

Kipling in China: Empires of Noise

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This essay is moved by the question: by what mode of transport did Rudyard Kipling visit China in 1889? Kipling's travel book *From Sea to Sea* (1899) has two parts. The first and shorter one is titled *Letters of Marque*, and contains his dispatches from his travels in India in the last two months of 1887.¹ The second, longer part reports from the journey he began in March 1889, and which took him from Calcutta to Burma, around south-east Asia, to Japan and then to the United States, which he entered via San Francisco. Kipling regarded the sea journey as something of a sabbatical, after his "seven years hard" working for newspapers in India.² But a journalist is never really on holiday, and he cheerfully plundered the places he visited for copy, some written up immediately and other observations put away for use many years later. Both parts of the book, and both journeys, begin with a cheerful denunciation of the generic Globe-trotter – "the man who 'does' kingdoms in days and writes books upon them in weeks" (1-2). The globe-trotter is recognisably the anti-traveller of travel literature, avatar of the age of convenience tourism and "the unbridled arrogance of five weeks on a Cook's ticket" (208). As organised and packaged leisure travel had boomed since mid-century, professional writers and professional travellers found it increasingly necessary, or useful, to distinguish themselves from the vulgar herd of tourists, whose observations of foreign places were assumed to be hurried, uninformed, and generally worthless. Kipling, to be sure, since his earliest published journalism for the *Civil and Military Gazette* in Lahore, had been cultivating a writerly personality founded on the assumption of superior or inside knowledge.

And if he relished the role of expert, it was equally important and satisfying to Kipling to speak from a knowledge which was shared, but exclusive. Expertise was a profession, a "mystery" in the mediaeval sense of a brotherhood trained in some trade or art; a freemasonry of knowledge (which also explains his lifelong love of professional jargons and "shop" talk). The British who worked in India had struck the sixteen-year-old Kipling, returning to become a journalist in the country of his birth, as such a brotherhood. Decades later, but still with something like schoolboy awe, he described the members of the Punjab Club at Lahore as consisting of "none except picked men at their definite work – Civilians, Army, Education, Canals, Forestry, Irrigation, Railways, Doctors, and Lawyers" (Kipling, *Something of Myself* 56). He saw and admired them as an elite community of experts. A newspaperman, who was in the knowledge business, Kipling stood slightly uneasily in this knowledgeable company; not a specialist himself, he, however, aspired to the condition of Mycroft Holmes, whose speciality was omniscience.

Since the dispatches in *From Sea to Sea* were put together from special correspondence and occasional articles for the *Pioneer* and *Pioneer Mail* in Allahabad, Kipling was even more than usually alert to his close and neighbourly relation with his original Anglo-Indian readers. He and they – long-term British residents overseas, and in some cases "country-born" like himself – were particularly liable to be affronted by the superficial observations and ignorant generalizations that globe-trotters, the unofficial cousins of the despised official ignoramus of the poem "Pagett MP,"³ were supposed to bestow upon the lands they zoomed through. And so Kipling presents his own travel writings, first about India and later about Asia and America, as a counter-discourse to that of the globe-trotter, a discourse of knowledge and expertise to stand against the routine prejudice and ignorance of the tourist, and to defend the world he knows from the libels of people who know nothing about it. To perform this role

(and it is a role, a performance, and a comic one at that) Kipling decides that he must assume the part. “The idea necessitated sacrifices, - for I had to become a Globe-trotter, with a helmet and deck shoes. *In the interests of our little world* [my italics] I would endure these things and more. I would deliver ‘brawling judgements all day long; on all things unashamed’” (208).⁴

In the following account I accept the invitation of this opening gambit to orient Kipling’s travel writings in *From Sea to Sea* to the poles of knowledge and ignorance. I will undertake to try to establish the Asian frontier where “our little world” ceases to be ours, specifically by looking at the way Kipling encounters the Chinese. In this investigation I will pay attention both to Kipling’s visual and to his auditory experience.

