

Huatong Sun

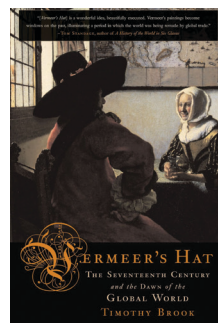
During my sabbatical, I picked up *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, by Ming China historian Timothy Brook. The subtitle is intriguing for a specialist in global design like me: What made remote islands connect with large continents? And what made a common humanity and a shared history possible for people from different corners of the world four centuries

ago? I was also looking for answers: My most recent book had the following inscription on the cover flap: "Social media users fracture into tribes, but social media ecosystems are globally interconnected technically, socially, culturally, and economically." To my dismay, more walls have been put up since that book was published in 2020.

Brook bookends an engaging account of global interconnectedness with two metaphors.

The opening chapter introduces the Buddhist metaphor of Indra's net, describing existence as a vast web of interconnected phenomena. Each node holds

a pearl reflecting all others, illustrating the interdependent nature of reality. The concluding chapter uses a Christian metaphor, quoting the poet and theologian John Donne to "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." The interconnectedness was also shown in a saying common in Holland back then: When older adults felt joint pains due to cold weather, they claimed it was snowing in China simultaneously.



Brook cleverly structures his book, using a set of research questions: "Where are the doors in this painting of Vermeer that would take readers into the world of the 17th century? And down what corridors and byways do they lead?" Using elements depicted in the paintings of Vermeer and another artist—Chinese porcelain, silver coins, as well as a boy from

Africa—Brook traces their flows as the global trade network was being built in the 17th century.

I was deeply touched by ordinary people's odysseys. For example, an Italian-Dominican missionary who had dreamed for years of converting Chinese people died of a sudden illness four months after he finally arrived in Fujian, at the age of 36. On his long voyage to the East, he survived shipwrecks and attacks by pirates and, when he was stranded in the Philippines, studied Fujian dialects.

The theme of the global history of intercultural transformation is inherently expansive, considering the topics and the geographical regions covered. Brook, however, has written a coherent, multilayered story in accessible language. The book serves as a great case study for the planetary thinking concept I've been working on. Our planet is not just a decontextualized stage for our design practices; rather, it assembles important geological forces as our eco-social contexts. Holland's emergence as a global trading power in the 17th century, succeeding Spain and Portugal, was fueled in part by profits from the herring fishery, which thrived during a period of "global cooling" between 1550 and 1700 that pushed North Sea fish stocks southward.



Poetry and meditation are good remedies for chaotic times. Lately I have been going back to *Meditation in Poetry* (诗里特别有禅), by Luo Yuming (骆玉明), a college professor of mine. I was immediately drawn to his calm, wise interpretation of the Chan Buddhist poetry.

One of my favorite poems was written by an anonymous nun in the seventh century:

All day long, I seek spring,
yet see none

My straw sandals treading
on clouds over hills

Returning home, I pick a
plum blossom to smell

And I see, spring hung on
branches

尽日寻春不见春
芒鞋踏破岭头云
归来笑拈梅花嗅
春在枝头已十分
(佚名 比丘尼)

Chan Buddhism believes that the Buddha nature of the world and the Buddha nature within one's mind are fundamentally the same. Seeking Buddha nature is nothing more than discovering the "original

face" of oneself. Luo reminds us that what matters is not accomplishing external goals, but finding and realizing ourselves through our own journeys. The nun from the poem spotted a sign of spring only after she engaged in a soul-searching journey.

The plot of the sci-fi TV series *Dark Matter* is based on the Buddhist wisdom according to which our mindset frames the world we see. Physics professor Jason Dessen has to find his way through a labyrinth of doors and corridors to reunite with his family. He discovers that his mindset will determine the reality he will walk into after opening the door, requiring him to concentrate and stick to his goals. Our global world in this age also seems stuck in an infinite corridor with many doors. Building more walls between different cultures or taking down the obstacles? The door needs to be opened with a clear and stable mindset. And remember, *the bell tolls for all of us*.

🔴 **Huatong Sun** is a professor of digital rhetoric and global design at University of Washington Tacoma and author of *Global Social Media Design and Cross-Cultural Technology Design*. She explores ways of creating empowering technology for local advocacy that redresses asymmetrical relations in the global power hierarchy.
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