"The inevitable steam-boat"

Archibald John Little and steam navigation on the Yangtze River

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The area surrounding the Yangtze River in China became increasingly crucial for Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. Following the Treaty of Tianjin (1858) and the Beijing Convention (1860), which closed the Second Opium War, Britons gained new treaty ports on the river as far as Hankou, together with freedom to travel.[1] Further agreements in the following years gave Britain more ports and promised to open the rich river basin, much coveted by merchants and investors who wished to exploit natural resources and trading opportunities in the interior (Rowe 193). Yet, the rights granted on paper were not always easy to be enjoyed in late nineteenth-century China: treaty terms were often extorted (Hevia 49, 57-61), and the Qing government understandably tried to delay or impede their application. Even when the central administration supported (at least formally) the application of the terms, provincial officials might resist them, if they were felt to be an infringement on their power or on local interests. On the British side, investors in China never seemed to be satisfied with the opportunities their government gained for them, and invariably clamoured for more (Reinhardt 38, 45). To further complicate matters, in the latter part of the century China became an object of contention between the Western powers, thus intensifying the need to carefully negotiate each move in order to retain the influence already gained, and possibly acquire more, while at the same time avoiding the risk of military confrontations (Otte 1-6).

Britons regarded the Yangtze valley as their "sphere of interest" (Rowe 236; Morgan 112-13);[2] and they firmly believed in its economic potential, seemingly confirming the traditional view of China as a land of fabulous riches, ready to be exploited. On the other hand, however, hopes of gain were frustrated by what some Victorians saw, quite simplistically, as China's stubborn resistance to progress. British travelogues of the period are full of praises for the Yangtze basin, often including statistics describing the vastness of the area, its large and hard-working population, the natural resources available and the volume of goods moved on the river, which was one of the main trade arteries of the Qing empire. In order to fully profit from the region, and from the river trade in particular, Britons wished to introduce steam navigation up to Chongqing, a rich manufacturing and commercial centre at the confluence of the Yangtze and Jialing rivers, but encountered formidable obstacles, including the nature of the Yangtze itself and the opposition of Chinese authorities.

The volume of trade on the Yangtze River was already impressive before the arrival of foreign investors: shipping through the Three Gorges had been made possible thanks to advances in navigation in the Tang and Song periods; in the eighteenth century, there was a remarkable improvement both in the size of ships and the volume of trade. Yet, the area of the Gorges still posed remarkable challenges: even expert pilots with a deep knowledge of the river could be baffled by sudden changes in the water level, fallen rocks or moving sandbanks. Moreover, the changing climate and the intense agricultural exploitation of the Yangtze area during the Qing period, which entailed massive deforestation, contributed to make conditions even more dangerous as explained by Kim. Diminishing vegetation uphill meant "accelerated run-off," and thus sudden changes in the water level; erosion and the resulting sediment charges could cause shifting shoals in the river bed, debris falling into the river, or even landslides (669). Moreover, the area had suffered impressive damage during the Taiping rebellion. The effects, including the introduction of the *lijin*, shifts in

[1] Other European powers too benefited from the "unequal treatises"; for a thorough discussion of the treaty-ports system see Fairbank and Liu, vol. 10, 213-63.
[2] On different views of the concept of 'sphere of interest', and its relation to the 'sphere of influence', see Wu, 922-28.

the cost of labour, the disruption of trade routes and changes in the power balance within provincial administrations were still deeply felt well after the rebellion had been suppressed (see Rowe 198-99).

Shipping was carried out in junks which had to be emptied of cargo in the most difficult passages and hauled from the shore through huge bamboo ropes held by trackers – a heavy task, that often entailed climbing up and down slippery paths; other workers stood on the banks, or in the water itself, to extricate the ropes from the rocks in case they got caught. Isabella Bird (1831-1904), who gave a detailed description of the trackers' job in her *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* (1899), defined it as "the hardest and riskiest work I have seen done in any country" (142), and provided a very vivid account of the dangers involved:

> The reader must sympathetically bear in mind that these poor fellows who drag our commerce up the Yangtze amidst all these difficulties and perils, and many more, are attached to a heavy junk by a long and heavy rope, and are dragging her up against the force of a tremendous current, raging in billows, eddies, and whirlpools; that they are subject to frequent severe jerks; that occasionally their burden comes to a dead stop and hangs in the torrent for several minutes; that the tow-rope often snaps, throwing them on their faces and bare bodies on jagged and rough rocks; that they are continually in and out of the water; that they are running many chances daily of having their lives violently ended; and that they are doing all this mainly on rice! (146-47)

In the second half of the nineteenth century, steam navigation was introduced in the lower Yangtze (Reinhardt 28-32),[3] but the nature of the river beyond Yichang seemed to pose an insurmountable obstacle to its further extension. Various inspections of the area of the Gorges had been carried out by the British since mid-century, including that by Thomas Wright Blakiston (1861);[4] however, the feasibility of the project remained uncertain, and by the late 1860s some still believed that steam navigation could not be carried on above Yichang (Reinhardt 47; Parkinson 151).