It is interesting in *From Sea to Sea* to observe Kipling testing the borders of what was literally his area of expertise, the British Empire and Anglo-India in particular. On his travels by land in the nominally autonomous Indian princely states that patchworked the subcontinent, Kipling was still moving through a familiar world – the princely states were still India, constitutionally independent but watched over by British advisors, whom Kipling calls the “Hat-Marked Caste” (52-64) – and as a speaker of English and Hindustani he remained in what we might call his linguistic zone.⁵ On the sea journey from Calcutta, via Rangoon and Moulmein in Lower Burma, Penang and Singapore on the Malay Peninsula, and as far as Hong Kong, he was still scarcely abroad at all in the political sense. The ship tripped from one to another of the stepping-stones of British colonial havens and naval harbours. At twenty-three years old Kipling was already quite well-travelled, but it is instructive to remember that – if we discount a brief trip to Paris when he was a schoolboy, accompanied by his father – when he crossed over the border from Hong Kong to China, later on in this trip, he would be setting foot outside British possessions for the first time.

It is not very surprising that much that he encountered on these travels was familiar to him. For the benefit of his Anglo-Indian readers he is forever drawing comparisons, sometimes contrasts, with landmarks and institutions and practices he and they know well. Some of these familiar-looking sights are uncanny in their slight difference from “home,” but many of them provide a reassuring sense of the continuity of the globalizing British presence, with its clubs and bustling street life, its missionaries and traders and policemen, its amateur theatricals and its gossip, from Peshawar to Singapore. There were Indians, of course, as well as British, everywhere he went in South-East Asia. But there were also Chinese. He got a look at them in Penang, a Malay straits settlement but – then as now – predominantly a Chinese town, and again at Singapore. But in Hong Kong it became clear that, in the words of his fellow-traveller the Professor, “the time to study the Chinese question was now” (266-67), and in Canton (Guangzhou) the Chinese question became critical, indeed violent. (The Professor is the narrator’s principal travelling companion and interlocutor on the sea voyage. As it happens, Kipling was accompanied on the voyage by his Anglo-Indian friend Alec Hill, a teacher at Muir College in Allahabad, and his American wife Edmonia. The couple had met Kipling in 1887, when he was recently returned from the travels described in *Letters of Marque*. Edmonia Hill in particular became his close friend and an important correspondent. The Professor in *From Sea to Sea*, who is unencumbered by a wife, may be based on Alec Hill, but is essentially an interlocutory and narrative convenience, someone to talk to, a travel-writer’s trope more than a character.)

At first sight, the Chinese in Hong Kong were impressive. The teeming streets were busy, and all around were signs of Chinese industry and diligence. Kipling noticed everything, and paid particular attention to artefacts and goods for sale. Here the tourist cruising the shops deployed the professionally sharp eye of the reporter, but it was more than this. Kipling's English childhood had been brightened by his visits to the Burne-Jones house at the heart of an aesthetic-political enterprise – the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – with one wing in ceremonial high art and the other in artisanry and the design of everyday objects. In India for the past seven years he had been in every sense close to a father, Lockwood Kipling, whose job was the creation and encouragement of arts, crafts, industry and design. It is no wonder that, wherever he went on his journeys, Rudyard's eye was drawn to made things, the designed objects by which he was inclined to base his opinions of a culture and people (his views on the Japanese present a yet more extreme example of this).

And so his description of Hong Kong is tight with objects, not only the local curios on sale in the shops, but the carving and gilded tracery decorating the fronts of shops that offer all manner of quaint and striking merchandise. "A fragment of twisted roots helped by a few strokes into the likeness of huddled devils, a running knop and flower cornice, a split bamboo screen – they were all good, and their joinings and splicings and mortisings were accurate" (253). There may be a relativity in aesthetic judgements, but carpentry is a universal language, and here it was testifying to the Chinese capacity for producing good work, the principal yardstick of Kipling's approbation. Hong Kong presented itself to his eyes as a teeming workplace, and the routine comparison with India was now a bit worrying – "This beats Calcutta into a hamlet" (270) – though it was still jocular. Thus at the end of his first dispatch from Hong Kong, Kipling turns cheekily on his Anglo-Indian readers, and tells them they have conquered the wrong country. "Let us annex China" (277).

