From Shanghai to Old Tachienlu

Travel & Research in China & Tibet

Tim Chamberlain





China - Between Revolutions

China is a country which fascinates me. Over the last few years I have been lucky enough to work in China, and have travelled to many parts of the country. It is truly vast, but it is entirely its own world. Much is being made of contemporary China and its current rise in the modern world – politically, economically, militarily. It is fascinating to see how China is changing – and, also, how it isn't. There is a huge difference between the city and the countryside. While certain metropolitan areas are surging ahead there is much in the rural areas which remains unchanged since Mao Zedong's Communist Party took over the country. But, as always in China's history, there is a great disparity between *those who have* and *those who have not*.

For those interested in China's history there are any number of books, films, and websites which will give you chapter and verse on the rise of Chairman Mao, the "Great Helmsman" – whose enormous portrait hangs above the entrance of the Tiananmen, looking out over Tiananmen Square towards his own mausoleum, where he still lies in State. There are also countless books on China's Imperial past too. One era which it is harder to find books about is the interim period between the revolution which did away with the Manchu Qing Dynasty in 1910/1911 and the Communist "liberation" in 1949, when the Nationalist Government fled into exile on the island of Taiwan, where it remains to this day.

The United Nations continued to recognise the Nationalists as the legitimate Government up until the 1970s, after which many Western countries have maintained their support for Taiwan, but in more muted political and diplomatic terms, quietly supporting Taiwan through trade and cultural initiatives. Whilst cross-strait tensions have eased of late, Beijing would still like to see Taiwan return to the fold one day, as have Hong Kong and Macao. But only time will tell what will become of all these several versions of essentially one China.



The interim period of China's history in the first half of the twentieth century is a period which has come to take over

much of my recent research interests. I am currently researching the life of a British Consular Official who was stationed in China during this turbulent period. He is remarkable because he went against the grain of his time, especially for a man essentially in the diplomatic service of one of the 'great Western powers', by marrying a Tibetan. It was a move, which in part, cost him his career.

I've been undertaking this biographical research for the best part of six years now (since 2005). Amassing all the relevant source material and piecing together various items of information to create a clearer picture has turned into a mammoth undertaking. But it has been, and still is, immensely interesting and rewarding of itself – not least because I have a family connection to the couple themselves. Their names are Louis Magrath King and Rinchen Lhamo.



Researching Louis and Rinchen's personal history has taken me to many different places. I've just spent the last two and a half weeks at the National Archives in Kew Gardens. I've also spent a lot of time working my way through archive material held at the British Library, at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and at the Royal Geographical Society. The search has also taken me on a number of journeys, both near and far. I've trekked down leafy lanes in Kent, along the bustling thoroughfares of Beijing, Chengdu, and Shanghai, and even up remote mountain paths in western China, where the province of Sichuan borders with Tibet. I've also had to familiarise myself with the times in which they lived – not just the complicated and chaotic politics of the feuding Provinces and their various tin-pot warlord Generals, but also the sights, sounds, and smells of their world; to try and imagine what it would have been like to have lived their lives and seen that era as they would have known it back then.



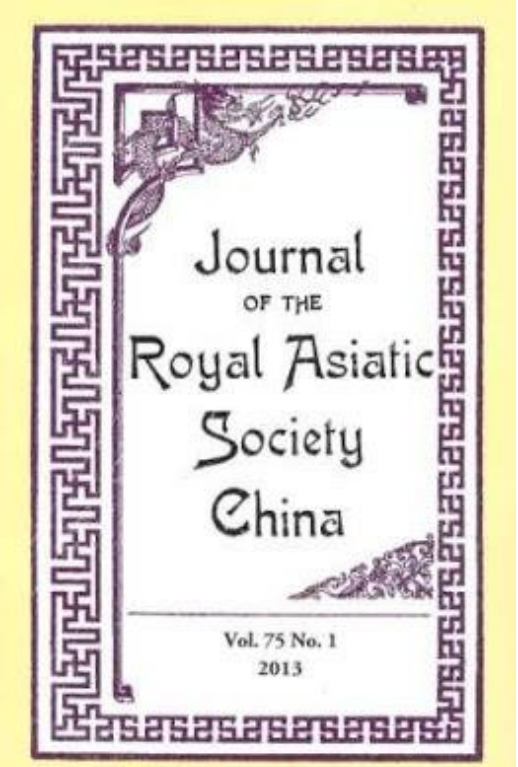
China & Tibet - Through Western Eyes

My first peer reviewed academic paper was published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China* in 2013. It examines the history of a family of writers who lived and worked in China at the turn of the last century. I'm related to this family (collaterally), and I originally began my research when I was asked to write a short article for the *British Museum Magazine* quite a few years ago. It took me five years of research to be able to write that short piece; but, once begun, it was a subject which had me hooked. That short article was simply the start.

One of the reasons why I originally began this blog was to chart and record some of my academic adventures such as this one, which has pretty much become my main project in life. I've been rather remiss in this particular aspect I have to admit, so over the next couple of months I'm hoping to post some more pieces here, detailing some of my research trips and my reflections on the processes of historical research as I begin to move beyond what began very simply as a personal investigation of family history into a broader topic of historical enquiry.

Part I

So, who were these people and what interests have they inspired in me?



Well, they were all members of the British community which settled in China after the Opuim Wars of the mid-nineteenth century. They were part of a vanguard of Westerners who, in their own words, were attempting to "open up" China (and the wider world), to expand trade into a truly global network. Western Imperial ambitions were part and parcel of this drive towards modernisation which saw the nineteenth century turn into a melting pot of industrialisation, commercialism, and the rise to pre-eminence of the nation state system. Our world in essence is the result of this era. What happened then still shapes and affects the global system which we have inherited, and which we and subsequent generations will continue to adapt. Exactly what the original vision of this nineteenth century project which emanated from Europe

might have been, indeed – whether or not it had been anything so coherent in the first place, is a highly debatable issue around which more than a fair few historians have centred their entire careers. But, as with any era, the different forces – social, political, economic, religious, etc. – which pushed and pulled, certainly combined to drive the dynamic which, as historians, we can now seek to pick apart and look at in detail; in order, perhaps, to better understand how we have come to live the way that we do now.

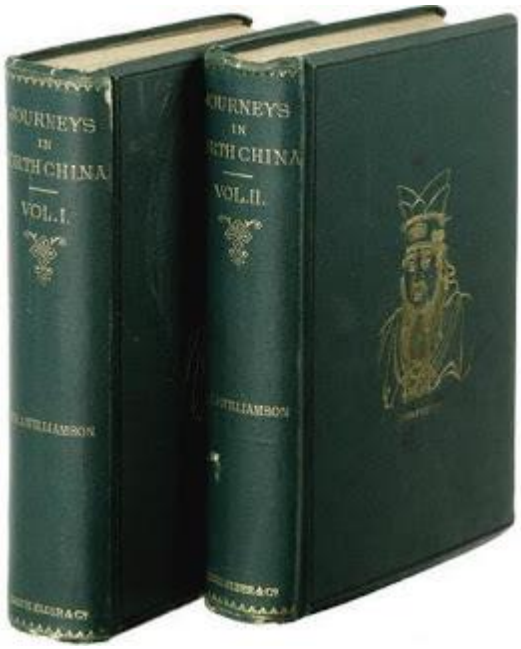
In that sense, all history is essentially about finding out who we are. Consequently, I am equally as fascinated by personal 'micro-histories' as I am by the grander narratives of the rise and fall of certain dynasties, great battles, revolutions, uprisings, and, treaties, etc., etc.



My current research interests began with the family tales of two people – Louis Magrath King (1886-1949) and Rinchen Lhamo (1901-1929). Two people from two very different cultures who married long ago, in a time when such marital unions were not necessarily "the done thing." But to understand who they were, as well as how and why they might have met one another, I had to fill out a lot of background detail. He was British. She was Tibetan. They met on the Chinese-Tibetan borderlands. But why was he there? What was happening in that part of the world at that particular time?

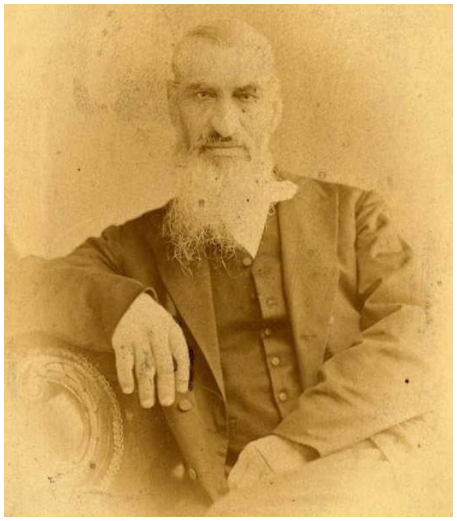
Fortunately for me, they had both written books on their life and times. But, in reading these, I realised I still needed to read more widely in order to understand the bigger picture. All such micro-histories naturally sit within a larger narrative. As I began to search out history books on the subject, so I began to shade in the details of the time, the place, the politics, etc. Simultaneously, I began to flesh out the principal cast too. Archives, photographs, family memories, began to people their world and bring character into these lives. Staring at blank faced sepia-toned formal portraits of unknown faces can be one of the most forbidding tasks for a historian, but finding these people's own words written down, hearing memories passed down of what they'd been like, what their habits and foibles were, really helps to bring them back to life. After a while we can begin to picture them for who they once were – real living people; but, we have to

be careful not to identify with them too much (especially if we are related to them!), because this might bias our understanding of who they were and what part they had played in that broader history which we are hoping to understand. Historical research is as much about constantly challenging your own thinking as it is about finding out facts.

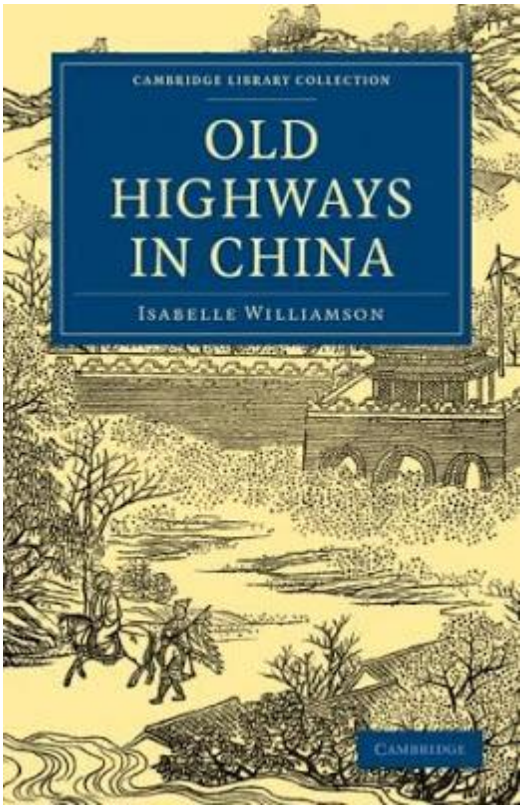


To understand why Louis King was living in a remote village high up in the mountains of the Chinese-Tibetan borderlands, it is best to start with his grandparents. The Reverend Alexander Williamson (1829-1890) and his wife, Isabelle, née Dougall (c.1834-1886), were Scottish missionaries. They were some of the first Westerners to travel widely in China and to write about their travels. Alexander Williamson is now best remembered for having founded 'the Society for the Diffusion of Christian and General Knowledge among the Chinese', and he is also remembered as the author of two monumental volumes of travelogue: his *Journeys in North China, Manchuria, and Eastern Mongolia, with some account of Corea* (1870). But, in many ways, I think his wife, Isabelle, is perhaps more interesting (if sadly rather less well known), because Isabelle Williamson wrote her own much slimmer and more accessible volume on a part of their travels, in which she notes down much that is of particular interest today regarding the lives of Chinese women whom she met and befriended. Her book, *Old Highways in China* (1884), is a rare window into this aspect of past Chinese society.





