

John Thomson's China — I

Illustrations of China and Its People, Photo Albums (1873-1874)

by Allen Hockley

An Imagined
Travelogue

Treaty-Port
Imagery

Ethnology
& Exploration

Chinese
"Types"

Reframing
the Past

Sources
& Credits



SCOTTISH PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN THOMSON IS
PICTURED HERE IN AMOY, CHINA, WITH
TWO HONAN SOLDIERS, CA. 1869.

Wellcome Library, London

*John Thomson, born in Edinburgh, was the first Western photographer to travel widely through the length and breadth of China. This unit introduces his celebrated *Illustrations of China and Its People: A Series of Two Hundred Photographs, with Letterpress Descriptive of the Places and People Represented, published in four volumes during 1873 and 1874.**

Illustrations of China and Its People comprises the most extensive photographic survey of 19th-century China. Its scenic views illustrate the many places Thomson visited between 1868 and 1872. Its portraits and street scenes document the costumes, customs, and occupations of the people he encountered. Thomson provided extensive captions explaining the scenes and subjects he photographed.

John Thomson's *China III* reproduces Thomson's pioneer albums in full, along with an image gallery of all 200 photographs. John Thomson's *China II* treats the images topically in a series of "visual narratives." John Thomson's *China I* analyzes the scenic views and human "types" in *Illustrations of China and Its People*, and looks beneath Thomson's elaborate travel narrative to expose the presumptions and prejudices that informed 19th-century Euro-American attitudes toward China and its people.

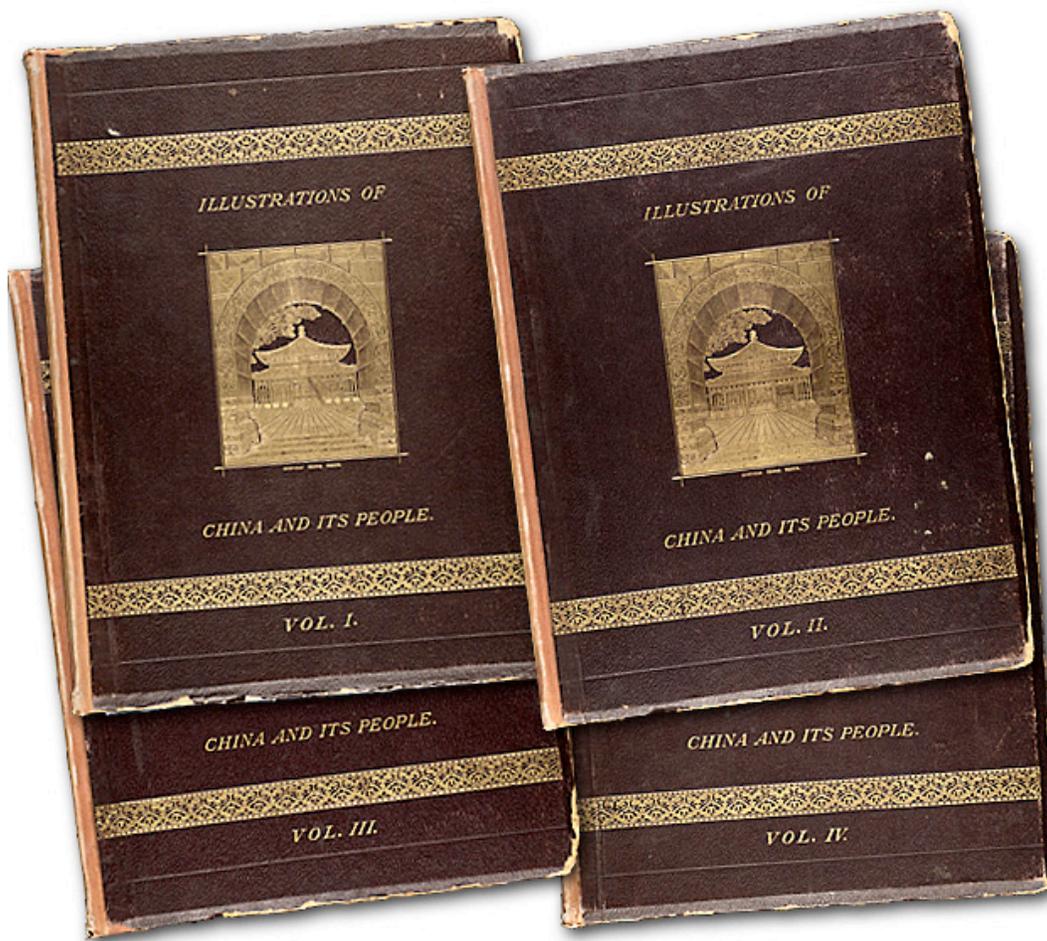


The photographs and captions by John Thomson in this unit were generously provided by the Beinecke Library at Yale University.



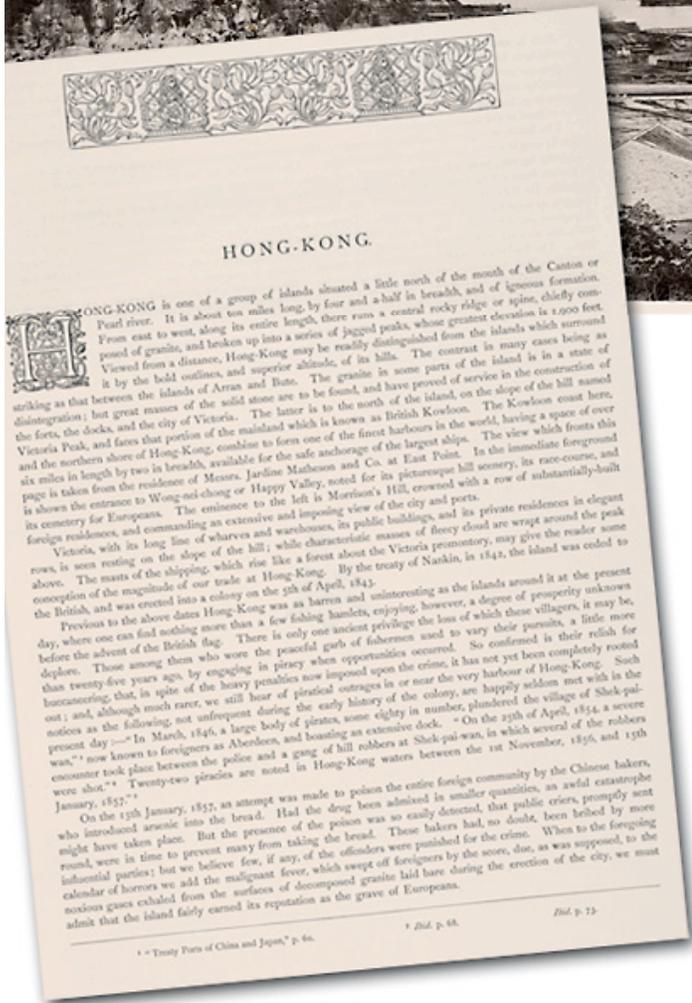
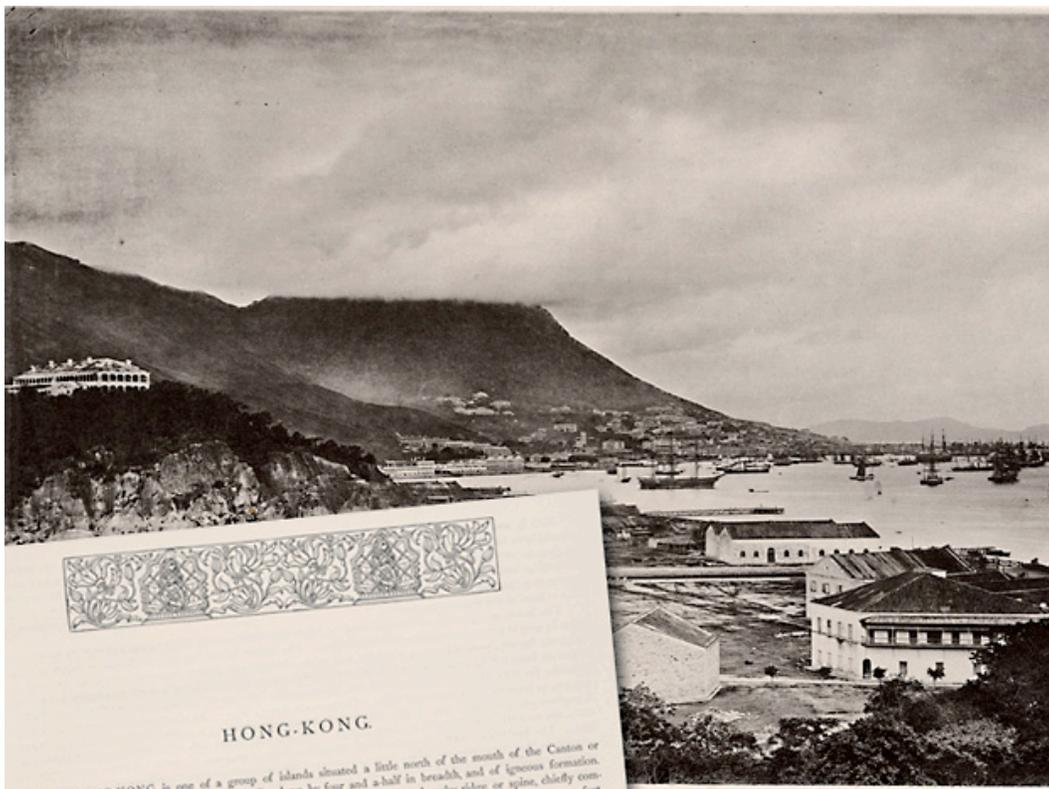
AN IMAGINED TRAVELOGUE

By any measure, John Thomson's *Illustrations of China and Its People* was a remarkable achievement. Its 200 photographs comprise the most extensive single visual survey of mid-19th-century China. The captions accompanying each photograph combine detailed descriptions of the images with learned opinions from contemporary scholars and Thomson's personal anecdotes. Written in an engaging style, these narratives enliven the images while situating them in their historical and cultural contexts.



John Thomson's Illustrations of China and Its People
Volumes 1 and 2, published 1873
Volumes 3 and 4, published 1874

Thomson acquired his photographs between 1868 and 1872 during a four-year residency in Hong Kong, from where he made several tours of various regions of China. His travels, far more extensive than those undertaken by most Westerners of his generation, extended beyond the relative comfort and safety of the coastal treaty ports, most of which were established less than a decade earlier upon the conclusion of the Second Opium War. In some captions, Thomson draws attention to both the novelty of his undertaking and his adventurous spirit by describing the hostile reception he received in more remote regions of the country.



Upon return to England,
Thomson prepared his
photographs of China for
publication and wrote the
lengthy accompanying text.

"Hong-Kong"
plate II, volume I

ct1013-1014 (caption)
ct1015 (photo)

Thomson organized his photographs and authored the lengthy captions for *Illustrations of China and Its People* after his return to Britain in 1872. The first two volumes were published in 1873; volumes three and four followed in 1874. The albums received much critical acclaim, as the following excerpt from a review in the November 11, 1874 edition of the *Pall Mall Gazette* indicates:

[Thomson] has secured a full record of all that is most interesting for us to learn concerning the ways of a remote civilisation, and he has even succeeded in registering types of the different classes of the population, from the highest to the lowest.... No picture of Chinese manners at once so full and so vivid has yet been attempted.... There is scarcely any side of Chinese life, either public or domestic, of which he has not secured some record.

While correctly emphasizing the significance of Thomson's achievement, the reviewer's enthusiasm and hyperbole also illustrate how little the West really knew of China at the time. In truth, Thomson's pioneer publication barely scratched the surface of what was not only one of the world's largest and most populated countries, but also one of its most isolated and least understood.



This map traces Thomson's route through China, as presented in the four albums. In reality it was not a continuous journey.

The favorable reception accorded *Illustrations of China and Its People* suggests that Thomson possessed an acute sense of his projected audience and its desire to know more of China and the customs of its people. He honed these instincts operating a commercial photography studio that served Hong Kong's growing population of foreign residents and tourists. As with most commercial photographers in Asia, Thomson worked in a wide variety of genres ranging from cartes de visite to portraiture and even government commissions. He was the official photographer for the Duke of Edinburgh's 1869 visit to Hong Kong. *Illustrations of China and Its People* includes a photograph from this commission.



"In this view, taken when H. R. H. the Duke of Edinburgh visited Hong-Kong, in 1869, H. M. S. 'Galatea' is seen at anchor off Peddler's Wharf." (from caption)

"Hong-Kong Harbour," plate III, volume 1 (detail)

ct1016 (caption) ct1017 (photo)

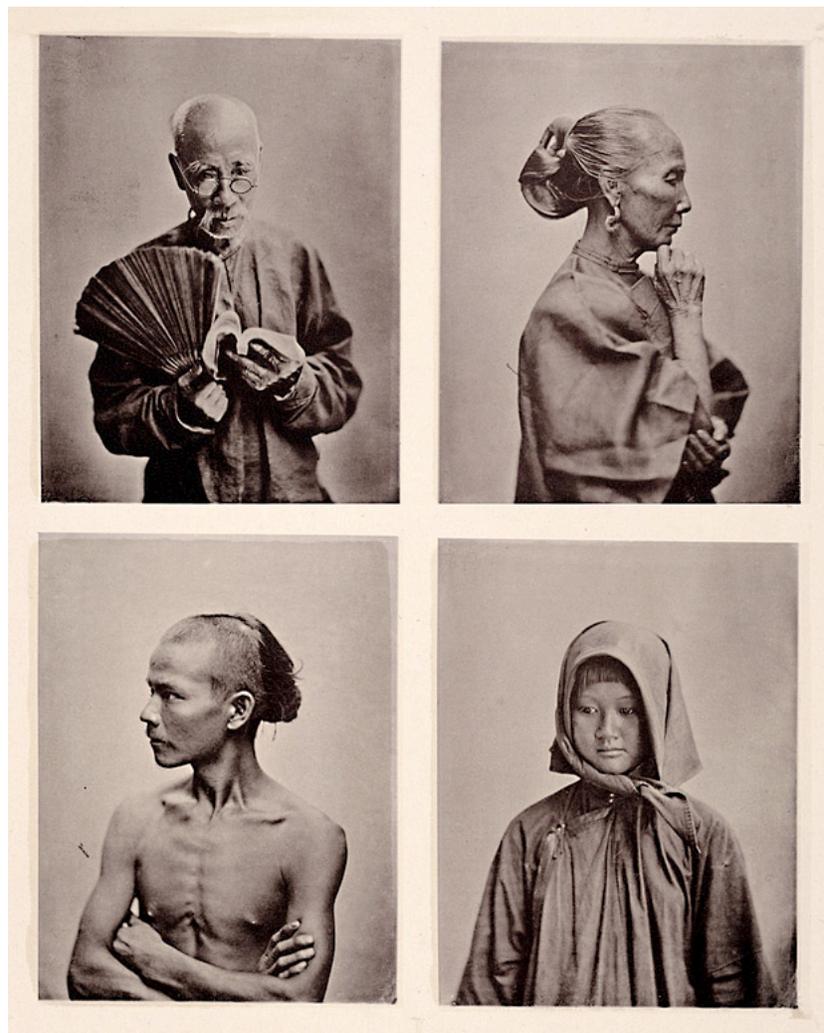
Thomson's photographs fall into two broad categories: scenic views and types. Views encompassed both natural landscapes and built environments. They could be panoramic, taking in large swaths of scenery, or they might highlight specific natural phenomena or individual structures.



*An example of a built environment in Thomson's China:
"The clock-tower, designed by Mr. Rawlings in 1861, is a great ornament to the city, the clock too, when regulated properly, is of no inconsiderable service." (from caption)*

*"The Clock Tower, Hong-Kong," plate IV, volume 1 (detail)
ct1025 (caption) ct1026 (photo)*

Thomson's "types" focused on the manners and customs of Chinese people and tended to highlight the defining features of gender, age, class, ethnicity, and occupation.



Thomson mounted these four portraits of "types" on one page, with a detailed accompanying description:

"Of the four heads shown in these pictures, the two upper ones are fair types of the aged labourers of China. Darby and Joan have for many years been associated together, and their life has been a uniform scene of hardships and toil....The two lower heads are those of a son and daughter belonging to the same class." (from caption)

*"Four Heads, Types of the Labouring Class," plate XI, volume 1 (detail)
ct1053 (caption) ct1054 (photo)*

Thomson sold individual photographs in various sizes and formats, as well as albums focused on specific themes. He also provided images for *The China Magazine*, the earliest photographically illustrated publication on China. The treaty ports of China proved to be an especially tough market for commercial photographers, with studios failing or sold to new proprietors willing to accept the risks. The four-year longevity of Thomson's enterprise attests to his aesthetic vision, his technical mastery of the medium (he later published treatises on photography), and his business acumen.

In the introduction to *Illustrations of China and Its People*, Thomson states that he "endeavoured to arrange these notes [i.e., his captions] and illustrations as far as possible in the natural order or sequence of my journeys, which extended over a distance, estimated roughly, of between 4000 and 5000 miles." He then describes the distribution of his itinerary across the four volumes:

Volume 1: Hong Kong, Canton, Macao

Volume 2: Formosa (Taiwan), Swatow (Shandao), Chao-chow-fu (Chaozhou fu), Amoy (Xiamen), Foochow (Fuzhou)

Volume 3: Ningpo (Ningbo), Shanghai, Nanking (Nanjing), Kiu-kiang (Jiujiang), Hankow (Hankou), Yangtze (Yangzi) River Journey

Volume 4: Peking (Beijing), Ming Tombs, The Great Wall

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Each volume begins with a table of contents that replicates Thomson's itinerary and lists the photographs he produced in each locale.

"List of Illustrations," volume 1 (detail)

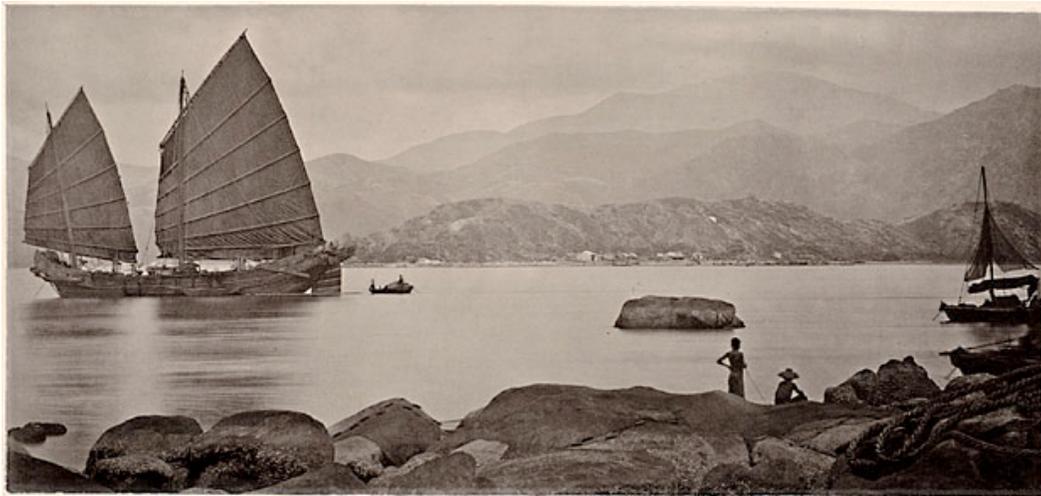
ct1009-ct1010

Technique & Aesthetics

Thomson arranged his photographs to enhance the sense of travel he hoped to convey. He introduces each of the locations he visited with a selection of representative scenic views. The types that follow are, for the most part, specific to the places or regions defined by the views. Thomson deployed these combinations of scenic views and types to highlight the unique character and sensibilities of each locale he visited. His captions often further reinforce the experience of travel by narrating movement from place to place. Viewing the four volumes sequentially, as Thomson intended, leaves readers with the feeling that they are accompanying him on a single continuous journey.

But the desire to travel with Thomson—the urge to turn the page, to move on to the next stop in the itinerary—is driven as much by Thomson’s impeccable technique and aesthetic vision as by the narrative structure of *Illustrations of China and Its People*. Drawing on conventions of the picturesque, Thomson composes and crops his images to maximize their visual and narrative impact.

For example, Canton, the second stop on his tour, lies inland and up river from Hong Kong. Thomson facilitates this transition in his narrative with an evocative image of a Canton junk. He opts for a horizontal format with the craft positioned on the extreme left in order to suggest movement along the river. His composition opens up a spectacular vista of the waterway linking Canton to Hong Kong. For emphasis, Thomson included two figures on near bank of the river looking out over precisely the same scene he offers viewers of the photograph.



“The term junk, applied by Europeans to all Chinese craft, whether trading vessels or ships of war, is probably derived from “jung,” the Javanese word for a large boat or vessel. Chinese ships vary in dimensions, model, and appearance, in the different parts of the Empire as much as do the sailing craft of Europe.” (from caption)

“A Canton Junk,” plate VIII, volume I
ct1036-ct1037 (caption) ct1038 (photo)

Thomson employs a vertical composition for his view of a Canton street to emphasize the urban density of a Chinese community. The street is cramped, the signs are unreadable, and local inhabitants interrupt their coming and going to glare back at the viewer. And yet despite the claustrophobic and perhaps threatening sensibility conveyed by this photograph, Thomson positioned his camera to capture the slight curve of the street in order to encourage the viewer's curiosity. Just as his image of the junk invites us to follow him further upriver, this photograph stokes our desire to enter this environment and round the corner with Thomson as our guide.