This position has been arrived at as a result of very largely visual data from the Chinese scene, and is underwritten by Kipling's description – the word foregrounds visuality – of a city which is bustling, productive, and orderly. "Neither at Penang, Singapur, nor this place have I seen a single Chinaman asleep while daylight lasted" (275), runs a fairly typical observation. On such visual evidence Kipling can pronounce with his customary authority and aplomb. It is when we turn off the picture, as it were, and pay attention to the auditory record, that we may begin to notice the limits of Kipling's knowledge, or knowledgeability or knowingness. He is eager to explore this "new world humming outside the window" (268), but he doesn't really have the equipment to interrogate and interpret it. He reports interesting conversations with a taipan, a general, and a European prostitute, but he is less at home with "that oilskin mystery, the Chinaman" (273). "Hi-yi-yow" (270), goes his rickshaw coolie. "Hi, low yah. To hoh wang!" yell his chair-bearers (304). Not much information there. The proprietor of a curio shop addresses him in pidgin – "You wanchee buy?" – and Kipling, who is struggling to reconcile the exquisite nature of Chinese crafts with the unpromising appearance of the people who made them, who all look alike to him, uses the same idiom ("the new tongue which I am acquiring," 273) to ask the shopman a question. Kipling picks up and relishes China-Coast pidgin as a new jargon.; there had been no need for such a form of communication in India, where he could make himself well understood in English and Hindustani.

"Wanchee know one piecee information b'long my pidgin. Savvy these things? Have got soul, you?"
 "Have got how?"

“Have got one piecee soul – allee same spilit? No savvy? This way then – your people lookee allee same devil; but make culio allee same pocket-Joss, and not giving any explanation. Why-for are you such a horrible contradiction?”

“No savvy. Two dollar an’ half,” he said, balancing a cabinet in his hand.
(273-74)⁶

This is a comic turn, to be sure, but this moment of mutual incomprehension is notably also the moment when a negative, even sinister note enters Kipling’s account of the Chinese in Hong Kong. “There are three races who can work,” opines the Professor, as they return to the street full of “the babel of Cantonese and pidgin.” ““But there is only one that can swarm,’ I answered” (274).

The Chinese world yields easily enough to the protocols of visual observation, anchored at both ends to Western and to Indian experience, and to modes of description – journalistic, poetic, and comic – evolved in the already mature genre of travel literature. In these ways it can be known. The soundscape, on the other hand, is a good deal harder to process, and this is only partly because Kipling is linguistically disadvantaged among Chinese people. He felt he had a pretty good idea of how Indians thought – many of his tales take us into the Indian mind – but he could have no such confidence about the Chinese. The Chinese were inscrutable to him by virtue of his linguistic disadvantage: this deficit could only be made up by imagination. Without linguistic access to Chinese interiority, he is obliged to ventriloquise in order to hear what Chinese people are thinking.⁷ When he does so, the news is not good, because his imagination is prejudicially programmed. “Look at their faces,” he tells the Professor. “They despise us. You can see it, and they aren’t a bit afraid of us either” (306).

This observation is made after Kipling and the Professor have crossed the border, to make the trip upriver to the Chinese city of Canton (Guangzhou). The things that he had found to admire in the colony – the bustle of the streets, the ceaseless industry of the people, their remarkable artefacts, all now return demonised: the bustle and industry now appear to be symptoms of aggression, the curios now seem malignant and devilish: he likens the street life of the city to Goblin Market – busy, grotesque and dangerous (302). Yet the closeness of colonial Hong Kong and imperial Canton should be emphasised. Both are Cantonese cities in the Pearl River delta, some seventy-five miles apart. The colony had an open border, and there was a busy economic traffic between the two cities, so it was not just that the people in the streets of Canton were similar to the people in the streets of Hong Kong: many of them actually *were* the same people. Yet the amused admiration with which Kipling described the Chinese in the colony has now turned thoroughly hostile. He repeatedly asserts that he hates the Chinese and expresses the wish that they be killed off. “Every other shop was a restaurant, and the space between them crammed with humanity. Do you know those horrible sponges full of worms that grow in warm seas? You break off a piece of it and the worms break too. Canton was that sponge” (304). Strangely, the great press of humanity in the city streets convinces him that he has come to an inhuman place, for it seems the Chinese set no value on human life. His admiration for the art and industry he saw in Hong Kong is forgotten. “I hated the Chinaman before; I hated him doubly as I choked for breath in his seething streets where nothing short of the pestilence could clear a way.” (305) His vituperation builds to a genocidal climax. “It would be quite right to wipe the city of Canton off the face of the earth, and to exterminate all the people who ran away from the shelling” (306).