Rev. Alexander Williamson



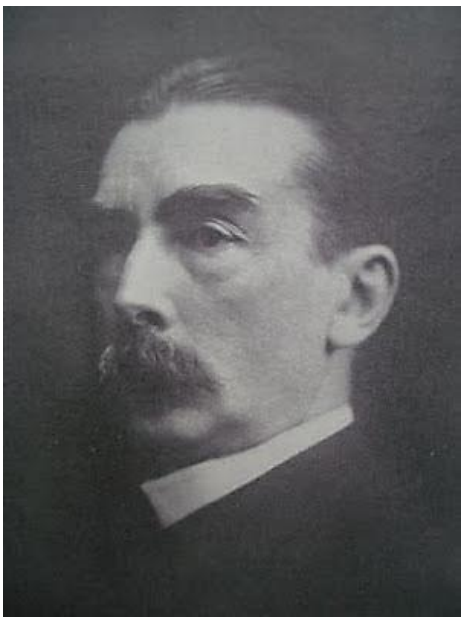


MRS. PAUL KING.



CHINESE COUPLE LATELY MARRIED.

Their daughter, christened Margaret, but more commonly known amongst the family as Veronica (1861-1949), was a well-known writer amongst the well-to-do circles of treaty port society. Her husband, Paul Henry King (1853-1938), was a prominent member of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service. Well-liked by Li Hong Zhang, a highly influential statesman in the court of the Dowager Empress, Cixi – Paul King was twice decorated for his service to China: first, by the Imperial Court with the Order of the Double Dragon, and, second, by the Republican Government with the Order of the Golden Grain (his medals are now preserved at Haileybury School, where in his younger days King had been a pupil). Paul and Veronica were married at Holy Trinity Cathedral in Shanghai in 1881, where the wedding was conducted by Bishop George Evans Moule.



Paul Henry King

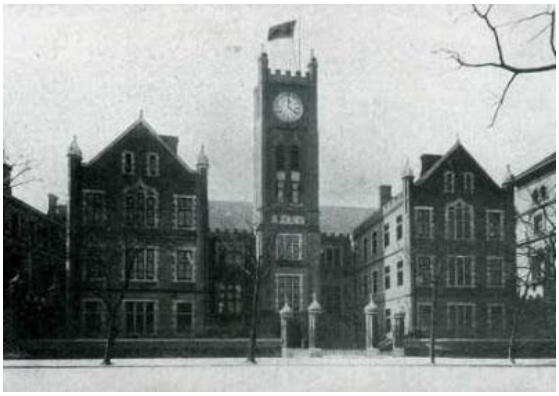


Order of the Double Dragon (left) & Order of the Golden Grain (right)

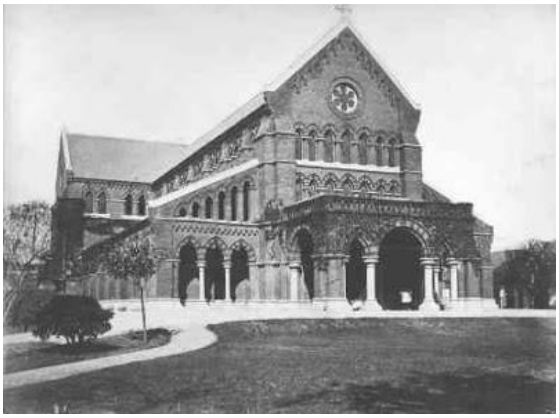
(Photo above of Paul King's medals, Haileybury)



Li Hong Zhang



Customs House, Shanghai, 1893



Holy Trinity, Shanghai c.1890s

Louis was their fourth son, born in China in 1886, and schooled at Chefoo and then at Berkhamsted. He joined the British Consular Service in 1905, and began by following a fairly normal career path. Gradually climbing up the ranks of the Consular Service ladder in China – first as a Student Interpreter at the British Legation in Peking, then progressing through the various Assistant grades at the British Consulate in Shanghai, and thereafter at various other treaty ports to which he was posted for varying periods of time, until his career took a decidedly unusual turn. In 1913 he was chosen to set up a new Consular outpost on the Chinese-Tibetan border. He was

ostensibly sent there to observe cross-border trade, yet in truth he had been sent with secret instructions to gather and report back military intelligence. In other words, he was a spy. The reality though isn't so much the characteristic kind of plotlines we'd expect from the pens of John Le Carré or Ian Fleming, but rather more like that of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. Louis was now a small but not insignificant player on the fringes of what was known as 'the Great Game.'



Chefoo School, c. 1915



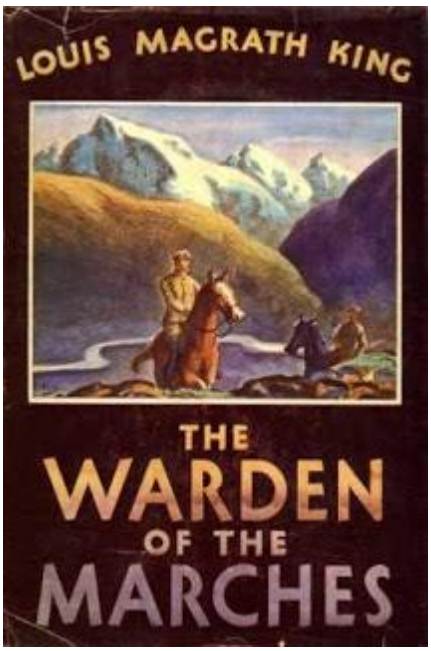
The British Consulate, Shanghai

The Government of British India feared for the security of its domain – "the jewel in the crown" of the British Empire. In particular, they were most concerned about the threat of a Russian attack from the north, hence neighbouring Tibet was increasingly an area of key concern. After the brutal incursion of the Younghusband Expedition in 1904, there were various attempts (both blundering and shrewd) to understand and so stabilise political positions; to demarcate territorial boundaries and thus fix lines drawn on maps – and so, Louis's posting to the remote town of Tachienlu 打箭炉 (present day Kangding 康定 in Sichuan; also known as Dartsendo དར་རྩེ་མདོ། in Tibetan) was intended as a means by which the British could keep an eye on Chinese intentions, particularly by monitoring troop movements in the region, given that the status of Tibet at the time was far from clearly understood.

Yet these lines on maps weren't really the way Central and East Asian societies understood or defined their regional polities – borders and boundaries were more like moveable social entities, made up of different fealties and alliances, autonomous or semi-autonomous principalities and tributary peoples. (See: Carole McGranahan, 'From Simla to Rongbatsa: The British and the "Modern" Boundaries of Tibet', in *The Tibet Journal,* Vol. 28, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), pp. 39-60). The British used to put up wooden or stone posts along the barren windswept hilltops to mark out the northern Indian border, but the local Tibetans when crossing these ridges no doubt saw them as handy beams or lintels which could be better used elsewhere – and so, knowingly or not, they used to infuriate the British officials by removing them every time a new set were put up!



Tachienlu (Kangding), by Zhuang Xueben, 1937



China at this time though was a highly unstable place. Civil war was raging in many parts of the country. The Central Government only had nominal control of certain regions, such as Sichuan and Yunnan, where in fact semi-autonomous local Generals held real sway, acting more like minor warlords within their own domains than regional governors. In the years before the nationalist revolution of 1911 which toppled the Manchu Qing dynasty, the ailing Imperial Chinese Army had rather remarkably made a concerted push into Eastern Tibet. Yet in the subsequent turmoil of the Republican revolution the Tibetan Army had countered this push and regained direct control of much of its former territory. Sporadic skirmishes were still being fought between Tibetan militias and Republican Chinese Army units.

A posting to this remote and volatile region was sure to be 'adventurous' to say the least, and Louis certainly had his fair share of thrills and danger – the atmosphere of which can perhaps best be gleaned from a novel which he wrote many years later, titled *The Warden of The Marches* in the USA (originally published as *By Tophet Flare* in the UK). But the facts of Louis's fascinating life are hard to piece together. They are scattered throughout a variety of archives, in once 'secret' official papers, half written memoirs, newspaper cuttings, brief mentions in other travellers accounts, letters, receipts, unmarked photographs, vague and foggy family anecdotes … To go in search of the facts of Louis's life, and to make a proper attempt at piecing together the events of around 100 years ago, I came to realise would – to *clinch a cliché* – require an adventure of my own.

What had begun as a simple suggestion: *why not write an article about how a group of Tibetan artefacts came to be a part of the British Museum's collection, placed on permanent display in the Museum's Asia Gallery?* – soon turned into something far more complex and life consuming. Simply staring at faded and confusing photographs of far off Tachienlu 打箭炉 (Kangding 康定) wasn't enough to unlock and understand this forgotten part of history. Books and archives can certainly offer a glimpse of times long since passed, but to locate Louis and Rinchen, and trace the key episodes of their lives, would require walking into those faded photographs in order to see and place them in their world – to find the essential *'genius loci',* as Louis himself would have said. In 2010, I got the chance to do just that – I set out with my camera and a new notebook full of blank empty pages in which to record my trip to Kangding …



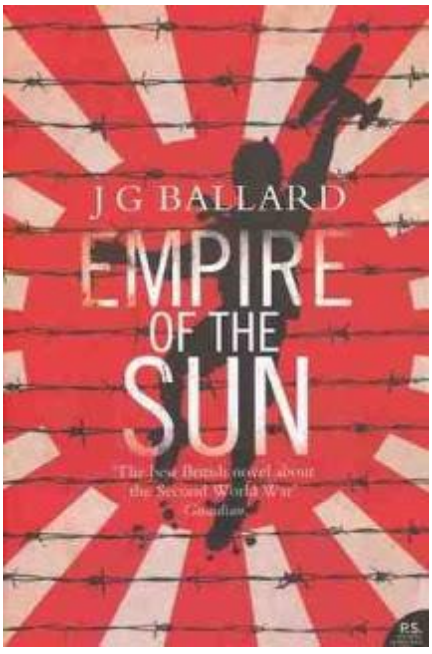




Retracing Old Shanghai

Part II

The story of my research, retracing the lives of the Williamsons and the Kings, begins in Shanghai. The three generations of the family all lived here for differing lengths of time at various points in their lives, and, like all foreigners in China in those days, they passed through the city on countless occasions. In 1910, Louis Magrath King was transferred to the British Consulate at Shanghai from the Legation in Peking, and, a hundred years later in 2010, I too would pass through the city *en route* to Kangding. But Shanghai is a starting point in more ways than one.