"The streets of a Chinese city differ greatly from those of Europe, and are always extremely narrow, except at Nankin and Peking. They are paved crosswise with slabs of stone, usually worn down by the traffic to a hollow in the centre of the path, and this disagreeable substitute for the gutters of European thoroughfares forms the only means by which the rain-water is carried off." (from caption)

"Physic Street, Canton"
plate XX, volume I
 ct1088 (photo)
 ct1086-1087 (caption)

Thomson's photograph of Golden Island near the mouth of the Yangze River demonstrates his familiarity with a more conventional approach to composition. The oval frame he employs to crop this image contains what would have been an expansive vista and focuses our attention on Thomson's primary subject. More importantly, the oval frame offers Thomson a geometric shape within which he can align his image. The level ground plane leading the viewer's eye to the island cuts across the oval with a strong horizontal axis. The pagoda rising from the left side of the island provides its vertical counterpart. But both axes are slightly off center; neither bisects the oval frame at its horizontal or vertical midpoints (and to do so would have resulted in a symmetrical but boring composition).

Thomson's composition betrays his influences. In framing and aligning this image, he has appropriated a formula commonly used by 19th-century British landscape painters to draw viewers' attention to the primary subjects of their paintings. In this

photograph, our eyes are drawn to the architectural details of the temple, especially the rooflines highlighted by the sunlight. Given his distance from the subject, the remarkable detail Thomson captures in this image provides a particularly strong endorsement of his technical skills.



"Kin-shan, or Golden Island, has attractions of its own no less remarkable than those of the sister islet below Chin-kiang. It is, however, an island no longer, for the alluvial deposits of the Yangtze's floods have joined it so completely to the right bank of the river, that I had no difficulty in finding room on dry-land for taking the photograph here numbered 17." (from caption)

"Golden Island, River Yangtze," plate IX, number 17, volume 3
ct3041 (caption) ct3042 (photo)

Thomson's types include a wide array of formats ranging from cameos, to half- and full-length portraits, to images of Chinese in situ such as the example shown here. In these photographs, Thomson offers viewers an example of upper-class domestic architecture, but the family occupying this house is of equal interest. The patriarch and his eldest son appear on the lower level of the dwelling while wives, concubines, children, and female servants gather on the upper balcony.



"No exhaustive or thoroughly satisfactory description of the domestic architecture of the Chinese house has, so far as I am aware, ever yet been given. A principal reason for this omission is the lack of anything like complete acquaintance with the subject. The fact is, the country is in itself a vast one, and its domestic architecture, though remarkably similar throughout, yet presents wide divergences of construction, designed to meet the varying requirements of climate and position." (from caption)

"Chinese House," plate VII, number 12, volume 4 (detail)

ct4033-ct4034 (caption) ct4036 (photo)

The "Chinese House" photograph offers a range of photographic types whose costumes and coiffures demarcate differences in age, gender, and social status. Thomson piques our interest in these matters with this image, then satisfies our curiosity with full-length portraits affording closer scrutiny of these or similar types.

"The Manchu or Tartar lady may, on the whole, be said to approach more nearly than her Chinese sister to our Western notions of female beauty and grace. The former enjoys greater freedom, and her feet, which are never compressed, appear to be naturally small and well-formed." (from caption)

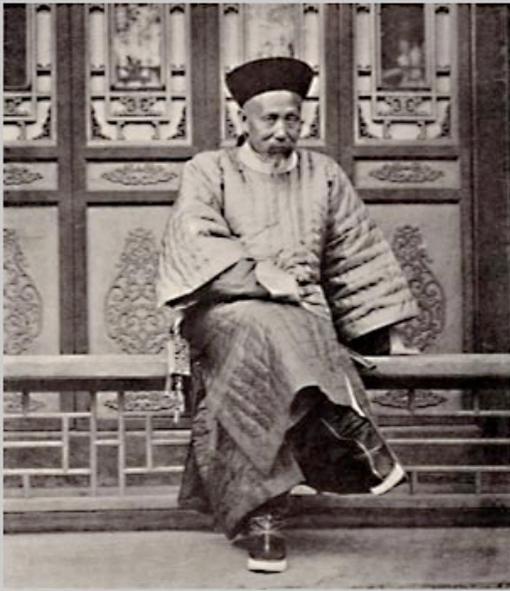
"Manchu Toilet"
plate XIII, number 35,
volume 4
ct4065 - 4066 (caption)
ct4071 (photo)

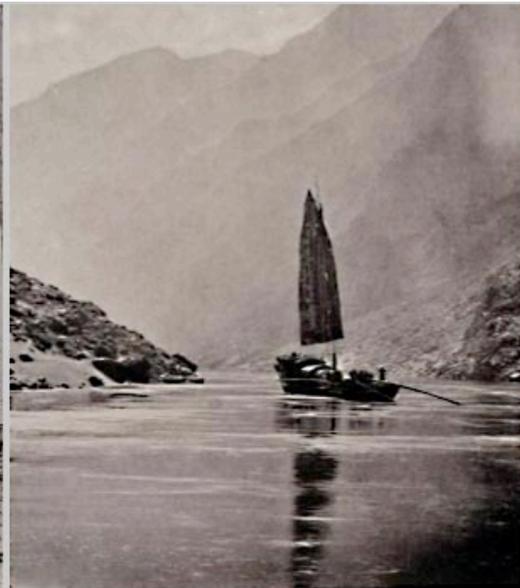
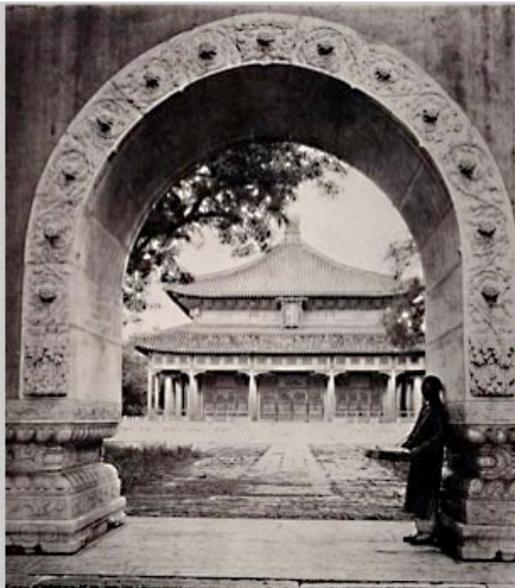


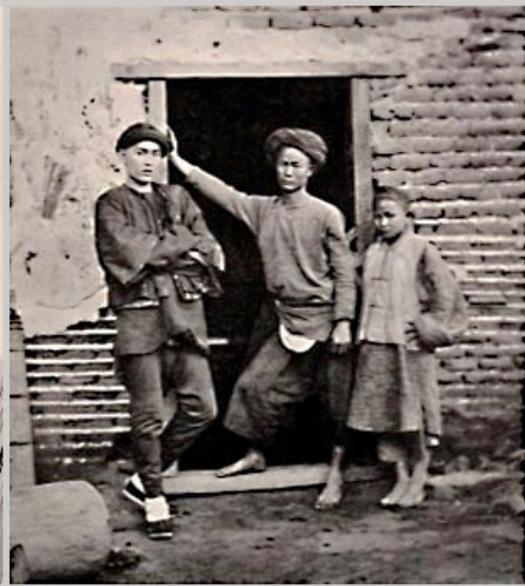
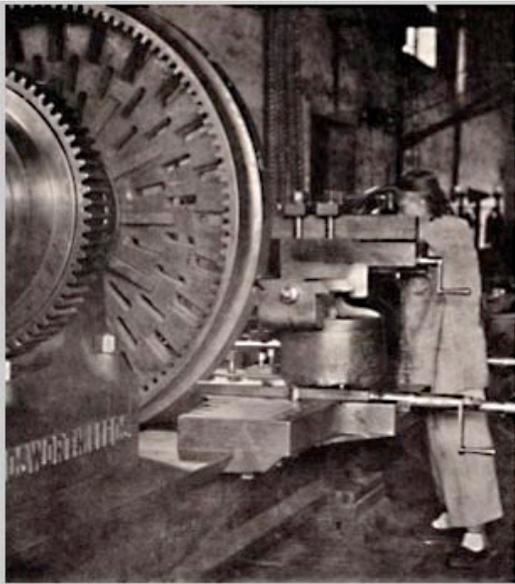
As we follow Thomson's itinerary and succumb to his narrative of travel, each image we encounter invites, tempts, cajoles, and demands our attention. Every photograph in *Illustrations of China and Its People*, be it scenic view or type, is visually seductive. They leave us wanting more, so we turn the page and continue our travels with Thomson.

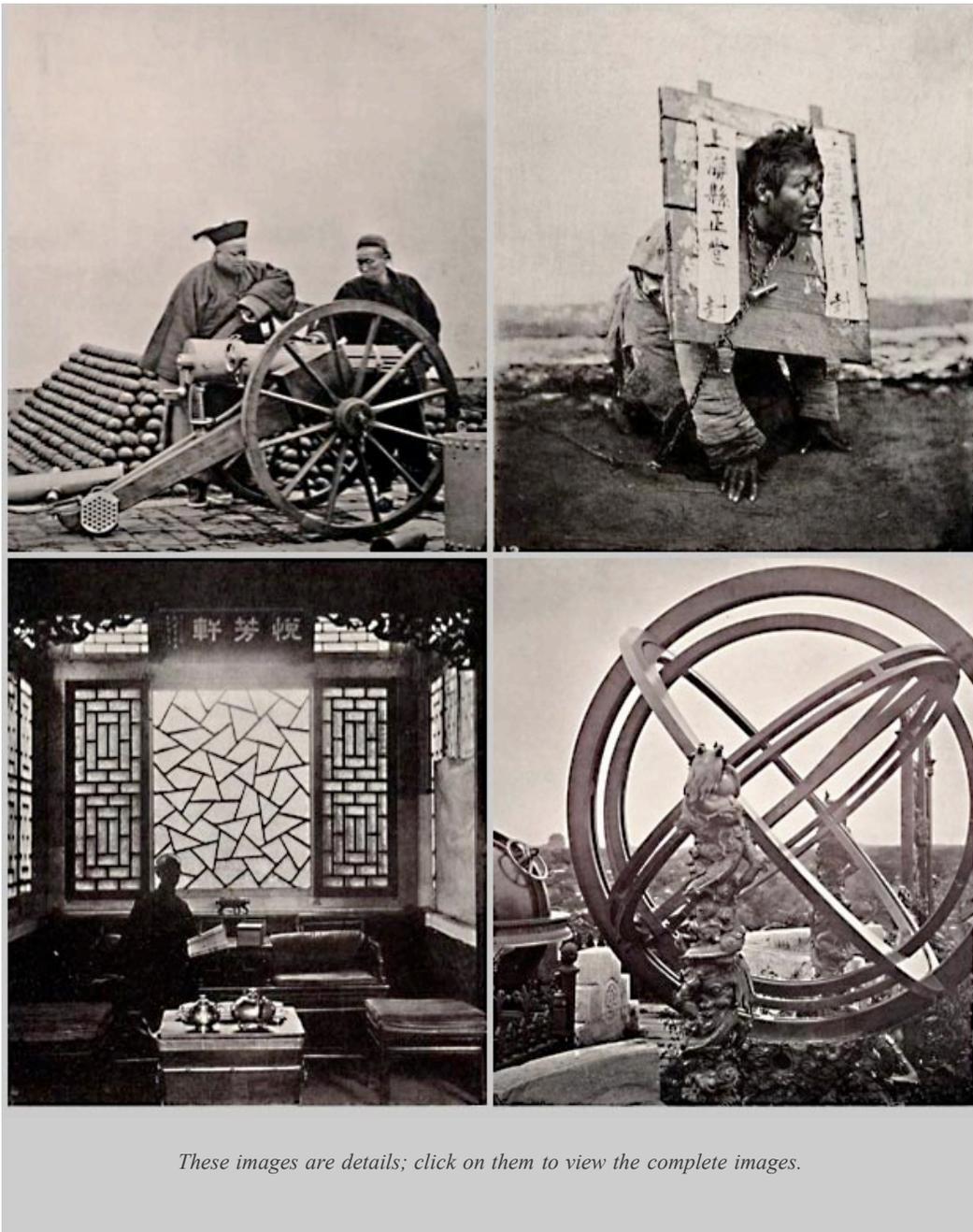
Thomson's Many Chinas

Thomson's four volumes were distinguished by their breadth and variety. He traveled widely, visited rural as well as urban areas, turned his lens on both the old and new, and offered portraits of a range of Chinese of different ethnicities and social classes.









These images are details; click on them to view the complete images.

Thomson's decision to organize and caption his photographs as a travel narrative was in many respects yet another example of his well-honed business instincts. The treaties ending the Opium Wars opened China to the West, and with the establishment of several treaty ports, Westerners quickly acquired an avid interest in visiting China.

Real accessibility came with the regularizing of trans-Pacific passenger service in 1867 and the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869. With Thomas Cook initiating the globetrotter era of safe affordable travel upon completion of his first round-the-world tour in 1873, the treaty ports of China emerged as popular stopovers for tourists just as *Illustrations of China and Its People* was being published.

"Objectivity" in an Age of Imperialism

It is tempting, therefore, to characterize *Illustrations of China and Its People* as the coup de grâce of Thomson's business ventures. But while his reputation and finances stood to gain, and while such concerns surely figured in Thomson's calculations, his introduction to *Illustrations of China and Its People* suggests broader motivations for his project.

My design in the accompanying work is to present a series of pictures of China and its people, such as shall convey an accurate impression of the country I traversed as well as of the arts, usages, and manners which prevail in different provinces of the Empire. 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.... I feel somewhat sanguine about the success of the undertaking, and I hope to see the process which I have thus applied adopted by other travellers; for the faithfulness of such pictures affords the nearest approach that can be made towards placing the reader actually before the scene which is represented. The letter-press which accompanies the pictures, and which will render them, as I trust, more interesting and more intelligible, is compiled from information derived from the most trustworthy sources, as well as from notes made either by me at the time the subjects were taken, or gathered during a residence of nearly five years in China.

The earnestness of this declaration of intent is obvious. In both his images and captions, Thomson is aiming for comprehensiveness and truthfulness. He believes firmly in the power of photography to accurately document place and race. And we see a methodology in the making when he encourages other travelers to adopt his practices and protocols. Thomson's claims, hopes, and advocacy make *Illustrations of China and Its People* very much a product of its time, when Britain in particular was engaged in consolidating a far-flung empire on which, as the saying went, the sun never set. His faith in the ability of photography to accurately represent foreign places and indigenous peoples was typical, and so too was his presumption of objectivity.

Today, well over a century later, we bring a more critical perspective to such claims about "trustworthy" information and "faithful reproduction." Thomson's opus opens a window not merely on "China," but also on the uses of early photography and the broader milieu of 19th-century imperialist travel narratives. His curiosity and adventurousness are undeniable, and the intrinsic attraction of his photographs remains strong. At the same time, however, this celebrated publication also tells us a great deal about some of the assumptions and prejudices that Thomson and his enthusiastic Western audience shared concerning not just China, but foreign peoples and places more generally.

Illustrations of China and Its People provides a particularly useful case study to unravel the complex symbiosis between photography and 19th-century British imperialism. Thomson first arrived in Asia in 1862. Using Singapore as base of operations, he explored and photographed sites in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), South India, Cambodia, Siam (now Thailand), and Indochina (now Vietnam). Before establishing his studio in Hong Kong in 1868, he returned to England for a brief visit during which he became a member of both the Ethnological Society of London and the Royal Geographic Society. His associations with these learned societies predetermined to some extent the methodologies he developed and concerns he expressed in *Illustrations of China and Its People*.

Thomson's engagement with learned societies deepened further after his return from China in 1872. Using his photographs, he presented the results of his China explorations to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1874. In 1886 he accepted the post of official instructor in photography with the Royal Geographical Society, which published his essay "Photography and Exploration" in the 1891 *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*. Although Thomson framed *Illustrations of China and Its People* as a travel narrative, his affiliations with these institutions suggest that his photographic practices and his sojourns through various regions of China were motivated by far more than mere pursuit of the quaint, the picturesque, and the spectacular.

This essay extracts Thomson's deeper agendas from his travel narrative and situates his images and photographic practices among the prevailing concerns of Britain's 19th-century learned societies. Some of this territory has been already been addressed by James P. Ryan and Anne Maxwell, whose broadly conceived studies of colonial photography include discussions of narrow selections of Thomson's photographs. My intention is to build on their scholarship by considering a wider array of images in a more detailed and comprehensive study of *Illustrations of China and Its People*.

To understand these agendas, it is necessary to examine smaller segments of Thomson's travel narrative. He and the many travelers who followed in his footsteps used the treaty ports as bases of operation for their travels. These ports provided havens of Western civilization and culture. Thus chapter two—"Treaty Port Imagery"—focuses on photographs and descriptions of these places. Comparisons with his photographs of Chinese cities reveal Thomson's attitudes toward the presence of Westerners in China.

Chapter Three—"Ethnology and Exploration"—examines two segments of Thomson's travelogue that best illustrate his appropriation of the practices, attitudes, and values promoted by British learned societies: his visit to Formosa (now Taiwan) where he photographed the Pepohoan, a native tribe inhabiting mountainous regions of the island, and his 1200-mile journey up the Yangzi River. The Pepohoan had friendly relations and commercial interactions with Chinese living on Formosa, but their language and culture remained distinct. As photographic subjects, they thus provided Thomson with an opportunity to deploy practices advocated by the Ethnological Society of London. His photographs and narrative of the Yangzi River undertaking exhibit several hallmarks of expeditions supported by the Royal Geographical Society.

The two case studies examined in chapter three provide an analytical framework for chapter four: "Chinese 'Types'". Despite Thomson's attempts to systematically document the people of China using the methodologies promoted by Britain's learned societies, his taxonomy was riddled with inconsistencies and bias that favored colonial interests. Using a wide array of images, this section assesses the integrity and viability of the system Thomson developed for classifying, organizing, and presenting his photographs of Chinese people.

Chapter five—"Reframing the Past"—returns to Thomson's scenic views with an examination of his photographs of China's historic architectural monuments. These subjects were of tremendous interest to Westerners and an integral component of Thomson's travelogue. The discussion accompanying these images focuses on the imperialist implications of Thomson's photographic practices and aesthetic sensibilities.

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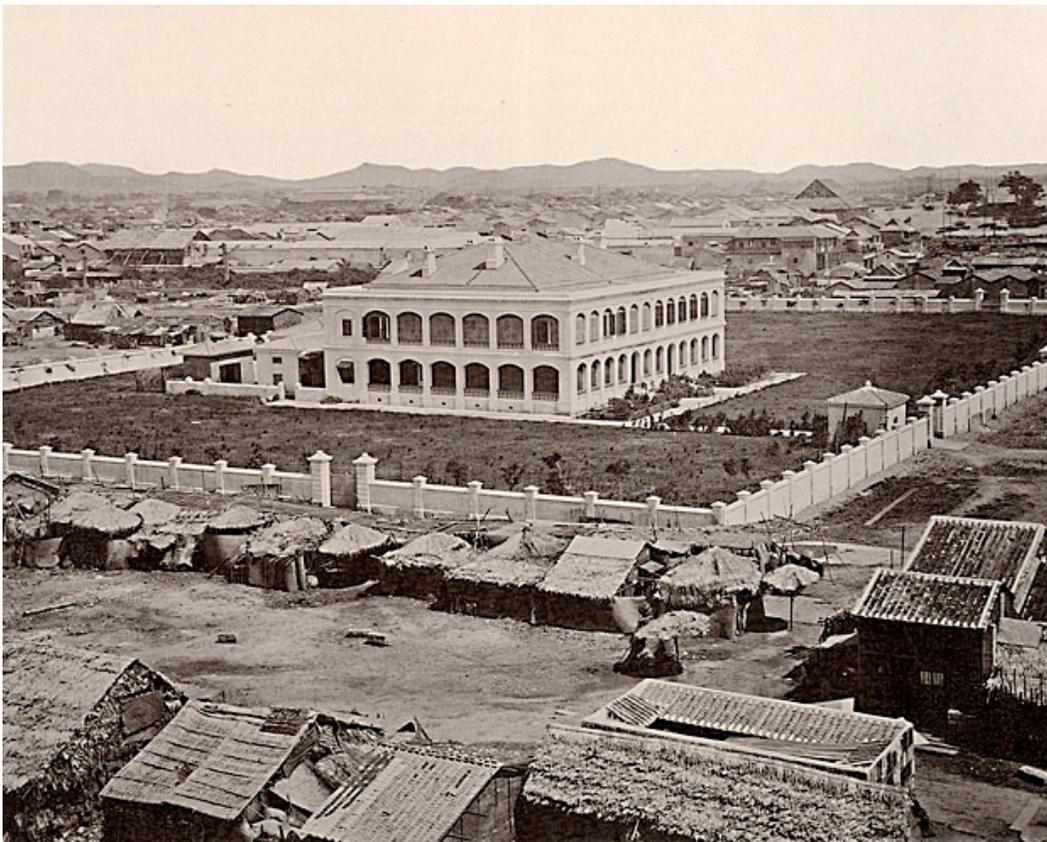
Sources
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TREATY-PORT IMAGERY & ITS IMPLICATIONS

In subscribing to the views and types protocol, Thomson was no different than most 19th-century commercial photographers working in Asia. This simple dichotomy provided a convenient means to organize and present large inventories to potential customers, and afforded a convenient means to organize the 81 scenic views and 119 types in *Illustrations of China and Its People*. Closer examination reveals that Thomson's photographs also occupy several sub-categories within the views and types convention.

27 of Thomson's scenic views—one third of the total—focus on the historical and contemporary presence of foreigners in China. Images of the treaty ports constitute the greatest proportion of these. This emphasis on the Western presence seems inordinately large. We need to ask, then, what purpose these photographs serve in Thomson's travel narrative, but also—and more important—what they might convey about contemporary British attitudes toward China.

One can argue that Westerners were a feature of late-19th-century China, albeit a much smaller presence than Thomson would have us believe. The treaty ports would be among the first scenes travelers following his routes would encounter. For a country as large and unexplored as China was at the time, these foreign settlements undoubtedly functioned as havens that softened initial encounters with China and its people. In that they retained many essential features of Western cities, they provided sanctuaries where Westerners could retreat to the relative comfort of a familiar culture.



