

# Thematic Research

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## In Search of China: From the Fantasy to the Reality

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Macao Museum.

In the 17th century, European missionaries came to China and propagated the knowledge about this oriental empire depicted in The Travels of Marco Polo back into Europe through their reports, letters, illustrations and oral records, which were collected and anthologized by the erudite missionaries in Europe. Among these anthologies, the one that can best represent the Western imagination of China must be *China Illustrata* (1667) edited by a German Jesuit, Athanasius Kircher, S.J. (1602-1680). The book comprehensively introduces the natural landscapes, religious beliefs, local customs, geography, politics, architecture and languages of China and those of its neighbouring regions. These writings are richly illustrated to show the missionaries' experience in the exotic Far East. This book could be said to be the first one to provide the Europeans with an overall yet vague impression of China. What is intriguing about this book is that, Kircher had never been to China, while he collected other missionaries' oral records, letters and reports and put up this masterpiece with the aid of his vast knowledge and rich imagination.

At the time, China still seemed unreachable for the Europeans who could but imagine this mysterious empire through writings and illustrations. However, this inconvenience had not discouraged their curiosity, but rather they were drawn to its mystique and exoticism in so far as they fantasized about it in their visual arts, which gave rise to the vogue of Chinoiserie that lasted for two hundred years.

Johan Nieuhof (1618-1672), an employee of the Dutch East Indies Company, is thought to be the first writer who derived writings and illustrations about China from the first-hand experience. In 1655 he travelled to Peking along with the Dutch diplomatic corps aiming to establish trade relationship with China. Although their mission ended up a failure, Nieuhof managed to write and draw what he saw during the two-year trip. His writings accompanied by his drawings made into engravings were published as a travelogue in *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperor of China, Deliver'd by Their Excellencies Peter de Goyer and Jacob de Keyzer, at His Imperial City of Peking* (1669). Thus the book contains the earliest illustrations of China given by the Europeans, covering a rich variety of themes including grotesque mountain views, exotic Asian fruits and plants, Chinese men with a Baroque touch, etc. Albeit stiff and exaggerative, his works were quaint and impressive. As this book was translated into many European languages, European aristocrats started to have imitations of the Chinese images and visual patterns in their design of palaces and gardens. Its influence was extended to the design of porcelain, tapestry and light decorations. Therefore, Nieuhof's work could be said the prelude of Chinoiserie.

Undergoing the political reform, the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment in the 18th century, Europe started to make great strides in its politics, economy and culture. The European countries made every endeavor to establish trade relationships with the many regions in Asia, and sent diplomatic corps to China in the attempt to open the door to this mysterious empire.

William Alexander (1767-1816), who followed Lord George Macartney (1737-1806) to China in 1792, was representative of the many artists who came to China along with the diplomatic corps. In his trip from Macao to Peking, Alexander produced a large number of sketches, including those of street scenes, landscapes, architecture, soldiers, women's dress, as well as the scene of the Qianlong Emperor receiving the envoy in the Forbidden City. Alexander's realist work could be said the first effort to present a real China. After he returned to England, Alexander tinged his sketches with watercolour or made them into engravings (see Figure 1 & 2). Imbued with a strong sense of oriental exoticism, his work enjoyed an immediate popularity in England, and throughout Europe, and in the meantime, gave shape to the Europeans' imagination of China. His work was published respectively in the most authoritative illustrated books about China, including *An Authentic Account of An Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (1797), *The Costume of China* (1805) and *Picturesque Representations of the Dress and Manners of the Chinese* (1814). Acutely observed and rigorously depicted by Alexander in his realist picturesque sketches, China is no longer mythically



Figure 1. Chinese barges of the embassy preparing to pass under a bridge, watercolour on paper, 1795. Image provided by Martyn Gregory Gallery.



Figure 2. A lady of rank, engraving, 1814. Image provided by Martyn Gregory Gallery.

bizarre, but rather appeared to be faithfully realistic. That said, as Alexander was from a rather different cultural background, he unavoidably had bias towards China and many details in his depiction still show a certain degree of exaggeration and deviation. To truthfully record the visual feature of China, the camera became a crucial means.

