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39. See Arafat (2013) for the hinterland turn of the Mappilas after the Portuguese assault. P.K. Yasser Arafath, "Malabar Muslims: History, Hangover, and Silences," *Social Scientist* 41, no. 3-4 (March-April 2013), 85-93.

40. To explain further, Ahmad Sherrif has contributed to our understanding of western Indian maritime economy after the Portuguese in his *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam*. One could argue that smaller ships such as dhows were a regular sight in Malabar coasts during this period. For example, Buchanan notes that vessels such as *pathermaris* or smaller vessels frequented between Talachery and Calicut coasts in the late 18th century. Ethan R. Sanders says that in Abdul Sherrif's analysis, the latter follows Michael Pearson's

argument that after 1500 CE there was a time when the western Indian Ocean was a "free sea" where there was no state to regulate. Ahmad Sheriff crucially notes the strong relations that existed between the maritime coast and the mainland, which one could see with growing evidence in 18th-century Malabar, as I attempted to point earlier. See Ethan R. Sanders's review of *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce, and Islam in Africa Today* 57, no. 4 (Summer 2011), 133-135.

41. Yumna Fatima, "For Ayesha Jalal, Islam is an Ocean," *The Express Tribune Report* (March 27, 2015), <http://tribune.com.pk/story/860073/a-sense-of-belonging-for-ayesha-jalal-islam-is-an-ocean/>

42. Menon, 1999.

The Panopticon Comes Full Circle?¹

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Everyone working in the humanities, social sciences, or technology policy in the last three decades has encountered the panopticon. To take three random recent examples from the 2,417 articles a JSTOR word-search produces, the panopticon has been invoked in a proposal on laws to protect consumers in the *University of Chicago Law Review*; in a critique of an art exhibition called "Utopia" in *Science Fiction Studies*; and in a discussion of police relations with poor black Brazilians.² The building became famous as the key metaphor in Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) account of the machinery of modern state power as it categorizes and surveys atomized individuals.

At the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows... the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other [so that] by the effect of

backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive figures in the cells of the periphery.³

Foucault's traced his own metaphor to British utilitarian and reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Bentham had proposed the design in his *Panopticon; or, the Inspection-House: Containing the idea of a New Principle of Construction applicable to any sort of establishment, in which persons of any description are to be kept under inspection; and in particular to penitentiary-houses, prisons, poorhouses, lazarettos, houses of industry, manufacturies, hospitals, work-houses, mad-houses, and schools: with a Plan of Management adapted to the principle: in a Series of Letters, written in the year 1787, from Crecheff in White Russia, to a Friend in England*. As Foucault reports, Bentham's design combines a tower with individual cells in a circular building around it. Supervisors could see into every cell without being seen, while no cell could have a view of any other cell. The key point is that the inmates know that supervisors could observe any prisoner at any time while remaining themselves unobserved.⁴ Experiments with variations on the form took place from the early nineteenth century: a prison in the Andaman Islands, for instance, had seven wings, like spokes, extending from the central tower.⁵ In art, philosophy, history, and

social theory both high and practical, the conception of the panopticon has become divorced from the particular form of hub and axle.⁶ It is the idea of total surveillance of atomized individuals, not the circular configuration, that grips the imagination. And this essay speculates that the original panopticon may have been rectangular, and real.

Where did Bentham's idea come from? Foucault suggests that the origin was the former menagerie at Versailles: an octagonal glass pavilion that allowed the king to look into seven cages.⁷ But Bentham very clearly credits his adored brother Samuel with the panopticon's design.⁸ Bentham penned his initial proposals in Russia, where Samuel was working for Prince Potemkin on several projects.⁹ The panopticons in England, which never materialized, were planned as a joint venture of the two brothers. As Inspector-General of Naval Works (including buildings) in England, Samuel designed a glass-and-iron panoptic "House of Industry" for England; it too was left unbuilt. But Samuel did build one in the service of Czar Alexander, in St. Petersburg in 1805.¹⁰ So: the panopticon was initially invented by Sir Samuel Bentham, although his fond elder brother greatly expanded on it and may have exaggerated his role.

How did Samuel come to think of so extraordinary a design? A man of many good, practical ideas, he was open-minded and imaginative. Saliently for this essay, he campaigned actively for British naval ships to use bulkheads creating watertight compartments in the hold, which work well to prevent foundering if only one or two are breached (less so if one entire side of the ship is ripped open, as in the Titanic). In 1795 the Admiralty commissioned him to design and build six new sailing ships "with partitions contributing to the strength and securing the ship against foundering, as practiced by the Chinese of the present day." Samuel made no secret of his Chinese source – Ben Franklin and others were well aware of it – and he borrowed other Chinese nautical ideas as well.¹¹ Furthermore, in 1782, before designing the panopticon, he had traveled through Siberia to the borders of China, met with Chinese officials, and observed shipping and other matters. He wrote a long description of a Chinese temple that noted which god was looking towards which – thinking about lines of sight.¹² It is possible that he also saw, or heard described, the unique buildings used to hold the Chinese competitive examinations for the qualification

to hold public office.

