



Peepboxes, Society, and Visuality in Early Modern China

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All across early modern Europe, peepboxes delighted the audiences who peered inside to see the dramatic effects that magnifying lenses could have on the pictures hidden inside these simple optical devices.¹ By the end of the eighteenth century, the peepbox had also become a common part of urban life in China (plate 1).² In this export painting from around 1790, a peepbox showman calls to passersby and gestures toward his set of staggered boxes fitted with lensed peepholes at various heights to accommodate a variety of viewers. Puppets or figurines atop one of the boxes attract bystanders and entertain impatient future clients, while the flag above them identifies what could be seen inside the box as ‘Western scenery’ (*Xiyang jingzhi*). This rare textual identification of the peepbox in a painting is a variation on ‘Western scenes’ (*Xiyang jing*), the most common of the several names by which the peepbox was known in Chinese. When written with a different final character, the single homophone *Xiyang jing* also meant ‘Western lens’, the peepbox’s second most common name in Chinese and one that emphasized its biconvex magnifying lens. Whether ‘Western lens’ or ‘Western scenes’, these Chinese terms for the peepbox were distinguished not by the act of looking, but rather by what one encountered in the device.

In Europe, the pictures seen inside the peepbox were generally known as *vues d’optique*. These horizontal hand-coloured prints are characterized by a strong central perspective with a single vanishing point and a variety of exaggerated depth cues such as foreshortening, size constancy, and chromostereopsis (the visual illusion of depth created by certain bright colour juxtapositions).³ These optical views, mostly topographic renderings of places abroad and sometimes at home, have been construed as orderly representations suitable for polite society even when they depicted foreign scenes, such as the Forbidden City (plate 2), the Chinese imperial palace in Beijing.⁴ Despite the widespread cultural effects of *chinoiserie* in Europe, less than one percent of extant European optical views depict China: all of these were produced in Paris and Augsburg around 1770–90, and often derive, as in plate 2, from Johann Nieuhof’s (1618–72) illustrated memoirs of the Dutch East India Company embassy to China in 1655–57.⁵ The optical views produced in China for its own peepbox culture were generically referred to as ‘Western paintings’ (*Xiyang hua*) despite typically being simple, hand-coloured woodblock prints that mostly depicted Chinese subjects.

Chinese engagement with optical devices began at least as early as 300 BCE, but expanded dramatically with the early modern introduction of European devices such as spectacles, telescopes, and the peepbox. By the late seventeenth century, domestically produced optical devices, primarily fitted with locally ground rock

Detail from Chinese optical view of a foreign city, mid-late eighteenth century (plate 4).

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crystal lenses, had become common to the urban Chinese cultural landscape. Their popularity is demonstrated by the *History of Lenses* (*Jingshi*, before 1681), Suzhou lensmaker Sun Yunqiu's (c. 1650–?) catalogue of his own devices for sale.⁶ The inseparability of optical devices and the history of science in Europe was transposed to China in the form of the Jesuit Johan Adam Schall von Bell's (1592–1666) Chinese-language treatise *On Telescopes* (*Yuanjing shuo*, 1626). However, optical devices did not catalyse scientific inquiry in China until the nineteenth century when, after circulating widely for about two centuries, they inspired the first Chinese treatise on optics, Zheng Fuguang's (1780–c.1853) *Crazy about Lenses for Sale* (*Jingjing ling chi*, 1846).

Thus far, the majority of scholarship on optical devices in early modern East Asia has focused on Japan, and particularly on the peepbox.⁷ Some attention has recently begun to be paid to Chinese optical devices, as well as their relationship with certain optical effects in late imperial Chinese art.⁸ Yet although Chinese optical devices were related more to the history of art than to the history of science, neither the devices nor their significant body of related art have been given dedicated



1 'Western Scenery', from *Chinese Drawings: Watercolours of Trades and Flora*, c. 1790. Watercolour on paper, 37.5 × 31.5 cm. Manchester: University of Manchester, Rylands Collection. Photo: © The University of Manchester.



2 Georg Balthasar Probst, *Le dedans du palais de l'empereur de Chine à Peking*, c. 1770–1800. Etching, engraving, watercolour, and gouache on paper, 31.8 × 44.5 cm. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute.

art-historical consideration. As the first step into a larger study relating optical devices and art in late imperial China, an art-historical inquiry into the Chinese peepbox and its pictures reveals the evolving social presence of both, and therefore their consequences for visibility in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).

