

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

An East Asian Circulation: Asa Mattice on the USS *Juniata*, 1883–1885

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On Tuesday, May 12, 1885, 210 men from the U.S. navy warships *Juniata* and *Monocacy* marched up Shanghai's Nanjing Road, from the riverside Bund to the Shanghai racecourse, led by a sixteen-man band. There, on the recreation ground inside the track, they exercised and paraded for two hours, putting their field gun teams through their maneuvers, and in the afternoon the band played for the spectators. The weather was fine that day. Toward the end of the proceedings, before the men were paraded back through the streets of the foreign-run International Settlement to embark for the ships moored in the Huangpu River, the *North China Herald* (May 15, 1885, p. 552) recorded that “past Assistant Engineer Mattice of the *Juniata* took a photographic view of the battalion by the dry plate process.”

This seems to be Mattice's sole, fleeting appearance in Shanghai's leading English-language newspaper, although the *Juniata* and its men can be partially tracked through its pages—as they can in Mattice's glass plate negatives—as the ship sailed to and from Shanghai or was directed to Japan or Korea. That May afternoon's photographic view is not included in the accompanying *Cross-Currents* photo essay, but some forty other compositions are, and they provide a telling glimpse of the world in which the officers of the *Juniata* moved during the ship's first posting to the U.S. Navy's Asiatic Squadron from 1883 to 1885. We sail with Mattice from Canton (Guangzhou) in the south, where the ship was stationed from October to late December 1883, then to Shanghai, where it was stationed on and off until 1885, alternating with Nagasaki and Kobe in Japan, and Fuzhou in China; in between, we go to Chemulpo (Incheon) in Korea in spring 1884. The images then follow the ship west—after it left Nagasaki on July 2 “amidst hearty ‘hurrahs’ from all the men-of-war in the port” to the strains of a band playing “Home Sweet Home”—and set off via Shanghai and Fuzhou to Zanzibar and Madagascar on its way back to the United States (*North China Herald*, July 31, 1885, p. 124).

Mattice's world is one of fresh sights and vistas, cross-cultural encounters, and curiosity. Mattice looks, composes, and takes his photographs, and Asians, Americans, and Africans compose themselves and pose, or stop in their tracks to look back. He was evidently instructed to take portraits of the crew and officers on the ship, but most of the images seem to be more personal explorations. There are many fine atmospheric images here, which show a talented hand and eye at work—exploring streets and vistas, small parties and individuals, curious sights, and the awful beauty of warships. And it is also that world hinted at as the USS *Trenton* and USS *Enterprise* sailed, a world of foreign power and violence, nationalist resistance and war (figure 1). Very little of that world is overtly portrayed in Mattice's photographs, although the wreck of the Chinese warship *Yangwu*, destroyed by the French at Fuzhou on August 23, 1884, should alert us to the straits of violence through which Mattice traveled (figure 2).



Figure 1 (l). The USS *Trenton* and USS *Enterprise* at sea.

Figure 2 (r). Henry C. Wakenshaw.

The United States Asiatic Squadron was actually patrolling an East Asian conflict zone, for as the *Juniata* arrived in Asia the French were fighting Qing China's proxies, the "Black Flags" in Tonkin in northern Vietnam, for control of the territory. In August 1883, republican France declared a colonial protectorate over Tonkin, provoking a breakdown in relations with the Qing that would lead to a wider war in August 1884. It was only after the signing of the peace treaty in April 1885, and the withdrawal of Qing forces from northern Vietnam by June of that year, that the USS *Juniata* received its orders to steam back home. By the time the *Juniata* arrived on October 7, Canton had been fractious for months. A British member of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs had been charged with the murder of a Chinese man in August, an event that had aroused opinion in a city that had long been

volatile as the recurrent flashpoint in Sino-foreign relations. Rising tensions over Tonkin and the expectations of war with France had further inflamed sentiment in early September, shortly after the aforementioned Brit was found guilty of manslaughter, leading to a serious disturbance (Morse 1917, 320–321; Wright 1950, 456). The British and French concession areas on the island of Shamian (Shameen) had been attacked by rioters, and for four hours homes and businesses had been indiscriminately pillaged and burned, with no distinction made between the French and other foreigners. So the American ship joined a British and a French vessel mooring off the Bund, their joint presence a visible statement of foreign intent and solidarity, while foreign merchants formed themselves into a militia, patrolling the streets and guarding the bridges onto the island. Two months after the riot, local tensions still remained palpable and the situation volatile (Seymour 1885, 58–64). But none of that is to be seen in Mattice’s shots of an intricate wood carving (and the blurred faces of an interested crowd) (figure 3), or of a sampan on the river, but it was in fact to protect American and other foreign interests in Canton that the *Juniata* had steamed up the Pearl River Delta.



