



British Naturalists in Qing China

Fa-ti FAN

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In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Western scientific interest in China focused primarily on natural history. Prominent scholars in Europe as well as Westerners in China, including missionaries, merchants, consular officers, and visiting plant hunters, eagerly investigated the flora and fauna of China. Yet despite the importance and extent of this scientific activity, it has been entirely neglected by historians of science.

This book is the first comprehensive study on this topic. In a series of vivid chapters, Fa-ti Fan examines the research of British naturalists in China in relation to the history of natural history, of empire, and of Sino-Western relations. The author gives a panoramic view of how the British naturalists and the Chinese explored, studied, and represented China's natural world in the social and cultural environment of Qing China.

Using the example of British naturalists in China, the author argues for reinterpreting the history of natural history, by including neglected historical actors, intellectual traditions, and cultural practices. His approach moves beyond viewing the history of science and empire within European history and considers the exchange of ideas, aesthetic tastes, material culture, and plants and animals in local and global contexts. This compelling book provides an innovative framework for understanding the formation of scientific practice and knowledge in cultural encounters.

Table of Contents:

Acknowledgments

Introduction

I. The Port

1. Natural History in a Chinese Entrepôt
2. Art, Commerce, and Natural History

II. The Land

3. Science and Informal Empire
4. Sinology and Natural History
5. Travel and Fieldwork in the Interior

Epilogue

Appendix: Selected Biographical Notes

Abbreviations

Notes

Index

Fa-ti Fan's study of the encounter between the British culture of the naturalist and the Chinese culture of the Qing is both a delight and a revelation. The topic has scarcely been addressed by historians of science, and this work fills important gaps in our knowledge of British scientific practice in a noncolonial context and of Chinese reactions to Western science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition to the culture of Victorian naturalists and Sinology, Fan shows an admirable grasp of visual representation in science, Chinese taxonomic schemes, Chinese export art, British imperial scholarship, and journeys of exploration. His treatment of the China trade and descriptions of Chinese markets and nurseries are especially welcome. I learned a great deal, and I strongly recommend this book.

--Philip Rehbock, author of *Philosophical Naturalists: Themes in Early Nineteenth-Century British Biology*

By focusing on the experiences of British naturalists in China during a time when it was gradually being opened up to foreign influences, Fan makes at least two important contributions to history of science: He gives us an authoritative study of British naturalists in China (as far as I know the only one of its kind), and he forces us to rethink some of our categories for doing history of science, including how we conceive of the relationship between science and imperialism, and between Western naturalist and native. Fan's scholarship is meticulous, with careful attention to detail, and his prose is clear, controlled, and succinct.

--Bernard Lightman, editor of *Victorian Science in Context*

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