I first visited Shanghai in March 2006 and returned in the summer of that year, staying for over a month. It was a fortunate coincidence that, just as I began my research, so too I was asked to make frequent trips to China to work in various museums there. It was a remarkable opportunity to connect archives and memories with real places. Many of these trips were up to a month long in duration, which meant I got to explore and understand several cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Xi'an, quite well. It was during that initial month-long trip to Shanghai that I began to read up about the era of colonial intrusions into China and Tibet.

Naturally, whilst I was there, I also decided to read J.G. Ballard's famous semi-autobiographical novel, *Empire of the Sun* (1984), which is set in Shanghai during the Second World War. I was already familiar with the story because Steven Spielberg's 1987 film of the book had been one of my favourites whilst growing up – I even went in search of the

runway built by the internees of the Japanese prison camp and retraced (as best you can in today's modern metropolis) Jim's walk from Lunghua Temple to the sports stadium (something perhaps to recount here in a future blog post sometime). The novel certainly helped to kindle a growing interest in old Shanghai. When not working, I'd spend my free time wandering around the streets between Zhōngshān Dōnglù 中山东一路 (the old Bund) and Rénmín Guǎng Chǎng 人民广场 People's Square (the site of the old racecourse) where there are so many grand old buildings still standing from the era of the International Settlement and the French Concession. As well as the old *shíkùmén* 石库门 lanes of the original, and formerly walled, Chinese town.



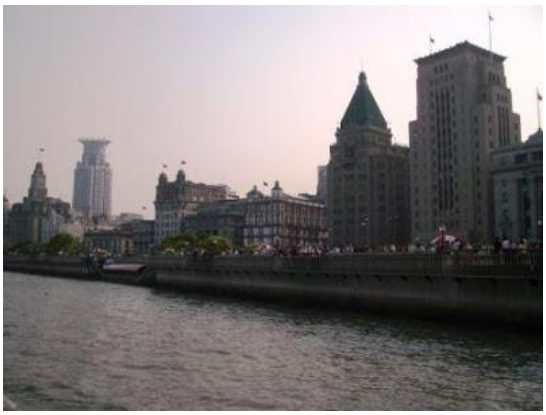


The Bund

In the early 1800s, Shanghai had been a small and relatively unremarkable Chinese settlement on the banks of the Huangpu River, which flows into the Yangtze close to where the great river flows into the East China Sea. The foreign powers were granted 'extraterritorial' rights to reside and trade at Shanghai, and so a small settlement grew up on the mudflats next to the Chinese town. Over time it grew into one of the premier treaty ports, with its own municipal council, its own police force, and volunteer self-defence force. Foreign merchants, banks, trading and shipping companies began to thrive here, erecting ever more grand buildings, particularly along the waterfront of the Bund. Many of the most prominent and well-to-do settlers built themselves large villas in which to live. Back then, according to some accounts, life in Shanghai – dubbed the "Paris of the East" because of its decadence – seems to have been a heady and rare old time. Many historians, Robert Bickers undoubtedly being the foremost among them, have chronicled the settlement's history from its small-time beginnings, through its hedonistic hey-day, when (to quote Jim Graham) "there was opulence", and its brutal subjugation during World War 2, to its dwindling decline, before the Communist Party seized control in 1949 and put an end to the outsider-controlled capitalist adventure there.



Nowadays, Shanghai is booming once again. Much as it was in the 1920s, the old 'ultra-modern' buildings fronting the Bund are today mirrored by the ultra-futuristic skyscrapers on the Pudong side of the river. And, asides from Hong Kong – of all the places I've been to in China, this is the city where foreigners and foreign business can most prevalently be seen. Shanghai is once again a world city – reawakened, reshaped, and, renewed.







By the time I returned for my second month-long stay in 2008, my research had significantly progressed. This time I went wandering the streets of old Shanghai with a better informed eye. This time I was looking for specific sites which I knew were connected to the Kings. I wanted to try to retrace the old city as they might have recognised it. Shanghai is now a forest of gleaming skyscrapers and palatial shopping malls, but there is extreme poverty sitting side-by-side with the extravagance, a disparity which would have been a familiar sight in the King's time as well. The constant, vibrant bustle and hubbub of the shopping streets must have resonated much the same in their day as it does now. The tall Sikh policemen directing traffic have long since been replaced by Chinese police officers. Hundreds of shabby looking taxis have replaced the old rickshaws. And almost all overseas travellers now arrive in these

taxis from Pudong International Airport. In the days when the Williamsons and the Kings came and went, everyone here would have arrived by boat. The Huangpu still teems with river traffic. Huge ships laden with all sorts of cargo, as well as river barges piled high with heaps of coal (and so sunk perilously close to the gunwales) doggedly motor up and down the busy channel from the point where the mouths of the Huangpu and the Yangtze meet before flowing into the sea. I took a boat down to this confluence point and back again, hoping to get a feel for what that initial arrival in Shanghai might have been like.









It was fascinating to see all the shipyards along the river, busily employed in building vast ocean-going vessels, between which crowded ferries criss-cross the busy channel, and tiny fishing boats still sling their nets in the open waters close to the reed beds near the river's confluence. At the mouth of the Huangpu, in the midst of the channel there stands a lighthouse. I'm not sure how old it is, but judging by its architectural features it looks as though it has stood there a very long time, and it is clearly still in use. It reminded me of Paul King, who mentions in his autobiography how he had helped in the first initiatives to light the Chinese coast, something which the Chinese Customs Service was charged with undertaking. Perhaps this was one of those original lighthouses?





My boat rounded the lighthouse and began to head back up the river towards Shanghai. I watched even more keenly now to get a sense of which old buildings would be the most visible amidst the mushrooming mass of glass and steel towers. And, surprisingly enough, the Bund is still quite a sight to behold as you round the bend in the river and those majestic old buildings slowly grow in size as you draw closer and closer. I felt the trip had given me a good sense of what that arrival might once have been like, not least because our boat started and finished from a landing stage a short distance from the old HSBC building and the Meteorological Signal Tower – the same old waterfront landing points of the Bund, revamped and still in operation.







The former British Consulate at Shanghai

The old British Consulate is located at the far end of the Bund, beside the 'Garden Bridge', which crosses over the Suzhou Creek where it flows into the Huangpu. When I first found the former Consulate in 2008, it was a derelict wreck. Only being able to speak a few bare words and phrases in Chinese, I mimed a request to be permitted to wander round the site and take a look, but was duly waved away by the tired looking man who sat sweltering in a booth, watching over the gate. So I tried to get as best a glimpse of the place as I could from the outside and managed to take a few snaps of the crumbling and forlorn-looking buildings through the railings of the compound's fence. When I knew I was about to return to Shanghai in 2010, I contacted my friend, Peter Hibbard, who specialises in the architectural history of Shanghai, to see if he knew whether or not there might be a way to arrange a proper visit by which I might get to see inside. He replied with the unexpected information that the place was currently under renovation, and sure enough, when I arrived in Shanghai and wandered over that way to take a look, I was stunned to see the extent to which the place had been transformed. Part of the old compound had been bought by the Peninsula Hotel Company (the original Peninsula Hotel, which opened in 1928, can still be found not far from the waterfront on the Kowloon-side of Hong Kong harbour).





The former Consul General's Residence - 2008 & 2010





The former Consul General's Residence - 2008 & 2010

The carefully manicured lawns of the old Consulate had been brought back to life, along with the old buildings of the Supreme Court and Consular Offices, and the Consul General's residence, which has been stripped back to expose its original decorative brickwork. This time I was happily waved inside and allowed to snap away merrily with my camera. The structural renovation of the old buildings was entering their final stages. I could see workmen busy inside, starting to refit the stripped interiors. Yet sadly, the buildings I was most hoping to see were all long gone. On my first visit in 2008, I had been unaware of the buildings to the side where the junior staff of the Consulate had resided. I'd first found out about these from a set of Works Office plans which I'd dug out from the Foreign Office archives. This was the building in which Louis would have lived, and which, presumably, I might well have walked past (if it was still standing) during my previous trips to Shanghai, but which was now quite definitely gone. A gleaming modern multi-storey palace of a luxury hotel now stood solidly in its place. Still, it was marvellous to see the rest of the Consulate revived and put to use, rather than let to rot and collapse, or worse – to see it bulldozed and erased altogether.





The former Supreme Court & Consular Offices Building - 2008 & 2010





The former Supreme Court & Consular Offices Building - 2008 & 2010



The Consulate, and the old Union Church building beside it (which had been gutted by fire in 2007), as well as the old Rowing Club (where Paul King had once been a member), and the old 'godowns' and former Mission buildings along Yuanmingyuan Road, have all been restored as part of the general Shanghai 'renaissance', which is now in the process of slowly transforming old Shanghai.

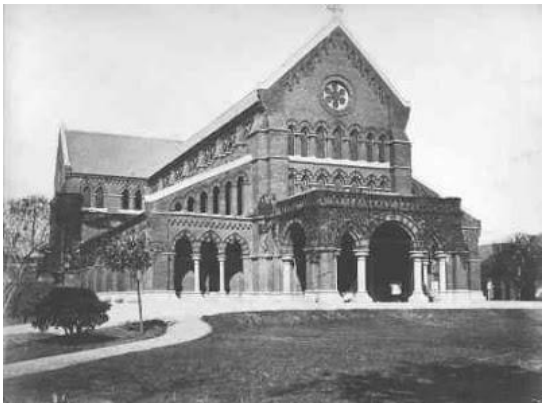


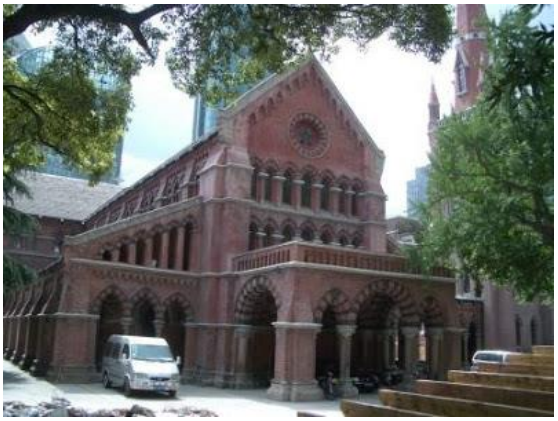
The former Shanghai Rowing Club, built in 1904

Further along the Bund, the old Customs House, which Paul King would have known well, especially when he had served as Shanghai's Commissioner of Customs, had been rebuilt in the late 1920s. This 'new' building still stands today and it is still used by the Chinese Customs Service, although sadly it is not one of several other buildings along the Bund which one is allowed to step inside to take a peek at its decorated lobby.



Shanghai Custom House, built in 1927





Holy Trinity c.1890 & 2010

Set a few blocks back from the Customs House is Holy Trinity Cathedral, which has also gone through an extensive renovation programme over the last few years. As with the Union Church already mentioned, this has included the rebuilding of its spire. The original spire hadn't yet been built when Paul and Veronica were married there in 1881.

