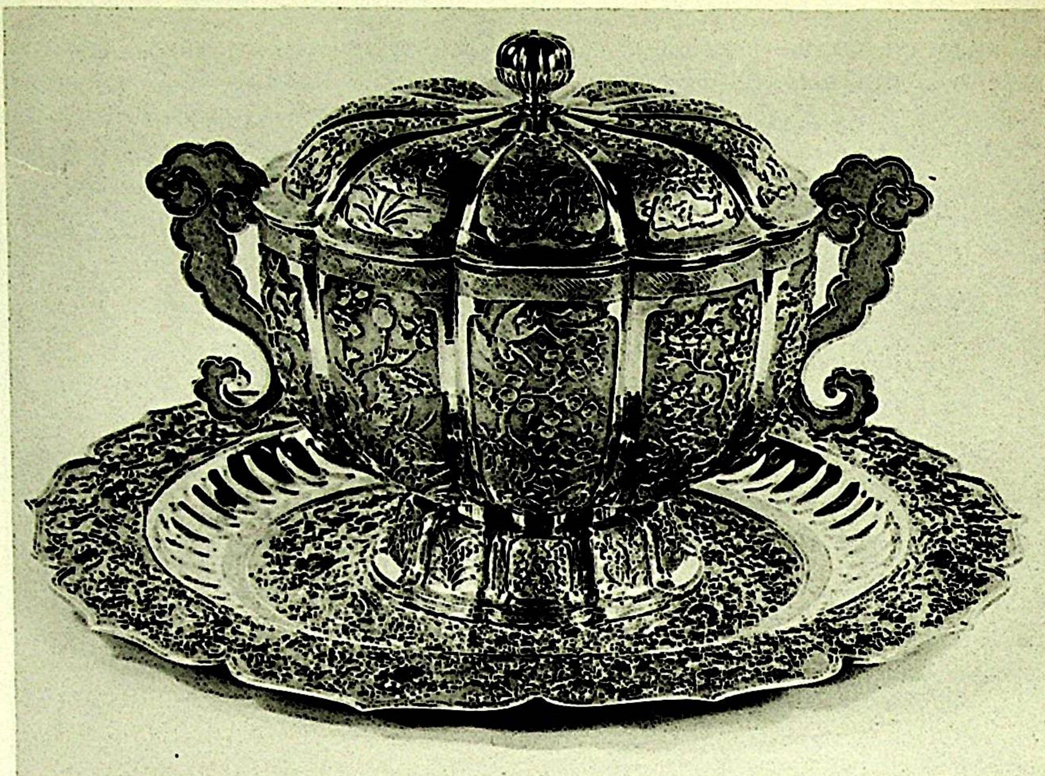
1. *Designs for jars and boxes* by De Moelder, London, 1694. (Victoria and Albert Museum)

this type is recorded and no Chinese carved lacquer reached Europe before the early 19th century. Another possibility is Japanese carved lacquer but this was almost as rare in Europe as the silver wares, and as late as the 1730s a French encyclopaedia had to explain the appearance and technique of carved lacquer because it was still so unfamiliar.

2. *Snuffbox.* English maker's mark PD crowned, c. 1685–90. Width 9.8 cm. An inscription on the back dated 1720 describes it as a gift from Charles II. (Victoria and Albert Museum).

The typically Oriental elements in De Moelder's design are to be found in a number of objects emanating from English and Dutch contexts of the last decade of the 17th century. Perhaps the best-known is the snuff box in the Victoria & Albert Museum which is linked by a later inscription (1720) to Nell Gwyn (plate 2). If the inscription is to be believed, it was a gift from Charles II, which would make it a very early example of this first phase of Chinese goldsmith impact on the West. Another box of the same design is on show at Leeds Castle; both bear the mark of a goldsmith, PD crowned, who is presumed to be a Londoner, and the Nell Gwyn box, when tested by spectrographic analysis, proved to be of the sterling standard.