The other crucial difficulty Britons had to face was the Chinese authorities' opposition to steam traffic in the interior. This was a vexed political issue, deeply connected to the complex economic and social context in which the river trade was performed. Traditional navigation entailed the use of a large workforce – in some areas, entire villages and towns depended on it; local officials feared the introduction of steam vessels, as they could deprive the population of its main means of subsistence and generate massive unemployment, beside putting local shipping businesses out of trade. Thus, although steam shipping between treaty ports was permitted by treatises, and carried out in some areas by both foreign and Chinese-owned ships, resistance to the full application of these rights was quite strong (Fairbank and Liu, vol. 11, 53-54). Furthermore, traditional river shipping was meticulously controlled through the *lijin*, a transit tax that vessels had to pay at each custom station along the river. This was a crucial source of revenue for local administrations (only a meagre portion of it went to Beijing), but it caused further expense for traders and further delays in the journey, as cargo had to be examined at each station. The introduction of steamers would entail the payment of a single transit duty to the Maritime Customs, causing the loss of the *lijin* revenue, and was thus fiercely resisted by local officials.[5]

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[3] In nineteenth-century China steamships came to acquire multiple meanings and functions, which changed remarkably since their introduction in the early 1830s (Huangfu Day; Reinhardt 2).

[4] Captain Thomas Wright Blakiston (1832-1891) of the Royal Artillery, a renowned scientist and explorer, participated in a survey of the Yichang Gorges in 1861 and provided much-needed information for later expeditions (Parkinson 149-50; Van Slyke 155-58); Blakiston's account of the voyage was published in 1862 as *Five Months on the Yang-Tsze*.

[5] The *lijin* had been introduced during the Taiping Rebellion to finance provincial armies. By the early 1860s it was applied in all the provinces of China; the rate varied from 1% to 10% of the value of the cargo, to be paid at each tax barrier (Fairbank and Liu, vol. 11, 61-62; Rowe 199; Reinhardt 38).

Within this context, the introduction of steam navigation in the Upper Yangtze acquired a multi-layered value for Britons: it offered the chance to expand their economic power in the region, but was also a constant source of friction with Chinese authorities, epitomising the difficulties that characterised the interaction between the two empires; for some, it also acquired the symbolic value of a challenge to demonstrate the superiority of Western technology and to force upon China a Western model of progress. A prominent figure in the introduction of steam navigation was Archibald John Little (1838-1908), a wealthy merchant who staunchly pursued the project for more than one decade.[6] In 1883, Little travelled to Chongqing to assess the practicability of steam navigation and to explore commercial opportunities in the Sichuan province; he left from Shanghai on an American steamer and reached Hankou, then proceeded on a Chinese junk up to Chongqing.

Convinced of his project's feasibility, he built a ship in Scotland, the *Kuling*, which was then shipped to Shanghai to be assembled and sent upriver in 1889. Yet, negotiations between British and Qing officials for the necessary permissions came to a standstill. The political climate was growing tense, as scarcity and rising prices fostered banditry and a growing antiforeignism. In 1886, riots against Christians had taken place in Chongqing (Daigle 12-13), and authorities, both British and Chinese, feared the potentially disruptive outcomes of steam vessels travelling regularly through the interior. The expedition was thus halted (Little blamed the British Government and Sir John Walsham, who "refused to coerce the Chinese Government in any way," Van Slyke 170-71); the *Kuling* never went beyond Yichang, and was eventually sold to the Chinese government (Parkinson 156; Reinhardt 50). Nevertheless, the idea was not completely abandoned. Other inspections were made in the area of the Gorges, and Little, profiting from the swiftly changing political situation of the 1890s and from the openings granted by new agreements between the British and the Qing, resumed his project. On the steam launch *Leechuen,* he finally achieved his goal: he reached Chongqing by steamer, even though still aided by shore trackers, in March 1898. Other steam vessels followed (including the *Pioneer*, Little's third venture, in 1900).[7] Even though regular steam navigation between Yichang and Chongqing was not established until 1909, an important breakthrough had been made (Parkinson 161; Reinhardt 50-51).

Little's 1888 book, *Through the Yang-Tse Gorges, or Trade and Travel in Western China*, describes the journey he took in 1883, thus capturing a phase of the project in which hopes were high, but were also tinged with uncertainty about the final result.[8] The text was openly meant to gain the support of public opinion for the scheme, but also provides a wider discussion of the cluster of meanings attributed to the river, illuminating the complex interweaving of aesthetic, economic, and human considerations which informed coeval debates about the British presence in the Yangtze area.

River Beauty

Although focused on the navigation project he invested so much upon, Little was not impervious to the beauty of the river: the scenery, deeply exotic and unfamiliar, is a constant presence in his text.