Holy Trinity is perhaps now better remembered for the Cathedral School which was attached to it. As a small boy growing up in Shanghai, J.G. Ballard was a pupil here, as was his fictional alter-ego, 'Jim' in *Empire of the Sun*. It was here that I made an unexpected find. A stone dedication plaque is set into the wall of the old school building. The lead metal inlay has all been teased from the chiselled lettering, but it is still readable nonetheless:



CATHEDRAL SCHOOL
HENRY LESTER ENDOWMENT
FOR BRITISH BOYS
AND CATHEDRAL CHURCH HOUSE
AND HALL

THIS CORNER STONE WAS LAID BY
C.F. GARSTIN, ESQUIRE C.B.E.
BRITISH ACTING CONSUL GENERAL
AT SHANGHAI
ON THE 19TH DAY OF DECEMBER 1928

DEAN: THE VERY REVEREND A.C.S.
TRIVETT, M.A. B.D.
TRUSTEES:

EDNEY PAGE. WILLIAM SEATON KING. PERCY W.O. LIDDELL
COMMITTEES OF ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT:
THE DEAN AND TRUSTEES. HIS HONOUR JUDGE SIR PETER GRAIN KT
SIR SIDNEY BARTON K.B.E., C.M.G.
A.C. CLEAR. R. CALDER-MARSHALL., C. HARPUR
B. LAWSON. R.F.C. MASTER, DR E.L. MARSH AND E.L. ALLEN HON. SEC.

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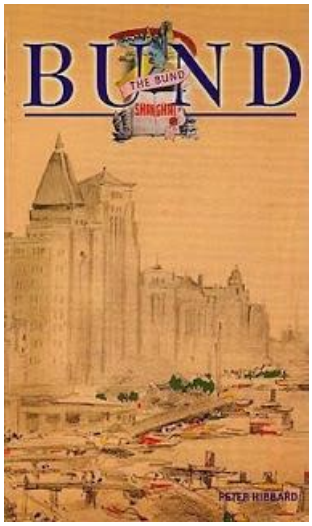


There are two names of interest which caught my eye here. The first is that of C.F. Garstin, and the second is Sir Sidney Barton. Charles Fortescue Garstin, the Acting Consul General, was Louis King's brother-in-law (so in my finding this it was a case of one brother-in-law finding another!). Garstin joined the Consular Service shortly before Louis in 1901, and later they both fought in France during the final year of the First World War, as officers in the Chinese Labour Corps.

Sir Sidney Barton was Consul General at Shanghai, and, presumably, he may have been away (perhaps on home leave?) when the dedication ceremony took place, hence Garstin's name appearing on the stone as Acting Consul General (he was later a full Consul General himself at Harbin).



A few streets away is a mock 'Tudorbethan' style building, Macgregor House, which bears a similar foundation stone laid in 1937 by Sir John Brenan K.C.M.G – who by that time had succeeded Barton as Consul General. Brenan had joined the Consular Service in the same year as Louis King (a picture of Brenan can be found in Peter Hibbard's *The Bund Shanghai: China Faces West* (2008), p. 154).

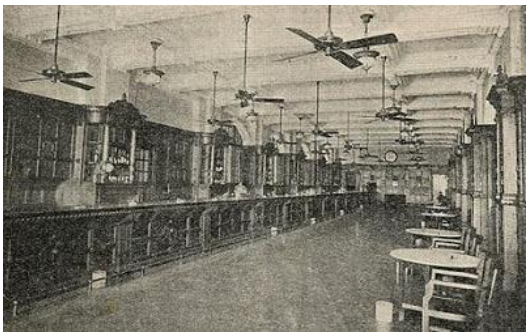


Another building which has recently been restored to something of its former glory, and also its original purpose, is the old Shanghai Club, which is now the very plush Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The famous 'Long Bar', which Noel Coward is said to have jokingly claimed that "one could see the curvature of the earth along its length", has been rebuilt.



I sat in here one afternoon in 2010, escaping from the intense summer heat, nursing a couple of cocktails whilst trying to picture what it would have been like when Louis was a frequent customer there. Instead, I found my thoughts drifting back through my own long stays in Shanghai – so much had changed in the city in just those few years between 2005 and 2010. It's rather remarkable that after all the changes, and all the upheaval and austerity of the last 60 years, Shanghai is now seemingly drifting back to what it once was – perhaps again it was that *'genius loci'* which Louis King so often remarked upon, staking its claim once more?

I couldn't help wondering, what might remain of old Tachienlu 打箭炉 (Kangding 康定) almost a century after Louis first set foot there? It was only a matter of days – my flight from Shanghai to Chengdu was already booked – soon enough, I would have the chance to follow in Louis's footsteps and find out.

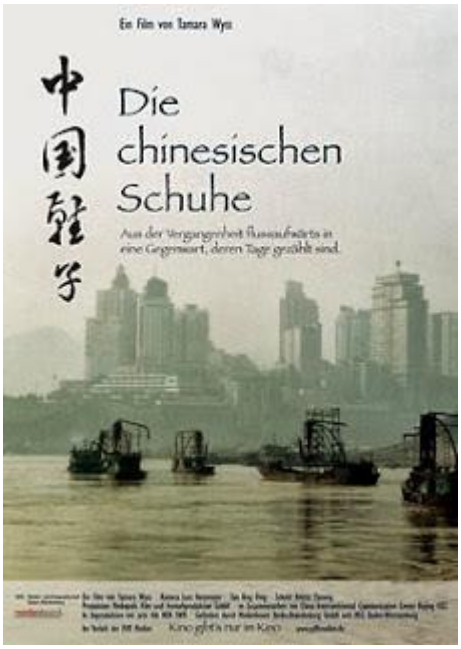


From Shanghai to Kangding



Part III

Shanghai : August 5th 2010 – 5:30am: Low on the horizon the sun was a perfect pale red disc in a milk white sky as my taxi took me along the flyovers from my hotel to the airport. This was finally the day - at last I was on my way. This was a trip I had long waited to make. I'd often sat in airport terminals looking at departure boards listing flights to Chengdu, wishing that one of those flights had been mine; but now, at last, I had a ticket to Chengdu in my hand and it looked like I was the only Westerner waiting to board.



The flight from Shanghai to Chengdu took only a couple of hours. In Louis Magrath King's day the journey took much longer. I had looked into the possibility of retracing his route by boat along the Yangtze to Chongqing, and then overland to Chengdu – but even if time and money had permitted, the riverboat schedules weren't right for the period when I was travelling. It is still a journey I would like to make one day. However, I have managed to travel it vicariously through an excellent documentary called *Die Chinesischen Schuhe (2002-2004)* by the filmmaker, Tamara Wyss.

In this film, Wyss retraces her grandparents' journey from Shanghai to Sichuan, matching their old photos to present day views of the river as she travels. It is an interesting film which also documents the physical and sociological changes to this dynamic river which have been brought about by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Wyss's grandparents, Hedwig and Fritz Weiss, were contemporaries – and indeed friends – of Louis King. Fritz was a member of the German Consular Service, and he and Louis were both stationed in Chongqing at the same time. Louis mentions Fritz in his unfinished memoir, and they both appear together in some of Louis's photographs. Just as Tamara Wyss had done, I was hoping to match some of Louis's old photos of Tachienlu 打箭炉 (Kangding 康定) to present day views.

I noticed a marked difference when I arrived in Chengdu. Not least the change in climate. Shanghai had been in the grip of a prolonged heatwave when I had left. Temperatures there were reaching around 40°C / 104°F, with humidity to match; – Chengdu was around 25°C / 77°F, but still humid. Also the people at the airport seemed very different too. As I later wrote in my journal, there were *"a lot of colourful characters collecting equally colourful luggage – monks in orange and red robes, soldiers in jungle fatigues. There were crates of mushrooms coming out on the baggage carousel, and all sorts of cardboard boxes – many smelling of foodstuffs. One of which had clearly spilled its contents, as soy sauce covered one part of the conveyor. My backpack had evidently been dipped like a large green dumpling into a mild vinegar!"*



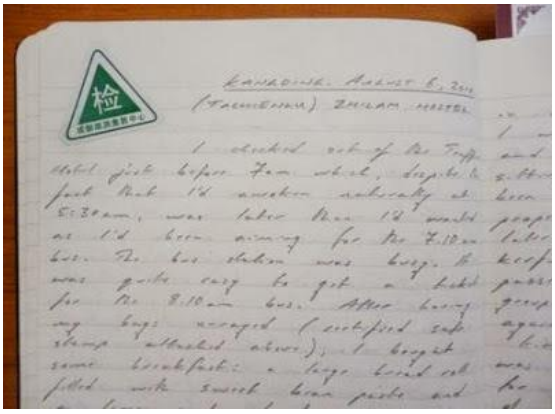


In Chengdu I checked into the marvellously dishevelled Jiatong, or "Traffic" Hotel, as it is known to foreign backpackers, which is perfectly located next to a bus station, beside the Jin River.

I had already travelled to some quite remote parts of China before, but the journey ahead was set to be quite a step into the unknown for me, as I noted in my journal whilst waiting to board the plane at Shanghai: *"I feel somewhat apprehensive, but far more excited by the prospect of this present trip. This will be my first time venturing solo deep into China. It's hard to know how I will fare with next to no Chinese language ability and no guides or [Chinese] friends for assistance. But I'm eager to take the plunge and see what I can find of old Tachienlu with its Tibetan Gombas, [and] its raging rivers meeting between the high mountains that I only know from Louis's old photos."*

At that time, there wasn't much information on the web or even in the guidebooks. I had spent ages trying to get a mental picture of the town from Louis's old photos and the relatively few present day views I had come across on-line, but this proved time-and-again to

be a frustratingly difficult task. It was hard to get one's bearings at such a distant remove. There was only one way to get a genuine sense of the place – which, of course, was to actually go there!



The next morning, I was up early. I checked out of the hotel and made my way to the bus station. I had just missed the first bus to Kangding, but I managed to get myself a ticket for the next bus out an hour later. The bus was full and, once again, even though I had not been the only foreigner at the bus station, I was the only one on board this particular bus. With the luggage all loaded up below, and a lot more crammed inside, and with everybody squeezed on board, we roared out of the bus station five minutes early. I couldn't help grinning, as this was it – *only now I let myself believe it* – <u>now</u> I was *really* on my way to Kangding – just 8 more hours on the road and I'd finally be there!





"Once out of Chengdu it was a marvel to see how green and fertile this part of Sichuan is – it really is the 'Red Basin' with red earth and red rocks, all kinds of trees and flowers everywhere. This was a bus ride which only increases in wonder with each mile covered as eventually the bus begins to thread its way between vertical close-sided walls of rock as the bus climbs through gorge after valley after ravine (and repeat …), climbing, climbing. The scenery, once emerged from the impressively gated, and also impressively long, Erlangshan Tunnel, is quite something; as from here you can really see that you are continually gaining altitude on your way up to Tibet. The view from the bus window and the drop from the side of the road at some points – without any exaggeration – is like the view from an aeroplane. At times it was a hair-raising and a continually bone-shaking experience of a bus ride. I only saw one major accident along the way and that

one was evidently fatal judging by the large number of spectators and the large amount of blood on the road with incense sticks burning all around the spill. It looked like a three-wheeler moped and a large truck had come to grief."