Visibility, broadly defined as the social aspect of vision, is essential to investigating the relationship between vision and representation in early modern cross-cultural contexts, especially as a shared willingness to engage the foreign has emerged as a common value in various places.⁹ In the case of the Chinese peepbox, attention to visibility reveals that the geographical, cultural, and social mobility of the peepbox experience over time came to define it as a distinctly popular phenomenon that identified one's place in society more than it reflected conceptions of the foreign. None of the early modern Chinese devices themselves are known to survive, but integrating centuries of textual sources, surviving optical views, and images of peepbox viewing in progress reveal far more about the experience than the devices alone could.

The Arrival and Sinicization of the Peepbox

A great diversity of Western and occidentalizing objects circulated in early modern China, testifying to widespread Qing interest in such things.¹⁰ Although present in China from at least the late seventeenth century, the peepbox was not among the scientific or artistic devices with which the Jesuits in Beijing demonstrated optics to the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722) around 1667.¹¹ Instead, it appeared first in southern and southeastern China, seemingly via European traders active in ports such as Guangzhou (Canton). In light of the dominant role that both the Jesuit mission in China and the Qing court played

3 'A Man with a Raree-Show',
in George Henry Mason,
The Costume of China,
London, 1800, image c. 1790.
Coloured stipple engraving
after painting by Puqua. Los
Angeles: Getty Research
Institute.



in mediating Sino-European cultural exchanges from Beijing, it is significant that the peepbox is not marked by either religious or imperial associations, and did not trickle down from these elite northern institutions into southern and southeastern society.

One of the earliest sources on the peepbox is the 'Six Poems on the Western Lens-Box' (*Xiyang jingxiang liushou*), published in 1697 by the scholar and government official Xu Qianxue (1631–14):

Moving to take up the immortal's lens and enter the glass.
The myriad layers of clouds and mountains are all carried in a bamboo basket.
It is commonly said that monks' footsteps seek but do not find:
The Wuling mists and clouds are fundamentally blurred.¹²

Xu's first poem of the six specifies a glass (*boli*) lens, an important detail confirming that at least this part of his device was imported. Rather than a multi-viewer public peepbox like the example shown in *plate 1*, however, Xu's device seems to have been a small single-viewer peepbox, which in Europe was a tabletop amusement for wealthier viewers at home. Describing one view as distant, misty mountain scenery (identified as the Wuling range in southern Hunan, whether or not accurate), Xu marvels on the portability of this miniaturized landscape, but ultimately qualifies his wonder by noting that the landscape cannot truly be known and understood in this context. What is translated here as 'monks' footsteps' (*lingzong*) can also mean 'deities' and 'treasured paintings', revealing that this highly educated official chose a complex aesthetic and religious metaphor for the illusory experience.

Commentary on the peepbox became far more common in the eighteenth century, when it also appears in export paintings of typical urban professions and customs in Guangzhou, as in *plate 1*. George Henry Mason's 'Man with Raree-Show' (see *plate 3*), based on another export painting acquired from the Canton painter Puqua (act. c. 1790), demonstrates that the Chinese peepbox was familiar to Europeans in addition to being an innovation on the long history of narration accompanying public picture-viewing in China.¹³ For a nominal fee, the showman would pull strings that extended from inside the closed box to manipulate a series of optical views for the viewer while accompanying them with his narration.¹⁴ Later on, peepboxes would also become known as 'pulling Western pictures' (*la Yangpian*) and 'pulling big pictures' (*la dapian*), alternative names to 'Western scenes/lens' that emphasized the showman's role in revealing the optical views.

Naturally, the peepbox eventually arrived in Beijing, as described in the scholar Zhang Xun's (1731–89) poem 'Western scenes' (*Xiyang jing*) from 1776:

As for the nation of Italy,
 this heaven is west of the large and small oceans.
 People's minds can use [the peepbox] as the means [by which]
 The fundamental principles of things are expanded.
 The sun and the moon are inside the glass,
 The fish and the dragon are concealed in a mustard seed.
 Children strive for a glimpse,
 Taking advantage of the struggle for the best position.¹⁵

Giandomenico Tiepolo's (1727–1804) two *Il Mondo Nuovo* (1757 and 1791) frescoes confirm that the peepbox enjoyed a significant cultural presence in Italy.¹⁶ However, Zhang's pinpointing of a particular country as the origin of the device is unusual, and somewhat unreliable given that most objects of European origin were generically identified as 'Western'. More important than this foreign identification, however, is his characterization of the peepbox as a means for understanding the world, and his use of the specific lexicon of late imperial Chinese approaches to knowledge, which emphasized 'investigating things' (*gewu*) in order to understand their universal principles (*li*).¹⁷ By saying that the sun and moon were inside the box, he also suggests that the operator of this peepbox was able to direct light into the box from overhead to make the scene inside appear as if in daylight (as was typical), as well as to backlight the image that, with certain areas cut out, would have made it appear as a nighttime scene.¹⁸ Zhang's reference to the ability of the biconvex magnifying lens to increase the perceived size of the details (here, aquatic creatures that were not visible to the naked eye) is a recurring theme of peepbox descriptions. Finally, the image of the children jostling for time in front of the peepholes

reflects both a significant audience demographic as depicted in Puqua's painting and the generally unsophisticated tumult of the public viewing experience.

