The Victorians and China: Travels with Ships, Ideologies and Literature

Julia Kuehn

One could argue that the Victorian relations with China began, *avant la lettre*, in 1793, with Lord Macartney's famous refusal to kowtow in front of the Chinese Emperor unless he did the same before a portrait of the British monarch. Gone were the days of a romanticised China, as in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"; the Macartney Embassy encountered China as a reality, and, more importantly, as a real force to reckon with. The relationship with China – politically, economically, culturally – was not going to be an easy one.

However, the increased contact with China – by mostly merchants, missionaries, servicemen, diplomats and travellers – did not necessarily mean that the "real" China was communicated back to Britain. Rather, as the title of Nicholas Clifford's 2001 study says, *"A Truthful Impression of the Country"* was usually the best one could expect: like Isabella Bird, whose quotation this is, almost all western observers of China would put their subjective stamp on things and people seen, stories heard and experiences had. More often than not, fictions and inaccuracies prevailed. Favourable impressions of China resulted mostly from the nineteenth-century vogues for Chinese landscapes and architecture, horticulture, tea and porcelain, silks and furniture. The educated Victorian would also acknowledge that China's production of humanistic scholarship was praiseworthy, as were the culture's early advances in science and technology: the Chinese had, after all, spearheaded the "four great inventions" of paper, printing, gunpowder and the compass. But there the western knowledge and appreciation usually ended.

On the one hand, the proliferation of half-truths, and negative ones at that, was due to the fact that China was, simply, immense. Any westerner who had made their way there – in some kind of service or resulting from a travelling inclination – could only see a part of the country and its people and customs. Even Archibald Little, an "old China hand" with a wide experience of the country over a five-decade period, could not help being overwhelmed and disheartened when he travelled, in 1897, through "the illimitable western mountains" of China towards Tibet: here, at *Mount Omi and Beyond*, was a landscape that seemed to have neither beginning nor end (103). Similarly, China's history stretched almost limitless over millennia in a way that made Europeans seem mere newcomers, encouraging them – and this became an important and recurring trope – to think of themselves as specialists in modernity. China's geographical and historical vastness dwarfed the westerner – "Little Me in China," said Christopher Isherwood retrospectively about his and W.H. Auden's 1938 experiences in the country (8) – and linguistic and cultural barriers added to this sense of befuddlement. If these obstacles were not already sufficient, there was something about the secret life of the mind and feelings of the Chinese people that remained unfathomable, or simply closed to the Victorians. As traveller Elizabeth Kemp acknowledged: "People *may* describe with success the soul of a people, provided it is sufficiently near the surface, but the foreigner who has known and loved China for a lifetime would be the first to repudiate the possibility of doing this in the case of China." (vii)

China's vastness and impenetrability did not always result in gestures of humility, like Kemp's, and reflexions on the limits of any attempt to describe the country with authority and sincerity. On the contrary, Macartney's trip was the very starting point for the economic, political and ideological conflicts that would ensue under Victoria's government in decades to come, leading to the First (1839-42) and Second (1856-60) Opium Wars and, eventually, the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901). As interest in and, especially, mercantile interaction with

China grew, so did an increasingly negative impression of China and the Chinese Administrators of the British Empire in Asia and elsewhere adopted a stance of cultural and moral superiority that seemingly justified its international interventions. John Barrow, for instance, a member of Macartney's entourage, was keen, rather than to accept the official account written by Sir George Staunton, Macartney's deputy, to write down the "unbiased conclusions of his own mind, founded altogether on his own observations" (xii). In his *Travels in China* (1804) we have the first Orientalist vision of the country in the Saidian sense. His was, in Colin Mackerras's words, "a blistering attack on China, its government, institutions, society, and people" (45). If China was so vast, unfathomable and also unpredictable – Napoleon's "sleeping dragon" – it had to be contained in action as well as in words. China was not just seen as backward, quaint, superstitious and lacking in energy, as in other, earlier, accounts but, more aggressively, it was described as tyrannical, oppressive, unjust and exciting feelings of fear, deceit and disobedience from its people. As the nineteenth century grew older these negative ideas remained and settled down as rigid Foucauldian epistemes that would govern much of the Victorians' "knowledge" about China in journalism, travel writing, novels, historical, ethnographic and religious studies, as well as Victorian policies related to China.

While still not a large field, a number of recent studies have been added by literary and cultural scholars to the existing body of scholarship on the relationship between China and (Victorian) Britain, seeking to extend and complicate previous studies of imperialism by highlighting this region of the world outside the bounds of Britain's formal empire. To "classics" on China-"west" relations like Eric Hayot's *The Hypothetical Mandarin* (2009), David Porter's *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (2010) and Elizabeth Chang's *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2010) – to name just a few – have now been added Shih-Wen Chen's *Representations of China in British Children's Fiction, 1851-1911* (2013) as well as Nigel Leask's and Ross Forman's respective studies, which are reviewed in this special issue of the *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*. Other reviews of books and collections by Elizabeth Sinn, Kendall Johnson and Philip Bowring widen the angle on China-"west" relations through perspectives of and work done in history, art history, American Studies, biographical studies and beyond.