[6] After studying in Britain and Germany, Little moved to China in 1859, where he lived until 1907. He worked at first for a German tea company, and then started various business ventures on his own, including the Chungking Trading Company (1883). In 1886 he married Alicia Bewicke (1845–1926), an author and activist for women's rights who became involved in the movement against foot-binding, founding the Natural Feet Society in Shanghai in 1895. On Little's navigation scheme see also Stevens, 2001.

[7] The *Pioneer* was the first commercially viable ship to reach Chongqing, carrying both passengers and cargo. However, it was never put to its intended use, as with the outbreak of the Boxer uprising the British Government commandeered it to evacuate refugees, and later purchased it.

[8] An account of the successful journey of 1898 was included in the third edition of Little's book (1898, 283-300). Alongside his business activity, Little published numerous articles and books, mostly discussing China and the Far East: among his travelogues see also *Mount Obi and Beyond: A Record of Travel on the Tibetan Border* (1901), *The Far East* (1905), *Gleanings from Fifty Years in China* (1910).

The landscape is sometimes described as the epitome of the Chinese picturesque, as in a passage that strongly evokes the familiar motive of the willow pattern (Chang 71-72), with the ever-present stone bridge: "On one side is a handsome stone bridge, looking up which is seen a waterfall which comes down a steep narrow glen, the whole forming a scene, which would make as pretty a picture of Eastern scenery as I have ever seen" (164). The most prominent mode of description of the river, however, is the sublime. Chinese landscape was often read by British observers in terms of striking visual difference, while reflecting changing ways of writing about nature, together with the overlapping of aesthetic and political concerns in the use of categories such as the picturesque and the sublime (see Chang 23-70). Leaving Yichang to the Gorges, Little captures the surprising magnificence of the view through words that evoke Pratt's discussion of the colonial gaze. On the one hand, he underlines how the landscape "opens up before the visitor," while at the same time the "landscanning European eye seems powerless to act upon or interact with this landscape that offers itself" (Pratt 60).

> Suddenly, on the left, a cleft in the mountains comes in sight, and lo! there is the Great River, narrowed to 400 yards, flowing in majestic grandeur between precipitous limestone cliffs which, in the distance, seem to close together and to leave no room for the river between them. The view and the surprise that burst upon one for the first time are indescribable, and no pen can paint the beauty and impressiveness of the panorama. .... Not a ripple disturbs its surface, and not a sound beyond the occasional echoes of the trackers' voices breaks the awful stillness. Clouds enveloped the higher peaks and enhanced the gloom of the chasm up which we slowly crawled. (104)

Little insists on the multi-sensorial side of the experience, stressing in particular the stunning silence, which contributes to enhance the impressiveness of the scene and the awe it generates in the observer. For instance, he notes that the entrance to the Witches Gorge "presents a sublime and solemn aspect. The silence is complete: the rare junks are lost in the immensity of the surrounding nature" (132).

Interestingly, the beauty of the scenery leads to a reflection on the negative changes that steamers might bring, and he rejoices in the opportunity to visit the Gorges

> before the inevitable steam-boat and the omnivorous globe-trotter had destroyed their charm. Such scenery is better left unvisited, if it has to be rushed through with steam, leaving no time to study the details or to fix any one picture firmly in the mind before it is obliterated by the next (105).

Besides the irony of stressing the unfavourable outcomes of steam travel while Little himself is trying to promote it, this comment presents mass-tourism as vulgar and disruptive. This reflects the view that the increasing availability of travel, facilitated by the expansion of the empire and by technological innovations, would eventually result in a shallower experience (Thompson 121). The tension between the need for "progress" and the awareness of its potential to disrupt unspoiled environments was indeed a staple of travelogues of this period, exemplifying one of the most pervasive ambiguities of Western expansionist projects.

> Based on their own understandings of resource usage, many colonists perceived imperial environments as inefficiently managed or inadequately developed by indigenous populations, while simultaneously valorizing native peoples' closer relationship to nature or singing the praise of 'wild' nature (Beattie, Melillo and O'Gorman 9).

Little presents himself as a sophisticated traveller, who can appreciate natural beauty while at the same time remaining committed to his commercial enterprise. Again, on his way back, he contrasts

steam travel, which deprives one of the "opportunity of thoroughly enjoying" the places they visit, with Chinese travel, whose discomforts are amply compensated by "its absence of hurry, at least in such regions as these, where every yard is of interest, and a new picture opens out at every mile" (325). The tension between his business goals and a dismissive attitude toward modern consumerism recurs in the text, for instance when Little notices writings on a rock, probably by Chinese travellers who had been delayed there, and comments that "Had I been in the vulgar West, I should have taken them for quack advertisements, but in the aesthetic East these notices were short poetical exclamations at the beauty of the scenery" (108). Again, when he sees a huge inscription on a cliff "in those elegant Chinese characters which are a decoration in themselves," he observes that, were it in the United States, such a spot "would be selected for an advertisement of 'Smith's Liver Pad', or 'Jones's Liniment'" (163-64).