The vast majority of sources on the peepbox emphasize its connection not to the West but to Suzhou, Yangzhou, and Nanjing, major cities in the Jiangnan region of southeastern China around the Yangzi river delta. The Yangzhou writer Li Dou (fl. 1764–95) noted that,

In Nanjing, people make square and round boxes, inside of which are flowers and trees, birds and fish, the strange and the divine, secret dramas, and the like. On the outside [of the box] is cut a round hole covered with five-coloured tortoiseshell. Peep through with one eye and what is small appears large. This is called the 'Western lens'.¹⁹

Li identifies the box as the product of Nanjing artisans, demonstrating both the domestication of the device and its connection with the Jiangnan cities famous for their craftwork and lens production. His list of the picture subjects seen in the box emphasizes their diversity as well as the new details of the prints that became visible when enlarged by the lens (notably not made of glass). Despite calling the peepbox a 'Western lens', he otherwise minimizes the object's foreignness.

Strengthening the Jiangnan connection, a 1792 publication about Suzhou included a comment supposedly made by the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95) on 'Western scenes' when he visited that city. The emperor noted that, 'inside the box are towers and pavilions, tigers and panthers, lions and elephants, mountains and forests, grasses and trees, deities and female immortals, all clear at a glance'.²⁰ It is significant that the Qianlong emperor is only known to have discussed the peepbox and its images in the context of Suzhou. Not only does the comment suggest that he did not consider them to be specifically Western despite his vast experience with such things, but it also links them to a Jiangnan city with a long history of optical devices.

In what context the emperor might have enjoyed the device is unknown, but peepbox viewing was typically a raucous public event. A peepbox showman's narration was often accompanied by drums and cymbals, their strident percussion adding drama to the performance. In addition, the noise had the practical effect of drawing the crowd's attention amidst the general clamour of the streets, particularly during busy temple fairs where the peepbox could be found during major holidays such as the lunar New Year.²¹ An anonymous Qing folk verse (*zhuzhici*) from Sichuan began by describing the din surrounding the public spectacle of the peepbox:

The sound of gongs coarsely overlaps the drumbeats.
What shrinks in the shadows is drawn out from the sides and spread out in the pictures.
The scenery is not the same as letting one's gaze roam foreign places:
Inside the 'Western lens' one sees West Lake.²²

Again noting the magnifying ability of the lens, identifying these optical views as scenes of West Lake suggests yet another name occasionally used for the peepbox. 'West Lake scenes' (*Xihu jing*) kept the term 'West', but referred to famed West Lake in the Jiangnan city of Hangzhou, which for centuries had provided painters, poets, and tourists with inspiring scenery. Clearly, the Westernness of the 'Western paintings', 'Western lens', and 'Western scenes' was a mobile concept. Quickly becoming only

nominally ‘Western’, the social significance of the device therefore far outweighs the importance of its foreign origins in assessing its effects on Chinese culture.

Chinese Optical Views

In the late seventeenth century, the Yangzhou resident Huang Lüzhuang (c. 1656–?) compiled an *Index of Strange Devices* (*Qiqi mulüe*), which listed objects that he either made or encountered in his native city. Directly following the section on optical devices is an inventory of unusual and often implicitly foreign pictures, which includes ‘tubular peeping lens pictures’ (*guan kui jinghua*) that are ‘not at all like paintings: use the tube to peep at them, then they are as lively and active as if real.’²³ Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chinese accounts of Western-style paintings consistently commented on the three-dimensional and lifelike qualities of these works, which appeared to move on their own.²⁴ Huang’s account suggests that the optical views in his index were still imported in the late seventeenth century, but Chinese artists began producing optical views by at least the 1750s, as demonstrated by Japanese evidence for their transmission across the East China Sea.²⁵ Even today, the majority of known extant Chinese optical views survive in Japanese collections.²⁶

Chinese optical views consistently employ the same sort of single-point perspective with exaggerated architectural orthogonals and other depth cues as their European counterparts, exemplified in plate 2. What few comments were made on the pictures themselves only rarely identify foreign content, but extant examples reveal that scenes of Western subjects were sometimes altered to accommodate domestic tastes, as in the composite image of a foreign city (plate 4). The city is