This special issue's agenda is cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary: we start the journey in the crown colony of Hong Kong, ceded by China to the British as a result of the First Opium War. Perhaps ironically, this is a paper on termini, or, rather the baffling question of why sea transport did not produce the same magnificent edifices as railway transportation did, in the colonial centres as well as in colonial outposts. Hong Kong's waterfront was, as **Stephen Davies** shows in his essay, for almost all of Victoria's reign a random muddle of dockyards, slipways, jetties, nullahs, promenades, sewage outlets and backs of buildings. It was only in the 1890s that the colonial government showed an interest in port planning and development but even then a general bias against ships and the sea – associated with commerce, commodities, discomfort, danger, death and low life – could not be concealed. Davies's article is a must-read for anyone interested in Victorian maritime history and, specifically, Victoria Harbour's characteristics and idiosyncrasies. On the other hand, the essay is an important reminder of the realities of transportation by ship (of goods and people alike). Anyone working on Victorian commodities or Victorian travels – related to China or other sites – will find its examples, data and argument both useful and eye-opening.

The coolie trade is briefly touched upon by Davies in his contemplations on passenger vs. freight transportation, but brought to more prominence in **Ailise Bulfin**'s essay. Bringing the perceived threat of "The Yellow Peril," which had become common parlance in the late-Victorian period as Orientalist impressions of China reigned, into the context of wider Chinese migration across the British Empire (for instance, into the settler colonies of Australia and South Africa and even the plantations of the British West Indies), Bulfin reveals the significance and impact of the coolie trade on imperial society and ideology beyond the immediate involvement of Britain with China. At the centre of Bulfin's essays are the representations of the Chinese in the travel writing, novels and short fiction of Australian-born Guy Boothby, who migrated to London in 1893. Just as Boothby's story and oeuvre show the far reaches of the Victorian Empire and the multifaceted nature of Britannia's engagement with China, the history of the Victorians' engagement with the Chinese is not limited to China alone.

With **Douglas Kerr**'s essay on Rudyard Kipling's 1889 travel experiences in, first, Hong Kong and then Canton (Guangzhou) we continue the discussion about how large, far-reaching and, indeed, disorienting both the British Empire and China were. On his way from India to the metropolis London, where he would appear on the literary scene in 1890, Kipling had encountered Chinese people at brief stopovers in Penang and Singapore before getting a closer look at them in the crown colony. Kerr shows how Kipling's frustrations about being unable to "understand" the Chinese – voiced in his travelogue as in many others that preceded and followed Kipling's – turn into a full-blown fear and racism as he steps, only for the second time in his young life, outside the boundaries of the British Empire and into Canton, China and realises not only the limits of Britannia's realm but also the existence and potential might of another, Chinese, Empire. The "facts" of China become "fictions" of China as ideologies and subjective representations take over, as they do in much of Boothby's work.

If we accept the argument that a focus on the sea and other waterways is generally neglected in Victorian Studies, this special issue is doing its best to remedy the situation by ending with **Jenny Huangfu Day**'s overview of how steamships and the ideas associated with them made their way into Qing-dynasty China and the Chinese mind and imaginary. Harnessing the powers of fire and water, steamships were not only a victory of modern technological ingenuity, Day argues, but as "cities on the sea" they were also microcosms of western culture, transporting (colonial) ideas of (international) law, racial superiority and civilisation. Steamships were, like the vessels in Davies's essay, more than simply a means of transportation that connected the Victorians with China – as Archibald Little, too, knew so well. They were instrumental players *within* the story of Sino-British contact during the Victorian era, as they shaped perceptions, ideologies and experiences on either side of the encounter.

The second part of the special issue offers five reviews of recent studies – published with Cambridge University Press and Hong Kong University Press – which investigate the relationships between China and the nineteenth-century "west" through various characters, themes, foci and disciplinary methods. Just as the Australasian Victorian Studies Association stresses its *Austral-asian* reach and critical trajectory, it also desires to reach Victorian scholars whose interests lie beyond or even outside literary studies, be these in history, art history, geography, area studies or law, medicine and economics. The book reviews collected here reflect this wider, cross- and interdisciplinary agenda.

This special issue originated in a number of China-focused panels at the annual meeting of the Australasian Victorian Studies Association at the University of Hong Kong in July 2014.

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Julia Kuehn is Associate Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong. She has published widely in the areas of nineteenth-century women's literature, travel writing (often China-focussed) and popular fiction. Her publications include *Glorious Vulgarity: Marie Corelli's Feminine Sublime in a Popular Context* (2004), *A Century of Travels in China* (ed., 2007), *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire* (ed., 2008), *China Abroad: Travels, Subjects, Spaces* (ed., 2009), *Diasporic Chineseness after the Rise of China* (ed., 2013), *A Female Poetics of Empire: From Eliot to Woolf* (2014) and *New Directions in Travel Writing Studies* (ed., 2015). Julia is currently working on a comparative study of German and British nineteenth-century realist fiction.