Porters carrying brick tea, photo by Ernest Henry Wilson, 1908

The prospect of an 8 hour bus ride, bumping along precipitous roads in sweltering heat, might seem daunting today, but in Louis King's time the distance from Yachow (present day Ya'an) to Tachienlu (Kangding) was 8 days – and Ya'an is roughly the halfway point from Chengdu to Kangding. In those days, the journey was made on foot with porters, horses, and "a chair" (litter) for carrying the wealthy Westerner or Chinese official, the whole entourage staying at roadside inns at the various stages along the way. This was the start of the famous Sichuan 'Tea Road', along which porters would walk, carrying back-breaking stacks of brick tea to trade at the border town of Tachienlu.











It is fascinating to read the accounts of Westerners who trod this route in those days and to compare the things which fascinated them along the way. I had read the following passage written by David Crockett Graham, a missionary and academic contemporary to Louis King, many times before, but only when my bus emerged from Erlangshan Tunnel did I really appreciate what his words described: *"On the afternoon of the third day after leaving Yachow, I reached the top of the first high pass. Looking westward I saw one of the most wonderful views that I have ever seen. There were rivers that had carved irregular valleys, beyond which were snow-clad mountains rivalling the Himalayas in height and grandeur. I said to myself, 'If I should see nothing else, this sight alone would pay me for taking the entire journey.'"*







Not long after the bus had set out, there was a bit of a reshuffle of passengers beside me as I was befriended by a young lad who wanted to practise his English. Lu Bin was travelling with his cousin, his Uncle, and his Uncle's friend. The two boys had just completed their exams and were now on a three month trip overland to Lhasa before starting at University later in the year. When the bus stopped for lunch Lu Bin and his companions invited me to join them. As you would expect in Sichuan the food was super spicy – I like spicy food, but this stuff really blew my head off!



When it came to the end of the meal I was rather embarrassed as they wouldn't let me contribute to the bill, insisting on treating me, they said, as their way of saying: "Welcome to China." It turned out that this was just the first of many kindnesses shown to me by people I met along the way. Throughout my trip I was constantly amazed at the smiling friendliness and welcoming generosity of the people I met.





As we roared up and down the hairpin bends, threading our way alongside the constant tumultuous waters of the Dadu River, a noisy Jackie Chan movie played on a TV at the front of the bus, but I was completely oblivious, simply mesmerised by the view from the window. Like many places in such regions of Asia, the river courses are dotted with dams and hydro-electric plants, both big and small. At one section there was what looked like an immense hydro-electric scheme under construction which will eventually necessitate transferring the road from one side of the valley to the other where it will thread its way through a number of new road tunnels cut through the steep sided hills. The valley floor itself was then a huge, earth-ravaged construction site forming a vast dusty plain, where large trucks were beetling around, loading up with broken rocks, or moving earth and rubble from one place to another. The bus lurched and bounced its way across the unmade surface with everyone groaning involuntarily with each sharp sudden bump until we got back onto the proper roadway.







Looking at my watch, I reckoned we still had a couple of hours to go when to my great surprise the bus slowed and then started to turn off the road. At first I thought it was another rest break in the journey, but Lu Bin looked at me and happily announced: “Kangding!” – We’d arrived in record time (6 hours), aside

from the road accident we had passed and the remnants of a couple of recent minor landslides along the road, we'd encountered no long hold-ups or delays. The bus driver had certainly gunned the bus along, and at each rest stop there had been thick hose pipes gushing water which had been shoved under the engine, presumably to cool it down, and/or to refill the rattling air-con. I was amazed at how quickly everyone got off the bus and found their baggage and then disappeared out of the bus station. I retrieved my rucksack and said farewell to Lu Bin and his companions, wishing them well for their onward journey to Lhasa. And then I set off into town.





Kangding sits at a fork in the hills where three valleys meet, here two rivers from almost opposite directions – the Zheduo and the Yala – merge and then flow together as one (the Luhe, or Dadu) along the route I'd just travelled. As I walked along the river, looking up at the steep-sided mountains which dominate the town, a very strange feeling came over me. The sound of the river roaring alongside mixed with the noise and bustle of the traffic, and the town itself seemed so bright and vividly alive. I was walking into a place which I had never visited before, yet it all seemed oddly familiar. Slowly, as I walked, half-remembered grainy views and sites began to fall into place. Hitherto disconnected black and white photos were already starting to fall into place in my mind – linking up in ways which I had been fruitlessly trying to fathom by staring at them for countless hours, trying to guess if the corner of a building in one photo matched that of a building in another photo looking in a different

direction. This seemed to bode well for my researches during my coming stay. I had a week ahead of me in which to explore – but my first task was to find the hostel where I would be staying. I only had a very vague idea of its whereabouts from an internet map I'd printed out which seemed to think Kangding consisted of just two roads!



Kangding is not a large town by any means, but my first discovery was that the blank spaces on my internet map were in fact honeycombed with a labyrinth of winding little alleys and backstreets. Forget unfathoming old photos, clearly my first challenge would be finding my hostel!

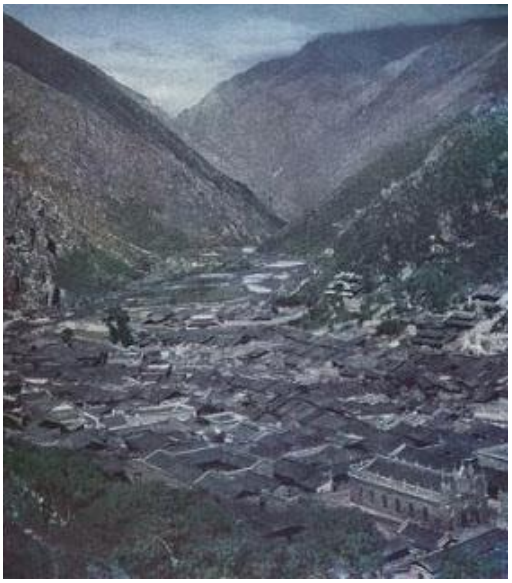


Kangding - Then & Now



Part IV

In the early 20th century Kangding 康定 (or Tachienlu 打箭炉, as it was then more commonly known), or Dartsendo དར་རྩེ་མདོ། in Tibetan, was very much a frontier town. It was here that the tea porters from China met and traded with the yak caravans coming from Tibet. It was a melting pot of trade, culture, and religions. Alongside the Tibetans and Chinese who made their livings here, either as permanent or transitory residents, there was also a sizeable foreign community too. For the most part these foreigners were missionaries (some of whom were also medical doctors), but there were also traders, consular officials, academics (anthropologists; botantists; geologists, etc.), and various other independent travellers. The missionaries were predominantly French Catholics and American Protestants, all of whom made Kangding one of their permanent bases; and from here, they would travel out to their smaller mission stations scattered across the region.



The French Catholics even built a sizeable church which can clearly be seen in this photograph of the town taken by the botantist, Joseph Rock, published in one of his articles for *The National Geographic Magazine* (October, 1930). Rock was one of several noted travellers who passed through Kangding *en route* to eastern Tibet. Quite a few of these independent travellers published accounts of their journeys through the region, but a great number of their fellow contemporaries did not, or if they did, many of these accounts now languish in obscurity – in contemporary newspapers, magazines, private diaries and personal photo albums. I'm fascinated by all of these travellers and their motivations for making these journeys at such a

turbulent time. None of them, it seems, were much put off by regular skirmishes between the various factions of the Chinese and Tibetan armed forces, as well as episodes of lawlessness and banditry on the isolated roads and mountain passes. There were times when towns as substantial as Kangding itself came under direct threat and even actual attack.





As one might well expect, much has changed in Kangding since those days around a century ago. The once impressive town gates are now gone, and many of the low wooden buildings with their grey tiled roofs, which were typical of Tachienlu, have given way to modern concrete apartment blocks; some several stories high, and the bridges which span the river that runs through the town are now more numerous and more solidly built too. But elements of old Tachienlu remain. There are still quite a few old wooden and stone or brick built buildings with tiled roofs to be seen, particularly on the hillsides and at the outer fringes of the town; and, not least, there is the traditional architecture of the three large and fully functioning Tibetan Gombas (which I shall write about in more detail in my next post). During my visit I found a large part of the old town centre had recently been levelled and a huge excavation was then underway, as part of a new development for a large modern shopping centre.





Kangding Town Square

Likewise, there is now no trace to be found of the old French Catholic church (which I guesstimate might have stood somewhere near the present town square?).



Kangding Protestant Church

However, there is both a modern Catholic, and a modern Protestant church, as well as a mosque, still serving their respective communities in Kangding.



Kangding Mosque





Two photographs of Tachienlu (Old) Catholic Church taken by Père Francis Goré (below), and its modern successor, located on the opposite side of the river



Tatsienlu, porte orientale du Thibet
(au premier plan, église cathédrale)



Tatsienlu
Eglise pro-cathédrale
(Intérieur)





With the help of Kris Rubesh (who runs the excellent Zhilam Hostel, where I was staying) acting as translator, I spoke to Mr and Mrs Lao, two long-time residents of the town. Mr Lao had lived in Kangding for 61 years and could remember of the old French Catholic church. Mr Lao said he recalled going into the church when he was a boy. His mother was an orphan who had been raised by the French missionaries, but he could not remember when the church had been demolished. Mr Lao's wife had come to Kangding around 40 years ago and she said the church was already gone by the time she arrived, so she had never seen it herself. Although Mr Lao couldn't recall when the church and all the surrounding buildings had been torn down, he did recall that there was a time when all the foreigners had had to leave Kangding (most likely soon after the CCP took charge in 1949). From my own researches I knew that the church had only narrowly escaped destruction in a

great fire in 1921 which levelled a large part of the town, so if the church hadn't been destroyed deliberately (perhaps during the Cultural Revolution?), it is quite likely that it could have succumbed to such a repeat disaster, or it could have fallen foul of one of the frequent landslides, inundations, or even earthquakes, which occasionally hit the region.

Whilst I was there I was fortunate enough to be able to take a look inside the modern Catholic Church, which is curiously set atop a building that also consists of a series of ordinary shops at ground-level fronting one of the main streets beside the river. It was interesting to note that many of the missals in the pews appeared to be a lot older than the present building – although that's no guarantee that they were transferred from the old church, they could well have come from further afield.



