

**A Journey
to the East**

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LI GUT'S

A New Account of a Trip Around the Globe

*Translated with an Introduction
by Charles Desnoyers*

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Translator's Preface

Shortly before 11:00 P.M. on Thursday, May 10, 2001, Michele Ridge, the wife of the governor of Pennsylvania, and John Street, the mayor of Philadelphia, stepped down from a horse-drawn carriage and, escorted by local dignitaries, some of whom were turned out in their best nineteenth-century finery for the occasion, ascended the steps of Memorial Hall in the city's vast Fairmount Park to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the opening of the American Centennial Exposition. Memorial Hall had housed the exposition's painting and sculpture collection and had also been the site of the Centennial's inaugural ceremonies in 1876. Specifically designed to be the only major building left standing at the conclusion of the fair, its role as a cultural repository took on a second life when it was transformed into Philadelphia's first art museum at the close of the exposition in November.

Among the most significant objects the new museum inherited from the Centennial were those remaining from the Chinese and Japanese exhibits, which, to this day, constitute a vital core of the institution's East Asian holdings. During the museum's own 125th anniversary celebration—the centerpiece of the city's Centennial festivities—these works were featured prominently in a special exhibit and the accompanying literature emphasized the considerable influence they exercised on late nineteenth-century painting, design, architecture, and decorative arts. But while observers from a host of countries recognized at the time the sensation these objects had created at the Centennial, their significance was captured most appreciatively by a lone Chinese commentator: a

young, obscure customs clerk named Li Gui whose participation, though unmentioned in his own country's exhibition brochures, would soon generate considerable notice among the highly placed both at home and abroad.

At the suggestion of a member of the staff of China's multinational Imperial Maritime Customs Service, Li's original charge had been to keep a record of the Centennial in the service of the empire's recent efforts toward industrialization and increased participation in international affairs. Soon, however, from his base in Philadelphia, Li expanded the scope of his fact-finding to include trips to other major cities along the eastern seaboard. As the Centennial drew to a close, he continued on to Liverpool and London, Paris and Marseilles, through the Suez Canal, and on to Aden, Ceylon, Vietnam, and Hong Kong, before returning to Shanghai. What began as a simple record of a historic event had become an epic travelogue; more than this, the direction and character of his journey were seen by Li as nothing less than proof to any doubting readers of the true shape and size of the world. Along the way, the unique position he enjoyed as an unofficial dignitary allowed him access to the notable and powerful while ensuring that he had free rein to comment on them as he saw fit. In so doing he has left us with one of the most significant and, outside China, least-known travel accounts of the nineteenth century.

Just how significant Li's account remains today in China was driven home to me on a dreary October morning in 2002 as I retraced his steps in a now empty Memorial Hall, accompanied by a film crew from China Central Television's program *News Probe*. They were in the United States filming a documentary on the life of another cross-cultural expositor, the educator and diplomat Yung Wing. Li was an admirer of Yung and had visited him at his Education Mission in Hartford, Connecticut. But the symbolic centerpiece of their connection was formed by the visit of the mission's 113 students to the Centennial, where Li accompanied them to various exhibits and interviewed them on their lives in America, after which they were feted by President Grant, the Centennial Commissioners, and assorted foreign dignitaries. In one respect, the incident represented the high-water mark of nineteenth-century Sino-American cooperation: Within a few years, the mission was recalled by its sponsors because of its purported cultural com-

promises, while the enactment of exclusion legislation soured relations between the United States and China for decades to come. Thus, as I sat on camera in Memorial Hall reading Li's account of the visit of the students to a Chinese audience, I could not help but be struck by the ironic juxtaposition of cultural roles the occasion presented. By turns overwhelmed and exhilarated, with my own lines of mediation between the strange and the familiar increasingly blurred, it later occurred to me that what I experienced that morning must in some small way have paralleled what Li encountered here a century and a quarter before.