The author displays a remarkable sensibility for the harmony between natural and man-made features he sees along the river: looking at the city of Chongqing, he notes:

> In Europe, excepting in purely wild scenery, and more especially in America, the delight in gazing on many of the most beautiful scenes is often alloyed by the crude newness of men's work. This is now unfortunately the case even in beautiful Japan - the home of aestheticism[9] - since the rage for copying western architecture and dress, fell as a blight on the islands of the rising sun. But here in the far west of China, nothing has intervened to mar the accord between Man and Nature. (244)

Similarly, Isabella Bird, whose travelogue on China often draws from Little's, observes: "In Chung-king, as in many another city of the upper Yangtze, the harmony between man's work and nature is yet unbroken, and the evil day of foreign inartistic antagonisms, incongruities, and uglinesses has not yet dawned" (496). Little's wife, Alicia, also stressed the tension between the need for progress and its negative impact on the environment. In *Intimate China* (1899) she writes: "I do hope there will be soon a steamer running to transport people safely and easily to this delightful region […] Yet it will be sad if steamers introduce an unappreciative crowd to the grand solitudes of the ravines and precipices, the rocks and rapids of the Yangtse" (39-40).

Quite intriguingly, Archibald Little attributes such harmony to *feng shui*, repeatedly praised in the book for engendering respect for the environment and promoting sensible building:

> Feng-shui, in its best sense, reigns supreme, and Man harmonizes with the soil as a bird with the air and a fish with the water. The buildings are all in keeping with the environment. The hoary battlements seem a natural excrescence on the rugged cliffs, and as the city walls follow the sinuosities of hill and dale, there is no sign of that strife with Nature which our bold Western methods encourage. (244)

This is all the more remarkable since, in British writings of the time, *feng shui* was more often viewed as a superstition unsupported by facts, whose main outcome was to hinder progress and prevent the Chinese from properly exploiting their natural resources (Bruun 35-43). In the passage quoted above, Little seems to diverge from the common view, and even acknowledges that, considering the Chinese climate and environment, *feng shui* principles may be said to be "founded on a true observance of nature, and are worthy of close imitation by the foreigners whose lot is cast here" (301). Yet, more in line with the view common among his contemporaries, elsewhere he too blames *feng shui* as a superstition "which interferes with all progress" (318), and concludes his

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[9] References to the swift changes undergone by Japan during the Meiji restoration were common in travelogues of this period; the effects of Westernisation were discussed for instance by Isabella Bird in her *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880). See also Ozawa 91-95.

remark suggesting that, even though some of its principles might be sound, they should be reconciled with the need for improvement:

> man has a double environment, with both sides of which, in order to be happy, he must try to live in accord, though the two are often incompatible. The Chinese have laboured as successfully as most peoples to place themselves in accord with their *natural* surroundings, but, as in the West, though in a less degree, the forces of their *social* surroundings has [sic] proved too strong for them. (302)

Thus, when it comes to human interaction with the environment, Little's attitude seems to be wavering between a sincere appreciation for Chinese traditions and frustration at their rejection of "modernity." At times, he seems to place the two cultures on the same footing, and is keen to specify that he does not believe Western civilisation to be superior in all things. For instance, he has no sympathy for the missionary enterprise, which he defines – adopting an image of vegetable growth – as a vain endeavour "to plant our Western ethics and beliefs in a soil utterly unsuited to them, believing apparently that the uprooting of a system so firmly rooted in the past and so thoroughly suited to the genius of the present is only a question of men and money" (40). Further than that, he even suggests that China, although an "interesting survival from antiquity," "must have lessons to teach us, no less than our civilization has for the Chinese" (40).

River Trade

Yet, Little has no admiration for Chinese ways when business is concerned. Like most coeval commentators, he blames the difficulties faced by British traders on the Qing state, focusing either on the local officials' protectionist attitude, or on the central government's general reticence to embrace "modernity"; while explaining to his readers the *lijin*, the transit tax much hated by Britons, he ironically places himself in the shoes of the "unfortunate Szechuen officials," who see the "intruding foreigner" as a "blight" for his insistence on paying a single duty to the Maritime Customs, and "fought as hard as they could against the innovation, . . . but in vain" (149).[10] He thus depicts local officials as vocal but ultimately ineffective against the pressures of foreign interests, which in this instance are backed by the central government in Beijing; the ironic tone that informs the passage further undermines the status of the provincial authorities. Little is well aware that reinforcing the central government at the expense of the provinces could be risky and may have unforeseen consequences; yet he admits that, considering the general state of affairs in China, which is far from satisfactory, this seems at the moment the best option available.

