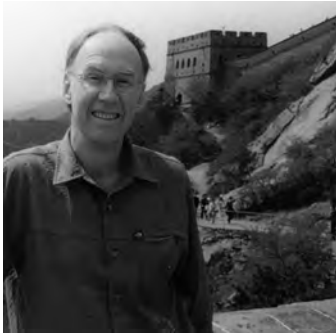


An EAA Interview with 2011 Franklin R. Buchanan Co-Prize Winner Peter Perdue



This is our fifteenth consecutive interview with recipients of the Franklin Buchanan Prize. This year's co-winners are Yale University historian Peter C. Perdue and Lynn Parisi, Director of the Program for Teaching East Asia at the University of Colorado. *China and the World: The Rise and Fall of the Canton Trading System* is now a component of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's *Visualizing Cultures* digital teaching project at http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/rise_fall_canton_01/. Peter Perdue created the units, and Parisi developed the accompanying teaching materials. Parisi, who previously won two Buchanan Awards, suggested that Professor Perdue's insights on the value of the Canton system as a classroom topic and on conceptualizing useful visual learning curricula would be of interest to our readers, and I enthusiastically agreed. Perdue has a PhD from Harvard in History and East Asian Languages. He has published several books and numerous articles on Chinese history and has interests in modern Chinese and Japanese social and economic history, world history, and the history of frontiers. I hope readers enjoy the interview that follows.

Lucien: *Peter, a plurality of our readers teaches some form of world history. Why, in your opinion, is learning about the rise and fall of the Canton trade system an important topic for survey world history courses?*

Peter Perdue: The Canton trade system, which lasted from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, was a period of sustained interaction between imperial China and Western European powers, in which both sides profited from economic exchange and cultural interaction. China had limited connection with Western powers like the Portuguese and Dutch before this period, but the scale of trade and number of foreign participants was much larger in the eighteenth century. The end of the Canton system during the first Opium War (1839–1842) marks the conventional beginning of China's modern history, with the imposition of "unequal treaties" on China following its military defeat. Every world history discusses the Opium War, but in order to understand China's position in the global economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we need to look closely at the preceding period, when the relative power positions were more balanced.

Lucien: *Visualizing Cultures (VC), about which many, but not all, our readers are familiar, is a visual learning site that contains seventeen units on a variety of Asia topics, including the three Canton units you helped develop, as well as curriculum materials that your co-award winner Lynn Parisi wrote. You've also worked on a prior China-related VC unit. How and why did you become interested in visual learning?*

Peter Perdue: Ever since I came to MIT in the 1980s, I have had a side interest in computer programming, especially the use of computer software for displaying numerical data and in graphing statistical connections on maps. I developed some simple maps for my first book on Hunan province using the available software at that time. My colleague in Japanese history at MIT, John Dower, has a very sharp visual eye, and from his experience in book publishing, he knew the importance of having good illustrations in scholarly books, as well as the limitations on the number of illustrations a publisher could allow. When he began the *Visualizing Cultures* project, I was very enthusiastic about its potential both for using advanced computer graphic software and for displaying vividly important historical events and processes by incorporating large numbers of images in addition to the analysis of texts. Both John and I felt that this was the perfect marriage of humanistic study and technology and that MIT was the ideal place to do it.

Lucien: *Returning to the topic of the rise and fall of the Canton trading system, why might students better understand this specific content through using the VC units?*

Peter Perdue: The story of the Canton trade told through textual evidence often concentrates only on the events that led up to the Opium War, and it is still mainly a story of diplomatic and military conflict. But there were many other personal relationships connected to the Canton trade, such as

the intimate connection of Chinese comprador merchants with their American counterparts and the fascination of American and British consumers with Chinese manufactured goods. The portraits and museum artifacts that we display on the site show the wide-ranging kinds of connections that develop in any kind of extended trading system, and they give us a personal view that spans aesthetic, emotional, and other aspects of every intercultural contact period. The landscape paintings and maps also show how the physical environment of the Canton region affected the people who lived there and how their intimate spatial interactions expressed both cultural conflict and cooperation. In law courts, on board ships, in markets, or in putting out fires, for example, the Chinese and foreign people of Canton met each other in a variety of close physical encounters, and the images show us directly this crucial aspect of their lived experience.

Lucien: *As a scholar of Imperial China and a world historian, what unanticipated benefits did you gain from your involvement in the development of visual learning pedagogy? What were some unexpected problems you encountered in conceptualizing and developing these units?*

Peter Perdue: The most difficult part of developing these units was learning to think visually—to allow, as much as possible, the images to drive the story instead of the text. Images, of course, need interpretation, so we can't do without the textual commentary, but they have an independent power that we as historians have trouble recognizing when we focus only on textual sources. Although the basic events of the Canton system are well known, I hope that the images will give students more nuanced ways of thinking about the interactions between China and the West and inspire them to study the period from both the textual and visual perspectives. From working on these units, I gained some striking insights into the blurred boundaries between "East" and "West" that undermine our tendencies to draw sharp lines between the two sides. The Cantonese artists who produced "reverse glass paintings" of figures like George Washington for the American market, for example, were "Chinese" in ethnicity but Western in their artistic style and audiences. The Chinese comprador merchants who treated their American colleagues to banquets and commissioned portraits of themselves also spanned both cultures, as did George Chinnery, the English artist who made sensitive pictures of the ordinary people of Macau and Canton. Even though this period ended in a tragic war, many sympathetic individuals did their best to cross boundaries of space, language, and cultural orientation to portray the humanity of all sides. This is the ultimate goal we strive for as historians, and the images help us a great deal in bringing these values to the viewers.

Lucien: *Thanks for the interview!* ■