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**Lee Fulton**  
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**Royal  
Geographical  
Society**  
with IBG

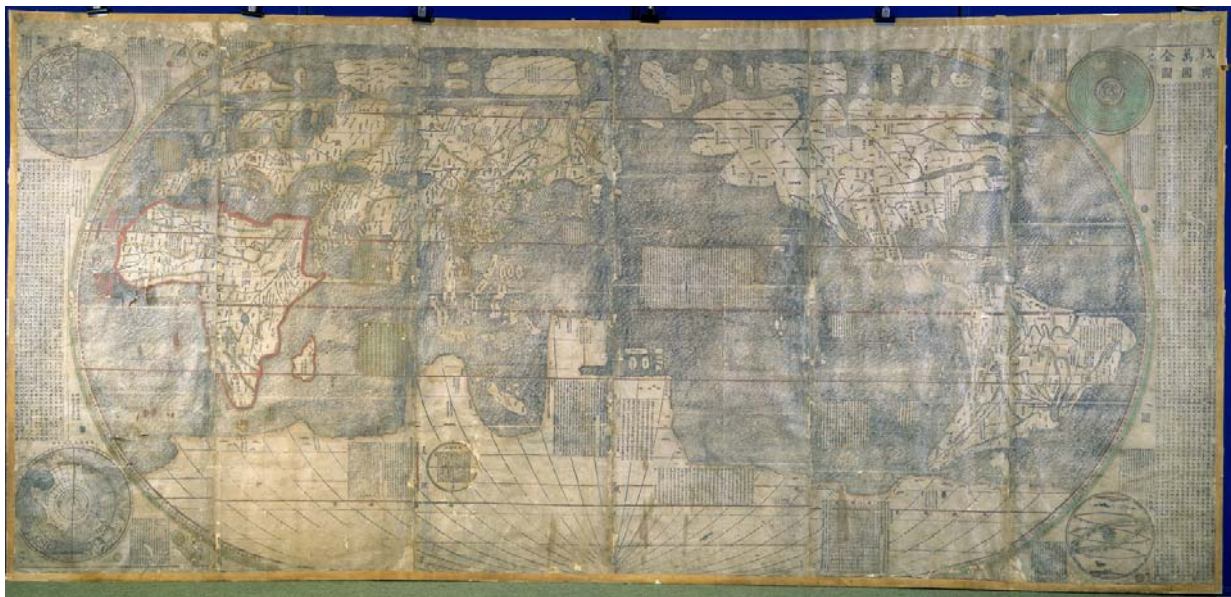
Advancing geography  
and geographical learning

- Exploring the Length, Breadth and Heights of China

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These explorations traverse the different frontiers of science and technology, cultures and societies, trade and investment and growth from ancient China to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as evidenced by the Chinese collection in the Royal Geographical Society (RGS), published books, media articles and reports on China.

According to the late Dr Joseph Needham (1900-1995), the four great inventions of ancient China are: compass, gunpowder, papermaking and printing. His attribution of the compass, gunpowder and printing to the Chinese has not been universally accepted by other scholars.<sup>1</sup> Needham established that Europe acquired the compass from the Chinese and although the earliest Chinese compasses did not have needles, he acknowledged that the Chinese pioneered the world's first dial and pointer devices in the third century AD.<sup>2</sup> Within the RGS collection is a magnificent geomantic compass of approximately 10 inches in diameter and contained in a large metal case. Such geomantic compasses are used for *feng shui* consultations such as where a house should be built or a city laid out. Gunpowder was invented in China in the ninth century AD by alchemists who were seeking the elixir of immortality rather than by those people seeking better weapons for warfare and destruction. In the late twelfth century, gunpowder came to the attention of the West and fireworks were one of the first forms of gunpowder to reach the West. Temple explained that the Chinese invented paper by the second century BC. He stated that unlike paper in the modern world, which is mostly made of wood pulp, paper in the ancient times involved plant fibres in most cases. It is: "the sheet of sediment which results from the settling of a layer of disintegrated fibres from the settling of a layer of disintegrated fibres from a watery solution onto a flat mould, the water being drained away, and the deposited layer removed and dried."