Kangding Catholic Church

I spent most of the week wandering around the town, mostly trying to match present day views with old ones. Often new tall buildings blocked me from taking effective "then and now" comparison photos, but these are a few which (to some extent) succeeded:



THE FRONTIER TOWN OF TACHIENLU, LOOKING DOWN THE VALLEY ALONG THE MAIN ROAD LEADING TO CHINA





THE FRONTIER TOWN OF TACHIENLU, LOOKING UP THE VALLEY ALONG THE MAIN ROAD LEADING TO TIBET



Previous page: Two photos taken by Sir Eric Teichman (published in 1922)

* * *

This page and next: Four views of Tachienlu, taken by Ernest Henry Wilson in 1908, with similar views taken in 2010:

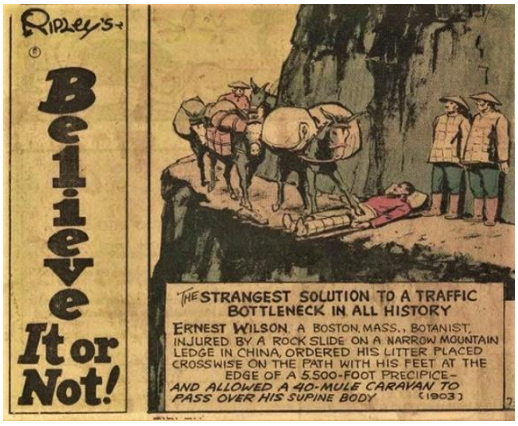








Ernest Henry Wilson *(1876-1930) was a British botanist who undertook several plant collecting expeditions in the China-Tibet borderlands, mainly for the Arnold Arboretum. Author of 'A Naturalist in Western China' (1913) and several other works, he later travelled widely in Asia and Africa.*



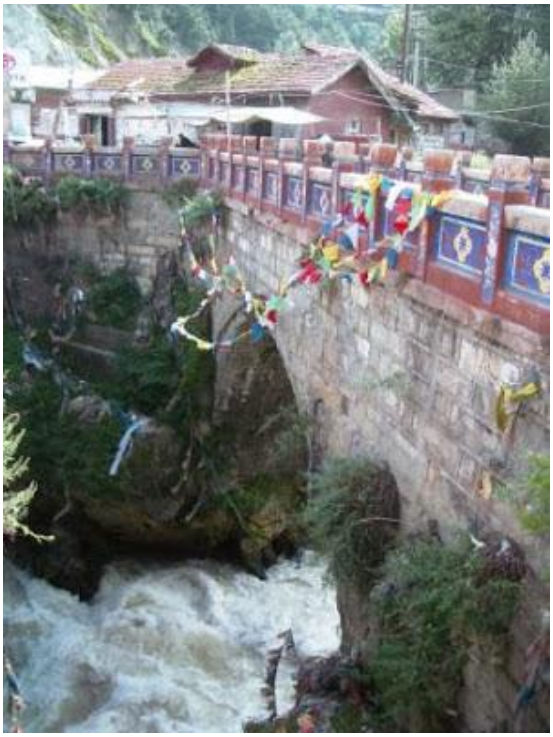
The last view (overleaf) is of the Princess Wencheng Bridge, which according to some foreign traveller's accounts was the last "Chinese-style" stone bridge which one would cross when travelling west. Some even went so far as to describe it as

"the Gateway to Tibet" (cf. Shelton; Kendall; Stevenson; Fischer; et al). It's now very easily missed as the expanding town has subsumed its surroundings. Hemmed in, it stands as a pedestrian bridge running parallel to a modern road bridge, and is enclosed by buildings on each bank. I crossed it a couple of times before I realised what it was. It is presumably named after Princess Wencheng, a niece of the Emperor Taizong of the T'ang Dynasty in China, who is said to have married Songtsän Gampo, the 33rd King of the Tibetan Yarlung Dynasty around 640 AD.









Guoda Mountain, by Ernest Henry Wilson in 1908 (above), and in 2010 (above right)

* * *

Princess Wencheng Bridge (left), by Ernest Henry Wilson, 1908 (middle right), and in 2010 (lower right)

The Tibetan Gompas of Old Tachienlu



Part V

"The morning of the 10th [August 1924] *broke fine; and about 9 o'clock we joined the happy throng that wandered leisurely out of town and up alongside the mountain torrent to Dorje Drag. The level sward in front of the lamasery was already covered with tents, the Tibetans being quite unable to resist the idea of a picnic; and the brightly striped canvas and gaily coloured clothes of men and women made a pretty picture against the rows of sombre poplars in the background. As we made our way through the crowd, now and then one more polite than his neighbours would stand aside, bow with out-stretched hands, and protrude a tongue of monstrous size and usually healthy colour, the polite form of salutation in Tibet.* […] *Passing through the vestibule with its great Mani drums, revolved by devotees as they go by, and entering the courtyard, we saw stretched opposite us, concealing the entrance to the main temple, an enormous painting on cloth of Dedma Sambhava."*

- *G. A. Combe, H.B.M. Consul at Chengtu*





Almost 86 years to the day, on August 7th 2010, I walked through the vestibule described above into the same Gompa –

Dorje Drak in Dartsendo དར་རྩེ་མདོ།

(Tachienlu 打箭炉, or Kangding 康定, as it is presently known in Chinese). Except I was not greeted by anyone poking their tongue out at me, nor by the sight of a huge *thangka* painting unfurled from the roof of the main temple building to the courtyard floor. Instead, the Gompa was rather quiet with just a few monks and local people lolling about, sitting on the grass. It was all very calm and relaxed. I wandered round, exploring all the temple halls. The place was filled with prayer wheels, and, in the main hall in front of the image of Guru Rinpoche (*Padmasambhava*), I saw a man performing a full set of devotions – pressing his palms together first over his head, then in front of his forehead, then in front of his chest, before kneeling, and then, leaning forward with his palms placed on two small squares of cloth, which, pushing forward, he would then use to make himself lie completely flat upon the floor by sliding forward; his face then flat to the floor, forehead touching the floorboards. He would then reverse the procedure to stand up again, before repeating the whole process. I've no idea how many prostrations he made in total, but it was clear that it was likely to have been many.

Visiting the Tibetan Gompas at Dartsendo/Kangding was one of the main research objectives of my trip. I'd managed to thoroughly confuse myself with a mixture of old and modern photographs; some found in Louis King's private papers, as well as those of some of his contemporaries, along with a multitude of other, more up-to-date images, mostly published on the internet.

It was clear that there are three main Gompas in the town, with other lesser shrines and religious buildings (Taoist and Confucian too) dotted around the surrounding hillsides. Of these three main Gompas, in Louis King's time, there was one situated in the centre of the town – Ngachu Gompa (Anjue Si) – with two outside the south gate, Dorje Drak Gompa (Jingang Si), and Lhamotse Gompa (Nanwu Si), which have since been absorbed into the expanded town (the three town gates are now all long gone).







Ngachu Gompa (Anjue Si), which was under-going massive architectural alterations, 2010



Dorje Drak Gompa (Jingang Si), 2010



Lhamotse Gompa (Nanwu Si), 2010

These last two Gompas are both situated fairly close to one another, and have apparently been confused and conflated by commentators from the early 20th century right up to this very day. Several of the accounts of early Western travellers through the town wisely remain rather vague, whereas more modern books (even English language books by Chinese publishers), and an array of websites mix the two up with bold and confident frequency!

And so, having long pored over this issue with a crossword puzzler's determination to crack the clues and definitively complete the conundrum, I'm now about to boldly venture my own theory as to how these mistakes may have arisen! … The root of the problem is possibly a photograph taken by Joseph Rock, published in the *National Geographic Magazine* in October 1930; or rather – it's not Rock's fault (he gets it right), it's someone's misinterpretation of his photo which has gained currency and run like silent, slow burning wildfire. This is the photograph:



Its original caption reads: *Plate XVI – "Prayer flags adorn a shrine of the yellow sect."*

Joseph Rock's description of this Gompa as belonging to the "Yellow Sect" (Gelugpa) indicates that it is most likely Lhamotse Gompa (Nanwu Si). Yet Rock's photo is frequently reproduced with the confident assertion that it is Dorje Drak Gompa (Jinggang Si). But Dorje Drak in fact belongs to the "Red Sect" (Nyingma). A photograph of the exterior of Dorje Drak features on the same page with the caption: *"Thunderbolt Monastery, a stronghold of the Red Lamas near Tatsienlu"* (see below, page 47), hence perhaps the possible origins of this confusion and subsequent misattribution.

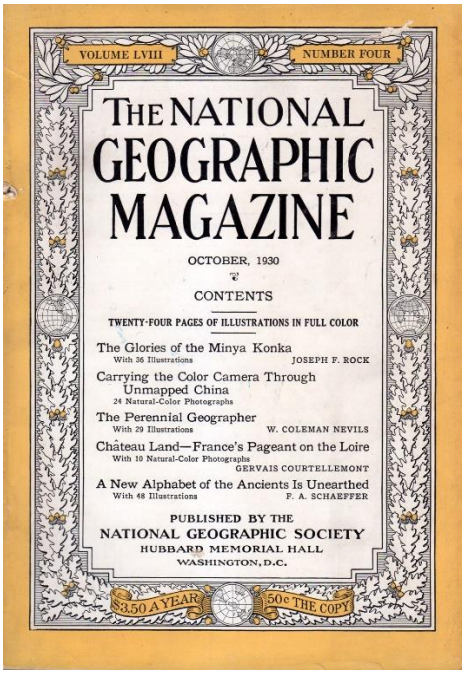
Both Gompas have been heavily altered since Rock's time, but a bit of time spent comparing Rock's image with those of Ernest Henry Wilson (1908), and Louis Magrath King's photographs (c.1920-1922), make the distinction quite clear for me (looking at the roofs of the side buildings), and even when compared to these two modern views (overleaf) of the same part of the Gompa in Rock's photo, which I took with me during my visits to each; the relative position of the slope of the hillside in the background is one key indication.



Dorje Drak (left) and Lhamotse (right) Gompas, by Ernest Henry Wilson, 1908.



Similar view of Dorje Drak and Lhamotse Gompas, 2010.





Dorje Drak Gompa



Lhamotse Gompa



"Prayer flags adorn a shrine of the yellow sect." (Lhamotse Gompa) by Joseph F. Rock, 1930



Lhamotse Gompa by Ernest Henry Wilson, 1908



Dorje Drak Gompa by Ernest Henry Wilson, 1908

George Combe's description quoted at the start of this post is possibly one of the most well-known descriptions of a religious dancing festival held at Dartsendo. Rinchen Lhamo, who was Louis King's wife, calls it the 'Ya-chiu' or 'Summer Prayer' – Combe, however, euphemistically calls it 'The Devil Dance.' Rinchen gently takes issue with this description: *"I do not know why they should call it so, for it has nothing to do with devils, but is a service of worship of Heaven, of intercession with Heaven on behalf of the whole people. It is our*

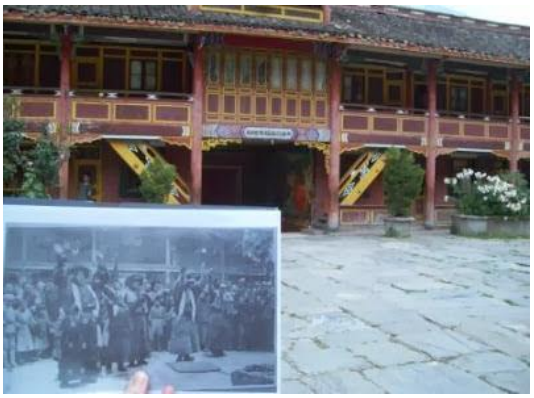
equivalent of your Christmas and Easter festivals.

Everybody goes to the Ya-chiu. It is the principal fête of the whole year, and lasts three days in succession, taking four or five hours each day from morning to afternoon. It is held in the court-yard of the Gompa. Awnings are erected on each side of the entrance to the church-hall. Under them, on each side of the entrance, sit the priests clad in full sacerdotal robes, amongst them those who with trumpet, clarionette, cymbal, drum and bell, take the place with us of your organs and orchestras. The chief officiating priest, the Living Buddha if there is one in the Gompa, sits on a raised dais under a canopy. The people occupy points of vantage, such as the balconies, the flat roofs, and the courtyard itself, in which latter they form a circle linking up the rows of priests. This circle is the arena where the dancing takes place."