Even if he did not see an examination compound in China, Samuel might have read about them. Quite apart from any preparatory reading for his journey, the Bentham's contemporaries were studying many aspects of Chinese life and technology, often as reported by Jesuits long resident in China. Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795), for instance, derived his assembly-line process from the description of Chinese porcelain production.¹³ After the panopticon proposal, Jeremy Bentham read George Staunton's account of the 1793 MacCartney mission to the Qing court, as we know because he applauded – as a way to save money and restrain the young – the Chinese family customs of early marriage and multi-generational cohabitation that Staunton reported.¹⁴ Among many topics, the Chinese civil service examinations had long been of interest: for instance, Pufendorf commented on them in 1672.¹⁵ As historian Ssu-yü Teng showed in 1942, nineteenth-century arguments both for and against the adoption of civil service examinations show their Chinese origins.¹⁶ Bentham and his disciple-by-upbringing J. S. Mill, among others, recommended their adoption in Britain as an anti-corruption measure, to undermine political patronage.¹⁷ Jeremy Bentham must have read about Chinese examinations, and Samuel may have done so too.

My focus is on the physical layout of the examination compounds, which were unlike all other Chinese buildings. Not all descriptions of the Chinese system available to European readers dwell on their architecture. But one early and well-known work on China does. Written by an Italian resident of Ming China, Father Alvaro Semedo (1585-1658), *The history of that great and renowned monarchy of China* had been available in English translation for a century before the inquiring Bentham brothers were born. Early in his book, Semedo describes the provincial examination compounds. They vary in size across the country according to the local number of examination candidates, he writes, but have a fairly standard design. (Bentham stressed the scalability of the panopticon.) A great wall surrounds the whole complex; a great court divides the outer and inner gates. At each of the four corners stands a tower to sound alarms or make announcements as needed. Before admittance, the candidates are strip-searched. Beyond the second gate, a bridge spans a pond. Beyond that stands yet another gate, closely guarded. Semedo describes the examination cells, with boards

for table and bench, and a gagged soldier to watch and serve the candidate seated beneath each table:

After this gate followeth another very spacious Court, having on each side rowes of little houses or chambers for the persons that are to be examined; placed on the East and West side thereof. Every chamber is ... in height about the stature of a man...; within each of them are two boards, the one fastened to sit downe on, the other moveable for a Table... There is a narrow entrie, which leadeth to [the row of cells], that admitteth but of one man a breast, and that hardly too; the doors of one row open toward the backside of the other...

And he describes the surveillance tower:

At the end of this narrow entrie I spake of, is raised a Tower upon foure Arches with Balusters without on all sides, within which there is a *Salone* or great Hall, where do assist some officers and persons of respect, who stay there to give account of what passeth in all the little chambers, which they have placed in their sight.¹⁸

Rows of cells open on one side are overlooked by a central tower open on all sides. A man in any one cell can see into no other cell. The overseers can view them all from the central tower.¹⁹

Similarly, present-day China historian Benjamin Elman describes the strip search for cribs (tiny books and shirts covered with the classics in tiny characters). He describes the soldiers under the tables, and the layout of the examination compounds of Ming-Qing times:

...double walls surround[ed] the grounds. The individually divided cells for the candidates radiated out east and west from the main south to north entry passage in a series of parallel rows that were separated by alleys no more than four feet wide... the entry to each cell was open from top to bottom for easier

surveillance from a single pavilion raised high above the ground.²⁰

Elman argues that the civil service examination system as a whole disciplined society sufficiently to obviate the need for gulags and reformatories. Even though, unlike prisoners, candidates voluntarily entered them, having worked all their lives for the privilege, Elman labels the examination compounds “cultural prisons,” calling them “a coercive technology” in which atomized candidates subjected themselves to the total gaze of overseers. And Elman footnotes Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* without comment.²¹ Yongguang Hu therefore identifies Elman’s “pessimistic” assessment of the examination system as rooted in Foucault, concluding, “Elman may exaggerate the power of ‘late imperial cultural regime’ when he labels the examination hall as a cultural prison... it is also possible to portray it as an effort aiming to improve fairness and transparency in the pre-industrial society.”²² Mill had pointed to both the examination system’s oppressive uniformity and its transparency and meritocracy in selecting office-holders, and so vast and complex a cultural formation indeed had a myriad of purposes and results, as Elman’s own work shows. Passing judgment is not my intention here.

Rather, the focus of this essay is the surveillance architecture of the examination compound and the panopticon. I speculate that the one may have sparked the idea for the other. As with the transmittal of gunpowder from the Mongols to Ambassador William of Rubruck to his friend Roger Bacon, there is no smoking gun. But as shown above, we know that many educated innovators of Bentham’s day read about China; that Bentham promoted examinations on the Chinese model; that Samuel Bentham – whom his brother credited with the architectural conception of the panopticon – had been to China; and that Samuel had borrowed other ideas from Chinese construction. I speculate, therefore, that thinking of the exams in Foucauldian terms may be an example of a historical circle. Bentham’s initial plan concludes with a panoptic design for schools, offered in the spirit of amusement, he says: but he does point out that it would prevent cheating with cribs.²³ Perhaps that was the original panopticon’s function. Perhaps it traveled full circle: from observed reality in China, to reform proposal in Europe, to social theory in Europe, and back to the historical interpretation of a real Chinese institution.