4 Chinese optical view of a foreign city, mid-late eighteenth century. Hand-coloured woodblock print. Kobe: Kobe City Museum. Photo: © Kobe City Museum.



immediately identifiable as foreign by its inhabitants, its varied multi-storey stone buildings, and the fountain at the centre foreground. But the artist has replaced unacceptable nude figures or other statuary that might have appeared in a European fountain with red-crowned cranes symbolizing longevity and auspicious golden dragons spouting water around a multi-eaved pavilion topped with a double gourd, another auspicious symbol of longevity. These forms and symbols are rather out of place in a Western city, but would have conveyed familiar and appropriate messages to Chinese viewers. The wrinkled white elephants, traditional Buddhist symbols in China but also generally Eastern emblems common in European images of the foreign, may also reflect the global reverberations of cross-cultural interaction.

More common than Western places were famous domestic sites such as the Forbidden City (plate 5), which would have been immediately identifiable as the palace complex by the red walls and golden tile rooftops reserved exclusively for imperial use. Shown here is its northern perimeter, the Gate of Divine Prowess (*Shenwumen*) on the right, and on the left, the private imperial park of Coal Hill (*Jingshan*) with its large hilltop pavilion, the highest point in central Beijing that directly overlooked the imperial palace. The artist has dramatically narrowed the wide moat surrounding the Forbidden City on all sides in order to fit the panorama into the print, thereby also sharpening the angle at which the walls recede orthogonally toward the distant vanishing point set at the easternmost gate of this walled-off precinct. The viewer is thus situated inside this supremely privileged space together with court officials, who all wear formal robes with animal or avian badges that identify them as civil or military officials of particular ranks. These court officials accurately reflect the very circumscribed group of individuals allowed access within the imperial city, automatically elevating the typical peepbox viewer to this elite and powerful group.

5 Chinese optical view of the Forbidden City and Coal Hill, mid-late eighteenth century. Hand-coloured woodblock print. Private Collection, Kanagawa Prefecture. After 'Chūgoku no yōfūga' ten: Minmatsu kara Shin jidai no kaiga, hanga, sashiebon (Tokyo: Machida Municipal Museum of Printing Art, 1995), fig. 76.





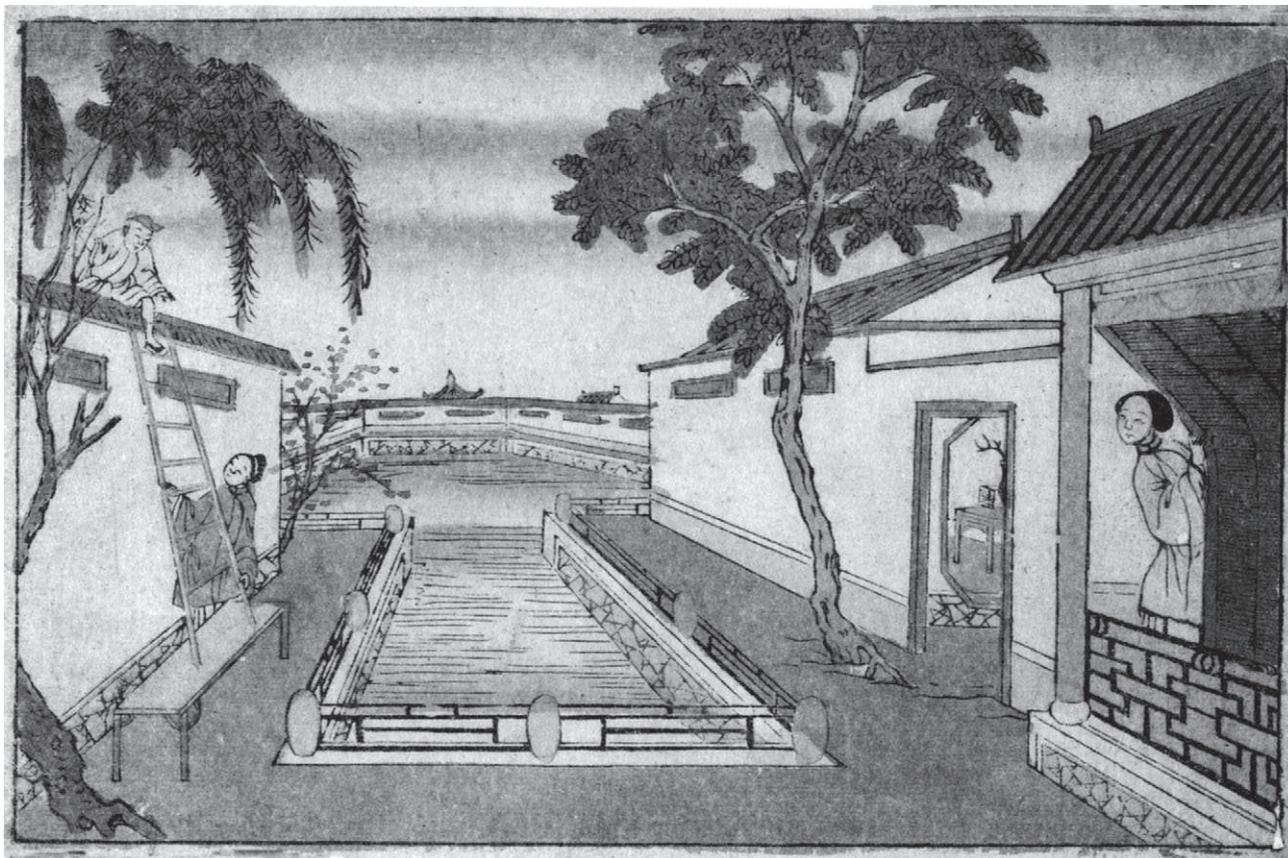
6 Chinese optical view of a scene from *The Story of the Western Wing*, mid-late eighteenth century. Hand-coloured woodblock print. Kobe: Kobe City Museum. © Kobe City Museum.