Figure 3. Gilded carving, Canton.

We could explore in detail the local violences that underpin many of these seemingly peaceful images, the fraught record of threat or war that had “opened” Asian ports and empires to foreign trade and residence after 1839 and that was now maintained by a mature infrastructure of military force of which the USS *Juniata* was a part. U.S. forces were part of this new Asian world, even if there were no American concession areas by this time in Chinese treaty ports. Chosŏn Korea had only formally opened relations with the United States in May 1882, and the first American minister, Lucius Foote, whom Mattice and other *Juniata*

officers visited in April 1884, had been in the post for less than a year. The warships of the China Station or Asiatic Squadron were deployed from hot spot to hot spot (the *Juniata* was to spend over four months in battered Fuzhou, from December 1884 onward), or more routinely anchored in this or that port to “fly the flag,” boost morale, and remind Chinese or other officials of the fact of foreign power—“to hearten the foreigners and impress the Chinese” (Johnson 1979, 205), as one naval historian put it, describing a January 1884 route march through Shanghai in which the *Juniata*’s crew took part. At this point in Shanghai, the foreign naval authorities on site were devising plans to protect the international settlement from possible Chinese attack (Johnson 1979; Little 1884). The ship might rightly have been thought an “antique” “second-rate sloop” by one of its recent captains, but it was a symbol nonetheless of the projection of continental power by the republic, and its incorporation into the multinational foreign presence in East Asia (Dewey 1913, 153, 155).

The fact of foreign power is often just oblique to the camera’s focus. The Nanjing Road is the subject of one of Mattice’s photographs here, a site of Chinese movement—rickshaws, wheelbarrows, and pedestrians—that was a popular subject for photographers, but this was the same street Mattice had paraded along with armed sailors and marines, artillery pieces, and a Gatling gun in tow (figure 4). The shopkeepers who watched him take the photograph may have watched the armed parade as well. The charmingly sweet portrait of two ships’ boys sitting cross-legged on deck with a cat and a kid goat in their laps is offset by the fact of their posing with their backs against an artillery piece (figure 5).

It would, however, be a disservice to Asa Mattice and his vision to read these forty images simply as a record of a subjugated, chastised, or turbulent Asia. The variety of images—and his evident imagination and determination to secure photographs of people and sights—attests, it seems to me, to a humane curiosity about the world through which he moved. Some of the views are familiar ones, visual clichés that others also secured, but all photographers in China, for example, seem to have lived in John Thomson’s shadow, for his 1873–1874 *Illustrations of China and Its Peoples*, and the body of work from which it drew, had established a common visual grammar for China’s foreign photographers (Cody and Terpak 2011). But even if Mattice, like others, sought out established views (this pagoda, that street scene, the boats at Fuzhou, the temple courtyard), or else proved their skills with this type of composition or that one, he has also added fresh images to the corpus of photographs from maritime Asia.



Figure 4 (l). Nankin Road, Shanghai.

Figure 5 (r). Boys with cat.

Sometimes we are lucky, and the skill, care, and attention of a photographer on the move across historic East Asia are rewarded with the survival of negatives or prints that had been carefully composed, painstakingly processed, and safely harbored while he was alive, and perhaps for a generation afterward. Most of the time, such records of moments, decisions, encounters, and individual curiosity have been lost, or are being lost yet. As I was asked to reflect on Asa Mattice's photographs, I was alerted to an online auction sale of a set of prints that oddly mirrored them, recording, it seemed, the similar East Asian circuits of a British royal naval ship a decade later, during the years of China's next major conflict, the 1894–1895 war with Japan. Unlike Mattice's collection, these prints had been broken up into small lots. The photographer was not named, and very little provenance was available. All that could be gleaned was that they had come from a house clearance in England's West Country, and from a naval family. They are well composed and are the work of a talented photographer who, like Mattice, had a personal vision. They seemed to show the East and South China Seas journeys of the HMS *Mercury* in 1895, for there were handwritten captions on the backs of the photographs showing streets or rural scenes at or near Nagasaki, Chemulpo, Hong Kong, and Fuzhou, the same sites shown here. Indeed, the HMS *Mercury* sits in a dry dock at Hong Kong just as the *Juniata* is docked at Nagasaki, and the portrait of a Japanese woman and her child echo one of a Chinese lighthouse keeper and his family (figures 6 and 7). While Mattice caught the wreck of the *Yangwu*, blasted by the French in the atrocious seven-minute Battle of Fuzhou on August 23, 1884, the British officer took a photograph of the Chinese forts at Dagou in Taiwan, probably some short time before they were pounded by Japanese guns in 1895. I purchased a few of them, but the collection is otherwise scattered (Bickers 2013).