What mostly infuriates him is the contrast between the potential for development and the Chinese refusal to comply with Western requests, so that "until some more favourable arrangement is made, we shall never see . . . the illimitable resources of this rich empire properly developed" (150). Like many other businessmen eager to invest, but prevented from doing so by the Qing's attempts to limit foreign activities, Little laments what he sees as missed opportunities to introduce innovations that would prove lucrative for foreigners, but also beneficial for Chinese citizens. He quotes as examples the Shanghai Waterworks (356-57), the hostility of the Qing government to modern mining techniques, so that the mineral wealth of Western China "lies undeveloped, while thousands of able-bodied men go about begging their bread" (357), and the failed project of the Shanghai-Woosung railway line, crushed by the government even though the "The Chinese people themselves were delighted with this experimental railway . . . and the trains were crowded as long as they were allowed to run" (355). The common element in all these examples is the insistence on the fact that, while Qing politicians (either at the local or central level) remain hostile to innovation, the people are ready to accept it, and would ultimately profit from it. Were these improvements

[10] On the Imperial Maritime Customs Service, and especially on the crucial role played by Sir Robert Hart, see Reinhardt 25-26; Brunero 9-17.

introduced, "the masses, who earn a bare subsistence by serving as beasts of burden, would have more elevating occupations opened out for them, and might be earning decent wages, while adding to the general prosperity of their native land" (357-58). Eager to gain the approval of his readers, he is very careful to stress that Western commercial ambitions in China would not deprive its population of its due, but ultimately benefit it far more than the policies implemented by its own government.

On the issue of steam navigation on the Yangtze, Little admits that what he sees as the Chinese "thorough-going conservatism" has "motives, many worthy of respect" (357), but he is ready to counteract them one by one: the difficulties posed by the nature of the river itself can be overcome by building the right type of vessel, Chinese merchants will welcome steamers (also because junks could not be insured, "so that the losses, when they do occur, are often ruinous," 351), and the whole region would benefit from the increased opportunities of commercial exchange. As for the understandable fears of unemployment, he argues that if steamers "employed local labour, and did not bring more strangers from other provinces than were necessary to teach the new hands their work, opposition would soon be disarmed" (321-22). He corroborates this view with a reference to what has already occurred in the lower part of the river: after the opening of Hankou to steam navigation in 1860, "nine-tenths of the traffic between that port and Shanghai is now carried on by steam; yet there are more junks on the river than ever. These are engaged in transhipping produce . . . to remoter districts" (352). Stating that the same results can be expected in the upper part of the river, Little defuses the local officials' fears, and presents the whole endeavour as beneficial to both the British and the Chinese.

The ultimate obstacle, thus, is the political will to make it happen. Little argues that the possibility of steam travel to Chongqing was "conditionally sanctioned in the Convention of Chefoo" (353), which stipulated that "arrangements for the opening of the port of Chung-king to foreign trade may be taken into consideration, as soon as steamers have succeeded in ascending the river so far" (353-54). A bitter comment clarifies his opinion of the agreement:

> The wording of the Convention is involved enough to satisfy the professional pride of the most thorough-going diplomatist, containing as it does the seeds of a quarrel ready to hand, for either of the high contracting parties to take up at any time. The clause affecting the Upper River is a notable instance of not allowing a boy to enter the water, until he has learnt to swim. (354)

According to him, the result will be that, even when "a suitable steamer is prepared to ascend," Qing authorities "will shelter themselves behind the ambiguous clauses of the Treaty, as long as they can, so as to avoid giving their consent" (354).[11]

But the Qing state is not the only one to blame: the Convention was signed by both parties, and throughout Little's text the dissatisfaction with British diplomacy is clear, even though less explicit than that with the Qing state. This reflects the ongoing tension between the merchant community and the British government concerning the policies to be adopted in China, a tension which became very evident in matters concerning navigation rights on the Yangtze river. Merchants lobbied for more political support to commercial expansion, while the government in London tried to curb expansionist commitments which might turn out to be too risky and expensive, both financially and

[11] The status of Chongqing within the treaty system was indeed quite complex: according to the Chefoo Convention (1876), the city was to become a treaty port with a resident British Consul, but the port would be opened to foreign trade only when it could be reached by steamship. An additional article to the Chefoo Convention (1890) allowed foreign steamers to reach the upper part of the Yangtze only after Qing-flag steamers established a presence there. The Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) granted the Japanese the right to reach Chongqing by steam navigation; Britain, thanks to the 'favoured nation' status, could enjoy the same right (Reinhardt 48-50; Parkinson 158).

politically (Reinhardt 39; Van Slyke 160). This exemplifies a wider discrepancy between the way in which China was perceived by Britons who lived there, and by those who did not. Length of stay, together with gender, purpose, or occupation, indeed played a crucial role in structuring "the dialogue between traveller and place" (Schoenbauer Thurin 23, 17).[12] Little articulates his objections within the frame of his own experience of China, as when, discussing the failure of the Shanghai-Woosung railway line, he blames Sir Thomas Wade, stating that he, "unwisely in my opinion, allowed the Peking officials to purchase the line, thinking they would then work it themselves. He did not understand the Chinese. No sooner bought, than the line was pulled up and thrown into the sea" (355-56). He thus implies that British diplomats are not always capable (or willing) to properly support the interest of their citizens, while presenting himself as more competent in judging what is best.[13]

