

**2003 Application for Luce Foundation Grant
for Undergraduate Research in Chinese Studies**

From:

Orin Bassoff
Reed College, MS #44
3203 SE Woodstock Blvd.
Portland, OR 97202
(503) 517-4765
orin.bassoff@reed.edu

To Whom It May Concern:

As an International and Comparative Policy Studies - History major in my junior year I have found myself asking a number of questions regarding research methods and the gathering of data. Looking for answers to these research questions has led my chosen major and an interest in cross cultural events. Having primarily studied the western views on culture I am motivated to look more closely at western perceptions of China, whether they be those of journalists, scientists, or artists, and how they interpreted the Chinese world they encountered.

In conjuncture with my education at Reed College, I have continued to develop an understanding of photography. Speaking with photographers and reading books in my spare time has deepened my knowledge of the field. Taking thousands of my own photos annually has contributed to my skill as photographer. I currently photograph in my free time as well as sell numerous photos to the Reed College administration. My application is a proposal to meld my photographic skills with my academic pursuits in a research project which requires both to succeed.

Focusing on the photography of John Thomson (1837-1921), my proposed project intends to deepen current insights into the inspiration behind his photos. A Scotsman by birth, Thomson lived and traveled in Southeast Asia and China from 1862 to 1872. First moving to Hong Kong in 1868 he then spent four years photographing China. During his residence in the country, Thomson traveled for four to five thousand miles on a series of photographic expeditions, covering much of the country, during which he took numerous photos portraying all aspects of the world he saw. My project would include the procuring of photographs related to my research question, cataloging them, and then developing an educated analysis as to how the photos came about, what Thomson intended for them to portray both independently and in his presentations, books, and albums he published, and finally how viewers of the photos have interpreted them since.

The goal of looking at Thomson's photos would be to assess the role Thomson played in influencing European views of China and how he forged a tie between the cultures. Specifically, as a westerner himself, how did he mean for his findings to be interpreted.

As mentioned above, this research project would help develop my investigative, data gathering, interpretative, and writing skills. In addition it would move me into the international arena of study while adhering to the comparative nature of my major as I look through a western lens at a Chinese subject.

Sincerely,

Orin Bassoff

Project Outline:

While Thomson's work has been cataloged in galleries, shown in books as well as on the web, and honored as one of the best visual representations of later nineteenth-century China, my preliminary research has yet to uncover a critical work which satisfyingly answers what Thomson may have intended by each of his photographs and by the collection as a whole. Some authors, such as James Ryan in *Picturing Empire : Photography and Visualization of the British Empire*, have summarily discussing how Thomson's work contributed to Europe's view of the imperialized East. Ryan broadly claims that Thomson's choice of subjects was influenced by "...aesthetic conventions of the picturesque and commercial taste with a form of geographical inquiry crafted through rhetoric of utility and accuracy."¹ In short because his photos were his source of livelihood, whose selling was spurred by a culture intrigued by the imperialized countries abroad, his photography was inherently capitalistic in nature. My work intends to avoid such generalizations and address the photographer directly by combining, a) research of how he came to take each of the photographs with, b) information he has left us himself about his journeys, and c) a comprehensive analysis of the individual images themselves. In doing this I propose to answer the specific question of how Thomson's artistic eye meshed with his western perspective and affected his photography. Consciously displaying the continuum in his work as an artist, journalist, imperialist, and entrepreneur is my general intention; this will be accomplished by breaking apart each step of Thomson's process, allowing the analysis of specific questions, and serving to clarify my larger question. The continuum can be found in Thomson's process from choosing his route, to finding guides, deciding where and when to take his individual photographs, and how he chose to market the photographs once he came back to Europe. Hopefully such inquiry will bring light to Thomson's motivation and inspiration during his photographic career.