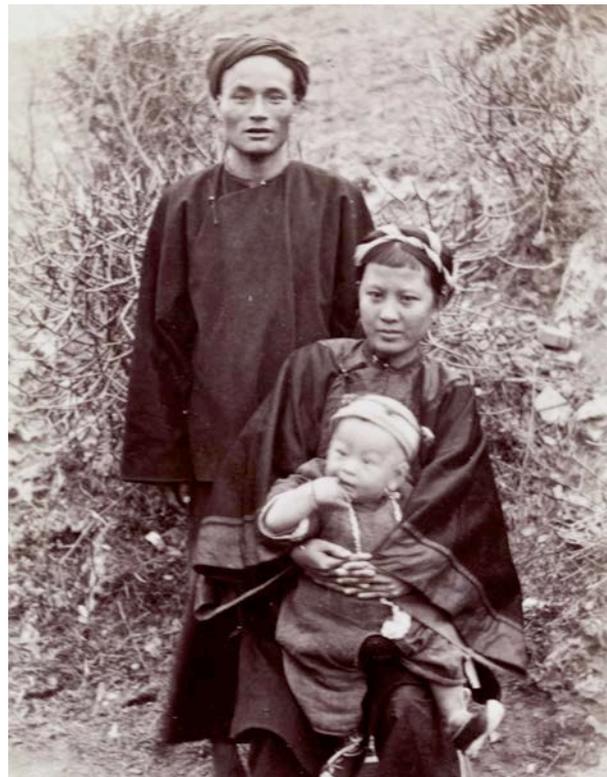


Figure 6 (l). Toyoha and Chisai.

Figure 7 (r). Lighthouse keeper and family, Takao Foochow, c. 1895. *Source*: Collection of the author.

In 1888 the movements of the *Juniata* and the activities of its crew could again be found in the Chinese and Japanese press, as the ship moved back into the U.S. naval circuit from Nagasaki to Kobe, to Shanghai (picking up the U.S. minister to China, Charles Denby, to transport him on a visit to Taiwan), Chemulpo (as fears of a popular anti-foreign outbreak intensified in June), Nagasaki, and then home again westward (Tsai 2009, 123; *North China Herald*, April 13 to September 29, 1888). The vessel, which had left New York on August 16, 1886, was again embedded in the network of foreign powers operating in East Asia. This time we do not have Mattice to record its movements, or the sights met or encounters explored by some of its crew, although we do have the journal of Lieutenant William Maxwell Wood II, who pasted into its pages his own photographs and other souvenirs (“William Maxwell Wood’s Pacific Cruise” 2012). Some of the photographs are certainly interesting, but the glass plates from Mattice’s cruise provide a more focused and singular vision, and a rare window onto the circulation of such a ship through the choppy waters of a region thrown into disequilibrium by the arrival by sea—by warship mostly—of the agents of

foreign powers. As photography steadily grew to be an easier and thereby more democratic pastime, naval personnel were to record their postings to the China seas in greater and greater numbers (and in greater and greater numbers of cheaper and cheaper prints). What the British called the “Senior Service” was always the better educated of the two branches of the armed forces, and its personnel was generally more interested in photography than soldiers (excepting army engineers). The albums from such men that the “Historical Photographs of China” project at the University of Bristol has encountered often follow a similar itinerary, moving north along the coast from Hong Kong to Shanghai and then, after 1898, to Weihaiwei in Shandong, and then back down. The sailor photographer often captures the same kind of scene, for his freedom of movement is often limited, by regulation or by economic circumstance. Always, though, there is an individual sensibility behind the camera, responding afresh to the life and landscape encountered.

Asa Mattice’s photographs should remind us, then, that while photography is not simply a tool of colonialism and of punishment, a weapon without bullets for exercising control over the camera’s subjects, the contingent facts of empire and asymmetries of power often do provide its context.¹ Mattice’s presence—in China, Japan, and Korea, on the streets of Shanghai, in the harbor at Fuzhou, and at the teahouse in Nagasaki—was predicated on the deployment of the U.S. navy power in East Asian waters, and the dispatch of the *Juniata* to the Asiatic Squadron. The ship was surveying as it sailed in Korean waters, and its officers were always observing and recording, sketching, writing, and calculating, adding to the banks of useful information built up by the data-hungry West. But Mattice’s talent and individual interests—shaped by his education, training, and culture, but nonetheless personal—also inform his roving camera as it captured photographic views and portraits as he traversed these circuits of power. We respond to the man behind the lens, just as we respond to the people and scenes that we find preserved on his glass plates.

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Notes

- 1 For the approach that delineates a “punitive photography,” see Fraser (2010, 39–52).

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