Louis and Rinchen's first daughter, who was born at Dartsendo (Kangding) in 1921, was given the Tibetan name "Sheradrema (She(s)-rab (s)Gröl-ma)" by Runtsen Chimbu, the Living Buddha of Dorje Drak. And, according to a note made by Louis, this name means 'transcendent wisdom' combined with the Tibetan name of the Goddess of Mercy – Drolma; Tara in Sanskrit, or Kuan Yin in Chinese. Rinchen was certainly a devout Buddhist, but whether this means she was a follower of Nyingma Buddhism, I'm not entirely sure. I suspect she was, as there is a picture of a Tibetan priest, a "Ge-she or Doctor of Divinity", in Rinchen's book *We Tibetans* (1926), to whom she was related, and whom the monks at Dorje Drak seemed to recognise when I showed them his photograph. But at present it's hard to know for sure.





Lhamotse Gompa by Louis Magrath King - Then & Now (c.1920 & 2010)

There are a number of photographs taken by Louis of some kind of festival at Lhamotse Gompa (some look religious in nature, possibly connected to the 'Ya-Chiu', others appear to be traditional Tibetan opera). I've seen a similar set of photographs, presumably of the same events, taken several years later by another of Louis's consular colleagues (Alwyne Ogden), taken from quite a reserved distance, whereas Louis's were for the most part taken very much in the thick of it all (... I suspect he'd have made quite an affable anthropologist had he been so inclined!).

It was remarkable to wander into Lhamotse and spend some time matching his views from the 1920s with the present day. I was extremely lucky, as I discovered from one of the Lamas, Lobsang Yeshe, that the building works I had encountered surrounding the Gompa were being undertaken to enlarge the monks' living quarters. Had I arrived a month later, he said, the old living quarters (which feature so prominently in Louis's old photographs) would have all been gone! – Involuntarily, I couldn't help expressing my sadness at this fact, but the young Lama smiled at me and said very simply: *"Nothing lasts forever, everything changes."* – I have to admit I was struck by his words quite deeply. And, with a little amusement, I thought to myself that if I had climbed these mountains in search of an epiphany – this was certainly it. Perhaps the ardent pursuit of history (even if it is one's own extended-family's history) is an ultimately futile exercise ... Why cling to the past?





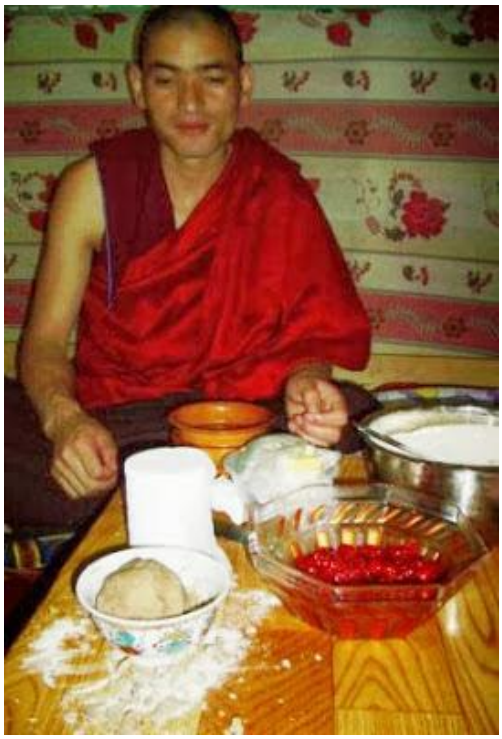
The building works at Lhamotse Gompa, 2010



Well, maybe not entirely futile. My trip was certainly more than a mere fact-

finding mission. It was in many ways also an exercise of self-fulfilment in itself. I found a lot more than just history during this trip. I think the most abiding thing I took away with me was, in fact, the kindness of all the people I met. There's no denying that my stack of old black and white photos helped prompt smiles and a sense of connection. Indeed, I spent quite a bit of time over several visits at both Dorje Drak and Lhamotse, where I was very much welcomed in by the Lamas who were fascinated by the old photos I'd brought with me. Some of the Lamas spoke a little English, and, with many of the others who didn't, we managed to converse with the aid of some well-thumbed copies of rather antiquated-looking Tibetan-English dictionaries, which I understood had originally come by way of India (and which contained some quaintly old fashioned English colloquialisms). In turn they taught me a few phrases of Tibetan. One monk, named Sonam Topden, very kindly invited me into his tiny room and introduced me to that famous Tibetan staple: *tsamba,* which I'd often read about but never before tasted. I made a marvellous mess making it! – We chatted away for quite some time with the help of his old dictionary and he wrote the name of Lhamotse Gompa in Tibetan for me. He was also quite an accomplished draughtsman. I saw several beautiful drawings he'd sketched of a seated bodhisattva – much like one I'd seen carved on a *mani* stone in another part of the town.











By the time I left Lhamotse that evening, the gates had been closed and the monks were all loudly reciting texts in the courtyard. I wondered if they were chanting sutras, but was told that this was something more like 'philosophy' disputation (?). The monks all smiled warmly as I passed by, and, as one young monk drew nearby he grinned and whilst looking at me quietly slipped the word "Demo" ('hello') in amongst his recitations.



As I've said, the three Gompas have all been architecturally altered or elaborated and expanded over time. Looking at them, it was hard to tell how old some parts were. The living quarters of Lhamotse clearly matched Louis's old photos, as did the large flagstones of the paved courtyard; yet the balcony lattice-work had been replaced and the staircases, as Lobsang Yeshe observed, were no longer quite so steep. I read in a recently published travel guide that Dorje Drak had been completely destroyed in 1959 (no reason given as to why), and so was later rebuilt. A final happy discovery I made at Dorje Drak related to two old photos of the Gompa's exterior; one taken by Louis King, and the other by Joseph Rock (as well as another of Ernest Wilson's too, if you have a *very* keen eye) – which was that there had once been two large *chortens* or *stupas* standing in the open fields just outside the Gompa. They are now both gone, and the Gompa is today

surrounded by houses with little gardens, but, when lining up a modern view of one of Louis's old photos, I noticed a number of *mani* stones piled along a garden wall. It was clearly evident that these had been dug up with the vegetables! – They lined the top of the overgrown wall, and yet more were propped alongside a nearby hut. A trace of the old chortens, it seemed, remains. I wondered how many of these old *mani* stones might have been there and witnessed Louis taking the very same photograph as me some 90 or so years before?

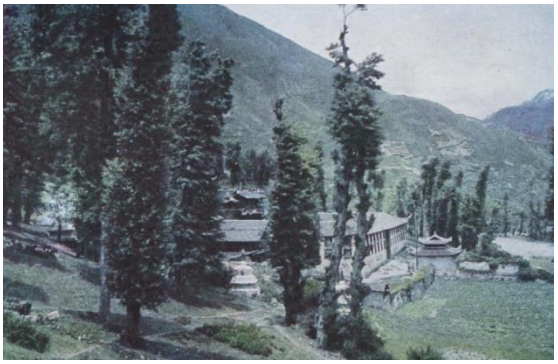




Dorje Drak by Louis Magrath King, c.1920



Dorje Drak, 2010

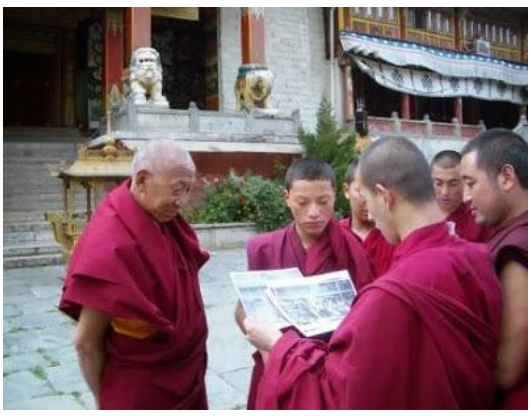


"Thunderbolt Monastery, a stronghold of the Red Lamas near Tatsienlu" Dorje Drak, by Joseph Rock (published 1930)











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Butter Lamps & Modern Thangka







Part VI

Just a stroll along the main shopping streets and the market area is enough to confirm for the curious that Kangding 康定 (དར་རྩེ་མདོ། Dartsendo) is still very much a frontier town. It seems like you can buy almost anything here: Electronic goods, clothes, food, pharmaceuticals, hardware and building supplies. Souvenirs are not hard to come by either. There are several shops dealing in Tibetan antiques and curios, everything from cheap tourist trinkets to genuine works of art. I perused a few of these shops and bought several strings of prayer beads before I came across the shop that really grabbed my interest.



The shop was run by two Nyingma nuns, and it was filled with all sorts of religious paraphernalia. Evidently, this was a kind of outfitter's store for everything a

Nyingma monk or nun might need. It seemed to sell everything from robes and headgear to butter lamps and prayer beads. I'd wanted to buy some presents for my family back home, but I was keen to buy them something which seemed relevant to my trip rather than something which might risk becoming confused with family heirlooms already acquired from this particular place almost a hundred years ago. Consequently, I found myself looking through a set of modern *thangka*. These small scrolls were a far cry from the wonderful hand-painted *thangkas* you will find in the temples of Central Asian Buddhist countries, or in a number of museums around the world. Incidentally, at the end of my trip, I saw a particularly fine display of thangkas at the Sichuan University Museum in Chengdu. But, nevertheless, even though these modern printed *thangkas* aren't of quite the same exquisite hand-crafted quality of those paintings now extant in many museum collections, they still rather appealed to me in their roughly glued and wonky nylon kind of way as everyday objects of the here and now. The little prints mounted on them are actually very detailed and well made. And no doubt, setting the everyday simplicity of their materials and manufacture aside, they are still very much objects of religious significance and undoubtedly just as precious as objects for genuine devotion and veneration for believers of the faith. As I leafed through them, one of the nuns came over and helped me sort out the various types of deities depicted, and, all the while, she was devoutly mumbling prayers under her breath. These are three which I finally selected for myself:









Now, to be sure, I am no expert on Tibetan Buddhism or Buddhist iconography, even in general; but I suspect that some of this blog's regular readers might be – so I'd very much appreciate any comments, corrections, or clarifications which my speculations here might merit! … My best guesses are that these thangka might depict: a) Red Tara, b) Hayagriva, and, c) Green Tara (?). Each scroll measures roughly 35cms / 13¾ inches height, 27cms / 10½ inches max. width, with the image being similar in size to a postcard, roughly 15cms / 6 inches height, 10cms / 4 inches width.