John Thomson was not a photographer who merely sold his photos. He was a prolific lecturer who frequently used his photos while back in Europe to illustrate presentations. In a time of imperialism and exploration his works strongly colored the public's opinion on China and influenced the imperial notions of the time. While authors such as Richard Ovenden, in *John Thomson (1837-1921): Photographer* (1997), comment on the stylistic qualities of Thomson's work in conjunction with a biography of the photographer's exploits, there has yet to be a comprehensive discussion of the connection between the photos and the influence they had on the developing western notions of China and the Asia.² Originally Thomson's stay in Hong Kong was that of a merchant photographer selling his work primarily to the local and occasionally to the traveling westerner. After settling down and becoming comfortable with the country he partook in four lengthy journeys and a number of smaller trips through China. These expeditions were of his own accord and, in my view, reflective of Thomson's personal objectives. Photographs from these journeys came to illustrate many a text, originally in the form of lithographs made from the photos (as they were much cheaper to reproduce in the late 19th and early 20th century), but later the photos were used as well. His photographs quickly became popular as a mainstay of visual representation of China for the western world at the time. In short this research will be looking at the photos and photographer hand in hand as an integrated duo, to understand one of the first Europeans to bridge the visual gap between east and west. What can

¹ Ryan, James R. *Picturing Empire : Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. pp.65.

² Ovenden, Richard. *John Thomson (1837-1921) : Photographer / Richard Ovenden ; Foreword by Sir David Puttnam ; Specialist Photographic Printing and a Chapter by Michael Gray*. 1st. ed: The Stationery Office Limited, Edinburgh, 1997.

be learned from this bridging process? By breaking new ground in my research I intend to exemplify the specific steps in the cultural bridging process, exploring what led Thomson to take the photos he did, how and why they were distributed in Europe and what role Thomson played in their circulation, and finally how they were received by the public. As mentioned before it seems critical to view Thomson as a vital agent who influenced, if not created, the process from start to finish.

Particularly a course on Rural China, Reed HIST 324, taken during Fall 2002, has prepared me for the study of this late nineteenth-century period. This course dealt with representations, both textual and visual, of peasants and rural China by foreign travelers in the 19th Century. Arthur Smith's book *Village Life in China*, 1970, is one of a number of books we read and discussed which illustrated western insights into China. Other political science and history courses as addressed in my resume have also prepared me for the political and social aspects of Thomson's life and work. My photographic background will serve directly in my analysis of the photographs as well as helping my understanding of Thomson's motivations and challenges.

The proposed course of research would consist of approximately ten weeks broken into preliminary research at Reed College, archival research in London, England, and finally analysis of the research with an article as the final goal to be conducted back at Reed.

The first period of my study would be devoted to researching a) what specific aspects or excursions of Thomson's extensive photography career in China will best suit my intentions and b) which photographs will best suit further inquiry into these aspects. The Wellcome Trust Medical Photographic Library, London, has an extensive searchable online database containing an almost complete collection of existing Thomson photographs. Small electronic proofs of the photographs in their collection allows for preliminary viewing. These proofs examined in juncture with my reading of secondary sources on Thomson will result in a list of photographs for use in my research. Once at the Wellcome Library, as discussed in the second segment, this preliminary research will help me to pinpoint which photos I will need to order for the final stages of my research. Currently a search of the Wellcome Library online database for Thomson's photographs taken in China results in 434 individual photographs and many more exist which are yet to be digitized and included online. Analyzing these photos will take a large part of the time in London so as much preparation as possible beforehand will be useful, thus the need for full time research during the first part of the summer. Lodging while at Reed will be in a Reed College Apartment, which has already been reserved. I intend to first find a large number of Thomson's China photos, consisting of those published by him, in texts written about him, and those who have used his photos in photo anthologies of China. This list in juncture with the Wellcome online database will afford me the ability to create a very useful tool for use once I arrive in London and give me an idea of what to expect in the photo collection. I will also want to create a list of information I need to gather about Thomson's career. As a member of the Royal Geographical Society, also in London, Thomson both presented to the society and contributed to its collection in the form of photographs and writings. There is likely to be numerous transcripts, documents and other archived information/data in the Royal Geographical Society's library of substantial interest to me. Preliminary work for the RGS Library will unfortunately be limited to my research in secondary sources as the library has no electronic catalogue available. A number of authors in my working bibliography have referenced the RGS Library so it is clear that this task will not be unfathomable. During preparation, appointments will be made to view the original photographs and conduct research in the archives at both London libraries as most are available to the public by appointment only. During this intensive preparation here at Reed College I will have the generous support Douglas Fix, Associate