“In 1684 a small patch of land on the bank of the river at Canton was granted to the East India Company, with permission to erect a factory there, provided all their traders and trading operations were strictly confined within its circuit. This site, with its present boundary-wall and buildings, surrounded by the miserable makeshift huts of the poorest class of the population, is shown in the photograph annexed. It now forms the American Concession Ground, and its buildings are occupied by Messrs. Russel, and by Messrs. Smith Archer, two of the oldest American houses in China.” (from caption)

*“The Old Factory Site, Canton”
plate XVI, volume 1 (detail)
ct1073 (caption) ct1074 (photo)*

Thomson’s images of the treaty ports convey precisely this sensibility. He favors panoramic scenes that sweep across a harbor or views taken from higher vantage points so as to encompass wide swaths of the foreign settlements. With their whitewashed column-and-arch facades, the Western-style structures of the ports stand out from the gray and black tonalities of his photographs as if they are bathed in a special light.

Thomson also employed another particularly effective means of visually enhancing the Western presence in the treaty ports. For his street-level images of Kiu-Kiang and Hankow, he positioned his camera at an oblique angle looking down the main avenues of the settlements. This encourages viewers to scan up and down the street along the strong visual axis of the composition. When viewing the Hankow photograph from right to left, it appears as if the foreign presence extends beyond the horizon. Viewing in the opposite direction, the Western-style facades of the buildings emerge from the end of the street, where the effects of atmosphere blur their appearance, and appear to grow in size and come into sharper focus as they parade in a stately procession toward the viewer. Thomson constructs a visual analogy for the march of civilization engendered by the presence of Westerners in China.



"Kiu-kiang is the second open port on the Yangtze, 445 miles above Shanghai. This port was selected as a suitable place for foreign trade, because of its close proximity to the Po-Yang Lake, and to the vast system of water communication which branches from this point to the interior. But as the lake is closed against steam traffic, and as Kiu-kiang stands fifteen miles above the confluence of the lake with the Yangtze, it has never taken a leading commercial position." (from caption)

"Kiu-kiang (Foreign Settlement)"
plate XIII, no. 24, volume 3 (detail)
 ct3053 (caption) ct3054 (photo)



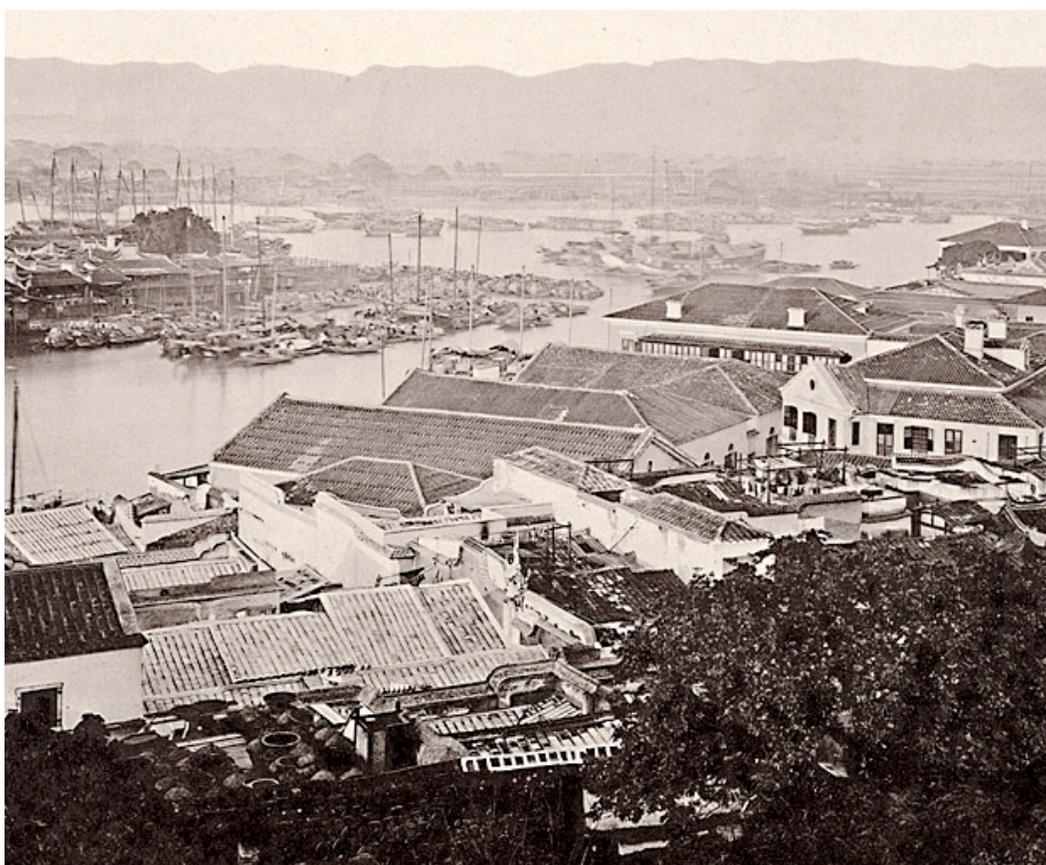
"The foreign settlement there has a frontage to the Yangtze, but the plot of ground on which it has been built is unfortunately lower than that occupied by the native town. Why this site should have been selected it is impossible to tell. The mistake is one which the natives themselves would never have committed, and it has entailed great suffering during times of flood." (from caption)

"Hankow (Foreign Settlement)"
plate XVI, no. 31, volume 3
 ct3063-ct3064 (caption) ct3068 (photo)

Thomson's captions and commentaries often reinforce the visual presentation of Western-style buildings. For his image of the foreign settlement at Foochow, he writes:

The settlement boasts an excellent club, library, and racket court, while the climate for six or eight months of the year is favourable to outdoor amusements. Many varieties of European flowers and vegetable are grown here to great perfection by the Chinese gardeners. It is altogether a sort of place where foreigners may well be content to reside. Here, as also in Amoy, there are a number of protestant and Roman Catholic missions in active operation. There is also a prettily built English church, opposite which the Chinese has erected a small shrine, where incense is burnt by devout Buddhists to counteract the influences of the Christian place of worship. Close to the church there is an English mortuary chapel and cemetery shade with a group of tall, dark pines.

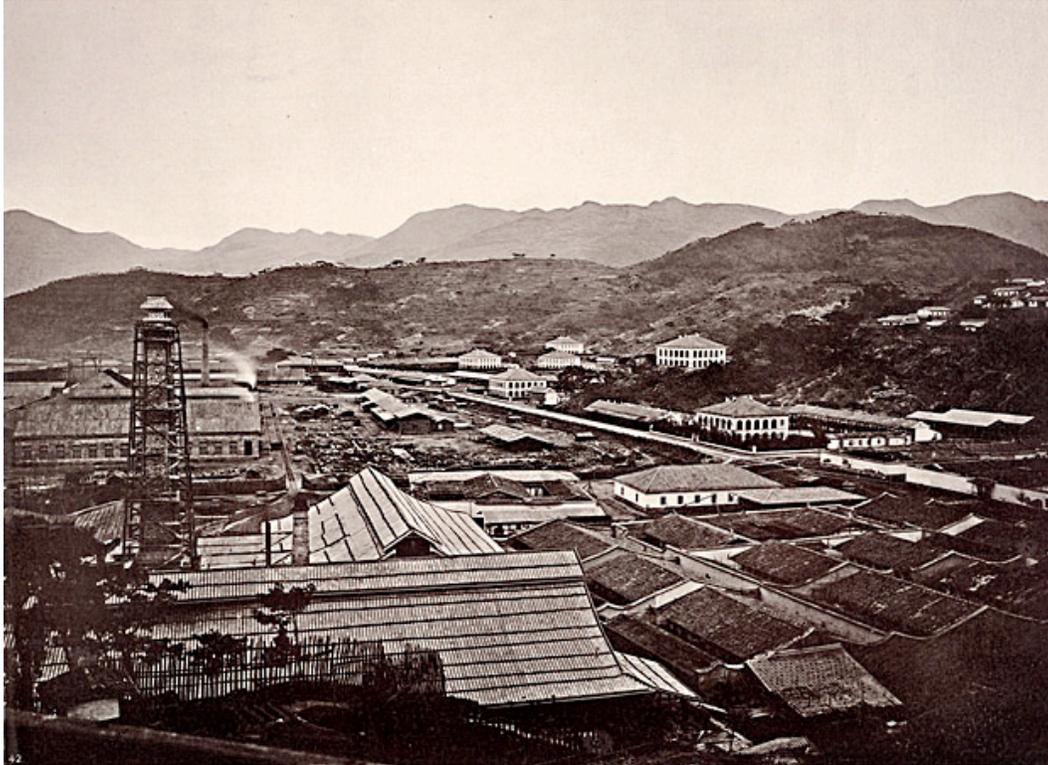
In short, Thomson suggests that Westerners could recreate, eat, be ministered to, die, and be buried in Foochow in ways not unlike what they might expect in their home countries.



"Foochow Foreign Settlement"
plate XVI, no. 43, volume 2 (detail)
ct2066 (caption) ct2067 (photo)

To viewers of *Illustrations of China and Its People*, Thomson's treaty ports would appear not only inviting but also capable of becoming agents of transformation. The caption for his photograph of the Foochow arsenal, for example, links the presence of foreigners to the modernization of China:

This Chinese arsenal, or naval training school, as I might more correctly describe it, is to me a very great proof of modern progress in the empire, and marks the dawn of a new era in Chinese civilization. ... [T]he Chinese have become aware that to study their ancient classical literature, or to con the maxims of their sages, is not the kind of education which will fit them to cope with their near neighbours, who are adopting the customs, arts, and sciences of the West.



"Foochow Arsenal"
plate XV, no. 42, volume 2
ct2064 (caption) ct2065 (photo)

Thomson provided brief historical synopses for most of the locales he photographed. For his images of Shanghai, he emphasizes the city's openness to foreign trade even before the treaty ports were formally established, and suggests the potential this relationship holds for China:

China will sooner or later be forced to press forward in the march of civilization, as her Japanese neighbours are fast discovering the secrets of Western power. When that time arrives, the Chinese will find the elements of all they are in search of at the foreign settlements in Shanghai, where the schools, the splendid commerce, the merchant palaces, the fleets of steamers, the local foreign government, the opulence of the inhabitants, and the condition of the streets and dwellings, offer an instructive contrast to the condition of the Chinese walled city which lies to the south of the foreign settlements.



"The treaty of Nanking was concluded in 1842; but even before that time Shanghai was a place of considerable trading importance." (from caption)

*"Part of the Shanghai Bund in 1872"
plate V, no. 8, volume 3 (detail)*

ct3025 (caption) ct3027 (photo)

The large number of treaty-port photographs provokes comparisons with Thomson's treatment of Chinese cities. How did he present and characterize the built environments of China, and what might this reveal about his attitudes and those of his readers? The caption for his photo of a market in Canton provides some clues. It begins with a general discussion of Chinese streets and the shops that line their sides, including the typical experience one might have upon entering a shop and interacting with its proprietor. Thomson concludes this part of the caption by commenting favorably on the visual appearance of the view presented:

Physic Street, or, more correctly, Tsiang-Lan-Kiai (our Market Street), as the Chinese term it, is one of the finest streets in Canton, and, with its varied array of brightly coloured sign-boards, presents an appearance no less interesting than picturesque.

*"Physic Street, Canton"
plate XX, volume 1*

ct1086-ct1087 (caption) ct1088 (photo)



But Thomson then extends his commentary as follows:

The streets of the city of Canton are irregularly built and tortuous in their course; those of the poorer sort are much narrower than the one shown in the photograph; they are badly kept, filthy, and even more offensive than the most crowded alley in London, the right of way being contested between human beings, domestic pigs, and undomesticated mongrel curs.

It is important to note the discursive strategy Thomson employs here, for it is more sophisticated than a simple comparison of the good and bad features of Chinese streets. Determined to protect the aesthetic integrity of his photograph, he directs his disparaging comments towards a subject not shown in the image but conjured up through comparison with a London slum. Thomson thus resolves the tension between his inclinations as an artist/photographer seeking out aesthetically interesting subjects and his role as correspondent speaking to the assumptions and expectations of his Western audience.

This approach enables readers to adopt a similarly bifurcated attitude towards China. Like Thomson, they can both admire and critique China by negotiating the differences between the picturesque qualities of the image and the far more negative characterizations that inflect his captions. In this particular case, the caption concludes with translations of several of the signs in the photograph, for which Thomson relied on W. F. Mayers, a scholar of Chinese. Thomson often cited experts and scholarly texts to give authority to his commentaries.

Thomson adopts a similar strategy for his view of Peking's central avenue. This artery, which extended from the main gate on the southern extremity of the city to the Forbidden City and residences of the emperor, was designed to impress visitors as they moved toward the administrative heart of the empire and the emperor himself. The avenue also provided a stage for imperial processions moving from the Forbidden City to the Temple of Heaven (appearing on the horizon just left of center), where the emperor—the son of heaven—made annual sacrifices for the benefit of the nation. Paved with stones and passing through massive gates and *pailau* (ceremonial arches), this avenue represented imperial authority and the order it brought to Peking and, by extension, the nation.



"This view (No. 21) is taken from the city wall of Peking, close to the Ching-yang-men, or central gate, between the Chinese and Tartar quarters. It is in a direct line with the centre of the palace, and is the route which the Emperor traverses on his way to the Altar of Heaven. In the foreground we see a white marble bridge which spans a kind of city moat. This street, like all the thoroughfares in the Tartar city, is a very wide one, and is a place of great concourse and traffic." (from caption)

*"The Central Street, Chinese City of Peking" plate IX, no. 21, volume 4
ct4041-ct4042 (caption) ct4043 (photo)*

Thomson points out these features, but focuses his attention not on the imperial presence but rather on the disorder encroaching on the avenue. He notes that vehicular traffic, apart from that of the emperor, is forbidden on the arched bridge in the center of the photograph, but then draws attention to the beggars congregating there "gambling in groups, or stretched upon the pavement to expose their sores and nakedness to the public gaze." For the cramped cluster of stalls between the bridge and the pailau, Thomson adopts the same strategy employed with his photograph of Physic Street in Canton: he narrates not his experience with the avenue shown in the photograph, but rather with one of the cramped side streets intersecting it:

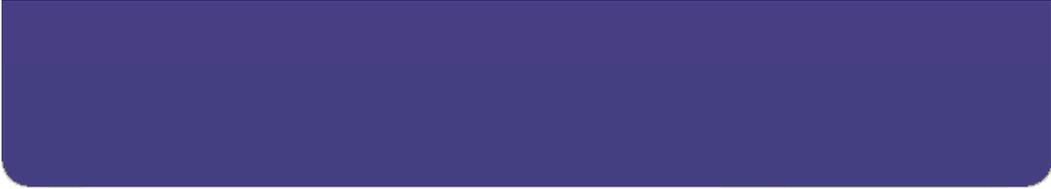
In the center of each street a raised causeway has been made, broad enough to accommodate two carts abreast, and is intended for carriage traffic. Between this raised causeway and the shops on either side of the road run broad spaces taken up with booths, tents, and stalls so closely packed as only to leave a narrow footpath close to the shops on the one side, and a chasm of deep mud pools on the other. From these pools material is taken for plastering and repairing the raised causeway. Most of the pools are stagnant and extremely polluted. One of my most disagreeable experiences during my visit to Peking was a ride along the road whilst the mud from these putrid pools was being ladled on the highway to lay the dust. The dust, indeed, was laid, but fume like those of the decomposing dead were raised in its stead.

In both image and caption, then, China's imperial capital compares poorly to the order and cleanliness of the foreign settlements that appear throughout *Illustrations of China and Its People*.

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MIT VISUALIZING CULTURES

John Thomson's China — I

Illustrations of China and Its People, Photo Albums (1873-1874)

by Allen Hockley

An Imagined
Travelogue

Treaty-Port
Imagery

Ethnology
& Exploration

Chinese
"Types"

Reframing
the Past

Sources
& Credits

ETHNOLOGY & EXPLORATION

Ethnology in Formosa

Volume 1 of *Illustrations of China and Its People* concerns itself almost entirely with Hong Kong and Canton, which by the late 1860s had superseded Shanghai as the premier outposts of British authority in China. Canton had long been the trading port favored by British merchants, and Hong Kong was formally recognized as British territory in the 1842 Treaty of Nankin that followed the first Opium War. Thomson's treatment of these sites thus focuses primarily on the British presence.

Volume 1 closes with an image of a Formosa mountain pass, however, and Volume 2 opens with a similarly rural scene of a bamboo grove on Formosa. These photographs stand in marked contrast to the scenes of Western-style architecture in Hong Kong, and are intended to emphasize the transition from the civilized world of the colony to the remote and primitive environment of Formosa. This transition sets the scene for an ethnological adventure among Formosa's semi-civilized native tribes.



*"A Mountain Pass in the
Island of Formosa"*
plate XXIV, volume 1

ct1106 (caption) ct1107 (photo)

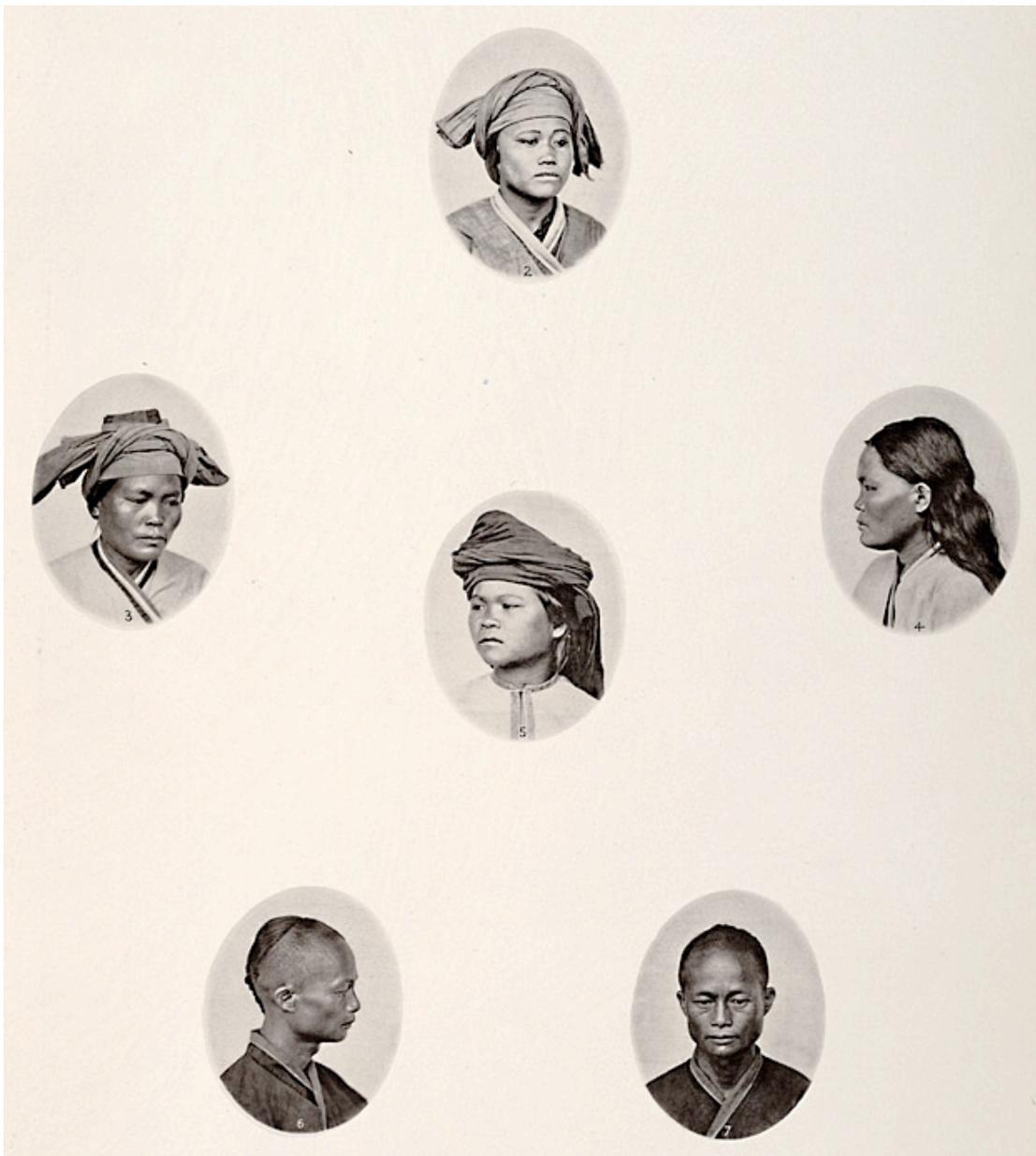
*"Bamboos at Baska,
Formosa"*
plate I, no. 1, volume 2
ct2010 (caption) ct2011 (photo)



Thomson lays the groundwork for the ethnological study he will pursue on Formosa in the caption for "Mountain Pass" by dividing up the island according to the ethnicities and cultural practices of its inhabitants:

The central range of mountains, together with the lower ranges to the west, the spurs thrown off to the east, and a great portion of the eastern coast, are still inhabited by aboriginal and independent tribes. These, in configuration, color, and language, resemble Malays of a superior type. Akin to them are the Pe-po-hoans, who dwell on the low hill lands and plateaux to the west of the central mountain chain. These Pe-po-hoan tribes are partially civilized, supporting themselves by agriculture, and being to some extent subject to the Chinese yoke. Outside of these districts, and occupying the fertile plains to the west, Chinese planters from Fukien province are to be found: and intermingled with them are the Hak-kas, a hardy, industrious, and adventurous race who emigrated from the north of the empire. The Hak-ka Chinese hold the lands nearest to the savage hunting-grounds. They also make alliances with the mountain tribes, and carry on trade of barter, exchanging Chinese wares for camphor-wood, horns, hides, rattan, etc.

This brief sketch of Formosa's demographic geography provides the background for what is perhaps the most important image/caption pairing in Thomson's ethnological project, a plate of six cameo photographs titled "The Natives of Formosa." As the first of several similar plates, this image introduces the protocol by which Thomson's understanding of ethnology takes visual form. The caption also situates Thomson's concerns solidly in the middle of the debates concerning race, ethnicity, and culture that preoccupied the British scientific community in the mid-to-late-19th century.