One way to account for this shocking reversal is to remember that Kipling is now definitely out of his zone of knowledge. Hong Kong was a Chinese town but it was also a British one, but there was nothing British about Canton – and of course nothing English or Indian either. Except, of course, that Canton was a treaty port, with European enclaves or “concessions” guarded by colonial police, which Kipling reaches with a great sense of relief. “This was English Canton, with two hundred and fifty sahibs in it. ’Twould have been better for a Gatling [gun] behind the bridge gate” (310). China for Kipling is an unintelligible empire of noise. To interpret this scene, he has no script to draw on but his ventriloquising imagination. Canton becomes an acoustic nightmare.

The March of the Mongol is a pretty thing to write about in magazines. Hear it once in the gloom of an ancient curio shop, where nameless devils of the Chinese creed make mouths at you from back-shelves, where brazen dragons, revelations of uncleanness, all catch your feet as you stumble across the floor – hear the tramp of the feet on the granite blocks of the road and the breaking wave of human speech, that is not human! Watch the yellow faces that glare at you between the bars, and you will be afraid, as I was afraid. (305-06)

Aggression and challenge are ventriloquised in the shop’s statuettes, probably household gods and undoubtedly not nameless, but only nameless in English. The sound of people in the streets, which he had taken as a sign of industry and efficiency in Hong Kong, is here interpreted as the noise of a great army marching to racial war.⁸ And the “human speech, that was not human” is, of course, human speech that was not intelligible to Kipling, because not uttered in one of his languages: here the boundary of the human was actually an isogloss. Indeed the hostility seems to be entirely a function of Kipling’s racial panic, projected on to the Chinese in Canton, and one part of his mind acknowledges this. “There was of course no incivility from the people, but the mere mob was terrifying” (305). Yet it was not a mob when it was going about its business in Hong Kong; “a few thousand Chinese all carrying something” (270).⁹

The marginal nature of Hong Kong in terms of “our little world” was marked by Kipling’s strange little pidgin conversation with the shop-owner, about whether or not the Chinese had a soul. The situation of Canton as definitely beyond the epistemological pale, is indicated by a conversation he reports which is so one-sided that his Chinese interlocutor – if that is the word – is entirely silent. Kipling describes how he and the Professor visit the Potter’s Field in Canton (the homely English name for a burial place for unknown or indigent people), where executions take place, and meet the executioner, who happens to be wandering about, and is then addressed by Kipling in this manner:

My friend, you cannot execute too freely in this land. You are blessed, I apprehend, with a purely literary bureaucracy recruited – correct me if I am wrong – from all social strata, more especially those in which the idea of cold-blooded cruelty has, as it were, become embedded. Now, when to inherited devildom is superadded a purely literary education of grim and formal tendencies, the result, my evil-looking friend, – the result, I repeat, – is a state of affairs which is faintly indicated in the Little Pilgrim’s account of the Hell of Selfishness. You, I presume, have not yet read the works of the Little Pilgrim. (308)¹⁰

Jocular though it may be with its full-blown oratorical rotundities, this pompous, patronizing and insulting speech seems to be part of Kipling’s revenge, his way of getting back at