Professor of History and Humanities. Fix's specialty is Modern China and Japan; he has also conducted research of his own on Thomson in regards to Taiwan.³

The second segment, two weeks, will consist of data collection at the Wellcome Trust Medical Photographic Library and Royal Geographical Society both in London, England. With the large collections at these libraries the bibliography developed from the first part of my project will become critical. Maximizing my efficiency at the libraries will be possible as I will have narrowed down the specific dates and places I am interested in, allowing me to get right to work culling through the photographs and archives. I have found inexpensive lodging at the Generator Hostel only a few blocks away from the Wellcome library and fairly close to the Royal Geographical Society so transportation to and from the library each day will not be necessary. Viewing the collection will afford me the opportunity to develop some broader views of Thomson's methods and interests first hand, while honing down the preliminary work completed previously in Portland. Finally, I will narrow down to 20 or 30 useful photos, order prints or slides of them, and return home.

The third stage of my research will be focused on carefully coming to educated answers regarding my specific questions. Combining my research from both libraries with research before leaving for London, I believe I will have enough information to answer my questions and elucidate the continuum found in Thomson's process from choosing his route, to finding guides, deciding where and when to take his individual photographs, and how he chose to market the photographs once he came back to Europe. Finally I will begin to bring light to Thomson's motivation and inspiration during his photographic career.

In completion of my research project a paper will be drafted discussing my research and findings. As such a paper could be longer than the fifteen page limit given by the Luce Foundation Grant's guidelines so a shorter secondary final report will need to be written for my oral presentation. This oral presentation will most likely include slides of the photos acquired in London as a supplement to the oral presentation. Another possibility would be putting up of a gallery in Vollum Campus Center Lounge or other location on campus. Any gallery presentation would have to be cleared with the copyright policies of the library from which the work came. As such, I do not yet know if a gallery presentation is a viable option. The longer paper, final report, slideshow, and possible gallery will serve to illustrate my findings and make them accessible to the Reed community.

³ See "<http://academic.reed.edu/formosa/index.html>" for a summary of Professors Fix's research on Thomson in Taiwan.

Contact Information:

The Wellcome Trust Medical
Photographic Library
210 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 7611 8348
Fax: +44 (0)20 7611 8577
email: medphoto.info@wellcome.ac.uk

Royal Geographical Society
(with The Institute of British
Geographers)
Sarah Strong, Archives Officer
1 Kensington Gore
London SW7 2AR
England, UK
Tel: 44 (0)20 7591 3050
Fax: 44 (0)20 7591 3001
email: archives@rgs.org

Royal Geographical Society Picture
Library
1 Kensington Gore
London SW7 2AR
Tel: 44 020 7591 3060
Fax: 44 020 7591 3061
email: pictures@rgs.org

The Generator Hostel
Compton Place
(off 37 Tavistock Place)
London, WC1H 9SD, UK
Tel: 0044(0)20-7388 7666
Fax: 0044(0)20-7388 7644

Professor Douglas Fix
History Department
Reed College
3203 SE Woodstock Boulevard
Portland, OR 97202
Tel: (503) 777-7422
Fax: (503) 777-7776.
email: douglas.fix@reed.edu
<http://academic.reed.edu/formosa/index.html>

Working Bibliography:

1. De Crespigny, Rafe. *China; the Land and Its People*. New York,: St. Martin's Press, 1971.
2. Gernsheim, Helmut. "Correspondence; John Thomson." *History of Photography* 4, no. 4 (1980): 343.
3. Lehr, Janet. "John Thomson (1837-1921)." *History of Photography* 4, no. 1 (1980): 67-71.
4. Ovenden, Richard. *John Thomson (1837-1921) : Photographer / Richard Ovenden ; Foreword by Sir David Puttnam ; Specialist Photographic Printing and a Chapter by Michael Gray*. 1st. ed: The Stationery Office Limited, South Gyle Crecent, Edinburgh EH12 9EB, 1997.
5. Ryan, James R. *Picturing Empire : Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
6. Thomson, J. *China and Its People in Early Photographs : An Unabridged Reprint of the Classic 1873/4 Work*. New York: Dover Publications, 1982.
7. Thomson, J. *Illustrations of China and Its People*. London,: S. Low Marston Low and Searle, 1873.