In addition to famous sites that allowed a sort of virtual tourism, other frequent peepbox subjects included scenes from popular fiction or theatre such as the thirteenth-century drama *The Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiangji*, plate 6).²⁷ In this image occurring in a private home, Buddhist monk-musicians with stubbly shaven scalps provide music, while the women of the family peek out from their secluded quarters at the event. The women also serve as surrogates for the viewer, looking onto the scene in a way that suggests intriguing gender implications for the real audience. When viewed through the lens, the juxtaposed bright red and blue in the print likely created a subtle effect of chromostereopsis, further enhancing the perceived depth of the print. Scenes such as this, with a diversity of characters and activities all in a single print, would have been ideal subjects for which the showman could provide narration, especially if connected to a particularly famous and familiar drama such as *The Story of the Western Wing*.

The final poem of Xu Qianxue's sextet identifies another subject that is only hinted at among extant optical views:

The universe is as vast and ancient as a pure jade flask.
 Watery reflections and sunlight are all drawn in the pictures.
 Tonight I stop and suspect what is inside the twinned lens:
 There is always 'spring scenery' in the void.²⁸

By mentioning the reflections and sunlight, Xu is likely referring to the tendency of European copperplate prints to illustrate the effects of light through hatchings and cross-hatchings, techniques common in both *vues d'optique* and the European



7 Chinese optical view of an impending assignation, mid-late eighteenth century. Hand-coloured woodblock print. Kobe: Kobe City Museum. © Kobe City Museum.

prints generally circulating in late seventeenth-century China. However, using the established metaphor of ‘spring scenery’ (*chunse*) that historically connoted erotic scenes, he is suspicious of what he perceives as inappropriate imagery viewed inside the box. Eroticism is relative, as such ‘spring scenes’ or pictures of ‘beautiful women’ (*meiren*, a euphemism for courtesans that Xu uses in another of his peepbox poems) were often so subtle as merely to show fully dressed women visible inside the walls of their secluded domestic confines. In an image of an imminent and unsanctioned assignation set within the women’s quarters of a luxurious mansion (plate 7), an enterprising maid steadies a ladder on a bench to allow a man to climb over the high wall of the compound, enabling him to rendezvous with the woman peeping coyly out from behind a bamboo blind on the right. Possibly also drawn from fiction or drama, such a decorous image was nevertheless an erotic scene, and including a man entering the women’s garden made the illustration even more titillating. As Xu’s poem indicates, these images were not simply accepted by all levels of society, but they were not uncommon, and showmen were not above emphasizing the appeal of such scenes.²⁹ Of the very few pitches to lure in an audience that were recorded, two mentioned women in erotically charged settings, specifically a Shanghai bathhouse.³⁰ The relationship between sexuality and visuality in the peepbox experience, as well as the gender dynamics involved, are rich topics that deserve much more consideration.