"The Natives of Formosa," plate II, nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, volume 2
 ct2012-ct2013 (caption) ct2014 (photo)

The lengthy caption for this image begins with a reiteration of the geography and demographics presented with the "Mountain Pass" image noted above. This serves to narrow Thomson's study of Formosa's four primary ethnicities down to the Pepohoan. The subjects in these photographs are all from Baksa, the only native village Thomson visited in Formosa. Thomson characterizes the Baksa Pepohoan as "the most advanced types of those semi-civilized aborigines, who conform so far to Chinese customs as to have adopted the Amoy dialect, the language in use among the colonists from China." Referring to the two male heads in the lower register of the plate, Thomson states: "The men of Baksa wear the badge of Tartar conquest, the shaven head and the plaited queue, attributes of modern Chinese all over the world." Tartar refers to the Manchu, a northern, non-Han Chinese people who ruled China from the mid 1600s to the early 1900s. Thomson's description of Baksa women shown in the four upper cameos stands in sharp contrast to that of the men: "The women, however, have a more independent spirit, and adhere to their ancestral attire."

Thomson's approach here signals his awareness of one of the more urgent imperatives facing mid-19th-century ethnologists. The Ethnological Society of London (ESL) was founded in 1843 by a faction seeking to break free from the religious (i.e., Quaker) affiliations and anti-colonial politics of the Aborigines Protection Society (APS). The breakaway faction sought to frame their goals and practices in purely scientific terms. Not all APS concerns were jettisoned however. Since the late 1850s, the APS had been lobbying on behalf of aboriginal peoples whose cultures were disappearing with the onslaught of colonization. In this milieu, photography emerged as the preferred technology for preserving dying cultures.

This so-called "salvage ethnology" provided a powerful motivation to acquire portraits of aboriginal peoples. In this endeavor, moreover, ethnologists focused on aboriginal females, believing that they were more reliable repositories of traditional culture. Thomson's treatment of the Pepohoan thus deploys all the hallmarks of salvage ethnology. He offers a unique variation on this paradigm by casting Chinese in the role of colonists threatening extinction of a primitive people, but seems blind to the irony of this argument. His scenic views of the treaty ports, after all, present Western colonists as a civilizing influence on China.

Proceeding with his assessment of the Pepohoan, Thomson makes several comparisons in order to place his subjects in broader geographies and ethnological discourses. He notes that the ancestral attire worn by Pepohoan women "closely resembles in its style the dress of the Laos women whom I have seen in different parts of Cambodia and Siam." Thomson then uses this comparison to define the parameters of his ethnological practice.

It will be readily perceived by those who have lived in China and in the Malayan Archipelago, that the features of the type here presented display a configuration more nearly akin to that of the Malay races who inhabit Borneo, the Straits settlements, and the islands of the Pacific, than to that of the Mongolian, and Tartar tribes of China. This affinity of race is indicated still further by the form and colour of the eyes, the costume, and the dialects of the people of Formosa.

Emphasizing visual and linguistic comparisons places Thomson's methodology within several evolving debates in the British scientific community.

20 years after its founding, the ESL faced the departure of one of its own factions when, in 1863, several members broke off to form the Anthropological Society of London (ASL)—a complex subject in itself. ASL members were politically conservative; unlike the ESL, for example, they refused to extend membership to women. In general, they subscribed to a belief in polygenesis, the idea that each race developed from distinct and separate origins. They were vehemently opposed to the possibility that the Caucasian and negroid races shared a common ancestry. By contrast, the ESL membership was far more open to the possibility of monogenesis—the argument, that is, that all races descended from a single ancestor, with differences attributable to environmental factors. Darwin’s concept of evolution (introduced in 1859) helped proponents of these opposing views reconcile their differences, and in 1871 the ESL and ASL reintegrated to form the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (RAI).

Philosophical and institutional reconciliation, however, by no means diminished the inherently racist attitudes held by the members of these societies. Using Darwin’s theories, racial differences were plotted along an evolutionary continuum with Caucasians seen as more evolved and therefore superior to other races. Africans were thought to be incapable of civilization. Orientals once possessed superior civilizations that had now fallen into ruin. Native Americans and Southeast Asian aboriginals, such as the Pepohoan Thomson photographed, were identified as independent races which were placed below Caucasians on the evolutionary continuum.

The ESL and ASL also differed in their practices. Ethnologists focused primarily on differences in language and culture to document relationships among various peoples. Anthropologists focused on physical appearance—skin, hair, and eye color, for example—but also anatomy. Anthropometry, the measurement of skeletal and cranial structures, provided the primary technology for documenting racial differences along anatomical parameters.

Because both the ESL and ASL methodologies focused in part on documenting visual differences among indigenous peoples, photography played an increasingly important role in their practices. The 1852 British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) *Manual of Ethnological Enquiry* advocated using photography to collect study images but provided little direction as to the sort of images that would be most productive. Early ethnological photography tended to be somewhat ad hoc as a result. In *Illustrations of China and Its People*, for example, Thomson’s types include the cameo portraits noted above, three-quarter-length portraits with neutral backgrounds intended to facilitate study of both head and costume, full-length portraits that situate their subject in their native environment, and village scenes featuring indigenous architecture and multiple subjects engaging in cultural practices of interest to ethnologists.



Clockwise from upper left: "Pepohoan Women" no. 9

"Mode of carrying Child" no. 10

"Costume of Baksa Women" no. 11

"Lakoli" no. 12

"Types of the Pepohoan," plate IV, volume 2 (detail)

ct2018-ct2019 (caption) ct2020 (photo)



"A Pepohoan Dwelling," plate III, volume 2 (detail)

ct2015-ct2016 (caption) ct2017 (photo)

In 1869 Jones H. Lamprey, a member of both the ESL and the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), attempted to standardize the photography of indigenous peoples with what came to be known as the "Lamprey Grid." It consisted of a large black panel with white strings stretched vertically and horizontally across its surface to form a grid of two-inch squares. Nude aboriginal subjects were to be photographed standing before the grid in frontal and profile views. The two-inch squares would thus provide the means to make anthropometric studies of the subjects. Thomas Henry Huxley, then President of the ESL, advocated a similar project in 1869. He argued for front and profile views of nude native subjects posed with measuring sticks. Both the subject and the measuring stick would appear in the same plane of the photograph, thus enabling anthropometric assessment. Apart from a few isolated case studies, Lamprey and Huxley's methods ultimately proved impractical, primarily because they required subjects from cultures willing to submit to these intrusive practices.

Where, then, do Thomson's ethnographic photographs and their captions fit within the institutional histories and methodologies of the ESL and ASL? Clearly his preferences lay with the ESL—before departing for China in 1867, he joined this institution, not the ASL. But perhaps the best evidence of his affiliation can be found in the arguments supporting his conjecture that the Pepohoan were similar to Malays and Laotians. Thomson's caption highlights visual similarities but in a decidedly ethnological as opposed to anthropological argument. He also supplied linguistic evidence in the form of a table comparing the numbering systems of Malays, Formosans, Magindanoans, and South Pacific Islanders.

NUMERALS OF FORMOSA, MAGINDANO, AND ISLANDS OF THE
SOUTH PACIFIC OCEAN.

ENGLISH.	MALAY.	SAMOEI TRIBE, FORMOSA.	BANGA TRIBE, FORMOSA.	NEW ZEALAND. ²	PAPOUS DE WAIGIOU. ³	PHILIPPINES. BISAYA. ⁴	MAGINDANO. ⁵
One	satu	itsa	lenga	tahi	sai	usa	isa
Two	dua	lusa ¹	noosa	rua	doui	duha	daua
Three	tigga	toroo	toro	toru	kioro	tolò	tulu
Four	ampat	sipat	pa'tu	wa	fiak	upat	apat
Five	lima	lima	lima	rima	rim	limà	lima
Six	anam	unam	neuma	ono	onem	uniem	anom
Seven	tuga	pito	pito	wtu	fik	pitò	petoo
Eight	d'lapan	aloo	nevaroo	waru	war	ualò	walu
Nine	sambilan	siva	bangato	iwa	siou	siàm	seaow
Ten	sa'pulo	poro	porooko	ngahuru	samfour	na'pulu	sampoolu

¹ In this example, *lusa* signifies "two," while in Malay the same word means "the second day." Throughout the above examples the numeral "five" is, with two exceptions, represented by *lima*. The late Mr. Crawford has, in one of his Essays, drawn attention to the fact that *lima*, in some African dialects, signifies "hand."

² Gaussin, "Du Dialecte de Tahiti," &c.

³ "South Sea Vocabularies," D'Urville.

⁴ Kennedy's "Ethnological and Linguistic Essays," page 74.

⁵ Ibid. page 76.

"In the table subjoined, I have contrasted the Formosa numerals with one or two examples taken from the languages spoken in the islands of the South Pacific, and I may add, that a more extended comparison of the vocabularies of Formosa and the Pacific Islands only tends to prove the common origin of the whole of the races who people them." (from caption)

"The Natives of Formosa"

Chart: Numerals of Formosa, Magindano, and Islands of the South Pacific Ocean, caption page, volume 2 (detail)

ct2012-ct2013 (caption)

Thomson was first and foremost a photographer and thus committed to methodologies that depended on the articulation of visual differences. His photographic practices bear this out. The cameo-sized images of the Pepohoan organize these subjects into a presentational format that provides an effective alternative to Lamprey and Huxley's attempts to standardize photographs of ethnographic types. Thomson further enabled comparative visual analysis by capturing frontal, profile, and three-quarter views of his subjects. Even his larger photographs that take in the customs and dress of the Pepohaon retain these basic poses.

In discussing the origins of the Pepohoan people, Thomson's caption also displays racist applications of the basic concepts of evolution circulating in England in the 1860s and 70s.

I am not aware that there is throughout the island any trace of the woolly-headed negro tribes found in the Philippines, on the mainland of Cochin China, in New Guinea and elsewhere, and supposed by some to be the remnant of the stock from which the original inhabitants sprang....The relationship between these islanders (i.e., the Pepohoan) to the hill-tribes of Eastern Asia would seem to point to that part of the world as the early home of the fair, straight-haired races who inhabit the islands from Formosa to New Zealand, and from Madagascar to Easter Islands. This theory would account for the total extinction of the negro race in the islands nearest the coast of China, as well as for the circumstance that they are still found in abundance in the remoter islands, such as New Guinea, where the negroes have been enabled to hold their own against such small numbers of pale invaders as would have been able to reach their shores. In the intermediate islands the blacks have been driven to the mountains and forests, and, in the north have disappeared entirely, and given place to the fairer and stronger race.

We see, then, in Thomson's practices, inclinations and tendencies that subsume contemporary issues and debates circulating in Britain's learned societies. It is thus fitting to ask what *Illustrations of China and Its People* may have contributed to these debates. No documentation or testimony survives to link Thomson's China photographs and the practices they embody to the policies of the societies to which he subscribed. However, Thomson framed *Illustrations of China and Its People* as a travel narrative, stating in the introduction to volume one: "I hope to see the process which I have applied adopted by other travellers." Perhaps the Royal Anthropological Institute's 1874 publication *Notes and Queries on Anthropology, for the Use of Travellers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands* bears the stamp of Thomson's achievements. The Royal Geographical Society issued a similar publication in 1883 titled *Hints to Travellers*. In his essay on anthropology, E. B. Tylor, one of the contributing authors to this publication, recommended the use of photography to record native types.

Exploring the Yangzi River

Thomson's use of ethnology to frame the photographs of his travel to Formosa has a corollary in his 1200-mile journey up the Yangzi River. The 19 images grouped under the title "From Hankow to the Wu-Shan Gorge, Upper Yangtsze" and accompanying text offer another sub-narrative informed by imperialist discourses circulating in British learned societies. But whereas his study of Formosa's Pepohoan natives was framed by ethnological discourses, Thomson's Yangzi River narrative exhibits a combination of scenic views and types more in keeping with expeditions supported by the Royal Geographical Society.

Thomson's scenic views of the Yangzi gorges constitute some of his most picturesque images. His descriptions of these scenes are particularly attentive to aesthetic experiences his photographs captured. His views of the Mi-Tan Gorge and T'sing-tan Rapid exemplify these concerns. Describing the former, Thomson wrote:

This rapid is one of the grandest spectacles in the panorama of the Upper Yangtse. The water presents a smooth surface as it emerges from the pass. Suddenly it seems to bend like a polished cylinder of glass, falls eight or ten feet, and then, curving upwards in a glorious crest of foam, it surges away in a wild tumult down the river.

His photograph of the Wu-shan Gorge carries this caption:

The river here was perfectly placid, and the view which met our gaze at the mouth of the gorge was perhaps the finest of the kind we had encountered. The mountains rose in confused masses to a great altitude, while the most distant peak at the extremity of the reach resembled a cut sapphire, its snow lines sparkling in the sun like the gleams of light on the facets of a gem. The other cliffs and precipices gradually deepened in hue until they reached the bold lights and shadows of the rocky foreground.

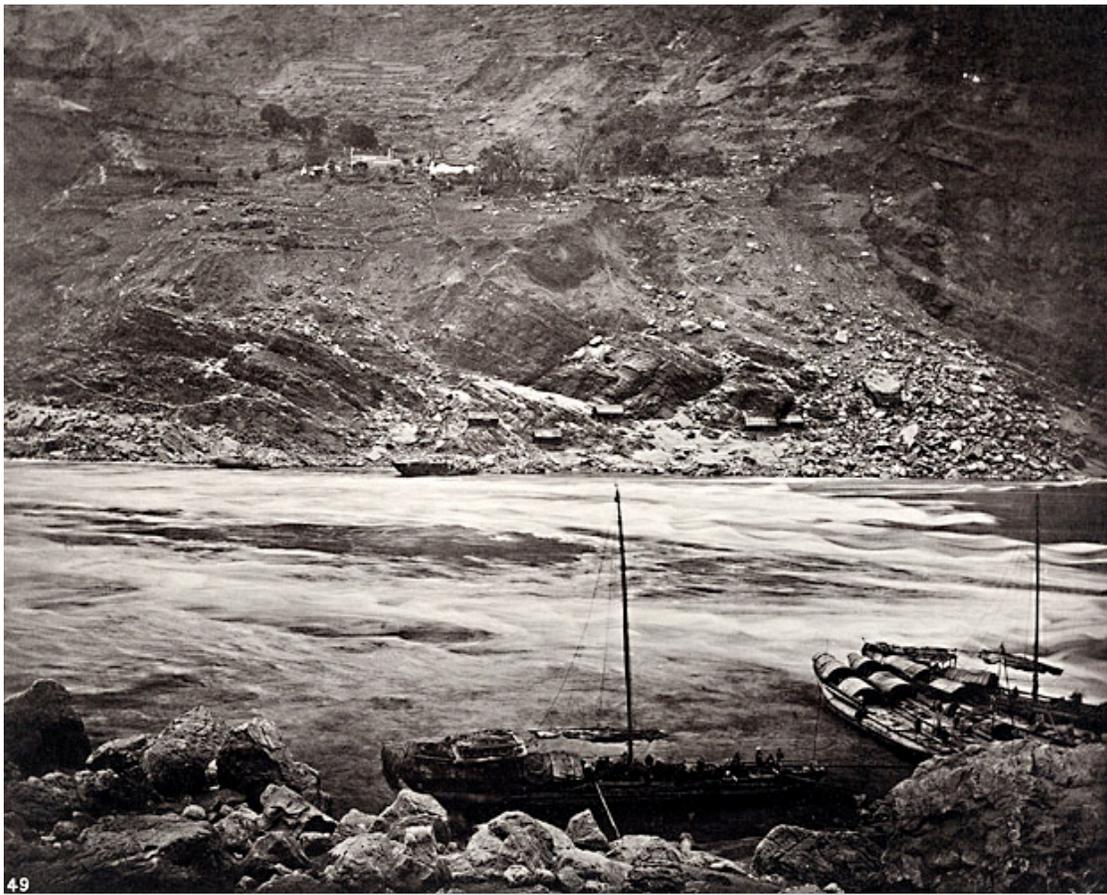
In these passages, Thomson draws attention to the superlative visual sensibilities he captured in these photographs, and in this sense his presentation of the Yangzi River images differs little from the approach he adopted for his photographs of China's historic architecture.

Scenic Views of the Upper Yangzi

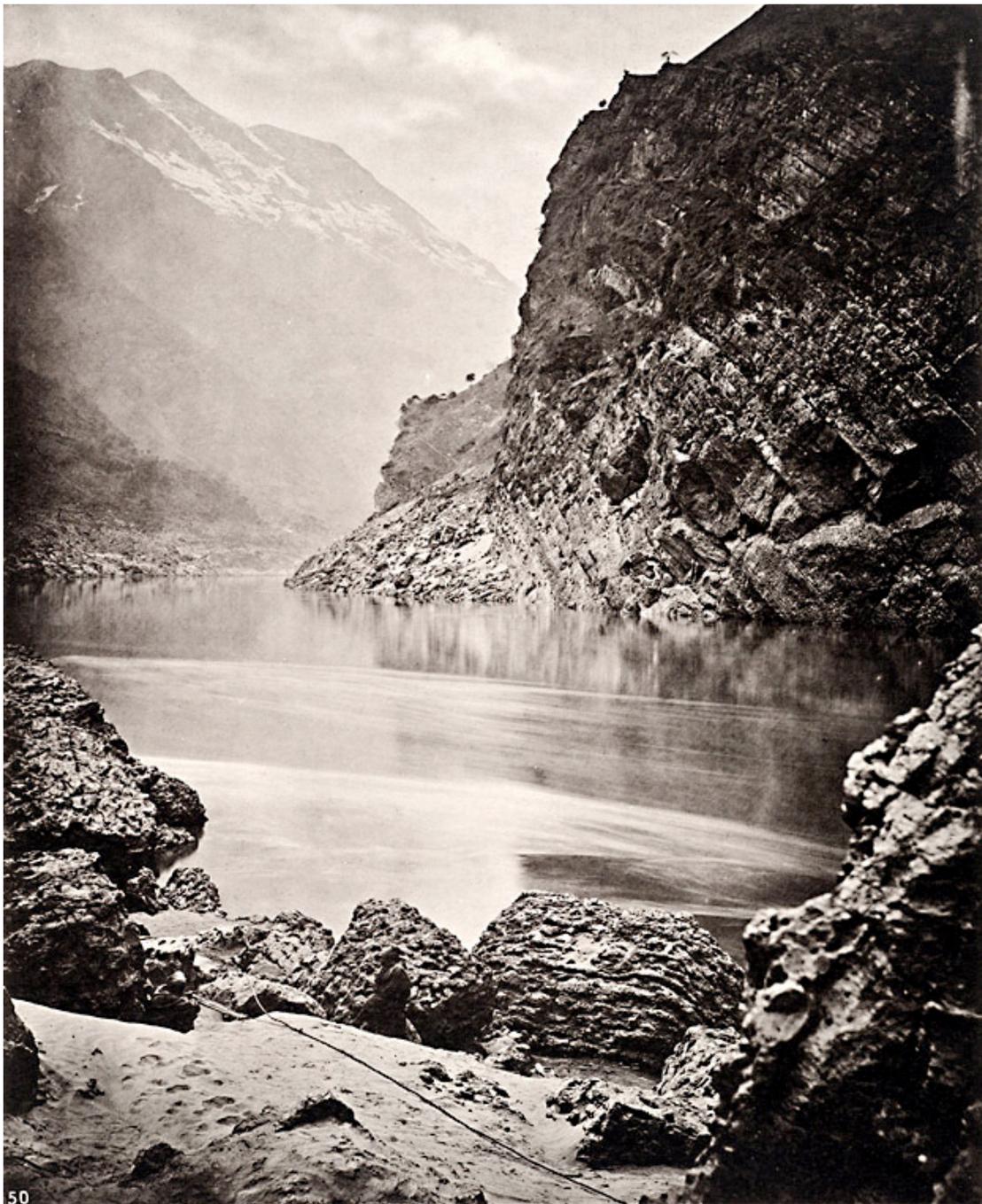
Thomson's Yangzi River narrative exhibits a combination of scenic views and types more in keeping with expeditions supported by the Royal Geographical Society. His views of the Yangzi gorges are some of his most picturesque images.



"The Mi-Tan Gorge, Upper Yangtze"
plate XXI, no. 48, volume 3
ct3104



"The Tsing-Tan Rapid, Upper Yangtze"
plate XXII, no. 49, volume 3
ct3106



"The Lu-Kan Gorge, Upper Yangtze"
plate XXIII, no. 50, volume 3
ct3108



"The Wu-Shan Gorge, Upper Yangtze"
plate XXIV, no. 51, volume 3
ct3110

While passages highlighting the picturesque qualities of the Yangzi provide a conceptual link to the scenic views scattered throughout *Illustrations of China and Its People*, they are few and far between, for Thomson significantly altered his protocols for the Yangzi River segment of his travels. He abandoned the usual image/caption combination in favor of a single lengthy caption in which he makes only passing references to the photographs. His scenic views are subsumed by a narrative emphasizing movement along the river above all other considerations. Clearly, Thomson regarded this segment of his travels as deserving of special treatment. So how might we understand this shift in protocol?

Noting similarities with David Livingstone's 1854 to 1856 exploration of the Zambezi River in Africa, James Ryan suggests that Thomson's Yangzi River journey typifies the sort of exploration promoted by the RGS. To the Zambezi expedition we could add Sir Richard Burton's discovery of Lake Tanganyika in 1858, Livingstone's search for the source of the Nile between 1866 and 1871, and Henry Morton Stanley's navigation of the Congo River from its source to the sea between 1874 and 1877. Founded in 1830 and chartered by Queen Victoria in 1859, RGS expeditions were undertaken in the spirit of exploration and discovery. Newspapers such as the *Daily Telegraph* and the *New York Herald* sometimes provided financial assistance in the hopes of increasing circulation with vivid accounts of intrepid explorers opening up remote regions of the globe. But while tales of adventure in distant lands made for sensational headlines, RGS expeditions were also and more importantly intended to serve British imperialist interests. Successful navigation of Africa's rivers enabled extraction and exploitation of the continent's vast natural resources.