This box has formerly been regarded as Chinese work, marked by an English retailer, but now that other pieces, decorated in a similar technique, are appearing both on the market and in public collections, it is possible to distinguish those which appear to be of Western origin, both on the grounds of the technique and by analysis of their metal content, and those which do not fit the pattern and may be considered Chinese work. Within the last 18 months there have appeared on the London market a cane handle, perfume bottles and a box, and a number of canisters for tea decorated in a similar technique to the Nell Gwyn box, and in the Hull Grundy gift to the British Museum another perfume bottle and box are to be found.[4] By the mid-eighteenth

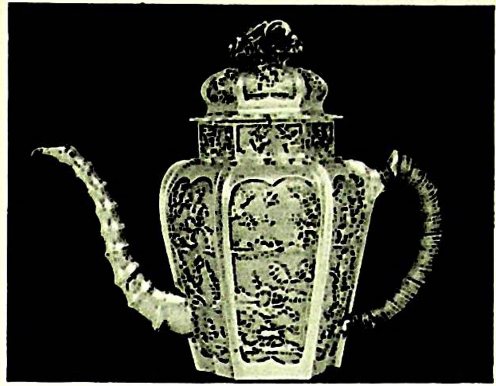


3. *Covered bowl and stand.* Silvergilt, English. Unmarked, c. 1700. Width of stand 15 cm. Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen.

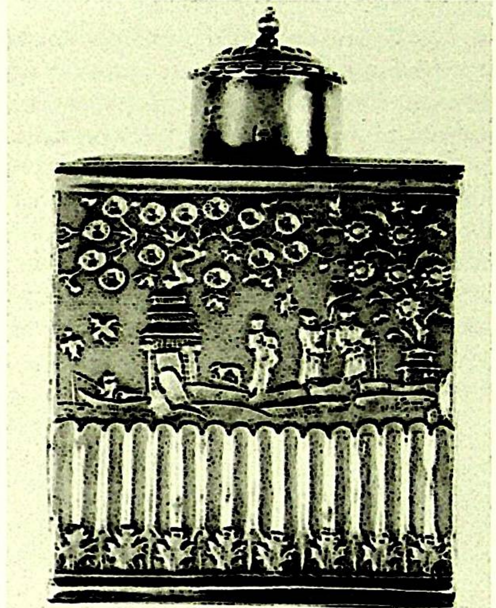
century teawares in this technique occur and Chamseis included a design in his ***Designs of Chinese Buildings . . . and Utensils*** (1757).

Indisputably English are three tea bowls by David Willaume of 1712 and also presumably English is a chafing dish by Antony Nelme, the latter with the recessed ornament chased and embossed rather than applied. A covered bowl and its under-dish in the Royal Collection (plate 3) has also been attributed to Willaume although it is unmarked; certainly its eclectic mixture of forms and motifs drawn from different aspects of Chinese decorative art is characteristically English. The form of the bowl is Yi-hsing ware, a design source fruitfully milked by John Dwight and the Elers brothers. The handles to the bowl take the form of a sprig of magic fungus, a sign for longevity which occurs as handles on both porcelain and bronzes. The goldsmith has taken the recessed panels and the shaped border, on which the bowl stands, again from Chinese decorative art, perhaps lacquer rather than porcelain, but the fluting within the dish is wholly European, as is the general form and function of the covered bowl.[5]

Two pieces represent the vanished class of Chinese silversmiths' work to have reached Europe before 1750. One is a jar which has been fitted later with a spout and handle (plate 4). The jar has English inscriptions of 1754 and 1816, and presumably the spout and handle, which are of sterling standard, were added at one or other of these dates, but the body of the jar is markedly divergent from sterling when tested by spectrographic analysis. It has a very high silver content (about 960) and the heavy cast construction of the hexagonal jar and its cover are in marked



4. *Jar.* Chinese, c. 1700; spout and handle added in England, mid-18th century (?). The relief is markedly deeper than on plates 2 and 3 and there was a high gold content, a characteristic of Chinese silver. (Victoria and Albert Museum).



