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From East to West with Grant and Li*

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(Posted by the China Beat on behalf of Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom)

One thing that American newspaper readers can’t help noticing—no matter which section matters most to them—is that people, objects, and images are circulating between China and the West at a dizzying pace. In 2007 alone, business reporters told of tainted food and dangerous toys coming from East to West, while their colleagues covering entertainment reported that film crews were heading in the opposite direction to shoot “Survivor: China.” Sports fans got reports of U.S. athletes preparing for the Beijing Games as well as articles about Yao Ming moving back and forth across the Pacific, to shoot baskets in Houston and get married in Shanghai.

What’s more, on a single recent Sunday (December 2, 2007), the Los Angeles Times greeted subscribers like me with not just one but two headline-grabbing stories about 21st century tourism with Chinese characteristics. On the front page, a story titled “Opening the Door for China” described changed visa rules that are likely to “unleash a new wave of tourism,” bringing Chinese visitors streaming into Southern California in record number to go to theme parks, stay at hotels and shop in the heavily Mandarin-speaking San Gabriel Valley, and buy herbal medicines and brand name luxury goods (confident, as they wouldn’t be at home, that they’ll get the real things, not fakes). The cover of the Travel section, meanwhile, showed snowcapped mountain peaks topped by large white lettering spelling out “REVVED UP for the SILK ROAD,” with smaller type above reading “Countdown to the 2008 Olympics” (a reminder of the media frenzy and big upsurge in West-to-East tourism predicted for this year).

The increasing intertwining of China and the West—and the excitement and anxiety it’s generating—has inspired breathless forward-looking commentaries about things like whose century this young one will be, as if it has to belong to either Us or Them. But what really seems in order during this countdown to the Olympics is slowing down and trying to catch our breath. Instead of peering anxiously ahead into the unknown, we would do well to pause, look back over our shoulders, and ask: Can we learn something useful from revisiting past moments when East-West exchanges increased? And those interested in the topic have some attractive places to turn just now, thanks to the recent appearance of four books and the mounting of two new exhibits.
A good place to start a backward look is with two books that shed new light on Chinese ties to Europe in the 1600s. One is *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, an elegantly written book by Timothy Brook, a leading China specialist making an assured foray into world history. His organizing conceit is simple: the objects in Vermeer paintings (articles of clothing, maps, etc.) can serve as “doors” that open to reveal surprisingly global dimensions of the Delft painter’s time. *Vermeer’s Hat* has much to recommend it to those interested in everything from art to colonialism, but its biggest pay-off here has to do with fakes. In Vermeer’s time, as Brook notes, European imitations of high quality Chinese porcelain were far more common than Chinese imitations of any Western good.

A second book, *China on Paper: Chinese and European Works from the Late Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century*, which is linked to an exhibit by the same name running at the Getty Research Institute, provides a different sort of new perspective on the same period. One thing it highlights is China’s long history as an appealing destination for Western armchair travelers. (This is an important group of travelers, since it has always far outnumbered that comprised of Westerners who actually made it to Asia—and this will surely long continue to be true, since, after all, the premiere episode of “Survivor: China” alone was watched by more than 15 million Americans.)

According to a chapter by Marcia Reed, one of *China on Paper*’s two co-editors, the most popular books about China circulating in the West a few centuries ago presented themselves as offering practical guidance to those bound for mysterious Cathay. But they were mainly intended to serve a different purpose. They were “books of wonder collected for—and sometimes by—armchair travelers.” These European readers were invited to pretend to follow in the legendary Marco Polo’s footsteps by reading the text and looking at the pictures, the same kind of invitation travel writer Susan Carpenter recently offered Los Angeles Times readers in her “REVVED up for the SILK ROAD” piece.
Moving forward to the late 1800s and early 1900s, we come to another pair of books, one again linked to an exhibit, that help place current phenomena into historical perspective. The first, *Picturing China: 1870-1950: Photographs from British Collections*, accompanies an exhibit by the same name that recently ran at London’s Brunei Gallery and is now traveling to other UK locales. (Alas, the book, which shows an arresting shot of a Chinese woman with a camera on its cover, is currently available only at museums, but armchair travelers who want to see the images in the show and others from the same digital archive project can do so without leaving home via the click of a mouse.) Of special interest here are the book’s arresting shots of Chinese and Western individuals, as well as Eurasians, who moved between different cultural worlds. In straddling divides between East and West, some of the subjects of these photographs, like today’s Yao Mings, went back and forth across oceans (albeit carried by ships, not jets). Others, though, navigated borders within a China that, at the time, had many divided cities, designated “treaty ports,” that contained foreign-run sections. This allowed people to move, in a single day, from an enclave like Shanghai’s International Settlement (the landmark buildings of which contained clock towers and other Western features) to a Chinese-run part of that same metropolis (where different design features, like curving tile roofs, topped the finest structures).

Last, but I hope not least (for obvious reasons), there is a fourth recently published book to consider: my own *China’s Brave New World—And Other Tales for Global Times*. Many of its
sections deal with East-to-West or West-to-East flows. But perhaps the most germane to focus on here are a playful pair of chapters on globetrotting in the era of Jules Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days*, “Traveling with Twain” (a chapter in which China only comes in indirectly, via such things as the author’s virulent disdain for missionaries and imperialism), and “Around the World with Grant and Li, (which looks at the global circuits of a famous American and much less well-known Chinese traveler who met briefly at the 1876 Philadelphia World’s Fair).

One topic I addressed in both of these chapters is, once again, armchair travel—this time taking the story beyond the realms of the books and visual representations dealt with in China on Paper. Yes, Twain was a wildly popular writer of books about his foreign travels. Yes, there were books published about the trip to China and other distant lands that Ulysses S. Grant took after his presidency. And, yes, Mr. Li, the Chinese globetrotter who met the General-turned-Statesman at the Philadelphia Fair wrote a travelogue to let his fellow countrymen know of the technological wonders he had seen in America and Europe (telegraph and train systems particularly impressed him). But written records of this sort were by no means the only devices that people turned to when hoping to experience far-off places vicariously in the late 1800s. Then, as now, there were many other ways to venture imaginatively to the other side of the world.

Americans and Europeans interested in getting a feel for the “East,” for example, could go to World’s Fairs, like the 1867 Parisian one) whose Middle Eastern displays
Exhibition and had suddenly landed in some large Chinese bazaar.” (For an extended discussion of this kind of imaginary travel to China by Americans during the first century of U.S. history, see the fascinating 2006 book by John Rogers Hadded, *The Romance of China*). As for Chinese of the same era who wanted to vicariously experience the “West”—they could simply go to Shanghai’s International Settlement, which provided a living and breathing display of Western lifestyles more immersive than any Epcot Pavilion or Travel Channel program.

Of course—to point to a final present-day echo of bygone days that helps us place a story about a twenty-first-century trend into a long-term perspective—what Grant liked about the International Settlement was surely not its whiff of the “exotic” West. Rather, stopping at Shanghai’s famed Astor Hotel, with its Western meals and English-speaking staff, doubtless gave him a comforting sense of familiarity in an alien environment—something that contemporary Chinese travelers who end up spending some of their time in the U.S. in places like the San Gabriel Valley would surely appreciate.

* A shorter version of this piece appeared in the St. Petersburg Times (Florida), January 13, 2008; the Twain chapter alluded to above is adapted from a piece that originally appeared in the online journal *Common-Place*. 