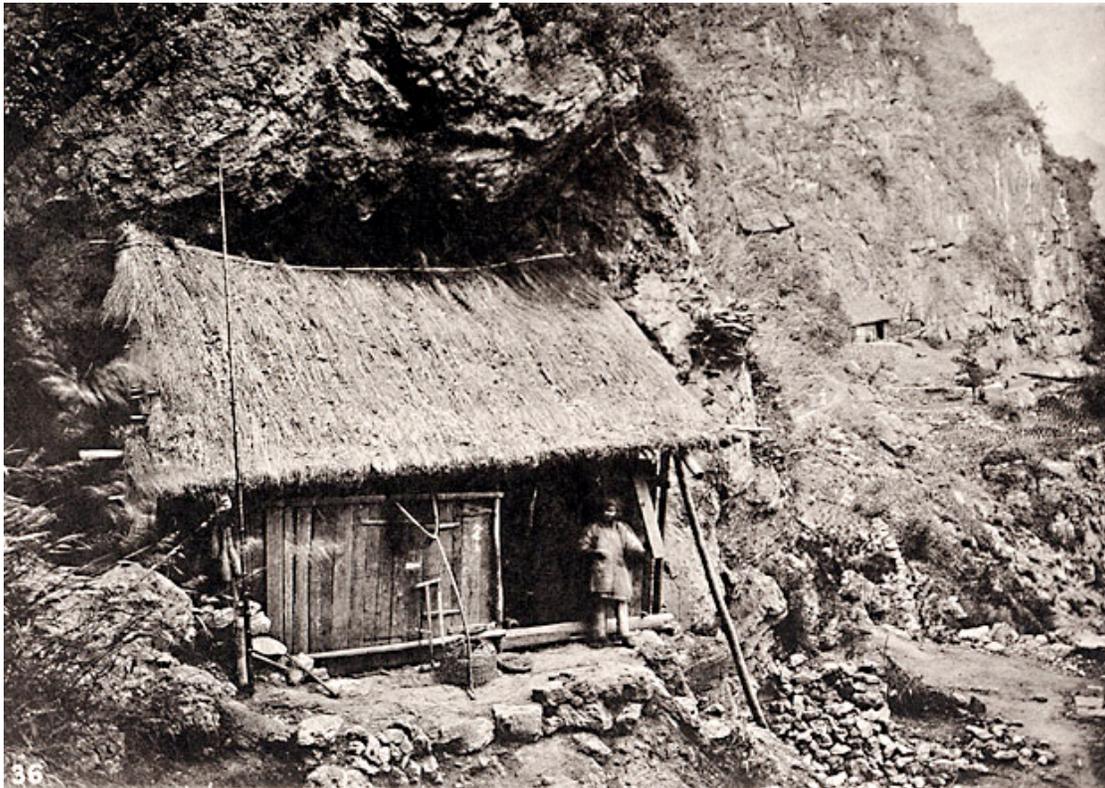
Circumstantial and written evidence suggests Thomson's Yangzi River journey is best understood from the perspective of RGS expeditions. He became a member of the RGS in 1867 during his brief visit to Britain prior to taking up residence in China. And although there are no surviving accounts of his activities and associations within the RGS at that time, past and pending expeditions were well documented in RGS publications as well as the popular press. While organizing his photographs and authoring captions for *Illustrations of China and Its People* after his return to Britain in 1872, Thomson delivered a lecture on his Yangzi expedition to the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), an umbrella organization that drew its membership from several learned societies.

His findings were subsequently published as "The Gorges and Rapids of the Upper Yangtze" in the 1874 edition of the BAAS's annual report. More specifically, the narrative Thomson supplied for his Yangzi journey betrays the hallmarks of RGS concerns. As Ryan notes, much of Thomson's Yangzi River narrative focuses on the potential for steam-vessel navigation of the Yangzi in order to open up the interior of China to commerce. He addresses navigational hazards, potential sites for trade depots and foreign settlements, and at one point along the lower Yangzi, he even advocates constructing a canal to cut 22 miles off the journey.

In serving Britain's imperial projects, RGS expeditions were concerned with far more than just topography and the prospects of resource exploitation. The RGS regarded itself as a scientific organization charged with the acquisition of knowledge broadly defined to include botany, zoology, mineralogy, and the study of indigenous peoples and cultures. Well-financed expeditions often included personnel dedicated to the acquisition of specimens, and where indigenous peoples were concerned, photography provided the means to this end. Thomson's Yangzi River narrative needs to be seen from this broader perspective, in that his photographs include as many human types as scenic views. As with most RGS expeditions, the people he encountered were an important component of his assessment of the river's potential for commercial exploitation. Thomson's photos and commentary betray these RGS sensibilities with an interesting mix of specimen acquisition, ethnological curiosity, and a utilitarian view of the river's human resources.

Upon entering the I-Chang Gorge, the first of several hazardous rapids along the upper Yangzi, Thomson began recording his observations of life along the river. He noted the "rude fisher-huts, perched here and there upon the lofty cliffs" as he passed through the steepest parts of the gorge. Where the river widened briefly, he discovered "several houses of a better class, surrounded by patches of orchard ground," the inhabitants of which "obtained a livelihood by selling the produce of their gardens to the passing boats." He then passed by more primitive dwellings, which he photographed and commented on as follows:

To these more civilized dwellings there succeeded abodes of a most primitive type—cave hovels, closed in front with a bamboo partition, and fitted with doorways of the same material. These cabins were erected in the most inaccessible positions beneath overhanging cliffs, and their smoke-begrimed interiors reminded me of the ancient cave dwellings which sheltered our forefathers at Wemyss Bay in Scotland.



"Cave Dwellings, I-Chang Gorge, River Yangtze," plate XVIII, no. 36, volume 3
ct3085 (caption) ct3087 (photo)

The comparison Thomson invokes here positions the inhabitants of this section of the river on a lower order of civilization. But he also recognizes the potential of this human resource.

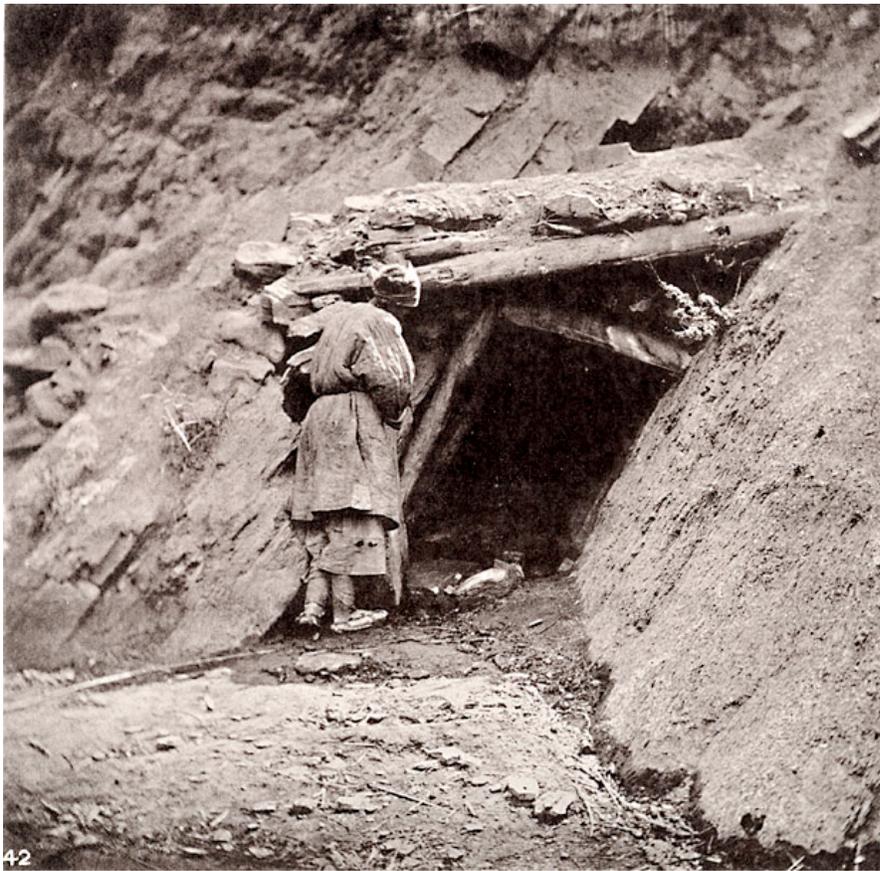
It is in just such desolate spots as these that the frugality and industry of the Chinese race are most conspicuously exhibited.

Thomson ends this passage by noting that stone from the I-Chang Gorge "used for building and for embankments lower down the river is found in great abundance." The implications seem obvious: this section of the Yangzi offers a highly useful resource (i.e., stone for building) in close proximity to primitive, frugal, and industrious (i.e., exploitable and cheap) labor.

With the potential for steam-vessel navigation of the Yangzi being Thomson's primary concern, his photos documenting coal extraction accord well with RGS interests in natural and human resources. His description of Chinese coal mining, rife with comparisons with British methods, suggests a desire to make the process more productive and profitable. For a photo showing a mine he writes:

There are a number of coal mines near Patung, and in the rocks where the coal-beds are found the limestone strata have been thrown up from the stream in nearly perpendicular walls. The coal is slid down from the pit's mouth to a depot close to the water's edge, along grooves cut for that purpose on the face of the rock. The workings are usually sunk obliquely, for a very short distance, into the rock, and are abandoned in places where to our own miners the real work would have barely begun. They sink no perpendicular shafts, nor do their mines require any system of ventilation.

Thomson's comment accompanying two photos of Chinese miners highlights their low wages. He notes that men who extract the ore "average 300 cash a day, or about seven shillings a man per week," while porters who carry ore in creels attached to their backs "can earn two hundred cash a day."



"Coal Mine," plate XIX, no. 42, volume 3
ct3091 (caption) ct3095 (photo)

"Chinese Coal Miners," plate XX, no. 44, volume 3
ct3097 (caption) ct3099 (photo)

Young children were employed to manufacture fuel by casting a mixture of coal with water in moulds that were then dried in the sun. Remaining attentive to the economic potential of coal extraction, Thomson notes that each block weighed one and one-third pounds and sold for five shillings a ton. He concludes his assessment of coal production by citing the observations of a predecessor:

Baron von Richthofen has assured us there is plenty of coal in Hupeh and Hunan, and that the coal field of Szechuan is also of enormous area. He further adds that at the present state of consumption the world could be supplied from Southern Shasi alone for several thousand years, and yet, in some of the places referred to, it is not uncommon to find the Chinese storing up wood and millet stalks for their firing in winter, while coal in untold quantities lies ready for use in the soil just under their feet. The vast coal-fields will constitute the basis of China's future greatness, when steam shall have been called to aid her in the development of her inland mineral resources.



"Making Fuel," plate XIX, no. 43, volume 3
ct3091 (caption) ct3096 (photo)

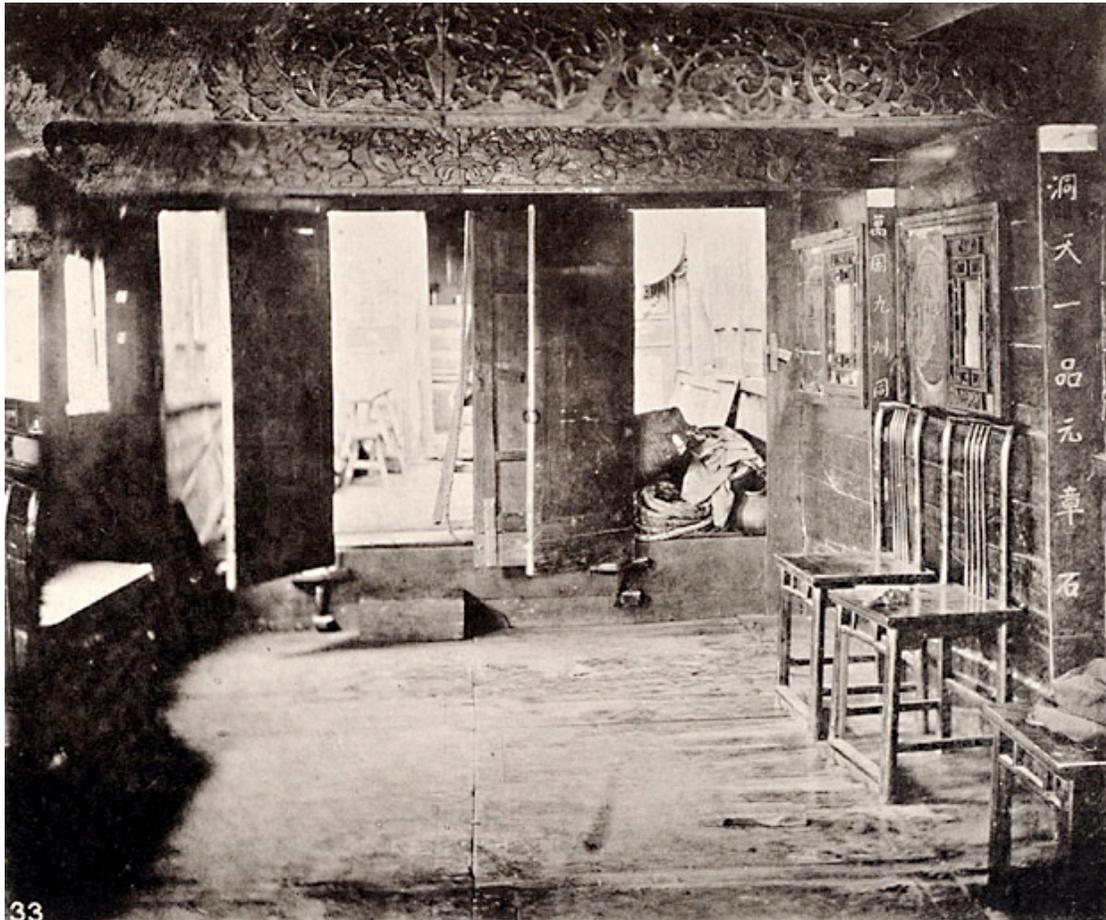
"Drying Fuel," plate XX, no. 45, volume 3
ct3097 (caption) ct3100 (photo)

When seen from this broad perspective, Thomson's images of coal production and his Yangzi River types in general retain their ethnological sensibilities while functioning as integral components of his broader concerns with navigation and exploration in service of British interests.

While utilitarian and imperialist in conception, RGS expeditions were presented to the public as adventures undertaken with considerable difficulty in distant and often dangerous places. Their retelling, in print or in person, exploited suspenseful incidents ripe with the possibility of imminent demise in order to enhance the daring heroics of their principal characters. Thomson possessed a keen awareness of these narrative tropes, and made effective use of them in his Yangzi River tale.

Foreigners were uncommon in the interior of China and sometimes viewed with suspicion or hostility. Thomson recounts a couple of shore-leave excursions that he perceived as threatening, but pirates were the main concern. He and his two American traveling companions often stood watch in shifts throughout the night. Relating one such experience, Thomson wrote:

I spent the time in writing letters, with my revolver close at hand. Once thinking that I could hear whispering and a hand upon the window, I grasped my pistol, and made up my mind to have a dear struggle for life. Listening, I heard the heavy breathing of the men piled in a sleeping mass in the forehold, and unconscious that a scene of bloodshed might the next moment ensue; then there was a noise in the cabin; and at last appeared my companion to relieve me on the watch. He had himself been the author of my unfounded alarm.



"Interior of Native Travelling Boat," plate XVII, no. 33, volume 3
ct3075 (caption) ct3072 (photo)

This brief but suspenseful story of a night early in the journey serves to set up a far more dangerous event that occurred later among the gorges upriver.

The officers of a gunboat stationed at the boundary which parts Hupeh from Szechuan warned us to beware of pirates, and they had good reason for so doing. The same night, at about ten o'clock, an intense darkness having fallen upon the gorge, we were roused by the whispering of a boat's crew alongside us. Hailing them we got no answer, and we therefore next fired high, in the direction whence the sound proceeded; our fire was responded to by a flash as report from another direction. After this we kept watch during the entire night, and were again roused at about two o'clock to challenge a boat's crew that was noisily stealing down upon our quarters. A second time we were forced to fire, and the sharp ping of the rifle ball on the rocks had the effect of deterring further advances from our invisible foe.

RGS expeditions in remote areas relied on local guides, interpreters, and labor. These circumstances provided opportunities for close study of the habits, character, and social interactions of indigenous people. Thomson's Yangzi expedition was similarly equipped. He hired a translator and two boats with crews to carry him up the Yangzi. Living in close proximity with his hired help led Thomson to comment on their character and appearance. Of the crew, he wrote:

These people can hardly be said to go to bed,—they wear their beds around them. Their clothes are padded with cotton to such an extent, that, during the day they look like animated bolsters. They never change their clothes, oh no! not until winter is over; and then they part with the liveliest company in the world. The boatmen are a miserably poor lot; nine of them sleep in a compartment of the hold about five and a half feet square, and disagreeable indeed is the odour from that hold in the morning, for the boatmen keep the hatches carefully closed and smoke themselves to sleep with tobacco or opium, according to their means and choice.



"Boat's Crew at Breakfast," plate XVII, no. 34, volume 3
ct3075 (caption) ct3073 (photo)

Thomson expressed similar displeasure with his interpreter Chang (depicted below) who, while educated, could not understand the dialect spoken by the crew. However, he redeemed himself as a master of ceremonies when Thomson met local officials along the route. Thomson's intimate studies of his crew serve as ethnology, but they also enliven his narrative with humorous anecdotes of shore leaves comprised of "drinking, gambling, and opium smoking," cock sacrifices to the river god, disputes between the crew and captain, disputes between the captain and his strong-willed wife, and several accounts of interpreter Chang's quirky behavior.



"Our Chinese Interpreter," plate XVII, no. 35, volume 3
ct3075 (caption) ct3074 (photo)

Although Thomson's Yangzi River journey received no official support or funding from the RGS, his images and commentary clearly conform to RGS discourses during the great age of river exploration. As with his study of Formosa's Pepohoan tribes, the Yangzi River segment of his travels reveals the impact of Britain's learned societies on both his photographic and narrative practices.



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MIT VISUALIZING CULTURES

John Thomson's China — I

Illustrations of China and Its People, Photo Albums (1873-1874)

by Allen Hockley

An Imagined
Travelogue

Treaty-Port
Imagery

Ethnology
& Exploration

Chinese
"Types"

Reframing
the Past

Sources
& Credits

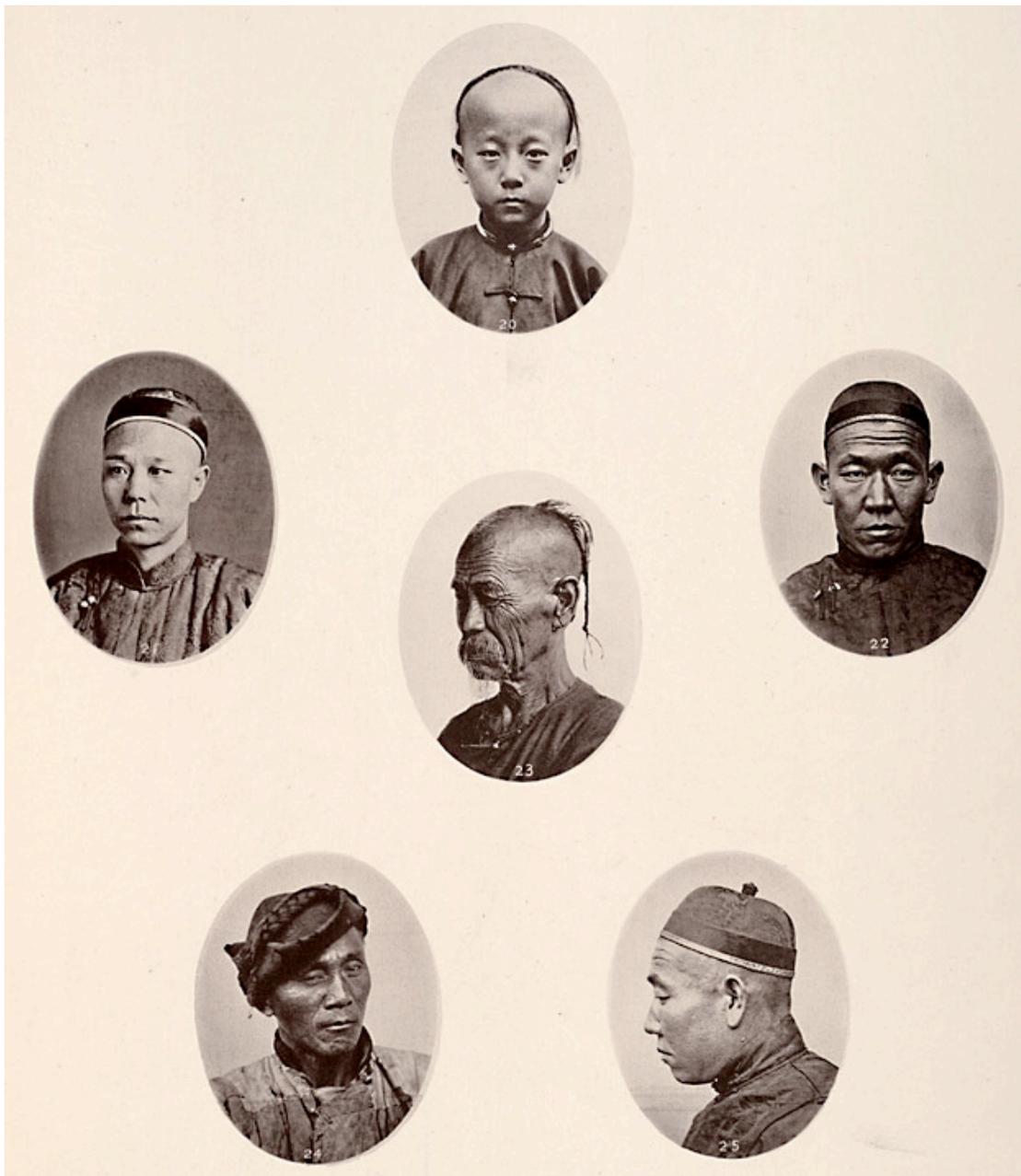
CHINESE "TYPES"

Races & Places

If we imagine the entirety of Thomson's journey as a single four-year expedition—a conception he promoted in the introduction to *Illustrations of China and Its People*—then the images and commentaries documenting his travels to Formosa and along the Yangzi become case studies with which to manage the large number and variety of Chinese "types" he identified throughout his travels. Thomson redeploys the ethnological arguments he made in his analysis of the Pepohoan to China's dominant ethnic groups. His assessment of human resources along the Yangzi models the concerns and practices he applies to local populations he encountered elsewhere.