5. *Canister.* London, 1703, mark of Seth Lofthouse. At least four others of this design and a variant (1697) are recorded. Three were tested; the alloy showed no trace of gold and the silver content varied between 930 and 960/Henry Willis.

contrast to the normal manufacturing techniques of European goldsmiths. They are paralleled on a tea-pot with London hallmarks for 1682/3 (Jackson *History of English Plate,* fig. 1260) which when tested recently had a silver content of more than 940. Another of a slightly later period, 1720–30, was included in the recent American touring exhibition of Chinese export silver.[6]

With certain exceptions, the small accessories – boxes, scent flasks and cane handle – decorated in the Anglo-Chinese technique do not bear marks. The exceptions are the Nell Gwyn box and its companion at Leeds Castle, and a group of tea canisters die-struck and made up in very light-gauge metal (plate 5). These are found with both English marks of the 1690s and with Britannia standard marks of 1703; five identical canisters recently seen on the London market bore respectively the mark of Seth Lofthouse and 1703, an unattributed crowned letter mark and a pseudo-Chinese mark. This may well have been an English goldsmith's attempt to enhance his pseudo-Chinese object and a similar motive may lie behind the Chinese chopmark on one end of a little counterbox of around 1700, again recently on the London market. By the mid-18th century, in another of the subtle Chinese responses to the expectations of their Western customers, Chinese goldsmiths' work was beginning to be

marked, sometimes in imitation of hallmarks and sometimes with Chinese names.

Contemporary with these little-understood Anglo-Chinese relief-worked pieces are the chinoiseries flat-chased on to standard English vessels. These produce fantastic scenes which have a dash of soy sauce about them, but incorporate figures in Persian dress, Classical ruins and fountains, and other elements which are, broadly speaking, exotic rather than specifically Chinese in their nature.

In analysing these chinoiseries, the task is made more difficult by the popular habit of adding them later to previously plain objects to enhance their interest and value. This practice was already flourishing in the 1860s; a tankard bought by the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1865 has been subject to this treatment. Its lid bears one date letter and maker's mark, its body another, and the crisp chinoiseries are lovingly chased around the very worn hallmarks, a confection to catch a curator. Another example is the basin, formerly in a Welsh church, then in the Dunn Gardner Collection, and now on loan to the National Museum of Wales, where the same enhancing has taken place. But there remains a significant number of well-provenanced pieces decorated with this technique, some in churches, others in colleges, to demonstrate the original repertoire of the ornament.

There are a few pieces in which both the form and decoration has echoes of China, for example the garniture at Belvoir of 1685–88, consisting of a pair of vases and a covered ginger-jar. A gold covered cup recently purchased by the British Museum is another example, along with a gold tea cup and cover of about 1685 found in the lake at Knowsley, presumably from the Earl of Derby's plate cupboard. Another gold piece, a cup and cover by Jacob Bodendick of 1675–76 belonging to Lord Yarborough, again shows Chinese influence in its inset panels on a matted ground. The style is broadly Dutch but the Chinese roots are unmistakable.

Two pieces at Cambridge, a cup and cover of 1684 given to St John's College by John, Earl of Salisbury, and the Ducie tankard at Queen's of 1683, can be presumed to bear genuine chinoiseries, as can some examples in church hands: a set of 1689 at Welsh Newton near Hereford and a set engraved with crude chinoiseries by the West Country maker John Dagge at Merton Church, and at the neighbouring West Putford Church.