Perspective in Late Imperial China

The consistent use of a single central vanishing point within an overall perspectival structure is the common element that made these optical views ‘Western’, despite being produced in China and often with Chinese subjects. Joseph McDermott

has argued that the use of perspective in Chinese optical views was an ordering device for the unfamiliar foreign, luxurious, fictional, and erotic scenes.³¹ But the scenes viewed would have had varying degrees of unfamiliarity to the audience, and furthermore, perspective did not carry such connotations of ordering space in early modern China. It was merely a representational device, and true single-point perspective was rarely found outside the imperial court and a subgenre of woodblock prints produced in Suzhou.³² The Qing court official and amateur mathematician Nian Xiyao (1671–1738) specifically stated in *The Study of Vision* (*Shixue*), his 1735 illustrated treatise on Western-style illusionistic painting and linear perspective, that there was no physiological, biological, or even cultural difference between European and Chinese vision, merely between their representational techniques.³³ Even the term denoting linear perspective (*xianfa*, literally ‘line-method’), which Nian coined, was only used in court circles. Outside Beijing, the term ‘Western ruled-line painting’ (*Xiyang jiehua*) was borrowed from a long-established genre of Chinese architectural painting that shares some visual similarities with Western perspectival paintings.³⁴ But this term was also generally applied to Chinese works such as woodblock prints that incorporated other Western techniques besides perspective, including deep spatial recession, some shading and volumetric treatments, and the distinctive hatching and cross-hatching of copperplate engravings.

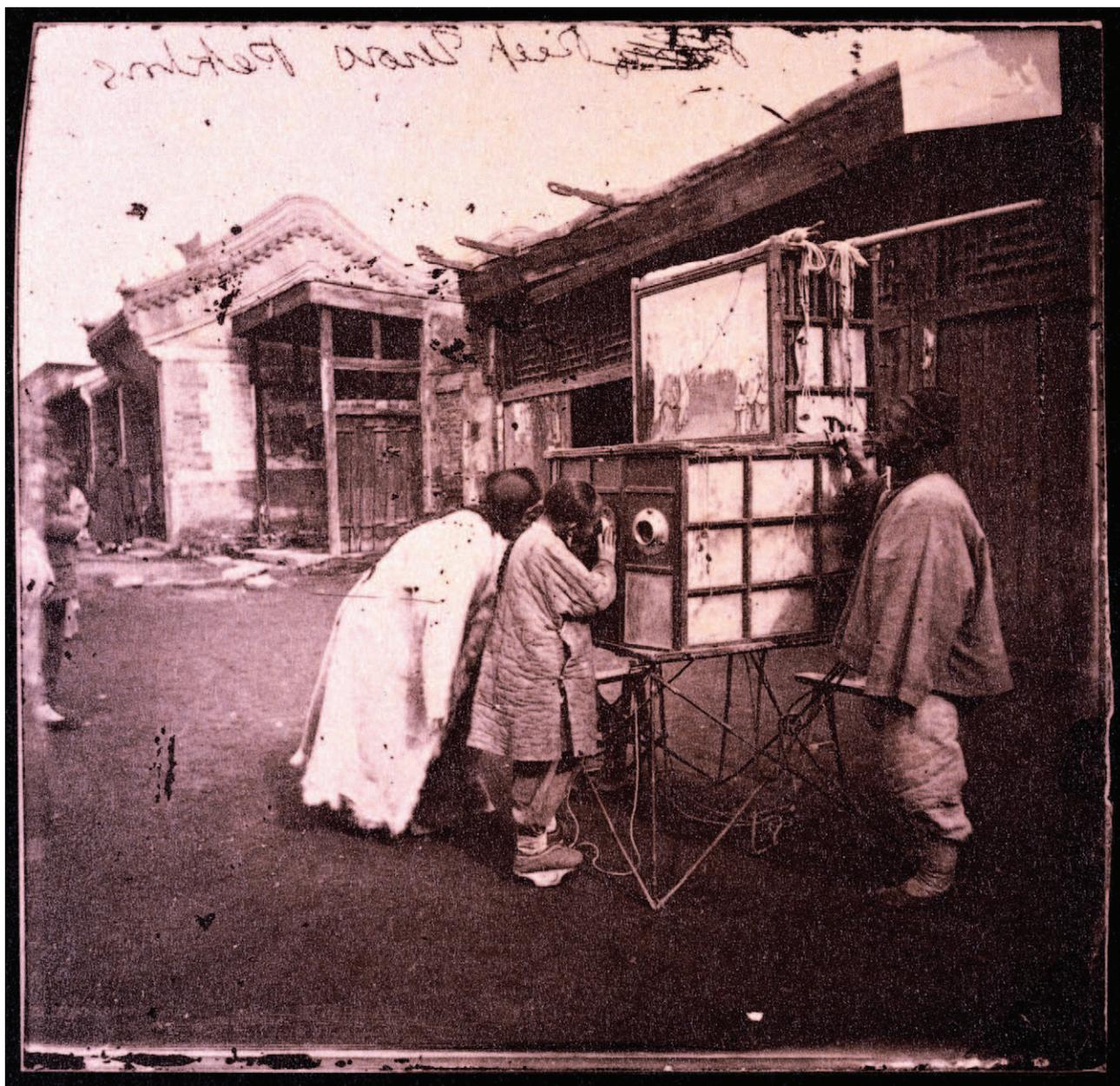
Perspective unquestionably signified the foreign, and therefore cultural difference, but to the literati scholar-officials with classical Confucian educations and accompanying high social status, it also indicated social and intellectual difference. Martin Powers has argued that a ‘cultural politics of the brushstroke’ arose as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chinese literati began to specify the lack of ‘formlikeness’ (*xingsi* or *xiangxing*) and an emphasis on self-expressive brushwork as what distinguished Chinese painting from – and made it superior to – its highly representational Western counterpart (which came closer to the type of paintings that professional Chinese artisan painters produced for the less cultured).³⁵ In their writing, the intellectual elite often rejected realistic foreign works as artisanal products suitable only for less educated viewers unable to appreciate the subtlety of ink painting. These arbiters of taste and culture therefore generally rejected perspective and other Western techniques during the early and mid-Qing dynasty not simply because they were foreign. More importantly, the increasing presence of these techniques further eroded the cultural primacy of this elite group that was steadily losing its social and political dominance to nouveau riche merchants and the non-Han Chinese ruling classes of Manchus and Mongols who were less invested in the traditional emblems of elite status.