Another point that Little wants to clarify for his readers in Britain is that sometimes the news they read at home is not completely accurate; again, thanks to his experience on the field he can rectify popular misapprehensions, as when he comments on the articles in the London press which state that China is finally "welcoming Western progress." In fact, this is only a partial truth: in his view, "the desire of the officials to avail themselves of our superior mechanical appliances, is confined to implements of war." He admits that such desire is "natural," considering that there are "half a dozen hungry nations knocking at their doors, and the fate of Turkey and Egypt before them" (354), and thus the Chinese are trying in every way to "retain their antiquated civilization whole and uncontaminated from the upstart barbarian" (354-55). Adopting a perspective similar to the one he used to discuss the *lijin*, he states that "one cannot help sympathizing with them," but still judges their attempt as an ultimately "hopeless task" (355). Thus, he presents himself as understanding (or at least trying to understand) the Chinese position, while at the same time confirming his confidence in the inescapability of the march of progress. Western ways – which he equates with progress – will prevail, and eventually unlock the immense, but still dormant, economic potential of China.[14]

Thus, Little's discussion of navigation on the Upper Yangtze expands to include the wider context in which business activities in China were carried out. He presents the various interests involved, on both Chinese and British sides, and their connections with larger political concerns. Indeed, as noted by Reinhardt, the steamship was a "long-standing site of struggle between Chinese sovereignty and external domination" (1-2), in many ways exemplary of the complex dynamics through which power was negotiated. Crucially, Victorians' insistence on the Qing's backwardness should be read with caution. Not only did the Chinese government implement important political and technological changes during the nineteenth century (Rowe 212-19; Smith 384-94), but its reticence to adopt "modern" ways, often attributed by Western observers to a blind hostility to progress, originated in fact from the need to control, or at least circumscribe, the influence of foreign powers. In particular, by opposing or postponing steam navigation in the interior, "Qing agency significantly shaped the emerging shipping network" (Reinhardt 23).

Yet, like most of his contemporaries, Little chooses to see Qing obstructions as a symptom of short-sightedness, espousing a rhetoric that identified the West with progress, and progress as inevitable.

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[12] On the importance of positionality see also Foreman 4-7, 18; Lee 2.

[13] In the third edition of *Through the Yangtze Gorges* (1898), Little details the current situation in China, still blaming the timid policies of Britain in contrast to the other powers' aggressive moves, so that "if our government does not wake up . . . we shall have handed over the solid work of three generations of Britons in China to our unscrupulous rivals" (xxiv). The only words of praise are for the new Minister in China, Sir Claude Macdonald, who supported Little's project and is described as a "man of action, unlike the kindly gentlemen who preceded him in sleepy Peking" (287).

[14] After the Second Opium war, a heated debate emerged in China concerning the need to adopt foreign technologies and forms of knowledge; in many cases, the initiatives that went under the label of 'Self-strengthening movement' were promoted by provincial or regional authorities, not by the central government, and were not unanimously welcomed. Modern historians too have provided very different interpretations of the Self-strengthening movement and its outcomes. For a detailed discussion of the issue see Rowe 201-30.

Considering the very explicit agenda of his text, this way of framing the issue supports his endeavour on two levels: he guarantees his readers that steam navigation will eventually succeed, and that this will benefit Chinese people as well, firmly framing his project within what he saw as a positive (although complicated) civilising mission. Steam navigation on the Yangtze is thus "inevitable," but this time in a positive sense.

River maintenance

The inadequacy of the Qing state is repeatedly insisted upon throughout the text, usually by the common comparison between the greatness of antiquity and the decay that characterises nineteenth-century China. His opinion, shared by many at the time, is that China, if left to itself, risks becoming "obliterated like Nineveh and Babylon, and the once flourishing cities of Asia Minor" (186). Adopting a familiar rhetoric often used to justify foreign intervention, he thus observes that Western interference is needed in order to "turn this magnificent country and its industrious inhabitants to some real account" (186).

This approach does not only concern steam navigation, however, but also China's capacity to properly manage the maintenance of the Yangtze River. Little discusses a "foaming cataract called the Tung yang tse," which is "interesting, as showing what many other rapids need, an attempt at artificial improvement" (161-62). However, the stone barrier built "just thirteen years ago" is already in disrepair: "The lower end is already partially washed away, and the centre, instead of being constructed of modern masonry, is filled up with loose rocks offering a convenient hold for the current to work upon" (162). A few days later he notices "for the first and only time, a properly constructed towing-path, consisting of a stone embankment built up twenty feet high against the rocky cliff, so that the trackers need not to jump like goats from stone to stone as in most similar places"; yet the embankment is "like all the useful public works still extant in China, ancient and out of repair, and of course it enters into nobody's head to repair anything nowadays" (181).[15] In this case Little blames the "so-called Literati" as the "the class opposed to all progress, and which stirs up the otherwise indifferent masses against the foreigner" (182). He even acknowledges that "I loathe the bespectacled Chinaman, whenever I meet one, with his rude stare; the civility we meet with in travel is entirely confined to the lower and middle classes" (182).[16]