Chinese people for being incomprehensible to him, and so exposing the limits of his epistemological regime, his empire of knowledge, “our little world.” Earlier in the visit, Kipling had been reduced to cowering in a curio shop, under the protection of their Chinese guide, while the Chinese crowd peered (or, as he saw it, “glared”) through the window. Notably, the Professor is busy examining the shop’s wares and shows no sign of sharing Kipling’s anxiety. Now with the executioner, he restores his linguistic authority by addressing this Chinese man in a language he knows he cannot understand, of which Kipling is a master – not just English, but a particularly stuffed-shirt variety, complete with cultural references that the executioner (even if he could understand the words) can be mocked for not recognizing. Kipling counters his linguistic disadvantage elsewhere by an utterance in a mode in which he enjoys an absolute superiority. In the Canton chapter he is also reasserting authority by uttering a series of slashing and hostile generalizations about the diabolical and inhuman Chinese. Later in the journey, in San Francisco Kipling found further reasons to be alarmed by the Chinese when, he claimed, he witnessed a murder in a gambling den in Chinatown. His animus towards the Chinese seems to have been lifelong (Scott 299-328).

Apart from the fact that Canton smelled bad – which it no doubt did; but then so did Benares – “Then the stinks rose up and overwhelmed us. In this respect Canton was Benares twenty times magnified.” (305) – it is hard to see even from his own account that its inhabitants had done anything much to deserve Kipling’s extreme and jocular hatred. I don’t know that this is a defence of Kipling, but it should be pointed out that his hostility to the Chinese is not merely hysterical and unthinking. It has a strategic basis. *From Sea to Sea* gives us, I believe, our first example of Kipling’s global thinking about empire. His journey, with its colonial staging posts, was not simply a pleasure trip but also allowed him to undertake a survey of the British Empire in the East, and while it gave him much to feel complacent about, he was also shrewd enough to see its long-term vulnerabilities. Even in India, and certainly in South-East Asia, the British were stretched extremely thin. Furthermore, their imperial stock did not replenish itself, for in Asia, unlike in the white dominions, the empire was established in places “where the Englishman cannot breed successfully” (252); white children, as he put it brutally, “run to leg and nose in the second generation in this part of the world” (252). Their money, their weapons, and their organization maintained British power in the Orient for the time. The mining companies and the railways were swarming over the continent. But there were not enough British, certainly not enough Asian-born British, to exploit and sustain the situation as it should be exploited, sustained and consolidated. At present the British had no serious rival in the region, but Kipling could see that the challenge, when it came, would come from an enormously populous, industrious, and capable Asian people, living on potentially “the richest land on the face of the earth” (275). It will certainly not then be a question of annexing China. Though Kipling was observing China in the late Qing, a ramshackle, run-down and demoralised empire wide open to the predations of foreign powers, he was clear-sighted enough to see it as a future global rival, commanding (at least in Asia) resources with which the British in the long term could not compete. China, of course, was not the only other empire in East Asia. But Kipling’s reports from Japan, his next port of call, are most interested in Japanese arts and crafts, and manners. He does not appear to see Japan as a possible geopolitical rival. When Kipling jokes that he hates the Chinese, this is, arguably, the serious strategic insight behind the joke.

To be sure, Kipling was already, at twenty-three, one of the modern masters of the rhetoric of ironic narration. The tone of his globe-trotting narrative, here and elsewhere, must be handled with due care. But having said that, the representation of the Chinese in *From Sea to Sea* must stand as an example of the psychopathology of empire in the frenetic last years of the

century. Kipling was certainly fulfilling the promise he made at the beginning of the journey, to “deliver ‘brawling judgements all day long; on all things unashamed’” (208). How much of this was performance, and how deep did it go? After his day or so in Canton, Kipling seems to have assumed the role of the brash and strutting globe-trotter only too well.

The explanation seems apparent enough. So long as he was reporting from “our little world” of India, or the somewhat extended but still familiar and possessed area of knowledge that was the British world, it made sense to challenge the ignorant globe-trotter at his own game. But once out of the auditory ambience of his own languages, Kipling found himself as out of his depth as any globe-trotter, adrift in a gulf of unfamiliar and worrying ignorance. Here was an Orient inscrutable indeed, which he was obliged to animate prosthetically with his own imaginings, and to settle with his own voice.