Epitomizing the tension surrounding this issue is the response of the literatus and philosopher Fang Yizhi (1611–71) to certain optical devices. Fang understood the principles and practices of the telescope and the camera obscura, but he dismissed the former as insufficiently subtle for understanding the true profound nature of light, and the latter as useful only for helping to depict the details of flowers and insects.³⁶ His rejection of these devices and their ability to magnify detail was therefore based on how they instrumentalized vision in favour of what was merely physically visible, and did so at the expense of the larger, more subtle universe in which one contemplated the abstract principles of things rather than merely looking at them in detail. The elite thus preserved their cultural superiority over the West by remaining at least rhetorically sceptical about most optical devices, and thereby also preserved their superiority over the

less educated lower classes – precisely the group who most avidly consumed the peepbox and its prints.

Consequently, the exaggerated use of perspective in the peepbox views not only identified these works as ‘Western’, but also as products intended for unsophisticated viewers. The generally lower social identity of the peepbox audience is implicit in the pictures, which consistently depict scenes that would have been outside their life experience: luxurious homes with secluded women’s quarters; clandestine relationships among the upper classes; foreign lands that no one could see until after the Qing formally lifted emigration restrictions in 1893; distant tourist sites reached through expensive travel; historical or literary events that were either long past or that never happened at all; and even the ultimate impenetrable space of the Forbidden City. In all cases, these are glimpses of a privileged world, which someone who did not belong to it could see only as a voyeur, as if through a hole in a wall of one of the buildings represented in the works.³⁷

8 John Thomson, Peepbox on a Beijing street, 1869. London: Wellcome Library.



A common trope in pre-modern Chinese literature, the voyeur as a character type is typically a low-status individual (such as a servant or child) who eavesdrops behind or peeps through a crack in a wall to lend veracity to a passage, particularly in domestic and erotic scenes.³⁸ All images of the peepbox experience, whether paintings, prints, or photographs, demonstrate that the only viewers who can stand upright to look in the box are children or petite women (plate 8). Most grown men are forced into awkward and rather undignified bending, crouching, sitting, and squatting positions, as a real voyeur might well be when the peephole dictated his or her viewing position.³⁹ The elite members of society who inhabited the world depicted in the prints might pay for the occasional holiday peep at a temple fair, as their comments on the peepbox show. But such vulgar public viewing of unsubtle foreign-style pictures from an undignified position was best left to children and the lower classes.

Vision, Representation, and Society

Neither the Chinese peepbox nor its associated images conferred upon the viewer any authority about the foreign, nor did they replace traditional modes of either looking or of representing. Early modern Chinese conceptions of vision are still not well understood, but at its core, vision required contact between the eye, the mind, and the thing viewed in the world.⁴⁰ Looking at paintings seems to have been a special case of vision. For example, the late-Ming terms used for looking at paintings – which one did in private, slowly, and with carefully selected intellectual and social equals – were socially coded as elite, educated, and male.⁴¹ How these changed relative to optical devices is only hinted at in scientific treatises such as *Crazy for Lenses for Sale*.