8. Thomson, J. *The Straits of Malacca, Siam, and Indo-China : Travels and Adventures of a Nineteenth-Century Photographer, Oxford in Asian Hardback Reprints*. Singapore ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
9. Thomson, J. *Through China with a Camera, by John Thomson*. Westminster,,: A. Constable & Co., 1898.
10. Thomson, J., and Judith Balmer. *Thomson's China : Travels and Adventures of a Nineteenth-Century Photographer*. Hong Kong ; Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
11. Vinograd, Richard. "Satire and Situation : Images of the Artist in Late Nineteenth-Century China." *Phoebus* 8 (1998): 110-33.
12. White, Stephen. *John Thomson : A Window to the Orient*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.
13. White, Stephen. *John Thomson : Life and Photographs*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1985.

Resume:

Educational Experiences:

Classes Completed At Reed College:

- Art – ART 282, Sculpture II, Spring 2002
- Economics – ECON 201, Intro to Economic Analysis, Spring 2001
ECON 383, International Trade, Spring 2002
- English – ENG 205, Intro Fiction: Colonial & Post Colonial Novel, Fall 2001
ENG 205, Intro Fiction: Early Novel 1719-1847, Spring 2002
- History – HIST 275, Culture & Society in 19 Century America, Fall 2001
HIST 301, European Diplomatic History, 1848-1914, Fall 2002
HIST 324, Rural China, Fall 2002
- Humanities – Hum 110, West Humanities: Greece & Rome, Fall 2000
Hum 110, West Humanities: Greece & Rome, Spring 2001
- Math – MATH 111, Calculus I, Fall 2000
- Physics – PHYS 100, General Physics I, Fall 2000
- Political Science – POL 200, Political Philosophy, Fall 2001
POL 357, War: Causes, Cures & Consequences, Fall 2002
POL 387, Democratization, Spring 2002
- Psychology – PSY 122, Intro to Psychology II, Spring 2001

Related Experience:

'98 – present

Photographer

Self run photography business for both private and business applications.

- Digital photography for Reed College News and Publications, Admissions, Student Activities, Reed Arts Weeks and others, with photographs in the Reed newsletters, college catalog, website etc.
- Photographs at personal sittings and of events for private individuals.
- Personal photography as a hobby.

Other Experience:

Aug. '01 – present

Gray Fund Committee Member, Reed College, Portland, OR

- The Gray Fund committee serves as an idea-generating body for sponsored events which hold a broad appeal to the community and which Reed College would be unable to provide otherwise. The Gray Fund is financed by an endowment from Betty Gray.

Feb '97 - present

Outdoor Education and Program Facilitator, Nevada City, CA

EnCompass (Center for Holistic Education), a Non-Profit organization for Children and Families

- Ropes Course group facilitation with families, corporate groups, sports teams, grade and high school students, and At-Risk youth.
- Camp councilor with leadership responsibilities including co leading groups of ten to sixty participants as well as co-lead of multiple day childcare venues.
- Whitewater canoe and raft guide for multiple day trips with families, classes, and home-schooled youth.

Budget of projected expenses:

Research at the London Wellcome Institute Library	
Flight from Seattle, WA to London Heathrow airport	Approx. \$800.00
Room and board for 14 days: (hostel room shared w/three other people £210.00; board at approx. £25.00 per day for £350.00 total board)	£560.00 or approx. \$895.00
Incidentals in London	\$200.00
Research fees for the Wellcome Institute Library	
35mm slides of Thomson's prints: would need approximately 25	25 @ £5.88 (\$9.50) each = \$237.50
Living expenses for full time work in Portland	
Rent for room \$300.00 per month for two months	\$600.00
Board \$35.00 per week for eight weeks	\$280.00
Miscellaneous expenses	
Printing fees and Incidentals	\$50
Total Funding Required	\$3062.50

(Additional outside funding will be sought to cover gallery expenses if the photos can be shown on the Reed College campus).