

Brook, Timothy: *Vermeer's Hat. The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*. London: Profile Books 2008. ISBN: 978-1-8466-8112-7; 272 S.

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Masterfully written and engaging, this work makes an important contribution to the study of global history and, specifically, our understanding of the complex interactions and conflicts that brought the world together as an increasingly integrated economic unit during the seventeenth century. The story centers upon the peaceful interiors of Delft, portrayed vividly in eight paintings by the Dutch master Johannes Vermeer and his contemporaries. Starting from a close examination of everyday household objects and activities found within these masterpieces, from a map or a dish to a woman quietly weighing coins, Brook takes us on a harrowing journey to the remote corners of the earth. We encounter French fur traders in Canada caught up in alliances and intrigues among native tribes; a shipwrecked „Portuguese“ vessel whose crew also included Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Malays, and Africans; riots and massacres in Manila and Peru; and men forever separated from their native lands, either voluntarily or forced. The protagonists of all these adventures participated as unwitting actors in the weaving of an intricate web of connections that spanned the globe to acquire and supply the objects that ultimately ended up in the sitting rooms of Delft.

By examining these paintings, then, Brook not only brings us into the past, but he also uncovers the overall economic and social context of the period, and the tremendous impact it had upon the way people subsequently lived and viewed their world. For Brook, the seventeenth century represented a time of second encounters, when the initial contacts forged among different civilizations during the previous century turned into permanent ties, and novel curiosities from distant lands became everyday consumption goods. The drive behind the linkage of far-flung markets lay in the European desire to reach China and obtain its prized manufactures, such as porce-

lain, which could not be produced at the same level of quality elsewhere. It was under this powerful impetus that European ships scoured the globe, attempting to find a shorter route to the country, and, once at its shores, obtain direct access to its goods by settling Macao, Manila and other outposts along its periphery. Lacking products of their own that could sell at competitive prices in Asia, the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch traders also hunted for the one item that would allow them to buy into the vast China market: silver, desperately needed by the Ming Dynasty due to domestic shortage of the bullion amid rapid commercialization. All the rest, from the Canadian beaver trade supplying the felt hats sported by Dutch men and craze for tobacco, to the Potosí silver mines, shipwrecked sailors, and exploitation of bonded labor, either financed the effort to reach China or became an unintended consequence.

Besides drawing Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas into an interconnected web of commercial exchange unprecedented in scale, the circulation of new products and ideas, and encounters with people of different backgrounds had a profound cultural impact on each region. Brook utilizes the term „transculturation,“ borrowed from Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz, to describe these intangible but far-reaching transactions. The seventeenth century, according to Brook, was a time when cultural exchange took on the form of „selective adjustment, made through a process of mutual influence“ (p. 21). Although the introduction of exotic products, such as tobacco, and encounters with strange people from far away created anxieties in each civilization, they quickly became eased through naturalization and justification according to the norms and traditions of the host. Brook romanticizes this era of relatively equitable interaction among cultures and adopted, as its symbols, multinational shipwrecked sailors and interracial marriage. Castaways and women in faraway lands played crucial intermediary roles, serving as the frontline of contact between two cultures, who utilized their knowledge of the language and customs of one land to help the other understand and make sense of them. In contrast, Brook laments the following period of imperialism,

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when radical changes forced upon most of the world provoked „resistance, violence, and loss of identity“ (p. 21).

Just like his previous masterpiece, *Confusions of Pleasure*, Brook successfully conveys complex ideas into simple yet compelling language comprehensible to even general readers, and complements it with richness of detail. At the same time, he skillfully combines the diverse realms of social, cultural, art, and global history, synthesizing and expanding upon the previous work done by scholars like Craig Clunas and the world-systems theorists. In this manner, Brook provides agency to human subjects and adequately considers their role in forging a new, interconnected world order, even as that order shaped them in different ways. He thus avoids the pitfall of many world-systems scholars of creating overly deterministic and mechanistic models of globalization.

Yet, I am afraid that Brook may have given too much credit to the Europeans, whether Dutch, Spanish, French, or Portuguese, as the most active movers and pushers of the entire process of interconnectedness. In contrast, the „rest“ of the world comes across in his book as reluctant and passive participants helplessly and relentlessly swept up in the ensuing tide. Moreover, I cannot fully agree with his conclusions, which imply that Europeans, with the eager backing of their states, enjoyed a dynamic feedback loop of increased trade fueling an intense desire to acquire even greater knowledge about the outside world. On the other hand, governments such as China's, burdened with the protection of „tradition“ and „civilization,“ looked upon the ocean, and the products and ideas it brought to shore, not as opportunities to exploit but as sources of rampant piracy and potential subversion that must be shut out.

Although not without its merits, this variant of the impact-response narrative does not adequately take into account the important role, for instance, of overseas Chinese merchants in forging crucial linkages in the chain of connections, including the creation of their own versions of the multinational armed trading organization. Despite its suspicions, the Ming court, admittedly on account of its increasing weakness, even granted legitimate

status to the leader of the largest of these networks, Zheng Zhilong. He became a high official in Fujian and oversaw a monopoly over China's foreign trade that yielded handsome profits on a scale far greater than his competitor in neighboring Taiwan, the VOC. The Tokugawa bakufu of Japan, before the advent of its isolation policy, strongly encouraged overseas commerce and considered supporting military expeditions and colonization efforts abroad.

In addition, Brook's work focuses mostly upon the two-dimensional cultural and economic exchanges between Europeans and non-Europeans, and brushes over the equally significant interactions among the latter. For instance, he only briefly alluded to the Chinese derivation of its term for tobacco from Japanese, or Japanese Christians covertly residing in Fujian. In fact, overseas Chinese conducted trade and resided at Nagasaki in far greater numbers than the Iberians or Dutch, with many settling down, marrying local women, and enjoying close relations with daimyo. Therefore, a study of the seventeenth-century world as seen from Moon Harbor or Nagasaki would, contrary to Brook's claim, differ markedly from a Delft-centered view. These problems aside, however, I believe that, in general, the book's ability to stimulate new questions and innovative approach to global history represent valuable contributions toward a better understanding of a dynamic and complex period in human history.

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