Kipling’s China, it turns out, was a fantasy in an actual sense. Years later, in 1903 his friend the classical scholar Gilbert Murray was translating Euripides’ *Electra* and seems to have consulted Kipling on the death by decapitation of Aegisthus, described in a speech in that play. Kipling was happy to contribute his expertise. “When a man’s head is cut off as a rule he belches a little as it were; making a sticky clammy sound (this can best be seen by visit to Canton execution ground – fee to executioner, and visitors must bring own Phthian chopper as local instrument is Chinese (Pinney 136).)”¹¹ Thomas Pinney, editor of the Kipling *Letters*, adds the following note:

RK wrote about the Canton execution ground (Letter 10, *From Sea to Sea*) but according to Mrs Hill he did not see it. “R.K. had a bad attack of Indian fever when we reached Canton and had to stay in his berth.” The substance of his description “was all told him by the Prof. and me.” (3:137,n.2)¹²

So Kipling, it seems, never set foot in the Celestial Empire. The sound of the decapitation, like the rest of his Chinese soundscape, is a projection and a ventriloquism. Kipling was transported up the Pearl River in a steamship, but the mode of transport for his visit to China was none other than the viewless wings of his imagination. It was transport in the other, more romantic sense, of rapture, ecstasy, and fiction.

Notes

¹ All subsequent in-text references, unless otherwise stated, are to the first volume of *From Sea to Sea*, that is, *Letters of Marque*.

² “Seven Years Hard” is the title of the chapter in the autobiographical *Something of Myself* in which Kipling recounts his career as a journalist in India

³ It begins: “Pagett, M.P., was a liar, and a fluent liar therewith – / He spoke of the heat of India as the ‘Asian Solar Myth’; / Came on a four months’ visit, to “study the East,” in November, / And I got him to sign an agreement vowing to stay till September.” The poem was published in the *Pioneer* in 1886. A short story, “The Enlightenments of Pagett, M.P.,” appeared in the *Pioneer* in 1890.

⁴ In “Merlin and Vivien,” in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, it is “blind and naked Ignorance” that delivers such judgements.

⁵ The relation between English and the language the British called Hindustani is amusingly discussed in Trivedi, vii-xxvi. Trivedi describes Hindi and English as still today “the two power languages of India” (vii).

⁶ Kipling’s question may be seen as a debased and parodic late appearance of the sixteenth-century European theological controversy over the question of whether the indigenous people of far-flung pagan cultures were possessed of souls. Kipling’s cod argument is that, despite his unpromising appearance, the shopman’s godlike ability to create beautiful artefacts (or “make culio allee same pocket-Joss”) is proof of his possession of a soul.

⁷ On this journey, Kipling had first encountered this kind of disadvantage in Burma, where “the Anglo-Indian was a foreigner, a creature of no account,” because he “did not know Burman” (220). This sometimes necessitated what I call ventriloquism – the speculative attribution of sense to an unknown language. In his famous Burmese poem “The Road to Mandalay” there is a spectacular example – “For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say: / ‘Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!’” A local informant might not agree that this was what the temple-bells were saying.

⁸ “The March of the Mongol” was a journalistic phrase coined in the title of a very recently published article by William B. Dunlop. In spite of its alarming title, the article notes the economic, diplomatic and military resurgence of China and urges British statesmen to consider “how they may best strengthen the existing friendship between the two mighty Empires” (41).

⁹ See Chapter 4, “Crowds,” in Kerr, 53-66.

¹⁰ *The Little Pilgrim* was a mid-nineteenth-century children’s monthly magazine, edited by Sarah Jane Lippincott and published by Leander K. Lippincott in Philadelphia.

¹¹ Murray seems not have found a use in his version of *Electra* for Kipling’s gruesome information about the sound of decapitation. In his account, the Messenger tells Electra: “Up with a leap thy brother flashed the sword, / Then down upon his neck, and cleft the cord / Of brain and spine. Shuddering the body stood / One instant in an agony of blood, / And gasped and fell.” Euripides, *Electra*, 58-59.

¹² *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling*, 3:137, n.2. The note refers to W. M. Carpenter, “RK’s Allahabad Home,” MS, Cornell, 24. I am grateful to Professor Thomas Pinney for bringing this to my attention.

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