Thus, he again draws a line between the people of China and their governors; this is not to say that he does not endorse some of his contemporaries' negative stereotypes about the Chinese in general. Elsewhere in the text he mentions their unreliability (237), their supposed indifference to suffering and their lack of the imaginative faculty (220). He writes that, "Like the animals to a great extent, their procedures follow instinct, or hereditary tendencies rather than reason, and their ambition seems limited to the gratification of the senses" (221). Nevertheless, his presentation of the Chinese population is mostly positive, even though condescending, stressing in particular their willingness to work, and he insists that, with "more highly gifted leaders," they could still become a great people (222). Most importantly for the purpose of his book, he is keen to specify that, unlike other areas of the country where antiforeignism is rampant, in the Sichuan province there is no animosity against Westerners.[17] The place is indeed described as an idyll: it is rich, the inhabitants are very

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[15] Little notes that the life-boats are "the only honest government organization I have ever met with in China" (349). While most British travellers praised the life-boats service, they tended to frame it as the exception that proves the rule, rather than as evidence of the Chinese's capacity to organise efficiently.

[16] A partial moderation of this judgement can be found in a passage where Little states that "it is the system more than the individuals – mostly kindly well-meaning men – which is to blame" (154). A very similar observation can be found in Bird's travelogue on China (253-61).

[17] Little observes that "The only ill-feeling towards foreigners ever manifested in this city was due to the action of the Roman Catholic missionaries" who tried to build on the site of an ancient Taoist temple (243-45). Episodes of antiforeignism escalated in the later part of the century, posing real threats to Westerners. On the complex roots of the phenomenon see Rowe 204-09; Fairbank and Liu, vol. 11, 78.

polite and, most importantly, they display an admirable independence from the central government (208). Even the Guild system, which in some ways resembles European medieval institutions, is very well organised, and protects its members so effectively that he almost wishes something similar were still in place in Britain (294-96).

River workers

The most vocal admiration, however, is reserved for river workers, and the trackers in particular. A brief description of the way in which navigation is carried out clarifies for his readers how difficult their job is:

> A big junk of 150 tons carries a crew of over 100 men, viz. seventy or eighty trackers, whose movements are directed by beat of drum, the drummer remaining on board under the direction of the helmsman; a dozen or twenty men left on board to pole, and fend the boat off the boulders and rocky points as she scrapes along, and also to work the gigantic bow sweep formed of a young fir-tree. Another half dozen of the crew are told off to skip over the rocks like cats, and free the tow-line from the rocky corners in which it is perpetually catching; besides a staff of three or four special swimmers called "tai-wan-ti" or water-trackers, who run along, naked as Adam before the fall, and may be seen squatting on their haunches on rocks ahead, like so many big vultures, prepared to jump into the water at a moment's notice and free the tow-line, should it catch on a rock inaccessible from the shore. (111-12)

But junk navigation is not only physically demanding, it is also remarkably dangerous; in fact, descriptions of accidents, or near-accidents, punctuate the narrative. Even though there are no precise data, because "Of the value of accurate statistics the Chinese have not the slightest idea" (351), Little postulates that the "loss of junks and merchandise in the rapids between Ichang and Chung-king amounts to about two and one-half per cent of the value of the traffic"; of this, the larger portion consists of goods damaged by water, while the "loss of life is not large, as the junks, after striking a rock, generally succeed in safely reaching the shore" (351). Yet accidents occur and can be fatal: a junk carrying "General Pao-Chao, the T'i Tu or commander-in-chief of Hu-Peh province" was recently wrecked, and his wife and sons, and several of his suite, drowned; the general was saved by a life-boat (115; 350). British consul Christopher Gardner too was saved by a life-boat when he "met with a serious accident, their boat capsizing, and going, as they described it, immediately into matchwood" (87).

During his journey, Little could repeatedly observe the consequences of various mishaps: he saw a big salt-junk "stranded on the boulders of a large cape of shingle, . . . others come to grief on the rocks or in the whirlpools, and go down bodily" (330). After a particularly harsh day of navigation, he recounts that "Oftentimes at the most critical moment, the manoeuvres are compromised by the tow-rope catching in an almost inaccessible crevice, when we hang in a most uncomfortable position until one of the trackers runs back, climbs with his bare feet cat-like up the rocks, and apparently at the risk of his life, releases us" (124-25). Later on the same day, seeing a long line of junks waiting for their turn to tow up, they try to avoid the delay by moving on the other, more dangerous side of the river, but "The rudder ceased to act; our boat, on entering the down current, suddenly shot out towards the middle of the stream – the trackers were thrown down, and two badly hurt by being dragged over the rocks, while the boat heeled over, threatening to capsize on the instant" (128). Of course, among the crew, trackers were the most exposed to risks: one of them "who, in fording a shallow between two reefs of rocks, had got out of his depth," was found face down in the water, and was rescued from drowning in the nick of time (183).

Trackers are thus daily risking their lives on a very harsh and dangerous job, and Little's text is full of admiration for them, as were all accounts of Western travellers in the region (Van Slyke 121).