As with his presentation of the Pepohoan, for example, Thomson utilized cameo portraits to display the heads of Chinese and Mongolian males. Like the prototype, these display frontal, profile, and three-quarter views of his subjects. His caption then homes in on visual differences readily apparent in the photographs. In his treatment of the Mongol male, for example, he states:

This type belongs to the north of the empire, and the features are heavier than those of the pure Chinese; indeed the face, taken as a whole, approaches more closely to that of the European cast. The Mongols wear the head wholly shaven, and in the practice they differ from the Chinese, who invariably carry a plaited queue.



"Male Heads, Chinese and Mongolian"
(The two men on the right wearing skull caps are Mongols.)
plate IX, no. 20-25, volume 2
ct2040 (caption) ct2041 (photo)

Thomson's focus on facial anatomy and coiffure to distinguish Mongols from the Chinese presented on the same page employs ethnological assessments similar to those used with his Pepohoan cameos. But his treatment of the four cameos showing Chinese heads represents a considerable expansion of the criteria with which he reads facial portraits. Ethnicity remains a concern, but he also comments on class, occupation, age, and character. For the image of the youngster at the top center of his layout (no. 20) he states:

[He is] a boy of the upper or most educated class, the son of a distinguished civil officer of Canton. He is a fine, attractive-looking little fellow, his full hazel eyes beaming with kindness and intelligence. The oblique setting of the eye, so peculiar to natives of the south, is well brought out in this picture. The face is altogether a pleasing one, but, as is common among children in China, it will gradually lose its attractions as it grows to maturity. The softness of the eye is then frequently replaced by a cold, calculating expression, the result of their peculiar training, and the countenance assumes an air of apathetic indifference which is so necessary to veil the inner feelings of a polished gentleman.

Thomson then uses the image to the left and below the photograph of the boy (No. 21) to "convey an idea of what this bright little fellow may in time become."

*Details from
"Male Heads, Chinese and Mongolian"
plate IX, no. 20 and 21, volume 2
ct2040 (caption) ct2041 (photo)*



Thomson offers a different reading of character for his photograph of the middle-aged male in the bottom left.

No. 24 presents the head of an ordinary Chinese coolie, a fine specimen of the lower orders in China. A man of this sort has enjoyed no opportunities of taking on the polish which is acquired by study and by the high experiences of official life. He is, as a rule, a kindly-disposed person, quite alive to his own interests, and endowed by nature with a profound contempt and compassion for all barbarians who dwell in the pale of Chinese civilization. This will account for the expression he is casting upon me as I am about to hand him down to posterity to be a type of his class.

He is thoroughly honest and sincere in his views, wishing in his heart, when kindly treated by a foreigner, that his benefactor had enjoyed the exalted privilege of being born a Chinaman, and that he may yet, in after periods of transmigration, luckily attain that dignity of birth in some future state.



*Detail from
"Male Heads, Chinese and Mongolian"
plate IX, no. 24, volume 2
ct2040 (caption) ct2041 (photo)*

In these examples, Thomson no longer reads his visual evidence purely as an ethnographer. Instead, he ascribes personalities to his subjects and encourages his readers to indulge in conjecture. In the process, Thomson abandons the objective authority he accords his photographs in the introduction to *Illustrations of China and Its People* and reverts to pre-photographic pseudosciences of physiognomy (reading a person's character from the appearance of their face) and phrenology (reading personality from the shape of the skull).

Thomson pairs the image of Chinese and Mongolian males with six cameo portraits depicting female coiffure. His caption adds yet another category to his taxonomy— locale:

The women dress their tresses into a diversity of artistic forms to suit the prevailing fashion of the locality in which they reside.

Noting the distinguishing features of each hairstyle, Thomson's typology correlates coiffure with place, to which he adds age, season, and clan affiliation as follows: a Cantonese girl of the middle class (no. 26), a woman of Southern China in the winter months (no. 27), a young girl from Swatow (no. 28), a woman from Swatow but from a different clan (no. 29), a woman from Ningpo (no. 30), and a woman from Shanghai (no. 31).



"Headdress of Cantonese Girl" no. 26

"Winter Headdress" no. 27

"Coiffure of Swatow Woman" no. 28

"Coiffure of Swatow Woman" no. 29

"Coiffure of Ningpo Woman" no. 30

"Coiffure of Shanghai Woman" no. 31

"Chinese Female Coiffure," plate X, nos. 26-31, volume 2

ct2042 (caption) ct2043 (photo)

Thomson expands this selection of female coiffure with a similarly titled plate of cameo photographs appearing in volume four. The first cameo at top center shows yet another woman from Swatow (no. 15), four images are of "married Manchu or Tartar matrons (nos. 16, 17, 18, 20), and the cameo on the bottom left displays the style of headdress worn by Mongol women during the winter (no. 19). His caption focuses mostly on the coiffure and costume of the Manchu women, but in keeping with his treatment of male subjects, Thomson draws attention to the facial features of his Mongol subject: "the face, with its high cheek bones, is one thoroughly characteristic of the Mongol race."



"Chinese Female Coiffure" no. 15
"Manchu Female Coiffure" no. 16
"Manchu Female Coiffure" no. 17
"Manchu Female Coiffure" no. 18
"Manchu Female Coiffure" no. 19
"An Old Mongolian Woman" no. 20

"Female Coiffure," plate VIII, nos. 15-20, volume 4
 ct4039 (caption) ct4040 (photo)

Thomson does not attempt to read character into his female subjects as he did with males. Instead, he opens up another line of commentary that employs a sweeping comparison with Western women.

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 hair into fantastic forms is naturally a difficult task, and one which, most probably, would shut out the spurious imitators in our own country, for few could throw their whole mind and energy into the work. In China, with these women, the hair is only done once or twice a week, necessity requiring the wearer to economize time. With a view to avoid injuring the elaborate coiffure during sleep, the lady supports the nape of her neck upon a pillow of earthenware or wood, high enough to protect the design from being damaged. In our land the device would imply a sacrifice of comfort, and here and there a case of strangulation would ensue; but no very grave objections could be raised to the novel chignon and its midnight scaffolding, when the interests of fashion are at stake.

Thomson advances this comparison further when commenting on the coiffure of Manchu women:

I confess myself unable to explain the mysterious mode in which the tresses have been twisted, but careful study of the illustrations will, I doubt not, reward any lady who may desire to dress her hair "à la Manchu." The style is simple and graceful, and must have been designed, one would almost think, to represent horns, enabling the wearer to hold her own against her antagonistic husband.... Joking apart, I would seriously advise the ladies of our land to try this chignon, as it would be a decided improvement upon those now in vogue, and should their husbands or brothers be devoted to artistic or literary pursuits, the basis could easily be procured in the shape of a limner's brush, a ruler, or a paper-knife, while the flowers and other ornamental accessories would be readily found where ladies always obtain them.

It appears from these passages that Thomson is attempting to draw in a broader readership for *Illustrations of China and Its People*, in this case Western women. And yet, the misogynous undertones of his commentary seem equally intended to entertain his male audience. Taking into account the full spectrum of his cameo photographs, Thomson defines four distinct ethnicities: Pepohoan, Chinese, Manchu, and Mongol. Facial features provide the primary means to separate the Pepohoan natives and Mongols from his Chinese and Manchu subjects. Costume and coiffure are marshaled as supporting evidence. Thomson uses costume and coiffure to subdivide his Chinese subjects by locale (Canton, Swatow, Ningpo, Shanghai). Costume and coiffure are also used to separate Manchu from Chinese. Thomson makes no mention of any facial features to support this distinction, and the Manchu are not confined to a specific locale. In short, no single, uniformly applied criterion underscores Thomson's typology.

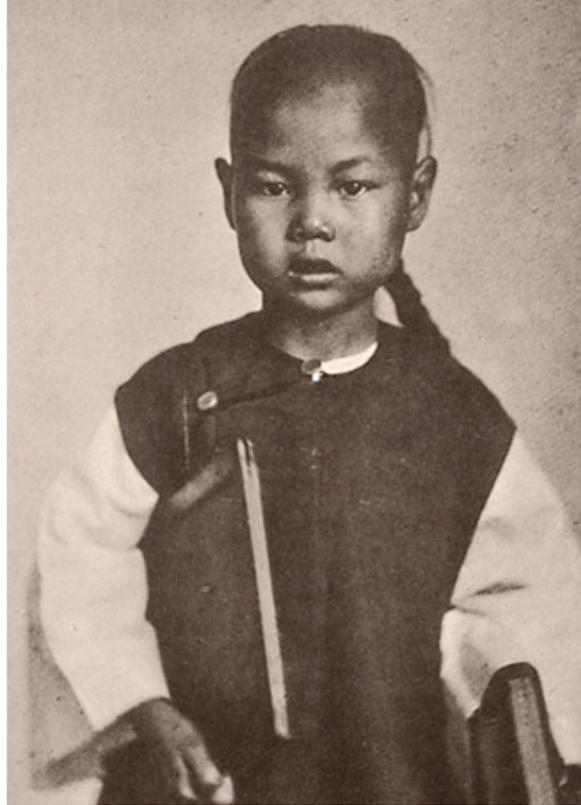
Thomson's cameos thus raise several questions concerning his ethnological practice. Was the use of photography to capture ethnographic specimens as unsystematic as these examples suggest? Or was the mixture of analytical criteria and the skewed typology it engendered unique to Thomson? Did he lack the full range of images necessary to conduct a more scientific and systematic study? Did the commercial underpinning of *Illustrations of China and Its People*, specifically the need to sell albums, force Thomson to opt for an entertaining presentation of his photographic types at the expense of more rigorous taxonomy? The answer is probably yes to all of the above. Thomson's observations are invariably informative and entertaining, and his visual juxtapositions can be instructive and enlightening. But they are not, by any means, systematic.

While Thomson's cameo portraits represent only a small number of the "Chinese people" scattered throughout these albums, they nonetheless provide important insights. Themes he initiates while discussing the cameos reappear and are developed further in the captions for his half-length portraits. His readings of coiffure and fashion become motifs on which he constructs detailed descriptions and assessments of cultural practices. Comparisons with the West appear frequently, as do comparisons between the various groups he documents. These provide occasions to make value judgments. To cite perhaps the most prevalent example, Manchu women generally compare favorably with Western women at the expense of Han Chinese whose lives, Thomson observes, are more circumscribed by traditional family and social structures.

Occupations & Trades

The majority of Thomson's types highlight occupations and trades as opposed to dress and coiffure. These too are often critically evaluated, with less emphasis on ethnicity. Instead, Thomson indulges the impulses he displayed with the people encountered along the Yangzi. Photographs of occupations and trades provide an opportunity to assess the people of China as exploitable human resources. This approach is discernable among the first portraits in the first album, which include a schoolboy and a young Chinese girl in Hong Kong. Thomson opens his comments on the schoolboy with a discussion of Hong Kong schools that offer English education to local children. Citing the testimony of teachers who instruct both Western and Chinese pupils, he notes that despite difficulties acquiring the English language, the Chinese student's "capacity for learning is so great that it will sustain him neck and neck in the race with his European rival." Thomson suggests that the best application of this capacity is a supporting role in the colonial enterprise as "interpreters, compradors, treasurers, or clerks."

"A Chinese School-Boy"
plate IV, volume 1 (detail)
ct1018-ct1019 (caption) ct1022 (photo)



Thomson's caption for the a Chinese girl offers far less hopeful prospects. He notes that women of the upper classes lived cloistered lives and were educated entirely within the home. For upperclass women, this might include some exposure to China's literary or music traditions, but for the most part girls received training in social etiquette required to serve their fathers and husbands. To this he adds the following assessment:

[B]ut the science to which they devote themselves with most assiduity is the knowledge of the mysteries of cosmetics and the toilet; how to paint the proper tint, finishing with the bright vermilion spot on the under lip; how to pose the quivering ornaments of kingfisher plumes or sprays of pearls about the coiffure; how to walk with grace on their tiny feet, and to sit down without furling or disarranging a fold of their silken attire.

"A Chinese Girl"
plate IV, volume 1 (detail)
ct1019 (caption) ct1023 (photo)



Thomson invokes a comparison with women of the lower classes to close this caption, stating that the latter "are seldom taught anything beyond the duties of the household, or the more arduous work of bearing burdens or labouring with the men of their families in the fields." Thomson's photograph of a Chinese girl thus becomes a critique of the treatment of women in China. And on this point, he taps into a trope deployed throughout the colonial world, whereby indigenous civilizations were measured by the manner in which they treat their women. China fares well compared to Islamic countries but poorly when compared to Japan where, in the imagination of Westerners, women of all classes were accorded both education and freedom of movement.

Despite the poor prospects for women in China, Thomson finds utility in their situation, noting in his description of the Chinese girl that "tea-picking and the rearing of silkworms are also female occupations." He follows up with a large-format image of women sorting tea leaves in Canton, and a single-page four-image spread illustrating stages in the preparation of tea for export. This is accompanied by a brief history of the tea trade and a description of the varieties of tea produced in China.



"Tea Picking in Canton," plate XIX, volume 1 (detail)
ct1084 (caption) ct1085 (photo)



A number of images document tea production and preparation for export.

Thomson's commentary on women sorting tea leaves, however, strikes a note quite different from his observations elsewhere concerning the "arduous work" which was the lot of uneducated females:

Many of the women are pretty or attractive-looking, and move their small well-formed hands with a marvelous celerity, pouncing upon and tossing aside the smallest fragments of foreign matter which may chance to have become admixed with the tea, and which none but a thoroughly trained eye could ever have discovered at all. It is impossible to visit an establishment of this kind and not be impressed with the orderly habits and business-like atmosphere of the place, where a thoroughly organized system of divided labour has produced from the leaf of a single shrub so many varieties of one of the most delicate and salutary of the luxuries we possess.

Thus, while Thomson might disparage the situation of women in China, he seems more than willing to set aside his criticisms when discussing women's role in an industry that produces "one of the most delicate and salutary of the luxuries we possess." The distinction rests in his use of the infamous British "we". Chinese girls may grow up to be slaves to fashion and subject to the whims of male patriarchs, or their lives may be circumscribed by household duties and farm labor, but when they prepare tea for export, they become an indispensable and, in Thomson's eyes, a picturesque facet of Britain's global economy.

Thomson made similar arguments concerning the role of women in the silk industry, as silk was equally important to British economic interests in China:

This business gives profitable occupation to thousands of the families of small farmers; who set aside a portion of their gardens for the culture of the mulberry shrub. On the wives and daughters of the household falls the business of superintending the various delicate operations connected with the production of silk—their duty it is to collect the eggs, to watch with care the process of hatching, which takes place in April, to nourish with the tender mulberry leaves the tiny worm as he accomplishes his marvelous labours, and then, when he has finished his silken fabric, to arrest his career of industry, and wind off the cocoons for exportation to the looms of Europe. We owe much to China; and perhaps a knowledge of the rearing of the silkworm, and the introduction of silk are two of the greatest boons she has conferred upon Western nations.

Try as he might, however, Thomson's efforts to photograph silk production failed. On this subject, the cloistering of women was detrimental to his aims, and he had to settle for a single image of two men standing by a silk-reeling machine.



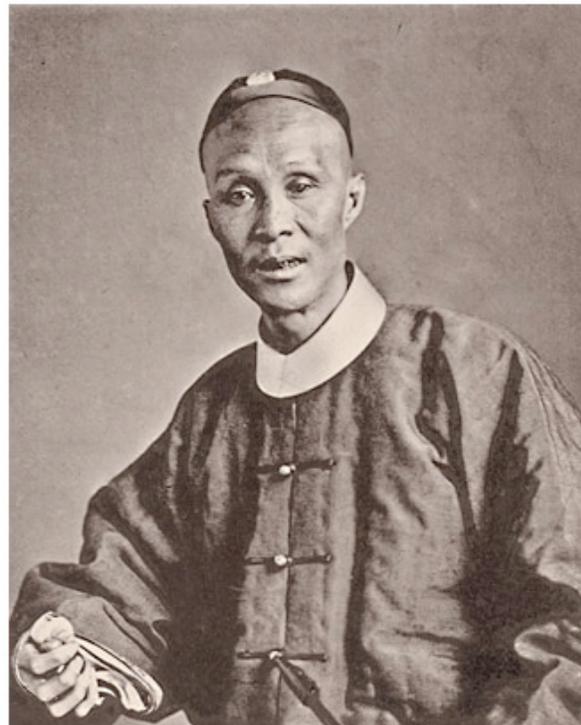
"The superstitious dread with which the people regarded my photographic apparatus rendered it impossible for me to obtain more than this single picture in the silk-producing districts, although I had made a special journey thither, with the intention of securing a full series to illustrate various operations concerned with this branch of industry." (from caption)

*"Reeling Silk," plate XXII, volume 1 (detail)
ct1101 (caption) ct1102 (photo)*

Gentlemen, Soldiers, & Beggars

Two photographs, jointly captioned as "Cantonese Gentlemen," extrapolate on themes Thomson introduced with his image of a schoolboy and provide a corollary to the discussion of women employed in tea and silk manufacture. According to Thomson, these two men embarked on radically different paths. The older of the two studied literature and acquired enough familiarity with Chinese classics, law, and history to enter the civil service, where he mastered the arts of bribery and extortion.

*"A Cantonese Gentleman"
plate XXII, volume 1 (detail)
ct1096 (caption) ct1100 (photo)*





The other is employed as a treasurer in a foreign mercantile house, where "he merits the full confidence and support of his employers." Accordingly, he has become "a leading man among the native merchants, a member of their best clubs and guilds, and one whose intimate knowledge of foreign businesses diffuses a wide-spread influence among the wealthy traders who dwell at the Treaty Ports." Thomson concludes with a description of the financial and social success enjoyed by the gentlemen who has adapted to the needs of the global economy.

"A Cantonese Gentleman"
plate XXII, volume 1 (detail)
ct1096 (caption) ct1099 (photo)

Thomson makes similar arguments in the caption for his image of Tartar soldiers. He provides a brief history of the Manchu (i.e., Tartar) conquest of China in 1644, focusing in particular on the subjugation of south China that followed. He notes that the permanent garrison established in Canton consists of about 1800 men, but because of inefficient government they are poorly trained, rarely paid, and poor. In Thomson's eyes, they are a redeemable resource.

Thoroughly drilled and disciplined, and with a commissariat that would provide effectively for their wants, they would still make good soldiers.... [A] number of Tartar and Chinese soldiers have been instructed in the system of European drill, and in the use of foreign arms. The reader cannot fail to be struck by the fine manly build and soldierly appearance of the Tartar artillery-men shown in the photograph. These men form the native guard of Sir D. B. Robertson, our consul at Canton.



"Tartar Soldiers," plate XIV, volume 1 (detail)

ct1063 (caption) ct1064 (photo)

With women working in the tea and silk industries, with schoolboys who acquire an English education and gain employment in mercantile firms, and with these rehabilitated soldiers, Thomson uses his photographic types to argue, often emphatically, that a viable role in the neo-colonial administration and economy awaits China's human resources, provided it acquires the appropriate training and incentives.

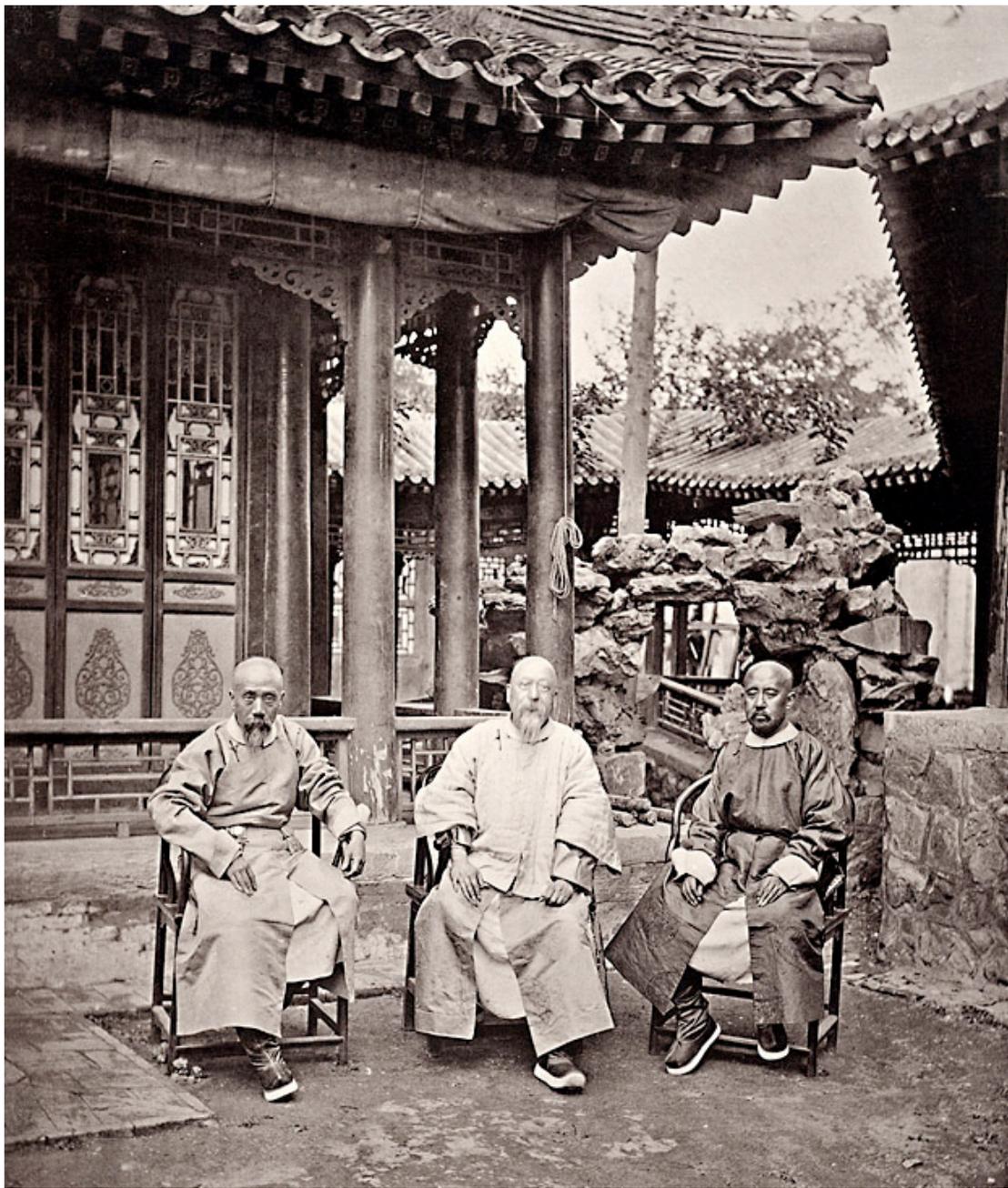
A small number of images stand out among Thomson's wide array of types for both their placement within the four-volume sequence of photographs and the manner in which they are treated. The first photograph of the first volume depicts a middle-aged Chinese gentleman dressed in traditional attire and sitting in the grotto of a Chinese garden.