This is a historian's translation. By that I mean both that I am a historian by inclination and training, and that the material itself, owing to its depth of description rather than its polish or profundity, will most likely be of interest primarily to other students of history. Though certainly observing the conventions of good literary style, Li's narrative is rather straightforward, and what he chiefly chooses to recount are salient aspects of industry, material culture, social institutions, manners, and mores, rather than fine points of the literature, philosophy, or other intellectual productions of his hosts. Similarly, as a work of translation, I expect its primary audience will not be China specialists, who in most cases are capable of reading Li's account in the original, but rather those looking for uncommon and underutilized primary sources in convenient form: scholars and students of Asian studies, Asian-American studies, American history more generally, and especially those in the rapidly expanding field of world history. Needless to say, I welcome comments and suggestions from all fields.

The title under which I have placed Li's *Huan you diqiu xin lu* (A new account of a trip around the globe) is *A Journey to the East*. Students of Chinese history will of course recognize this as a play on the title of the beloved, fantastical stories of the adventures of the seventh-century Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang, *Xiyou ji* (A journey to the west). But it is also the heart of the title of the last section of Li's account and the part that contains his day-to-day journal entries. As such, I believe it to be evocative of the whole on several levels. First, it states clearly the direction in which Li is constantly moving, stressing to his readers in graphic fashion the true configuration of the physical world—as does his choice of the term *diqu*, or “globe,” in his account's full title. Second, it suggests

that like Xuan Zang, whose quest for authenticity compelled him to seek the seminal texts of Buddhism among practitioners in the monasteries of India, Li saw his task of evaluating technologies and institutions for use in China as inseparable from observing their operation in their places of origin. Finally, my use of this title is an invitation to readers outside of China to make a provocative shift in perspective: to see themselves as “other” and their own backyards as someone else’s back of beyond; to empathetically enter a realm historically inhabited by the greater portion of the world’s people, for whom going to the “West” meant crossing the Great Eastern Ocean to remote, exotic lands situated, as Li put it, “on the back of the globe.”

While parts of Li’s account have appeared in other places in translation, most notably in R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee’s *Land without Ghosts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), this volume represents the first full-length treatment of it in English. A great many people have contributed to this project over the years, and space permits me to mention only a few of them. I wish first to thank the Association for Asian Studies and the China and Inner Asia Council for a generous grant in 1995, which enabled me to start this project. Thanks are also due to La Salle University for arranging a research leave for me in the fall of 1996. Special thanks are in order for the reference staff at the Free Library of Philadelphia, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia City Archives, Eastern State Penitentiary, the United States Mint in Philadelphia, Independence Seaport Museum, Imperial Maritime Customs Project, the New York Historical Society, Connecticut Historical Society, Antioch College, University of California at Berkeley, University of Pittsburgh, and the Harvard-Yenching Library, all of whom furnished materials for this project. Eithne Bearden, Stephen Breedlove, and Bernetta Robinson-Doane of La Salle’s Connolly Library deserve special mention for their skill and determination in ferreting out obscure sources for me. Special mention is also due to Felice Fisher, Lisa Robertson, and Adriana Proser of the East Asian Art Gallery in the Philadelphia Art Museum, for their help with materials on Chinese participation in the Centennial from the museum’s archives. Signal help in navigating the difficult terrain of classical Chinese sources was

received with great thanks from Michael Nylan of the University of California at Berkeley. Similar thanks for Japanese terms go to Mariko and William La Fleur of the University of Pennsylvania. Help from an unexpected quarter was gratefully received from Jingcao Hu and Qian Gang of China Central Television and An-Min Chung of Drexel University. It goes without saying that my sincerest thanks go as well to the editorial staff of the University of Michigan Press.

Translator's
Preface

Far more than my own efforts, this book is the product of the support and advice of my friend and mentor for more than twenty years, Professor S. M. Chiu, formerly of Temple University, and his wife, Helen. I can never fully repay them for their kindness and expertise through all of those afternoons spent poring over this text at their house, fortified by tea and cake. I can only offer again to them my profoundest thanks. Needless to say, any errors that remain are mine alone.

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Finally, this book is dedicated to a person of unsurpassed courage, admirable insight, piercing intelligence, exquisite patience, and most especially an all-encompassing sense of humor, my wife and partner through all, Jacki. "Many have done excellently, but you exceed them all." *Wo ai ni.*