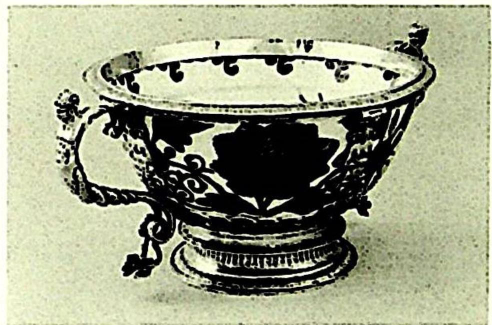
It is not quite accurate to regard these flat-chased chinoisierie as peculiarly English, since there is a set of candlesticks, snuffer and stand by the New York maker Kierstede of the 1960s in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The figures on these pieces are distinctive; each is using an astronomical instrument and surveying the stars, whereas the repertoire of English chinoiserie is of rather theatrical Tartars with bristling moustaches and curved swords, Persian-like warriors and maidens, and figures who seem almost like Pulchinello.[7]

No engraved source for this melange is known and the only parallels are on wallpapers of 1690–1710. Although it has been suggested that a single workshop was responsible for flat-chasing all the chinoiseries on English silver, there are considerable differences both in subject matter and in the lay-out of the ornament; for example on a salver in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston the design of four rocky mounds, each topped by a wind-blown tree, is carefully symmetrical and balanced with none of the disjunction of scale characteristic of the cheaper (presumably) chinoiseries found on tankards, bowls, beakers and so on.

Some at least of the scenes are reproductions of wood-block prints from Chinese theatrical themes and it may well be that the intermediate step for these chinoiserie confections on silver is a wood-block print too, since the stabbed line, which is so

significant an element in the flat-chased chinoiserie, is not a technique adopted by goldsmiths in England for other chasing at the time. Although illustrated books about China, such as those by Nieuhoff and Athenazius Kirchner, were available in London, there is little more than the choice of subject in common between these and the chinoiserie on silver, and the *Designs for Japanning,* published by Stalker and Parker in 1688, equally bear little more than the most fleeting resemblance to the chinoiseries on silver. Unlike the relief-worked silver discussed earlier, these are a distinctively Western European concept, a romantic view of Cathay.

Long before the goldsmiths of London could have seen any printed Chinese subject matter, they were responding to the stimulus of Chinese decorative art. The earliest pieces of porcelain to have survived with English mounts are of the 1560s, notably the Lennard Cup at the Percival David Foundation (1569). This, like the von Manderschiedt Cup, no doubt reached Northern Europe via the traditioal porcelain route through Egypt and into Turkey and the Levant. But by the 1580s and 1590s English privateers were seizing porcelain along with other Chinese manufactured articles from Portuguese carracks. These cargoes were dominated by large bowls or basins, ewers and bottles, and these are the items which we find mounted in silver gilt and sometimes fitted with handles: for example the collection formerly at Burghley and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the pieces sold from the Royal Collection in 1649–50, the great basin owned by Sir William Eliot at Port Eliot in 1631 and the Trenchard Bowl, treasured by a Dorset family until it was purchased by the Victoria & Albert Museum recently (plate 6). For a brief period porcelain was accorded the dignity of elaborate silver-gilt mounts and treated as an exotic or a curiosity item, along with ostrich eggs, agate and crystal; but the designs show absolutely no awareness of the exotic origins of the porcelain and there is no attempt by the goldsmith to reflect the painting on the porcelain in the decoration of the mounts.[8]



6. *Trenchard Bowl.* Jia jing porcelain; silvergilt mounts. London, 1599–1600. Maker's mark IH. The same handle design occurs on mounted porcelain in the Schroder Collection, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and elsewhere. (Victoria and Albert Museum).

By 1620 or so the magic of porcelain was waning. It was becoming so much a generally recognised commodity that gentlewomen served dessert to their guests on porcelain dishes and the delftware potters of London were imitating popular designs like the bird on a rock for bourgeois customers. From this time the mounts for porcelain, with rare exceptions, became trumpery or vanished altogether.

Another form of Far Eastern decorative art to reach the goldsmiths' shops of London and Paris were the nautilus shells which were stripped of their outer skins, in Canton, and sometimes carved with Chinese subjects, like the cup in the Fitzwilliam Museum (mounts London 1585/6) and the three with French mounts in the Museo degli Argenti, Florence. But again the goldsmiths were blind to the ornamental possibilities and to the carving on the shells. These exotic objects were considered fitting gifts at New Year for the Queen and the mounts are often of very high quality; a very early

English nautilus cup purchased recently by the Victoria & Albert Museum (1557) has a carefully-chased foot and basket weave knop. It bears the mark of a distinguished goldsmith who may well have been one of the contractors to the Jewel House.