'Kunyu Wanguo Quantu' by Matteo Ricci, 1644

Printing on paper and silk through engraving on wood block arose in China in the eighth century AD.<sup>2</sup> An excellent example of wood block printing on paper is the Father Matteo Ricci's Chinese World Map presented to the RGS by Dr. W Lockhart in 1858. The woodcut map of the world on 6 sheets, which is a 1644 copy of the original edition dated 1602, is currently hanging on the East Wall of the Map Room in the RGS.

In my search through the RGS photographic collection for China, I was looking for a diverse range of photographs encapsulating the social history, cultures and economic growth of China. In China there are 56 ethnic groups and the Han ethnic group constitutes 93.3 per cent of the population in the

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia website

<sup>2</sup> Robert Temple; Introduction by Dr Joseph Needham FRS, FBA; "The Genius of China – 3,000 Years of science, Discovery & invention" (Third edition published in 2007 by André Deutsch)



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spending from various levels of government, domestic private enterprises and foreign capital investments.



Elderly woman and grandchild, Beijing, © Brenda Friel; Kajgar Chinese Women-Small Feet, 1880-88

Is there gender equality in China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Looking back to the old patriarchal system of China there were practices such as women foot binding and concubines, which are considered as derogatory practices in today's society.

With the Communist revolution of 1949, the publication of the current version of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and legislation, women in China have entered into almost all walks of life and this represents one of the highest female employment rates in the world. Women in China accounted for 8% of the total workforce in 1949, rising to 31% in 1978 and reaching 46% in 1995.<sup>9</sup> Currently, the rules of the Chinese government require that professional women working for government institutions and companies to retire at the age of 55, while men retire at the age of 60. Female blue-collar workers have to retire at the age of 50 while their male colleagues retire when they reach the age of 55.<sup>10</sup> Hence, although gender equality has improved in terms of feudal norms and rituals, there is no doubt that there is institutional discrimination for those women employed in China's public sector in regard to inequality in retirement age thresholds. According to a national study on gender assessment conducted in 2005, gender inequality was existing in the poverty-stricken rural areas of China. Professor Li Xiaoyun led the study group which surveyed 10 villages in the poorest rural areas, which included Sichuan, Gansu, Shaanxi and Jiangxi provinces and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Professor Li said that: "In poverty-stricken areas, men and women are quite unequal in political rights" and furthermore, "Women are less involved in villager autonomy elections and account for a very low percentage of the village committee" as "women were not nominated in the election process".<sup>11</sup> On a more positive note, and in the echoes of Mao Zedong's famous statement that "women should hold up half the sky", it was announced at a press conference by Huang Qingyi, vice president and first secretary of the All-China Women's Federation Secretariat, that the proportion of female officials at the various levels of China's government and state institutions has risen to 40%. She also said that "the participation of women in politics has increased enormously" and cited that currently there are nine female state leaders.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations Development Programme China website on Gender Equality in China (updated December 12, 2001)

<sup>10</sup> Xinhua News Agency October 30, 2003 on china.org.cn website

<sup>11</sup> People's Daily Online September 8, 2005

<sup>12</sup> Xinhua News Agency May 16, 2007

Scaling the heights of China could be demonstrated pictorially through the numerous Mount Everest expedition photographs archived at the Royal Geographical Society.



The way to the summit from the highest point of the final climb, by T H Somervell, 1922