Notes:

1. I would like to thank the following Bentham scholars for their generous help, without claiming that they agree with my hypothesis: Fred Rosen, Michael Quinn, Philip Schofield, and Zhai Xiaobo (who sent some relevant photos). I also thank the editor and anonymous reviewer.
2. Lauren E. Willis, "Performance-based Consumer Law," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 82, no. 3 (2015): 1309-1409; Rhys Williams. "Radical Politics, Recent Exhibitions, and Utopianism Now," *Science Fiction Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016): 183-187; Halifu Osumare, Ph.D.. "Keeping it Real: Race, Class, and Youth Connections Through Hip-hop in the U.S. & Brazil," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 37 (2015): 6-18.
3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, orig. 1975; translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979) 200ff.
4. Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, edited by Miran Božovič (London: Verso, 1995), 29, 34-7, 43. But as Foucault recognizes in passing, Bentham's design is very complex, with special doors and windows, blinds, gratings, lamps, speaking tubes, belfry, heating tubes, running water in each cell, etc., and Bentham worried considerably over the practical details of lines of sight and sources of light (35-41 (Letters II and III), 101-114 (Postscript I)).
5. Choi Chatterjee, "Imperial Incarcerations: Elaterina Breshko-breskkovskaia, Vinayak Savarkar, and the Original Sins of Modernity." *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (2015): 850-872, 862.
6. Jerome E. Dobson and Peter F. Fisher, "The Panopticon's Changing Geography," *Geographical Review* 97, no.3 (2007): 307-323, 307-308.
7. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 203. (The eighth side had a door.)
8. Bentham, *Panopticon Writings*, 33, 34, 39, 76 et multos.
9. Janet Semple, *Bentham's Prison: A Study of the Panopticon Penitentiary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 99, 106.
10. Semple, *Bentham's Prison*, 214.
11. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China: Volume IV, Physics and Physical Technology: Part 3, Civil Engineering and Nautics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 420-22. See also John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 215-6.
12. Lady M[aria] S[ophia] Bentham, *The Life of Brigadier-General Sir Samuel Bentham, K.S.G., formerly Inspector-General of Naval Works, lately a Commissioner of His Majesty's Navy with the Distinct Duty of Civil Architect and Engineer of the Navy* (London: Longman, Green Longman, and Roberts, 1862), 53f. Samuel Bentham later spent more time working on the Siberian-Russian border, but that was after the first panopticon letters.
13. Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 100-101.
14. Michael Quinn, personal communication June 12, 2009, citing Bentham, *Writings on the Poor Laws*, volume 2, forthcoming. Cited by permission.
15. Benjamin E. Wallacker, "Review of Victoria Tin-Bor Hui, War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Asian History* 42, no. 1 (2008): 97-8.
16. Ssu-yü Teng, "Chinese Influence on the Western Examination System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7 (1942-1943): 267-312, 305.
17. J.S. Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, edited by Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 527 note 353. Mill also deployed the examination system to warn against uniformity in thought, however: "On Liberty," in Philip and Rosen, 70-1.
18. Alvaro Semedo, *The History of that great and renowned monarchy of China: wherein all the particular provinces are accurately descried: as also the dispositions, manners, learning, laws, militia, government and religion of the people. Together with the traffick and commodities of that country* (London:

E. Tyler for I Crook, 1655), 38-9, 42, 44. Semedo marvels that some who may go home triumphant, able to build a family “Palace,” enter the examinations still “daubed with clay, wherewith they lately were mending of their cottages:” such was the opportunity for social advancement the system presented, in contrast to the Europe of his day. On the way in which such sixteenth- and seventeenth- century comparative observations on China echo and become magnified into exaggerations as Western standards change, see Sarah Schneewind, “A Brief Comment on Early European Treatments of Ming Taizu,” in *Long Live the Emperor! Uses of the Ming Founder Across Six Centuries of East Asian History*, edited by Sarah Schneewind (Minneapolis: Society for Ming Studies, 2008).

19. Semedo, *History*, 49, 42.

20. Benjamin Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 228 and note 39. Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 195 and note 44.
21. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy*, 219-21.
22. Yongguang Hu, “Review of Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy*,” *Ming Studies* 70 (2014), 79-80.
23. Bentham, *Panopticon Writings*, 33, 86.



Qing Examination Hall.

Image courtesy of Charles Poolton and Historical Photographs of China, University of Bristol.

Book Review: Edward Beatty, *Technology and the Search for Progress in Modern Mexico* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015)

Edward Beatty’s monograph, *Technology*

and the Search for Progress in Modern Mexico, is an incisive study of Mexico’s technological trajectory, one that was heavily import dependent over the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. It elaborates at length upon the avenues of technological transfer,

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