After photography was invented in 1839, the first camera reached China in the English military officers' hands during the First Opium War (1839-1842). In 1844, Jules Itier (1802-1877) produced the earliest photographs of China in record. Itier was a customs officer of the French diplomatic corps that passed through Macao and entered the mainland to negotiate the details in the Treaty of Whampoa. Itier spent his spare time in Macao on photographing Praia Grande (see Figure 3), A-Ma Temple, the Inner Harbour and Taipa with daguerreotype photographic technique. During his stay in Canton, Itier portrayed Keying (then the Governor-General of the Two Kwang Provinces) and the Paw-sse-tchen's family (Paw was then a well-known comprador). He also photographed the streets, foreign factories, and the scene of signing the treaty. After he returned to France, he published the engravings of his photographs in the travelogue, *Journal d'un Voyage en Chine en 1843-1846*. His work is considered the earliest photographic depiction of Chinese men and Chinese landscapes after the technology of photography was introduced to China. As he

stayed in a relatively small area of China during a limited period of time, Itier understood very little about Chinese people's custom and the social condition of the time. During the war, Western imperial powers sent photographers to China along with the armies, and henceforth the real China was exposed to the lenses of the Europeans.

At first, Westerners' photographic activities in China were confined to the southern coastal areas. Not until the Second Opium War (1857-1860) did the photographers followed the armies to the mainland. They photographed not only landscapes and architecture, but also the battle scenes. British photographer Felice Beato (1832-1909) came to China with the army in 1860, and took pictures of the aftermath of the war. Beato, the first photographer permitted to portray the Chinese imperial family, managed to keep a treasurable photographic record of the Old Summer Palace before it was burned down. As a photographer accompanying the army, Beato focused on the corpses of the Manchurian soldiers and shot these pictures from a triumphal perspective, flaunting the military power of the British Empire. Unlike Beato, John Thomson (1837-1921), however, photographed the daily life of Chinese people from a humanitarian perspective. His respect for China and his friendly attitude earned him the reputation "Chinese Thomson".



Figure 3. View of Praia Grande, daguerreotype, 1844. Collection of Henry Fok Foundation / Image provided by Macao Museum of Art.

Thomson, born into the family of a tobacco trader in Edinburg, Scotland in 1837, became an apprentice to an optical instrument manufacturer and learned photographic skills during his youth, meanwhile attending the evening class of an art school. In 1862, Thomson came to Singapore and started his own photographic studio. He travelled to Thailand and Cambodia, and became the first photographer to take pictures of the Angkor Wat. After his travel in the Southeast Asia, Thomson decided to settle in Hong Kong. In 1868, he established the J. Thomson Studio inside the building of the Commercial Bank on the Queen's Road (see the advertisement on *The China Mail*, 11th March 1868). The studio was later moved next to the Lane Crawford's Messrs & Co. on the same street (see the advertisement on *The Daily Press*, 26th May 1870). At that time, Thomson mainly produced portraits and landscape works. He became a frequent contributor of the earliest photographic journal of the East Asia, *The China Magazine*. After spending two years on the preparation, Thomson sold the studio and was ready for his photographic travel into the mainland.

Based in Hong Kong between the end of 1870 and 1872, Thomson went twice into the mainland and visited many cities in China, including Canton, Macao, Swatow, Chaochow, Amoy, Formosa, Foochow, Shanghai, Ningpo, Nanking, Wuhan, Tientsin, Peking, as well as Yangtze. Unlike most Western photographers at the time who tried to capture the exoticism of China, Thomson focused on Chinese society, the people of different social classes, their daily life, street and market scenes, natural landscapes, as well as the trade scenes in the treaty ports.