“Prince Kung, now about forty years of age, is the sixth son of the Emperor Tao Kwang, who reigned from A.D. 1820 to 1850. He is a younger brother of the late Emperor Hien-foong and consequently an uncle to the reigning Emperor Tung-che.”
(from caption)

“Prince Kung”
plate I, volume 1 (detail)
ct1011 (caption) ct1012 (photo)



Volume four opens with a similarly conceived photograph: three men in traditional garb seated in the courtyard of a traditional house.



"Shen-kwe-fen (left) is the Chinese President over the Board of War... Tung-sean (middle), Chinese President of the Board of Finance, is a celebrated scholar, and the author of numerous works, notably one of an historical and topographical character... Maou-cheng-he (right), a Chinese, is fifty-six years of age, and President of the Board of Works..." (from caption)

*"The Government of China"
plate I, volume 1 (detail)*

ct4010-ct4011 (caption) ct4012 (photo)

The plate immediately following is comprised of four mid-sized photographs, each of which poses a single male subject, in this case wearing traditional Manchu costume, seated or standing in the same courtyard.



*“Wen-siang, Manchi Minister of State (2)
Li-hung-chang, Governor-General of Pei-chih-li (3)
Cheng-Lin, Manchu Minister of State (4)
Paou-keun, Manchu Minister of State (5)”
plate II, volume 4*

ct4013-ct4014 (caption) ct4015 (photo)

As frontispiece illustrations to two of the four albums, the men in these images assume considerable importance in Thomson's conception and presentation of China. Thomson raises their status further by identifying these men by name. Prince Kung, a member of the imperial family, opens volume one, and by extension the entire project. The seven men fronting volume four (devoted almost exclusively to Peking) are identified as prominent members of the national government. These photographs function as types in the conventional sense of the term—human subjects wearing traditional costumes indicative of their ethnicity and social status, presented in a setting befitting their occupation and financial means. But in naming the men depicted in these photographs, Thomson invests the images with a degree of individuality not normally accorded a type. He turns these types into portraits, which elicits the question: why these men?

The elevated social position of the men featured accords them a level of individuation unwarranted for most of Thomson's types, and the captions convey more specific reasons why these portraits appear in an otherwise ethnological treatment of the people of China. For the image of Prince Kung, Thomson begins by describing his royal heritage. This affords an opportunity to explain the social structure underpinning Chinese nobility. Through this portion of the caption, Thomson treats Prince Kung as a type, albeit a very exclusive type. But he also adds the following:

Prior to 1860 he was little known beyond the precincts of the Court; but, when the Emperor fled from the summer palace, it was he who came forward to meet the Ministers of the Allied Powers, and negotiate the conditions of peace. He holds several high civil and military appointments, the most important that of member of the Supreme Council, a department of the Empire resembling most nearly the Cabinet with us. Quick of apprehension, open to advice, and comparatively liberal in his views, he is the acknowledged leader of that small division among Chinese politicians who are known as the party of progress.

In other words, Prince Kung was a key figure in the negotiations ending the Opium Wars. Moreover, he represents a progressive (i.e. pro-Western) faction in the government.

Six of the seven government officials fronting volume four are discussed in a caption titled "The Government of China." Thomson lists their official positions and duties. For some he provides a brief biography and/or a short statement framing their political dispositions. In all cases they hold credentials and attitudes similar to Prince Kung, but one among them, Li-hung-chang, is accorded a lengthy caption all to himself. Thomson's opening statement suggests why he chose to focus his attention on Li.

Li-hung-chang stands foremost among the viceroys of the eighteen provinces of China as the man who exerts, probably, the greatest influence on the progress and Destinies of the Empire.



*“Li-hung-chang,
Governor-General
of Pei-chih-li”
plate II, volume 4
(detail)*

ct4013-ct4014 (caption)
ct4015 (photo)

Continuing in this vein, Thomson notes that Li is well known to foreigners for the assistance he offered in putting down the Taiping rebellion, for establishing the Nanking arsenal, and for modernizing the Chinese military. Thomson puts these accomplishments in perspective with a lengthy argument concerning the prospects for China's future in which comparisons with Japan's rapid modernization emerge as a central theme. Returning to the subject of the photograph, Thomson begins a detailed biography of Li by further extolling his importance to China:

I need no excuse for introducing details regarding the life of a man such as Li-hung-chang, who occupies the most prominent position in China, and thus exerts a powerful influence on the well-being of nearly one-third of the human race.

On concluding this biographical sketch, Thomson reclaims his role as an ethnographer—he describes Li's physical appearance as if defining the parameters of yet another Chinese type:

He is now the greatest son of Han, and in appearance the finest specimen of his race which it has been my lot to come across. He stands six feet high, his bearing erect and noble, and his complexion exceedingly fair, while dark, penetrating eyes, and a mouth shaded by a dark brown moustache, betoken inflexible determination.

Remove the reference to Han from this passage, and Thomson could very well be describing a Caucasian. His concluding statement reinforces Li's trans-racial status with an assessment of his pro-Western character and outlook:

Although thoroughly Chinese by sympathy and education, Li-hung-chang has an intense admiration for our sciences, and for the inventive faculties displayed by the races of the West. He is also ever ready to admit the superiority of our arts and appliances, and eager to advocate their practical introduction into China.



Within Thomson's photographic types, these portraits provide exemplars of what we might refer to as "good" Chinese.

There are, scattered among the four volumes of photographs, polar opposites to the types Thomson favors with positive commentary. For example, the rehabilitated Tartar soldiers discussed earlier from volume one stand in sharp contrast to Manchu soldiers appearing in volume four. Thomson notes in his commentaries on the latter that most of the imperial troops he encountered on a military exercise north of Peking were still equipped with bows and arrows or old fuse matchlocks.



Thomson's photographs relating to China's military.

A more critically incisive comparison can be found in Thomson's description of an "old Tatar bannerman."

[A] humble member of the Manchu camp, who kept watch at the gate of the French hotel by night; and although in the pay of the government, and allowed a salary sufficient for his own support, yet, by the time the amount reaches his hands through the official channel, it dwindles to about six shillings a month, and a regulation sheep-skin coat once a year. ... Wrapped in sheep-skin coat, and in an underclothing of rags, he lay through the cold nights on the stone step of the outer gateway, and only roused himself at times to answer the call of his fellow-watchman near at hand.

*"One of the City Guard,
Peking," plate XXII, no. 51,
volume 4 (detail)*
ct4103 (caption) ct4105 (photo)



Thomson affirms the destitution of this individual, so apparent in the photograph, with a description of his daytime occupation as a rag picker. As is, this type is hardly an endorsement of China's past, present or future, but Thomson ratchets up the intensity of his criticism when identifies the man as Old Wang, an "unfortunate specimen of the soldiers of the standing army, the bold conquerors who once subjugated China." Once again, a photographic type takes on the qualities of an individualized portrait, but one that stands in stark contrast to the progressive government officials presented earlier in the same volume.

Illustrations of China and Its People is inhabited by types that Thomson clearly regards as inimical to a productive China. His dislike of Buddhists, discussed below in "Reframing the Past," provides one such example. And he has nothing but disdain for the hordes of beggars plaguing Chinese cities and preying on their inhabitants.



“Professional beggars are numerous in all parts of China, but it is in the larger cities that they more particularly abound, and their skill in dodges and deception would have furnished advantageous hints to the mendicants who used to infest our English thoroughfares. In China the beggar pursues his calling unmolested, and even has received for himself a recognition and quasi-protection at the hands of the civic authorities.” (from caption)

*“The Chief of the Thieves”
plate XXI, no. 53, volume 2
ct2082 (caption) ct2086 (photo)*

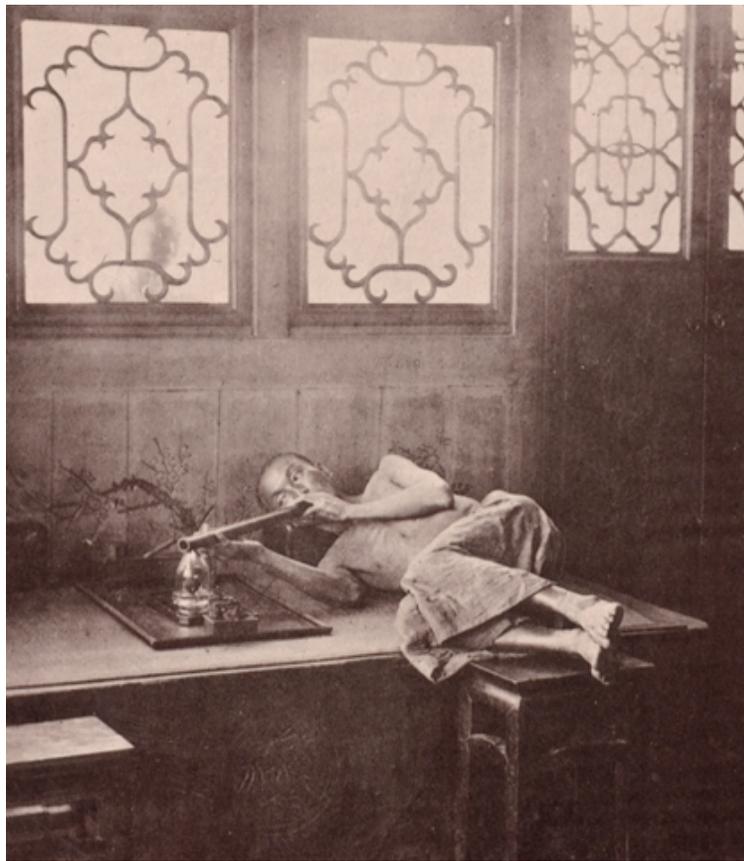
As with his treatment of Old Wang, however, it is important to recognize that these types provide Thomson with convenient scapegoats representing the real target of his ire. Thomson’s most vitriolic criticisms are seldom leveled at the people appearing in his photographs. More often than not, he targets systemic inequities and failures of Chinese culture. In other words, the types he finds so disagreeable are symptoms of the corruption and disorder of a civilization in decline.

Opium Addicts

There is a measurable degree of earnestness in Thomson’s attempts to argue these causal relationships, and yet, with one especially debilitating social practice—opium consumption—Thomson seems more than willing to disparage its symptoms while remaining purposefully ignorant of its causes. Thomson’s captions on opium smoking offer a detailed treatise on the preparation and consumption of the drug, quotes from a medical doctor, and a lengthy anecdote of an artist acquaintance who succumbed to addiction. But his photographs of opium smokers also function as types when, opening with “[t]he opium pipe has become an indispensable Chinese luxury,” Thomson describes the social consequences of addiction. The first of his photographs situates opium smoking in the public sphere:

Many of the worst class of beggars are confirmed opium-smokers, — men who have been dragged down from positions of comfort or affluence by the vice. Long lost to all sense of honour and self-respect, and sunk so low as to become the begging pests of their former friends and associates, they would give the last rag that covers them to gratify their passion for the drug that has consumed their reputation, their substance, and their flesh.

*“Opium-smoking in a
Restaurant”*
plate IX, volume I (detail)
ct1040 (caption) ct1045 (photo)



The second image shifts the scene to the private homes of “the wealthier classes of the Chinese.” Here, the effects of addiction are measured on the family:

Opium-smoking is one of the most enslaving vices, which, when it has secured its victim, gradually poisons and destroys the finer feelings of his nature, causing him to neglect his business, dispose of his property, and even sever the sacred ties of kindred by selling his wife and children into slavery so that he may gratify his ruling position.

Thomson’s condemnation of opium smoking would accord well with the beliefs of his viewers, as most English men and women were uniformly appalled by the habit. But like Thomson, few would openly acknowledge that China’s opium addiction was in good part of Britain’s making.



“This picture shows the method in which opium is smoked by the wealthier classes among the Chinese. The smoker here has leisure and money at his command, so that he is able to indulge freely in the use of the drug.” (from caption)

“A Whiff of the Opium Pipe at Home”

*plate X, volume 1 (detail)
ct1046 (caption) ct1049 (photo)*

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John Thomson's China — I

Illustrations of China and Its People, Photo Albums (1873-1874)

by Allen Hockley

An Imagined
Travelogue

Treaty-Port
Imagery

Ethnology
& Exploration

Chinese
"Types"

Reframing
the Past

Sources
& Credits

REFRAMING THE PAST

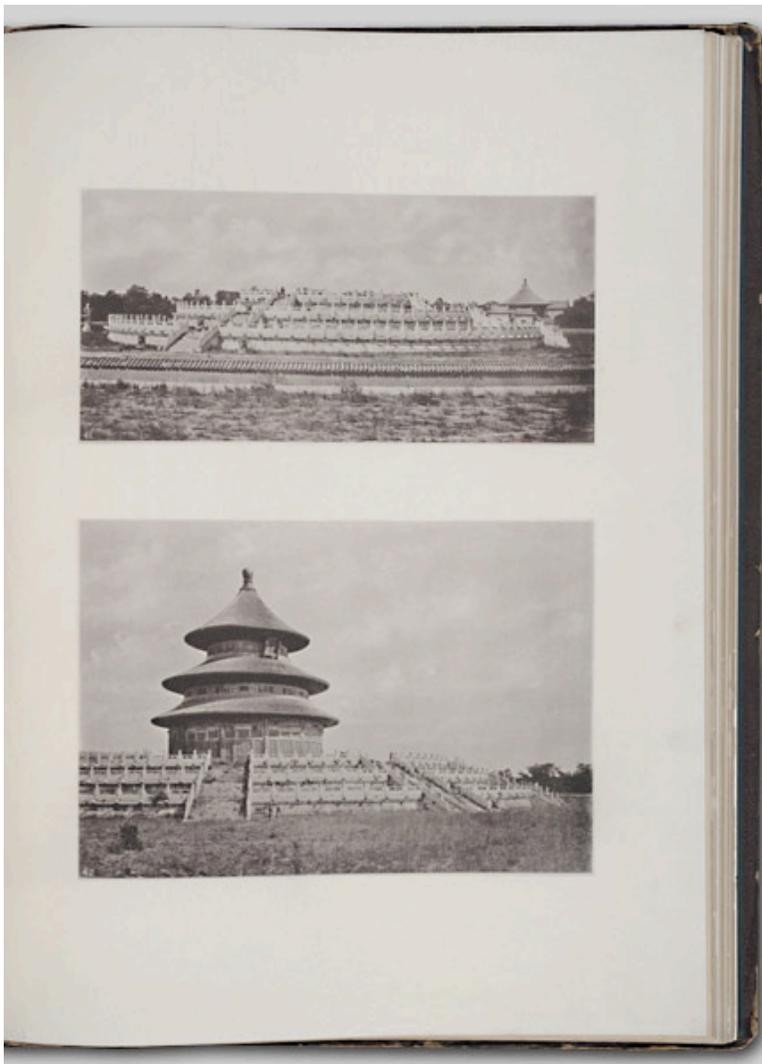
Historical Sites, Aesthetics & Cultural Critique

Thomson used three formats for the scenic views in *Illustrations of China and Its People*. The smallest images (roughly 3.5 in. square) are grouped four to a page; medium sized images (either 8x4 or 8x5.5 in.) appear in pairs on a single page; and his large format images (either 8x9 or 8x10 in.) are given an entire page unto themselves. The large-format images are clearly of higher quality than the small- and medium-sized photographs. They showcase Thomson's aesthetic vision, his eye for the picturesque, and his technical mastery of the photographic medium. They possess, in other words, qualities that draw the attention of viewers and lay claim to a degree of visual authority that the small- and medium-sized photographs cannot.

Formats & Picture Size

Several page layouts were used in Illustrations of China and Its People. The size of the photographs corresponds to the significance accorded them by Thomson as he organized the albums. As a viewer turns the pages, the larger images are seen as highlights.





These three album pages show the page layouts and relative size of pictures used in Illustrations of China and Its People:

(above) four photos per page;

(left) photos in pairs (with an occasional mix of three images);

and (below) large format photos on a single page.



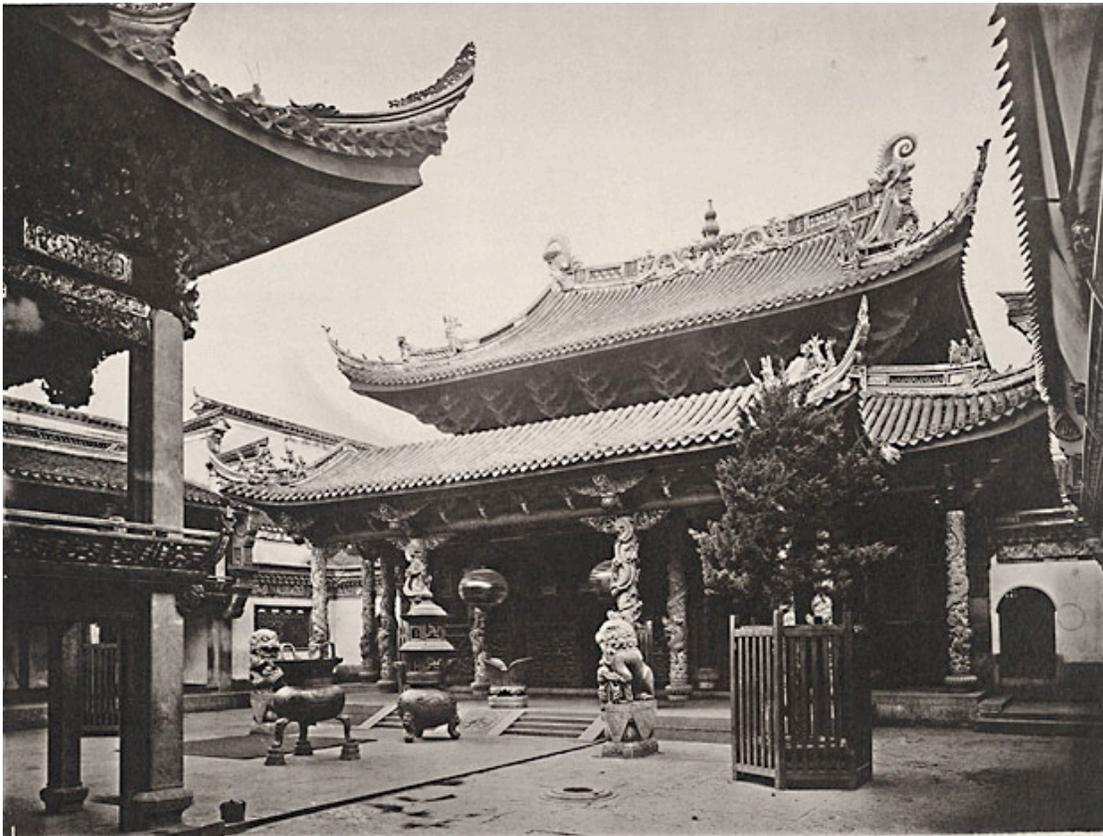
ct4075 (top) ct4084 (middle) ct4081 (bottom)

Thomson's large-format photographs of Chinese scenes also compete for attention with his views of the treaty ports, which for the most part are similarly large-format images. As previously noted, Thomson's captions for the treaty-port photos emphasize the civilizing presence of these communities. So how then does he reconcile the compelling visual qualities of Chinese architecture with his generally negative critique of traditional culture? The captions for the following series of images reveal his response to this quandary.

“Fukien Temple”

Thomson’s caption for his photograph of the Fukien Temple opens with an endorsement of this image as “one of the finest examples of temple architecture in the Empire.” He encourages careful examination of the picture:

The student of architecture will find the picture worthy of the closest scrutiny, for even the minutest details among the ornaments of the building are full of deep significance in reference to native art and the Buddhist or Hindoo mythology.



*“The Fukien Temple, Ningpo”
plate I, no. 1, volume 3 (detail)
ct3010 (caption) ct3012 (photo)*

As an example of this “deep significance,” Thomson draws the viewer’s attention to the dragon motifs that wrap the main columns of the structure:

It will be noticed that the stone pillars of the central edifice are remarkable for grotesque yet beautiful designs, where the dragon, the national emblem of China, is seen to be the leading figure....The dragon wields a potent influence over the people of the Empire; it forms one of the fundamental principles of their geomancy, and is supposed to exist in every mountain and stream throughout the land: its control is as firmly believed in by the Chinese masses as are the benign effects of the sunshine upon the earth.