Scholars disagree to what extent optical devices offered seventeenth-century viewers alternative modes of vision that affected conceptions of vision or representation, if at all.⁴² But because these aspects are inseparable from social status, elite conceptions may not have changed much given the challenges such things posed to their identity and authority. As the optical views themselves demonstrate, both vision and representation were affected for lower-class viewers because perspective came to connote both the foreign and the popular, but their viewership is rarely considered when discussing vision and representation. The geographic and cultural mobility of the European peepbox and its optical views within China thus also acquired social connotations as the device evolved from a rare foreign curiosity in the seventeenth century to a fully sinicized, widespread popular entertainment by the late nineteenth century. The peepbox remained popular well into the twentieth century, long past the introduction of photography, but the roles that these optical devices played in the construction of modern society have yet to be determined.⁴³ Nevertheless, by the end of the eighteenth century a new kind of art viewing and spectatorship was already firmly established among a new group of consumers, who were considerably less elite than art viewers traditionally had been.

By the start of the twentieth century, the peepbox was widely treated as a Chinese folk art despite its foreign name. In the 1920s, two and a half centuries after the earliest discussions of the peepbox, the shows displayed at temple fairs were still aimed at children and country peasants.⁴⁴ Around this time, however, the effects of erotic peepbox views on public morality became a concern. A c. 1909–10 guidebook to Chengdu, Sichuan specifically noted that one of the picture types that could be seen in a peepbox were ‘pornographic pictures and the like (*chungong deng tu*) of the

worst fashion, which have already been banned by the police'.⁴⁵ Also around this time of the 1911 fall of the dynastic system, the peepbox became a negative metaphor often used by reformers to refer to intentionally misleading behaviours or techniques used to exploit people's ignorance and gullibility, just as it had been in Europe since at least the eighteenth century. Chinese dictionaries today still retain both 'peepbox' and 'trickery' as definitions for *Xiyang jing*, demonstrating that the problem was not foreignness per se, but the incorrect view of reality that the peepbox pressed onto the undereducated.

With an ongoing history of more than three hundred years, recently the Chinese peepbox has been revived on a small scale as an ersatz traditional folk art, for example in Beijing where it is connected to artificially romanticized ideas of 'Old Peking'. Its continued but evolving presence today, limited and contrived though it may be, confirms its persistent popularity as well as its complete sinicization. The early modern origins of the Chinese peepbox and its optical views, as well as its cultural implications for the social status, gender, and personal identity of its viewers, are now all but forgotten by contemporary viewers and showmen. Reclaiming these associations demonstrates how the peepbox endures as a diachronic case study of an object that, through vision and representation, continues to mediate between cultures and social classes.

Notes

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- Richard Balzer, *Peepshows: A Visual History*, New York, 1998.
- This export image of the Chinese peepbox was republished as the foundation of the engraving 'A Raree-Show at Lin-sin-choo' in Thomas Allom's *China, in a Series of Views, Displaying the Scenery, Architecture, and Social Habits of that Ancient Empire*, London, 1843.
- Vues d'optique* is the name generally given to such prints, but it can also refer to those particular to the *optique* or *zogrscope*, a single-viewer device that employed a lens and a mirror (Barbara Maria Stafford, Frances Terpak and Isotta Poggi, eds, *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*, Los Angeles, CA, 2001, 344–54).
- Erin C. Blake, 'Topographical prints through the *zogrscope*', *Imago Mundi*, 54, 2002, 120–24; Erin C. Blake, 'Zograscope, virtual reality, and the mapping of polite society in eighteenth-century England', in Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree, eds, *New Media, 1740–1915*, Cambridge, MA, 2003, 1–29.
- Niklas Leverenz, 'Vues D'optique with Chinese Subjects', *Print Quarterly*, 31: 1, March 2014, 20–44; Johan Nieuwhof, *Het gezantschap der Neêrlandsche Oost-Indische Compagnie...*, Amsterdam, 1665.
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- 38 Jing Zhang, 'In his thievish eyes: The voyeur/reader in Li Yu's "The Summer Pavilion"', *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, 34, 2012, 25–42.
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- 40 Anne Burkus-Chasson, "'Clouds and mists that emanate and sink away": Shitao's "Waterfall on Mount Lu" and practices of observation in the seventeenth century', *Art History*, 19: 2, June 1996, 184.
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- 42 I agree with Clunas that they did, whereas Burkus-Chasson and Purtle believe that they did not.
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