The most significant innovation from China for goldsmiths was the revolution in both social life and tableware triggered by the arrival of tea. Englishmen like Richard Cocks in Japan in 1613 – 20 made the first tentative discovery of the beverage which required specialised vessels, both for brewing and for drinking. Both Chinese and Japanese drank from small bowls with saucers, which acted also as lids, although they differed in their use of the tea-pot, which in Japan was merely a container for hot water, while the tea was whisked in individual bowls. In China the pot held both leaves and water, the pattern adopted in England. From the first, the English preferred silver; Richard Cocks, accustomed to the much greater capacity of a silver cup or tankard, substituted silver porringers as cups for his tea. As early as 1651 the Earl of Derby had a gilt tea bowl and silver tea bowls were to compete with porcelain for a place on English tea tables until about 1720. There are examples in several British museums (Victoria & Albert, Burrell Collection, Holbourne of Menstrie).[9]

The history of the silver tea-pot in England before the 1680s is unclear; in France le Pautre published a series of designs in the 1660s for extraordinarily baroque pots, showing no hint of Chinese influence but the first English tea-pots of the 1680s betray close links with their Oriental origins, whether in porcelain, Yi-hsing redware or stoneware or metal. They also take a wide variety of forms, reflecting the enormously increased variety of Oriental trade goods reaching England by then. The melon-shaped pots at the Ashmolean and Victoria & Albert Museums (c. 1685) are reminiscent of hot wine pots, while a slightly later silver gilt tea-pot at Burghley (1694) has the hexagonal body and recessed panels of a bronze and a crabstock handle.[10]

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Brian Beet, Wynyard Wilkinson, Henry Willis and Robert Barker for drawing my attention to early pieces of Anglo-Chinese silver. My colleagues in the Far Eastern Department have discussed the early Anglo-Chinese pieces and Graham Martin has tested alloys of some by X-ray spectroscopy and spectrographic analysis, a research programme which continues. The results will be published elsewhere.

References

1. Crosby Forbes, John Kernan and Ruth Wilkins, *Chinese Export Silver, 1785 – 1885,* Milton, Mass., 1975.
2. D. K. Bassett, 'Trade with China, 1623 – 1684', *Journal of Royal Asiatic Soc.*, parts I/IV, 1960.
3. J. F. Hayward, 'A William and Mary Pattern Book for Silversmiths', *Proc. Society Silver Collectors,* vol. II, no. 1, 1977.
4. Spinks, *Minor Arts of China,* 1983, no. 56 (canister) and no. 58 (oval box).
   British Museum, *The Art of the Jeweller: the Hull Grundy Gift,* 1984, nos. 413, 414 (containers). The Dutch pieces include jars and canisters from Leeuwarden and Amsterdam (1697 – 99).
5. Commander G. E. P. How, *Notes on Antique Silver, 1946/1947,* p. 21.
6. Crosby Forbes, *Chinese Export Silver,* International Exhibitions Foundation, N.Y., 1983.
7. P. G. Safford, 'Colonial Silver in the American Wing', *Bull. Met. Mus. Art,* Spring 1983.
8. P. Glanville, 'Chinese Porcelain and English Goldsmiths, c. 1560 – c. 1660', *Victoria & Albert Museum Album,* no. 3, 1984.
   F. Watson *Chinese Porcelain in European Mounts* China Institute in America 1980.
9. *Royalist Composition Papers, 1643 – 1660,* ed. J. H. Stanning, no. 12, p. 201 (Record Society of Lancs. and Cheshire, vol. 24). Other instances are cited in Glanville, *Silver in England,* Allen & Unwin, 1987.
10. N. Penzer, 'The English Silver Tea-pot and Its Origins', *Apollo,* December 1956.
    Burghley House, *Catalogue of Silver Exhibition,* 1984.