But here Thomson’s generally informative commentary turns to criticism:

The dread of disturbing the repose of the dragon spirit as he broods over the soil of China forms one of the chief obstacles to the advance of Western science, to the opening of mines, and to the construction of railroads and telegraphs across the interior of the country.

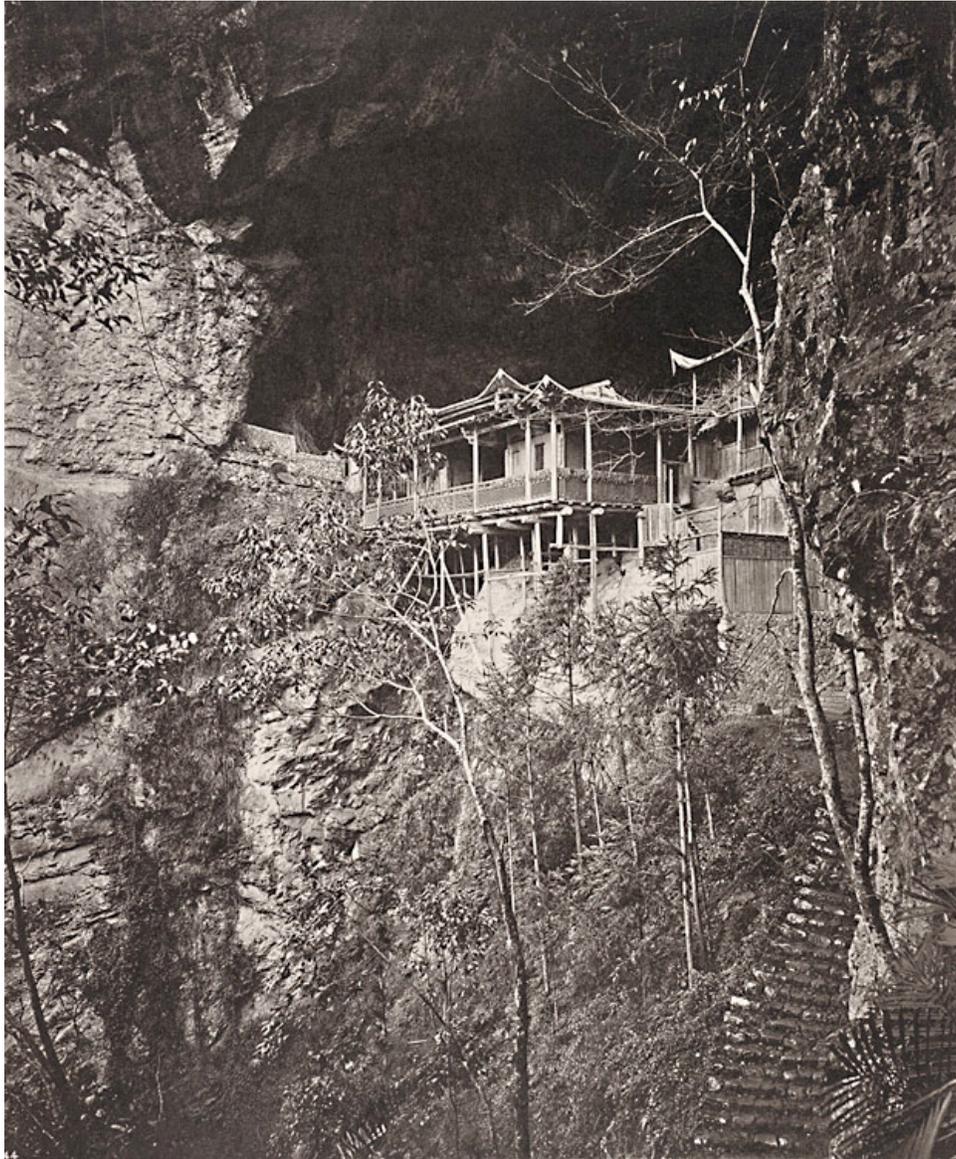
Thomson’s combination of praise for the picturesque qualities of the site and disparagement, in this case, of superstitious impediments to Westernization, provide one means by which he extends his critique of China into his most aesthetically compelling photographs.

In effect, Thomson is juxtaposing past and present. Most of his scenic views focus on architecture erected in bygone dynasties. The brief histories of these sites and structures that Thomson often includes in his commentaries serve to isolate and fix whatever cultural importance they may have had in the past. The picturesque and aesthetic qualities of these monuments thus become their only intrinsic assets to survive into the present. This separation of aesthetic value from historical context opens up a discursive space into which Thomson can then insert descriptions of the current conditions and associations of the sites, thus enabling the juxtapositions he requires to sustain his overarching critique of China. With the Fukien Temple, he focuses on the persistence of beliefs and practices deleterious to China’s future. The following examples illustrate variations of this basic strategy.

“Yuenfu Monastery”

For his image of Yuenfu Monastery, Thomson’s caption first draws attention to its remote location among heavily wooded mountains and its spectacular placement in a cavern near the summit of one peak. The absence of people in the photograph emphasizes these qualities. But Thomson deliberately writes the human presence into his caption in a description of the two youths and the infirm, blind abbot who reside permanently in the monastery. Noting their daily routine, he states:

These recluses appeared to be extremely strict in their ritualistic observances; waking me every morning at sunrise by the wailing of their chants, by ringing their bells, and beating their gongs. Their meals, according to the practice of their order, consisted wholly of vegetable food, and tobacco was a luxury in which they freely indulged. Nevertheless I strongly suspect the old man to be an opium smoker.



“Yuenfu Monastery,” plate XVII, no. 44, volume 2

ct2068 (caption) ct2069 (photo)

The reference to opium would have triggered an array of negative associations for Thomson's readers. In effect, Thomson suggests that the human (i.e., Chinese) presence in the monastery—not shown in the photograph, but documented in the caption—impinge on the picturesque and aesthetic purity of the site.

"The Island of Puto"

Thomson takes a similar approach and tone to his photograph of the Island of Puto. He describes the scene in glowing terms:

The group of sacred buildings, embowered in rich foliage, and backed by the granite-topped hill, the bright colors of the roofs and walls, the sacred lotus lake spanned by a bridge of marble, together make up a picture of rare, romantic beauty.



"Kwanyin Temple, Puto Island," plate VII, no. 15, volume 3
ct3037 (caption) ct3038 (photo)

But his characterization of the inhabitants of this monastery is anything but complimentary:

This ecclesiastical population is said to number 2,000 souls, and its ranks are recruited from time to time by the purchase of young slaves, who are trained by the monks to devote their lives to the spirit crushing service of the Buddhist faith, and finally are drafted, many of them, as mendicants to the mainland to seek support for the maintenance of the monasteries, and of the lusty, lazy monks, the pious paupers who spend their years in drowsily chanting to the Buddha, and who, if dirt and sloth will foster the growth of piety, must indeed be accounted holy men.

Later in this caption Thomson confesses that he may have been too severe in his judgment, as he had "met with hospitality at the hands of many of the less devout members of the creed." But he quickly equivocates with "I am bound to state with equal candour that the faithful mendicants, or Buddhist touters, never failed to seek a recompense."

We cannot know for certain if Thomson's disparaging treatment of Buddhist monks reflects his personal disposition or a broader British attitude toward China's religions, but the later seems more likely. Christian missionaries of various denominations were hard at work with their own efforts to "civilize" China.

“The Abbot and Monks of Kushan Monastery”

Thomson reaffirms an anti-Buddhist bias with a photograph titled “The Abbot and Monks of Kushan Monastery.” His caption for this image draws explicit comparisons between Christianity and Buddhism. Noting first several superficial similarities between the garb of Chinese Buddhist monks and medieval Christians, Thomson then states:

The similarity between the Buddhist faith and the Roman Catholic churches may be traced even more minutely than this. Buddhists everywhere have their monasteries and nunneries, their baptism, celibacy and tonsure, their rosaries, chaplets, relics, and charms, their fast-days and processions, their confessions, mass, requiems, and litanies, and especially in Thibet [Tibet], even their cardinals and popes.



“The Abbot and Monks of Kushan”
plate XVIII, no. 45, volume 2 (detail)
ct2070 (caption) ct2071 (photo)

Seeking more common ground between the two faiths, Thomson then lists Buddhism's 10 chief commandments (as opposed to the more doctrinally correct eightfold path), some of which resemble their Old Testament counterparts (theft and murder, for example). In listing these, he adopts the "thou shalt not" phrasing from the Bible. But when citing examples of what he refers to as "a multitude of minor laws," Thomson's choices gravitate to the seemingly inconsequential minutia of monastery life:

*Every priest before he eats shall repeat five prayers for all the good things
that have happened to him that day.*

His heart shall be free from cupidity and lust.

He shall not speak about his dinner, be it good or bad.

He shall not smack in eating.

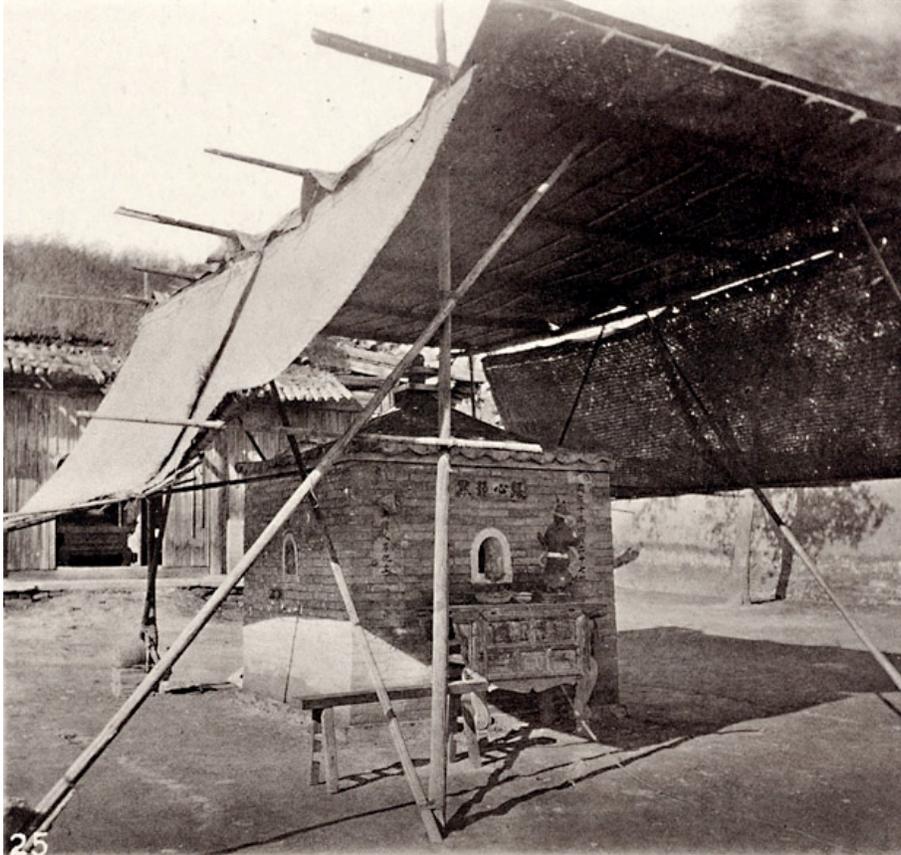
When cleansing his teeth he shall hold something before his mouth.

Thomson states that no mortal can attain Nirvana unless all the maxims are strictly observed. He concludes with a less than subtle condemnation: "If this be indeed true, then the disciples of Sakyamuni in China at the present day have, I fear, but slender prospects of happiness in a future state."

“A Living Tomb”

Thomson’s photograph titled “A Living Tomb” provided another opportunity to disparage Buddhist practices. The caption describes a monk who had himself entombed in this small brick structure as a means to inspire donations for the repair of a nearby monastery. As with the examples cited thus far, the greatest portion of Thomson’s caption evokes images not shown in the photographs—in this case, more extreme forms of soliciting alms. He recalls meeting a monk in a Peking lane as follows:

This wretched being sought to awaken the slothful souls of the citizens to charitable acts by beating a gong. He was a ghastly object to behold, for he had passed an iron skewer through his cheeks and tongue and strode the streets in mute agony, with blood-besprinkled robe and a face of death-like pallor.



“The subject of the illustration is a small tower in front of a monastery in the outskirts of Peking. This tower has been built over a living Buddhist priest, whose only means of communication with the outer world is through the four small windows. When I saw him he had been shut up for many months, and intended so to remain for years if necessary, until he had collected funds enough from the charitably disposed to repair the ruined monastery in the rear.” (from caption)

“A Living Tomb,” plate X, no. 25, volume 4 (detail)

ct4045 (caption) ct4050 (photo)

Thomson digresses further along this path with equally disparaging and horrific anecdotes conveyed by Father Louis le Comte (1655–1728), a Jesuit priest who resided in China for three years during the late-17th century. Le Comte serves as a recognized authority to affirm a long history of Buddhism’s uncivilized practices in China, and thereby validate Thomson’s observations.

“Front of Kwan-yin Temple, Hong-Kong”

Chinese people appear in some of Thomson’s photographs of historic architecture, and while his captions account for their presence, his critical strategy changes little. His photograph of the Kwan-yin Temple in Hong Kong is a particularly important example. As the first image of a Buddhist temple viewers encounter in *Illustrations of China and Its People*, it sets the tone for all others that follow, including those discussed above that show no human presence. As the following sequence of excerpts demonstrate, Thomson’s caption for this photograph alternates favorable descriptions of the physical features of the building with negative commentary on the people that inhabit the site.

Like the majority of Chinese temples, it has been erected in a position naturally picturesque, and is surrounded by fine old trees and shady walks, commanding an extensive view of the harbour.

A never-ceasing crowd of beggars infest the broad granite steps by which the temple is approached, and prey upon the charitably-disposed Buddhists, who make visits to the shrine.

The temple front is a good specimen of the elaborate ornamentation with which these places of worship are adorned.



"Front of Kwan-yin Temple, Hong-Kong," plate IX, volume 1
ct1039 (caption) ct1042 (photo)

Thomson concludes with a description of a woman casting fortunes on the floor of the temple in hope of a favorable omen from Kwan-yin to cure her infant son of illness. This practice of juxtaposing favorable description of the architecture with disparaging commentary on Chinese people is replicated in the sequence of images he presents of the Kwan-yin Temple. The figure kneeling on the steps of the temple appears as a portrait in the next photograph.

"A Mendicant Priest"

In effect, the architecture-to-people transition in the caption becomes view-to-type transition in Thomson's photographs. With the camera now focused directly on an affiliate of the temple, his characterization of Buddhist institutions becomes even more virulent. He notes that this priest's duties include "begging for the benefit of the establishment" and performing "unimportant office for the visitors to the shrine, lighting incense-sticks, and teaching short forms of prayer." As with many of his human subjects, Thomson paid the priest to pose for this portrait, but in this case, he received a litany of complaints about the inadequacy of the fee. It is not surprising that Thomson concluded his caption with the following:

He is a type of thousands of the miserable, half-starved hangers-on of monastic establishments in China. Equally indispensable are tribes of loathsome beggars infesting the gates of the temples, and herds of hungry, howling dogs, that live, or die rather, on temple garbage and beggars' refuse.



"A Mendicant Priest," plate IX, volume I

ct1039 (caption) ct1043 (photo)

“The Kwo-tsze-keen, or National University, Peking”

Thomson’s photograph of “The Kwo-tsze-keen, or National University, Peking” offers a subtle nuance to the critique he employs with his photographs of Buddhist institutions. This image depicts a Confucian temple, which, unlike Buddhist monasteries, seldom had residential communities. In other words, Thomson could not invoke the presence of indigenes to provide a critical perspective. For this image, the human presence Thomson so often adds into captions of historic monuments appears instead in the form of a person standing under the arch in the foreground.



“Entrance to the Kwo-tsze-keen, or National University, Peking”

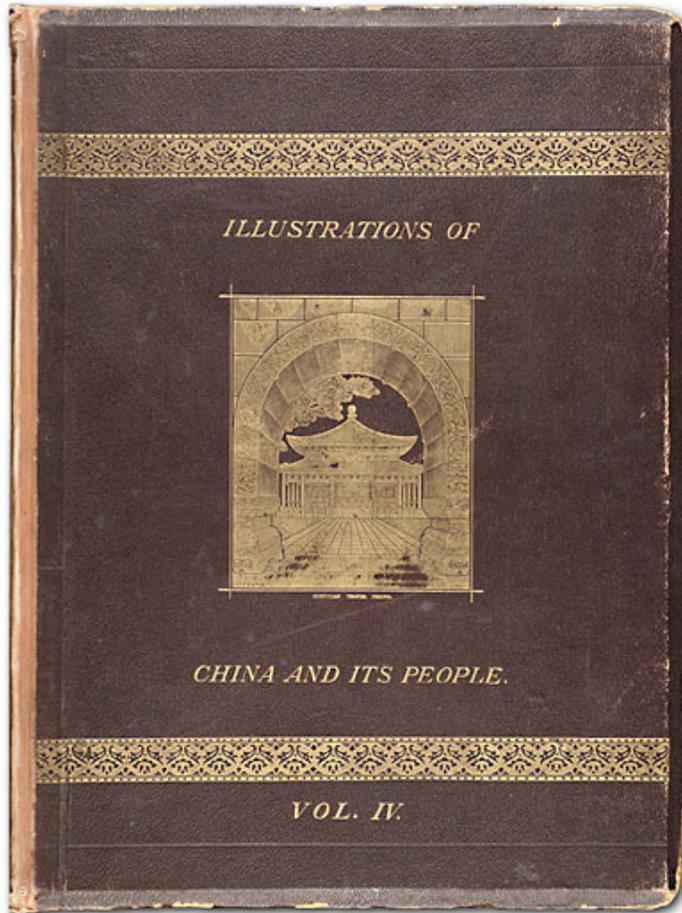
plate IV, no. 9, volume 4

ct4026 (caption) ct4027 (photo)

Thomson offers no explanation for this human presence—the caption provides only a brief history and straightforward description of the site. Dressed in traditional costume, the person is holding a tray suspended from his neck, but we cannot see what it contains and have no way of knowing if its contents relate to the architectural monument. We do not know if this person is employed in some official function or if he is just there selling trinkets. The shadow cast by the arch impedes a clear view of the person, thus enhancing his indeterminate status.

Perhaps herein lies Thomson's critical strategy. In both image and caption, Thomson seems determined to diminish the presence of this individual. He suggests that we simply ignore him altogether and focus instead on the historical monument. But in order to appreciate the aesthetic beauty and architectural details of the structure, our gaze must first pass by this person. Although unacknowledged, he still pollutes the site. As this Chinese subject flickers between absence and presence, we sense that he will eventually fade away under the civilizing scrutiny of Thomson's lens.

Thomson was obviously proud of this particular photograph. Of the 200 examples in *Illustrations of China and Its People*, he chose this image for the gold-embossed design appearing on the album covers. And in turning this photograph into the signature icon for his entire project, Thomson completed the processes he initiated when he took the photograph and authored the caption—he eliminated altogether the human subject.



The previous photograph, "Entrance to the Kwo-tsze-keen, or National University, Peking," was chosen for the gold embossed cover of all four albums, thus becoming the signature icon for Thomson's entire project.

Album cover, volume 4
ct4001

The Great Wall Is No Longer Great

Thomson chose a photograph of The Great Wall to conclude *Illustrations of China and Its People*, and the caption he provided appropriately sums up both his attitudes toward China and those of his British audience. Thomson begins by acknowledging Western fascination with this structure: "My readers doubtless share with me in feeling that no illustrated work on China would be worthy of its name if it did not contain a picture of some portion of the Great Wall." But he quickly disabuses admirers of the monument of any sense of grandeur:

This wall is an object neither picturesque nor striking. Viewing it simply as a wall, we find its masonry often defective, and it is not so solid or honestly constructed as one at first sight would imagine. It is only in the best parts that it has been faced with stone, or rather, that it consists of two retaining walls of stone, and a mound of earth within. In other places it is faced with brick, and there are again some other parts, of the highest antiquity, as is supposed, where we find it to consist of an earthen mound alone. Not a few travellers regard this wall as the greatest monument of misdirected human labour to be met with in the whole world[.]



"The Great Wall of China," plate XXIV, no. 56, volume 4 (detail)

ct4111-ct4112 (caption) ct4114 (photo)

In many of the examples cited above, Thomson's photographs and captions convey admiration, perhaps even fondness for the picturesque and aesthetic qualities of China's monumental historic architecture. We might ask, then, why his characterization of the Great Wall represents such a conspicuous departure from his usual practice. The answer lies in its symbolic value—there was far more at stake with this image than any other historic site he photographed.

Thomson notes that the Great Wall was constructed to protect China from barbarian tribes invading from the north:

The Great Wall seems to me to express a national characteristic of the Chinese race. All along that people loved to dwell in their own land in seclusion, pursuing the industries and arts of peace, and to them China has ever been the central flowery land. Within it everything worth having is concentrated, and outside of it, on narrow and unproductive soils, dwell scattered tribes of barbarians ever bent on predatory excursions into the paradise of the Celestial Empire. These outer barbarians, among which we ourselves are still secretly included, have always been an endless source of trouble, now beyond the wall to the north, now along the coast on the south and east, and at other times in the mountain regions to the west.

For Thomson, China's insistence on its innate cultural superiority and the practices of isolation this belief engendered have all been for naught. Just as it fails to embody any picturesque qualities and aesthetic value, the Great Wall has not and never will secure China's borders. Mixing history and metaphor, Thomson uses his photograph of the Great Wall to illustrate all that was and is wrong with China. His travels extending over 4000 miles come to a close at the Great Wall, as does China's historical isolation.

Viewers of *Illustrations of China and Its People* who followed Thomson's pioneering travelogue would readily agree that the foreign presence in the treaty ports driving China to modernize—engagement with the West as opposed to isolation from it—represented China's only hope of achieving peace and prosperity.

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