Even though his frequent comparisons of their agility with that of animals seem to detract from the praise, Little is ready to acknowledge that there is more than physical dexterity to their feats. In fact, trackers are not only depicted as hard-working (a trait attributed to all Chinese workers in travelogues of this period), but also as brave and generous; for instance, he recounts how, during his long walks, he is repeatedly rescued by them. One day he follows the trackers on the towing path, but reaches a point where the path stops, and the only way forward is through very small steps cut in the rock; he cannot proceed, and is "almost in despair," when one of the trackers comes back to help: "Carefully divesting myself of my boots, avoiding a glance at the foaming water below, and holding the man's hand, I soon got over; but what a path for men harnessed to a tow-line to risk their necks on!" (123). On another occasion he himself caused a delay of an hour :

> The shore was a pile of broken rocks of all sizes, over which they with the tow-line hopped like cats, while I toiled painfully along bathed in perspiration, though clad in nothing but a pair of flannel trousers and a shirt. Somehow, I lost the beach, and gradually ascended until I struck a mountain-path five or six hundred feet above. I crawled along this until in view of the precipice below me and the path getting almost too narrow for foothold, I came to a stop. (160)

This gives him a chance to admire the view, but he still cannot move forward or return to the boat, until "the crew spotted me in my white flannels wandering aloft, and one of them climbed up and put me in the right path, and brought me down in safety" (160).

Significantly, Little also insists on the very hard conditions under which they labour, which are not limited to the dangers inherent in their tasks:

> a more cruelly-worked or more poorly-paid, and withal a better-tempered set of fellows are not to be met with the whole world over. Dirty and ill-paid, mostly covered from head to foot with itch sores, and treated like dogs, they work with a will, and are always ready for a joke. During the whole of my trip, I, in my ridiculous foreign dress, never heard an uncivil word from one of them, and, as I have related in my account of the upward journey, on more than one occasion, when rambling along the shore I found myself unexpectedly caught in a tight place, they goodnaturedly [sic] came to my assistance. (331-32)

Most importantly, they seem to stand out if compared with other Chinese workers, as their "order, discipline, and promptness . . . is a striking contrast to the lax way in which, in other parts of China, bodies of workmen seem all to be giving orders together" (159).

The praise for the trackers leads to numerous considerations concerning the disproportion between the harshness they have to endure and the wages they get for it. Little describes five of them "clinging, on their hands and feet, to the jagged rocks as they pulled the boat up inch by inch," and extols "the pluck and endurance of these poor coolies, earning but two dollars in cash for the two months' voyage, and getting from the Lao-ta three meals of coarse rice, flavoured with a little fried cabbage, for their sustenance, upon which they are called to put forth all their strength from dawn to dark daily" (144-45). Crucially, his insistence on their meagre earnings provides a further reason to support his steam navigation project: he explains that each boatman is paid 300 cash for the down journey, "besides three meals of rice daily, with eight ounces of pork each three times on the voyage" and "For the voyage up, which occupies thirty to forty days, the pay is 800 to 1000 cash (3s. 6d.)." He then exhorts his readers to "Compare this with the pay which the same coolie would get if on board a foreign steamer, at least eight dollars a month, his rice costing two dollars, with the toils of a galley-slave exchanged for almost nominal labour" (321). The reference to slavery should not pass unnoticed: in this way, the author does not only pose as someone who wants to help the

trackers to gain better work conditions, but almost as a liberator. Yet he never seems to ask their opinion on the issues that are so central to their lives, and they have no specific voice in his text.

Conclusions

Little's text, written to enlist the support of the British public for his project, draws together many of the issues underlying the establishment of steam navigation in the Upper Yangtze: the need for an appropriate vessel to overcome the obstacles posed by the Gorges, the tensions surrounding the introduction of technological innovations, the vexed question of taxation, and the political power-struggles that hampered the endeavour. On the one hand, the author tries to include the perspectives of the various actors involved, in order to provide his readers in Britain with a more accurate picture of the complexities he had to face. On the other hand, however, he incorporates other points of view in order to deflate them, presenting his own as the most informed, balanced, and attentive to the real needs of the local population. He shows that his plan is feasible and, most importantly, beneficial for all – an instance of the progress that China needs, and British investors are ready to provide.

Yet, the encounter with the river, which has been central to Chinese history and culture for two millennia, also complicates simplistic assumptions on the superiority of the West and its more "efficient" management of the environment, as can be seen in Little's criticism of mass tourism or in his comments on Chinese building practices, deemed more in harmony with nature than Western ones. Moreover, the opportunity to observe junkmen and trackers erodes received stereotypes about "the Chinese," testifying to a degree of admiration and respect seldom voiced in this period, even though river workers are still denied a voice of their own. Crucially, the overlapping aesthetic, economic, and human considerations that characterise Little's account reflect the multi-layered significance of the Yangtze, a unique environment which focalised, and partially reshaped, current views of China, its people and its nature.

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