In the era of the wet plate processing, Thomson had to carry heavy photographic equipment and a large number of glass plates. In order to get to the places where Westerners had never reached before, he had to cross rapid rivers and climb steep hills in the dreadful weather, and at the same time put up with the hostile, suspicious, and at times violent treatment of the local people. Although the task was difficult, he eventually overcame all odds with the aspiration to photograph China. In his book *Illustrations of China and Its People* (1873-1874), Thomson writes:

'With this intention I made the camera, the constant companion of my wanderings, and to it I am indebted for the faithful reproduction of the scenes I visited, and of the types of race with which I came into contact. Those familiar with the Chinese and their deeply-rooted superstitions will readily understand that the carrying out of my task involved both difficulty and danger.'

What is more, he also writes about the difficulties in working with the wet plate process,

‘I had my own bitter experience of that north-west wind. When I executed the illustration which I introduce to my readers (see Figure 4) I was standing in eighteen inches of snow drift. The thermometer being very low, I should say near zero Fahrenheit, I had engaged a group of coolies to hold my dark room down, for the wind threatened every moment to hurl it off its legs. When washing the plate free from cyanide of potassium the water froze on its surface, and hung in icicles around its edges, so that in order to save the picture I was forced to take it to a neighbouring native house, and there to thaw the ice above a fire.’

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that, before he came to China, Thomson looked into the writings and illustrations previously done by missionaries, envoys and painters. The depiction of soldiers, monks, tradesmen, prisoners, and women’s dress in his photographs was found similar to that in William Alexander’s watercolour works and engravings. Like Alexander, Thomson had a keen eye for Chinese women’s dress and hairstyles, and so he photographed them ardently. In an article, Thomson humourously introduces them to the Western women audience:

‘The coiffure presents a variety of styles differing in the different provinces. Hereafter I shall supply some examples of these, which in every instance are most elaborate, and achieved by painstaking manipulation. Many of the patterns of the female headdress are very picturesque and might furnish our own countrywomen with hints.’

In another article, he emphasizes:

‘As will be observed, the chignons are each of them different, and all alike deserve careful study by the ladies of Western lands. The dressing of the hair into fantastic forms is naturally a difficult task, and one which, most probably, would shut out spurious imitators in our own country, for few could throw their whole mind and energy into work.’

We can observe from his work that Thomson was a sociable photographer. Despite the cultural differences, he tried to befriend the Chinese people of different social classes, not only the noble and the rich, but also the common and the poor. His book collects the portraits of the imperial family members, Manchurian and Han Chinese officials, merchants and compradors, as well as beggars, night watchmen and scavengers. Thomson passed through many streets and lanes with stamina and patience, and made realistic photographic record of China keeping in mind the positivism in anthropology and sociology. After he returned to England,



Figure 4. Chefoo Settlement, wet plate process, c. 1871.

Thomson was keen to introduce a real China to the Europeans through publishing photo albums, writing travelogues and holding seminars. Thomson vigorously attempted to change the Europeans’ stereotype of China by publishing not only a lot of photographs in his books, but also wrote illustrations about what he saw and heard from the locals during his journey. In the last chapter of *Illustrations of China and Its People*, Thomson honestly reveals his intention:

‘I will conclude, therefore, by expressing the hope that the work will convey a faithful impression of the places over which my journeys extended, and of the people as I found them, so that my five years’ labour may not have been in vain.’

The American photographer Lewis Hine (1874-1940) once said, ‘Ever the Human Document to keep the present and the future in touch with the past.’ Seen in this light, Thomson’s photographs offer an opportunity for the Westerners to know about China and for us to know better the reality of the late Qing China. Every piece is a fragment that re-familiarizes us with the renowned figures and the life in those days, as well as the splendid landscapes and the traditional dress of the time. These fragments come together and provide a remarkable glimpse into history. Unlike the work of his contemporaries, what Thomson left to us is a rich collection of photographs about China that carries great research value. From West to East, from the fantasy to the reality, the Europeans’ exploration of China was started with the missionaries’ written records in the 17th century and followed by the artists’ representation in the 18th century. In the first two hundred years, Westerners’ understanding of China was restricted to those writings and artworks. However, the appearance of the camera not only improved the visual experience, but also shortened the mental spatial distance, and moreover it truly depicted Chinese society of the time. The camera is the most faithful medium that translates reality.