Within a contemporary context, over the last two decades the high points are those challenges for China in maintaining a stable macroeconomic environment and in reforming the financial and legislative systems. On September 17, 2001, the World Trade Organization (WTO) successfully concluded negotiations lasting 15 years on China's accession to the WTO and formal approval was given at the WTO's Ministerial Conference in Doha on 10 November 2001.<sup>13</sup> At the WTO's first Trade Policy Review of China on 19 and 21 April 2006, it was recognised by Members that China has taken considerable steps in reforming its economy and the continuation of China's trade liberalisation policy. Such reform has resulted in China's rapid economic growth, which has been at around 9% over nearly two decades and bringing about an eleven-fold increase in per capita income between 1978 and 2005. The percentage of China's population living below the poverty line has declined from 73% in 1990 to 32% in 2003. Also, trade and investment reforms have led to China becoming the world's third largest trader. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported in its 'Economy Survey of China, 2005' that China's rapid pace of economic change is likely to be sustained for some time.<sup>14</sup> However, the European Union's trade commissioner, Peter Mandelson has recently described China's ballooning trade surplus as "unsustainable" after figures showed that the surplus had risen by almost 75 per cent, year on year, in May 2007.<sup>15</sup> He said that cheap labour was only part of the reason for booming exports, and added: "The rest of the explanation is that it is due to unnecessary barriers and restrictions. If China wants to keep our trade relationship on an even keel then it is going to have to recognise the misgivings that exist in Europe about those policies which in our view restrict European companies entering its market." He also said that China has made no progress in tackling piracy despite an agreement to tackle infringement of intellectual property rights (IPRs). Similarly, many WTO's Members have expressed concern that the enforcement of IPRs by China remained a problem despite China's efforts to address the issue through the setting up of a complete legislative and enforcement mechanism for IPRs and the raising of public awareness of IPRs.<sup>16</sup>

The OECD survey also mentioned that five of the ten most polluted cities in the world are in China. On June 4, 2007 two days before the start of the G8 plus six summit, China unveiled a 62-page action plan on climate change. Although "China will put climate change at the heart of its economic and energy policies but this effort is without committing itself to quantified emissions reduction targets".<sup>17</sup>

The Chinese are perceived to be passionate for gambling and considerable amounts of money could be involved with "mahjong", a domino-like game involving four people. Mao Zedong prohibited playing mahjong as he thought that a working man ought to spend his money on his family and those who play

<sup>13</sup> World Trade Organization website

<sup>14</sup> OECD website

<sup>15</sup> Financial Times Tuesday June 12 2007

<sup>16</sup> World Trade Organization website

<sup>17</sup> Guardian Unlimited Monday June 4 2007

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mahjong cannot make a Giant Leap Forward.<sup>18</sup> Mahjong was banned in mainland China in 1949, but after the Cultural Revolution, the game was revived. In Hong Kong, Macao and elsewhere however, mahjong has always been popular, particularly with those who are Cantonese speakers.<sup>19</sup>



Playing dominoes (mahjong) © Michael Hughes

Going for a gamble in a modern economy has been demonstrated by tens of millions of Chinese who were queuing as share punters on China's Shanghai and Shenzhen stock exchanges. China's stockmarket is booming as groups of small investors are crowding around computer terminals to carry out their trades, whilst keeping an eye on the prices as they flicker across big electronic screens at branches of securities trading firms.<sup>20</sup> Over the past four years with more installation of broadband internet connections and the use of mobile telephony, more people in China are playing the markets including working people, students, pensioners and housewives. Recently, in order to stop China's stockmarket frenzy, the Beijing authorities curbed it with tripling stamp duty on share trading, causing tumbles in Chinese shares.<sup>21</sup> With so many employees spending their work time trading stocks online, some companies have introduced fines as a deterrent. As many students were known to have been trading shares on the stock exchanges, it led to the Chinese education ministry putting out a warning telling them to focus on their studies. While there are cases of people pawning their houses to buy shares, it is believed that the Chinese middle class has substantial savings to fall back on in the event of a stock market meltdown. It is estimated that personal bank deposits in China are currently worth around \$2,000bn (£1,010bn).

With the transformation of China over the last decade in terms of political, economic and social changes, it would be interesting to watch and track further changes to be experienced by China over the next few years and decades, to determine whether higher peaks have been reached!

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<sup>18</sup> Mahjong News website

<sup>19</sup> Wikipedia website

<sup>20</sup> The Economist, April 28 2007

<sup>21</sup> Financial Times, Thursday May 31 2007, Tuesday June 5 2007, Friday June 8 2007.