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Chinese Cultural Studies:
Xia Qinggao Hsieh Ch'ing kao
Selections from The Hai-lu (1783-1797 CE)

From: The Great Chinese Travelers, ed. Jeanette Mirskyl, (1964), 266-71, repr. In Mark A. Kishlansky, ed., Sources of World History, Volume II, (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995), pp. 126-28

[Kishlansky introduction] While there are many travelogues in which Europeans describe the new cultures they encountered during their travels abroad, there are far fewer accounts of Europe by non-Western observers. Even as late as the end of the eighteenth century, well-informed Chinese only knew what they had been told of Europe by European travelers to China. Thus The Hai-Lu of Hsieh Ch'ing kao is an important travel account, which reverses the conventional viewpoint. Hsieh Ch'ing kao traveled throughout Western Europe during a 14--year period between 1783 and 1797. He worked, presumably as an able bodied seamen, on a Chinese merchant ship.

Hsieh Ch 'ing kao (1765-1822) was illiterate and went blind during the course of his travels. Thus the places he had seen were deeply etched in his memory. Toward the end of his life, he dictated his account to one of the local schoolboys. While it is possible that he traveled to America, as his excerpt suggests, it is more likely that he heard tales of the invention of the steamship rather than saw one.

Portugal (called Ta-hsi-yang, or Pu-luchi-shih)". . . has a climate colder than that of Fukien and Kwangtung. Her chief seaport [Lisbon] faces the south and is protected by two forts manned by 2000 soldiers and equipped with about four or five hundred cannons. Whenever any ship calls at the port, it is first examined by officials to see whether there is any case of smallpox on board. If there is not, the ship is permitted to enter; otherwise, the ship must wait outside the harbor until all traces of the disease have disappeared. Places of importance are seven in all: Lisbon, Coimbra, Guarda, Vizeu, Villa Real, A-la-chia [?], and Chaves. All these towns are densely settled, garrisoned by heavy forces, and are connected by good land and water routes.

"The people are white in color, and are fond of cleanliness. As to the dress, the men usually wear trousers and short upper clothes, both very much

tight-fitting. On special occasions, another piece is worn over the shirt, short in the front and long in the back, just like the wings of a cicada. Women also wear short and tight-fitting upper-clothes, but instead of trousers they wear skirts which are sometimes eight or nine folds deep. Among the poor this is made of cotton among the rich, silk. When rich women go out they often wear a veil made of fine black silk. Both men and women wear leather shoes.

"Monogamy is the prevailing practice. It only when either the husband or wife has died that the other may remarry. The family of the prospective bridegroom takes particular pains to find out the size of the bride's dowry before marrying her. Marriages between persons of the same surname are permitted but they are prohibited between children of the same parent. All marriages must receive the sanction of the Church and it is only after the priest has pronounced his benediction on the couple that a marriage is considered concluded. The marriage ceremonies usually take place in the church.

"Religion plays a dominant part in the lives of these people. Whenever anyone would commit a crime, he would go to the priest in the church and confess his sins and repent, after which he would be absolved by the priest. The priest is strictly forbidden to tell others what he has heard; he would be hanged if he did so. When a king ascends the throne, he does not take a new reign title, but follows the Christian calendar. There are also womenfolk who withdraw from the world and live apart in convents.

"The king of the country is called li-rei. His eldest son is called li-fan-tieh [l'infante] ; his other sons, pi-lin-hsipi [principes] ; his daughters, pi-lin-so~shih [princezas]. The Prime Minister is called kan-tieh [conde] ; the commander-in-chief of the army, ma-la-chi-tsa [marquesado]....These officers are usually selected from among the leading citizens of the local community. In order to assist the local officials in their administration of affairs, the home government usually sends out a military official to each region. If the possession is a large one, then three or four officials are sent. If any problem arises, a conference is held of the four local officials and the two central officials from home to decide on the solution and his solution must be in conformity with local customs and habits."

Spain "...is said to be north-northwest of Portugal and could be reached by sailing in that direction for about eight or nine days from Portugal [one of Hsieh's mistakes in indicating directions.] The area of this country is larger than that of Portugal: the people are fierce and wicked. Catholicism is the main religion. Its products are gold, silver, copper, iron, wine, glass, and watches, etc. The silver dollars used in China are manufactured in this country.

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England "... is located southwest [sic] of France and could be reached by sailing north from St. Helena for about two months. It is a sparsely settled island, separated from the mainland, with a large number of rich families. The dwelling houses have more than one story. Maritime commerce is one of the chief occupations of the English, and wherever there is a region in which profits could be reaped by trading, these people strive for them, with the result that their commercial vessels are to be seen on the seven seas. Commercial traders are to be found all over the country. Male inhabitants from the ages of fifteen to sixty are conscripted into the service of the king as soldiers. Moreover, a large foreign mercenary army is also maintained.

Consequently, although the country is small, it has such a large military force that foreign nations are afraid of it.

"Near the sea is Lun-lun [London], which is one of the largest cities in the country. In this city is a fine system of waterworks. From the river, which flows through the city, water is raised by means of revolving wheels, installed at three different places, and poured into pipes which carry it to all parts of the city. Anyone desirous of securing water would just have to lay a pipe between his house and the water mains, and water would be available. The water tax for each family is calculated on the number of persons in that family.

"Men and women all wear white ordinarily; for mourning, however, black is used. The army wears a red uniform. Women wear long dresses that sweep the floor, with the upper part tight and the lower part loose. At the waist is a tight belt with a buckle. Whenever there is a celebration of festive occasion, then some young and beautiful girls would be asked to sing and dance to the accompaniment of music. Girls of rich and noble families start to learn these arts when they are very young.

"Whenever English ships meet on the ocean a ship in dire straits, they must rescue all persons on the ill-fated ship, feed and clothe them. and then provide them with sufficient funds to take them back to their native lands. Any captains neglecting to perform such a task would be liable to punishment.

"Among the minerals produced here are gold, silver, copper, tin, and iron. Manufactured articles include tin plate, cotton and woolen goods, clocks, watches, wine and glass.'

Sweden "... can be reached by sailing about ten days or more from Holland and about six or seven days from England. The inhabitants of the country are more honest and simple than the English. Her trading vessels carry a blue flag with a white cross. Northwest of Sweden.... and on the same island and connected with it by land routes is Yung-li-ma-lu-chia [Denmark, which then included the present Norway]. The people here have a slightly

larger and stronger physique than the Swedes and their customs and habits are similar to those in Sweden. This is the country whose ships fly the yellow flag in Canton.

"Mieh-li-kan [America] is a small isolated island in the middle of the ocean. It could be reached by sailing west for about ten days from England.

Formerly it was part of England but now is an independent county, although the customs and practices of the two countries still remain alike. This land is called Hua-ch'i by the Cantonese. [Hua-ch'i, "FloweryFlag," refer to the United States flag flown from the ships.]

"Minerals found in the country include gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, and tin. Manufactured products include tin plate, glass, snuff, wine, woolen and cotton goods. Water transportation in this country is done by means of baots which have wheels on the side and a fire engine in the center. When a strong fire is generated, the wheels are set in motion. thereby propelling the boat forward. The construction of such a boat is clever and ingenious. and other countries are following the example."

Questions [from Kishlanksy]

1. What aspects of each country did Hsieh think it was most important to record?
2. Why is it likely that Hsieh never visited America?
3. Do you think Hsieh's subsequent blindness affected his account?
4. What does this excerpt tell us about Hsieh's own culture?