

China in the World

The Rise and Fall of the Canton System

BY PETER PERDUE AND LYNN PARISI
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VISUALIZING CULTURES
HTTP://TINY.CC/WDS8X

Reviewed by Jeffrey R. Johnson

As China's relevance continues to grow, new resources are allowing teachers to offer increasingly nuanced instruction to their students. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology *Visualizing Cultures* project has been at the forefront in this effort, giving teachers access to high-resolution historical images along with authoritative essays and ready-made lessons that ask students to read photographs, paintings, and drawings as historical documents. The most recent unit is "China in the World: The Rise and Fall of the Canton System," by Peter Perdue, along with accompanying lessons by Lynn Parisi.

Perdue's copiously illustrated essays weave together the complex host of conditions by which the Canton trading system began, operated, and eventually ended. Monsoon wind patterns provided foreign ocean-going vessels easy navigation to Macau, but the ships required expert Chinese pilots thereafter to guide them through the increasingly narrow ship channel in the Pearl River to Canton. This enabled the Chinese government to sequester and control Western traders until the development of steam ships of shallow draft, a technological change that ensured British victory in the Opium Wars. Perdue's essays are provided in PDF form for downloading.

The images included in this series reflect the evolution of sea transportation, the living circumstances of the Western community, the trade goods, and the unique culture produced by a trading system in which foreigners had very limited access to China. The artwork reproduced in "China in the World" reveals the narrow aperture through which the foreign traders could view China during the period of the Canton system. The authors note that the China trade represented by Chinese and Western artists and artisans was produced to correspond to the Westerners' perceptions of themselves and of China:

In Western eyes, the Canton trade system became the source of a romanticized image of both Western commercial activity and China itself . . . What we encounter in these visuals, in short, is the Canton trade system as portrayed largely through (and for) the eyes of the non-Chinese—colorful, romantic, sometimes exotic, often heroic, and exceedingly incomplete.

With the Qing dynasty's loss of autonomy in the Opium Wars and later the development of photography, foreign access to China increased, and the representation of China in Western images changed dramatically; however, the view that Parisi and Perdue make available to us is valuable—not just in the study of a particular time and place—but to situate the Canton trade within larger global factors, thereby prompting questions about cultural relations and imperialism.

Along the way, Perdue introduces some of the colorful characters who inhabited the international community. For example, in section II, "Macau and Whampoa Anchorage," students will meet Harriet Low, a young American woman whose curiosity inspired her to sneak into Canton dressed as a man, violating the Chinese government's prohibition on for-



eign women there. Portions of Low's account of her clandestine adventure are made available via a link to the *Google Books* edition of her diary.

Parisi's three lessons enhance the utility of the artwork and Perdue's essays by asking students to read the images as historical documents. Lesson 1, "Life of a Canton Merchant," has students examine the images for evidence about the traders' lives. Lesson 2, "A Tale of Two Cities: The China Trade in Canton and Hong Kong," is the most extensive, focusing on key geographical factors including the cities' relative locations, specific characteristics, and the movement of people and ideas as a result before asking students to apply newly gleaned insights to their own cities. Lesson 3, "Imagining China: Exploring 19th-Century American Impressions of China through Canton Trade Artifacts," introduces the complex process whereby Western merchants, enjoying only limited access to China, became purveyors of Chinoiserie items that fed the growing Western appetite for Eastern exotica. Each lesson includes a selection of relevant images in PDF form for students to use in exploring the questions posed.

The illustrations—along with the contributions of Perdue and Parisi—make the subject compelling. Throughout the website, image quality is uniformly good, and navigation is easy. For those who wish to use the images for tasks other than those provided in Parisi's lessons, section IV of "China in the World" provides complete image galleries, categorized by people, places, commodities, and ships. Teachers can devise their own creative lesson plans or assign research or interpretive work using the images. "The Rise and Fall of the Canton System" would complement college courses focusing on eighteenth and nineteenth century China, along with high school World History and AP World History courses. ■

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