I also bought two brass butter lamps (roughly 7cms / 2¾ inches max. diameter; 10cms / 4 inches height; each very simply turned on a metalworking lathe). Such butter lamps are an important part of day-to-day Tibetan Buddhism as well as its various festivals, and they can be found in all Buddhist temples. The light of these lamps is akin to the spiritually transformative process sought by Buddhists seeking enlightenment, symbolised by the physical illumination of a flame arising out of an otherwise ordinary 'everyday' substance such as yak butter. In Louis King's time, there would have been many of these devotional butter lamps burning

inside the temples. Indeed, there is a sublime, but very small and difficult to make-out photograph taken by Louis himself, inside what I suspect might be Dorje Drak (Jingang Si) which seems to show banks of butter lamps burning beneath a large thangka painting which is partly obscured by a shaft of strong sunlight entering the temple, with what looks like a row of seated statues high in the roof beams overhead. Nowadays these butter lamps are more commonly found inside special cabinets standing outside in the temple courtyards, this is presumably done as a safety precaution against fire – although as a recent fire at Lithang late last year (2013) has heartbreakingly demonstrated ordinary electrical accidents can be just as devastating. These photographs are of the butter lamp cabinet found in the courtyard of Lhamotse Gompa (Nanwu Si).







The pair of brass butter lamps, as described above, which I bought from the Nyingma nuns' shop in Kangding



During his first stay at Tachienlu (Kangding / Dartsendo) Louis Magrath King collected a number of religious objects, including some *thangka* paintings, prayer wheels, a dagger, and a number of *vajra*, as well as several small statues – such as this wonderful 17th century Hevajra with his consort (above). He donated these objects to the British Museum, presumably when he passed through London on his way to or from serving in France as a Captain assigned to the Chinese Labour Corps, around 1918-1919. I've not been able to trace any archived correspondence at the British Museum relating to Louis's donation, but amongst Louis's own papers he did keep hold of an official letter of thanks from the then Director and Principal Librarian, Sir Frederic Kenyon (1863-1952), whom it's not clear (but perhaps unlikely) that Louis met; as well as a 'Deposit Receipt' for the five *thangka* paintings Louis donated, which was signed by Laurence Binyon (1869-1943), who was then Deputy Keeper of Oriental Prints and Drawings, and a well-known poet, now best remembered for his poems on the Great War. The receipt indicates that Binyon and Louis must have met when Louis made this donation to the BM. And, given Louis's own literary ambitions, it's interesting to think of these two men meeting in this way. Several of the statues which Louis gave to the British Museum are of such quality that they remain on permanent display in the British Museum's Asia Gallery (Room 33).





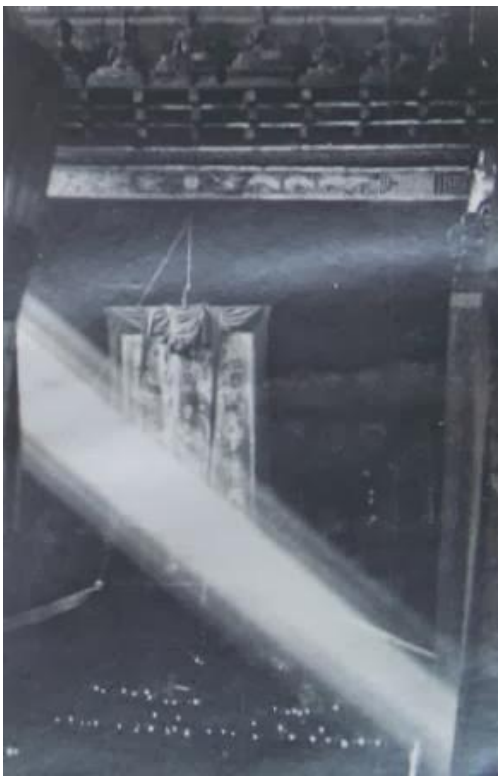
During his second stay at Tachienlu, after the First World War, Louis was given a remarkable object by the Kalon

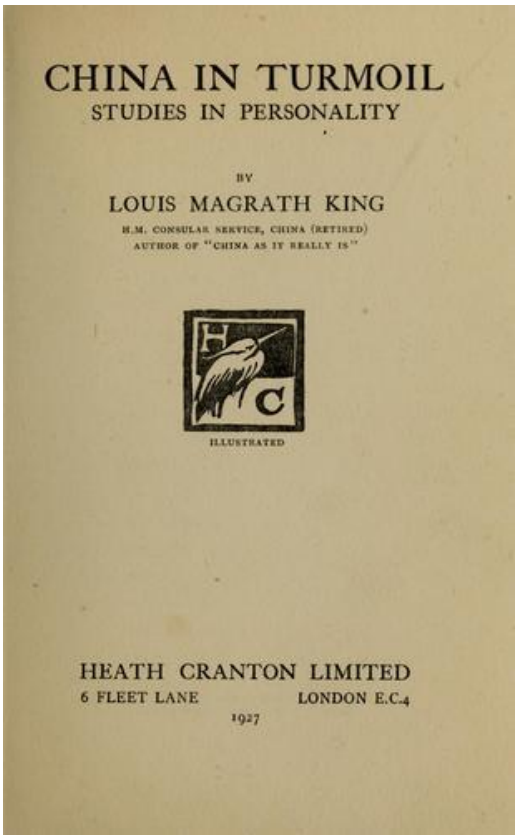
Lama, Champa or Jamba Tendar (c.1870-1922), who was a senior state official and Governor-General of the Tibetan province of Kham (*note*: there is a biographical entry for Champa Tendar in English on *The Tibet Album* website, but be aware, all the photos this entry currently links to (in 2014) are actually of the subsequent Kalon Lama who succeeded Champa Tendar after he passed away in 1922). Louis and Champa Tendar seem to have got along very well with one another, and Louis gives his own account of the Kalon Lama's life in his book, *China in Turmoil* (1927). The object which was given as a personal gift from the Kalon Lama to Louis as a mark of their personal friendship was a silver teapot which was said *'to have been in use by the 11th Dalai Lama.'* Louis duly reported the gift to his superiors in the Consular Service and the Foreign Office and was subsequently given permission to retain the gift for himself. I don't know where the teapot is now, but I know for certain that Louis did not donate it to the British Museum, even though there are similar teapots in the BM's collection donated by some of Louis's contemporaries, notably Sir Charles Bell (1870-1945).



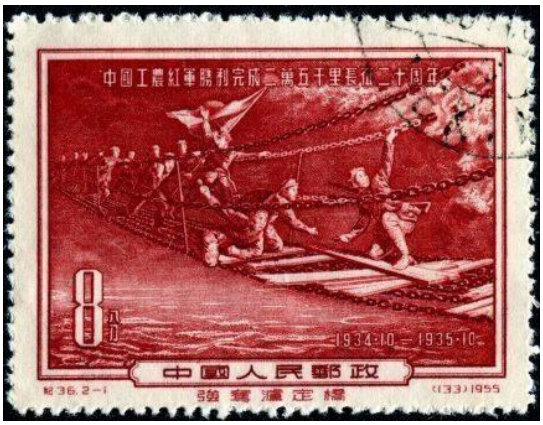
Many such objects acquired during traveller's journeys have found their way into various museum collections throughout the world. It was Louis's small but significant collection in the BM which started me off on this long and continuing journey of research when I was first asked to write about him for the *British Museum Magazine*. I've always been fascinated by these often rather anecdotal stories connected to objects. We can learn a lot about cultures and technologies in different time periods from such artefacts, but it's also these side stories which can tell us as much about how such objects have been perceived and used in later eras. Sometimes, these stories in themselves can make what might otherwise be relatively ordinary or mundane 'everyday objects' uniquely special in their own right. I recall once, whilst noseying around in a store room at the BM, I came across one such *extraordinary-ordinary* object. It was a small prehistoric flint arrowhead, much like any other prehistoric flint arrowhead – there are hundreds upon thousands of these in museum collections everywhere – but this one was accompanied in its drawer

by a neat little handwritten note which explained that this particular arrowhead had apparently been discovered by woodman whilst he was felling a tree, the arrowhead presumably having embedded itself in the tree trunk which (if true) had continued to grow around it. Such anecdotal side stories are often as (or even more) fragile than the actual objects they accompany – for instance, how might we perceive that little arrowhead without its accompanying note? … This is one of the key reasons why museums as repositories of such folk knowledge, as much as the actual artefacts themselves, are such important cornerstones upon which our human history sits. Places in which our history can be preserved and shared across time. Every object, whether it is old or new, whether it is a priceless work of art or an ordinary, common everyday utensil, has its own significance and its own unique story to tell.





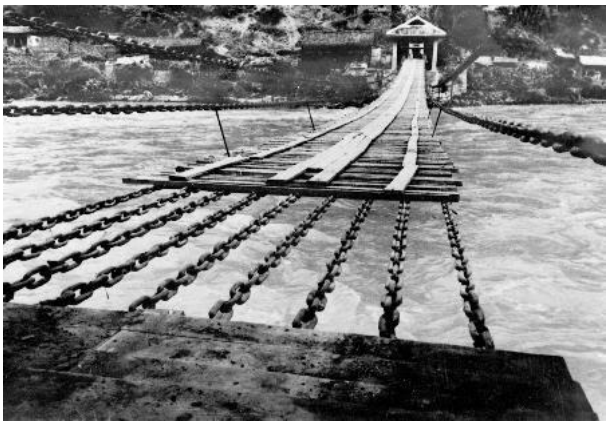
Last Stands at Luding



Part VII

The bridge at Luding in Sichuan is perhaps most remembered as the site of a "decisive" conflict between China's rival Communist and Nationalist forces in 1935, during the famous 'Long March'. For many years the political rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party has memorialised this battle in heroic terms which border on the almost mythical. Yet in recent years the veracity of some of the finer details of this historic event have been brought into question. One writer (Jung Chang) has even gone so far as to suggest the battle never even took place. **[1]** – Another commentator (Zbigniew Brzezinski) has quoted Chinese Premier, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) as saying of the battle: *"Well, that's the way it's presented in our propaganda. We needed that to express the fighting spirit of our forces. In fact, it was a very easy military operation. There wasn't really much to it. The other side were just some troops of the warlord who were armed with old muskets and it really wasn't that much of a feat, but we felt we had to dramatize it."* **[2]**

I have to admit, the 'Long March' and the history of the Communist rise and defeat of the Nationalist Government are a little later than (and so is not really) my direct area of study, but from what I know of the rag-tag political rivalries between the various Republican-era Warlords in Sichuan (of which I have read quite a bit), I think there is perhaps more than a grain of truth in this official CCP account when describing the Red Army's presence at Luding in 1935, it states: *"Probably never before had the Sichuanese seen fighters like these – men for whom soldiering was not just a rice bowl, and youths ready to commit suicide to win."*



And I am sure most of today's visitors to this chain link bridge, which is said to have originally been built in 1706, will certainly have the heroic story of the Chinese Communist fighter's exploits in mind as they stand and pose to have their photographs taken on its gently swaying span – with the tumultuous

noise of the Dadu River, still roaring unceasing and timeless, beneath it. Yet, when I visited the bridge in 2010 and posed for my own picture, I had a very different historical episode in mind. A far less well-known stand-off which happened almost exactly twenty years before the 'Long March' reached Luding.



In 1915, during the constantly shifting turmoil of the Warlord era, Kangding 康定, or Tachienlu 打箭炉 as it was then better known (དར་རྩེ་མདོ། Dartsendo, in Tibetan), was endangered by rebel Chinese soldiers. Discontent at harsh conditions and a lack of pay had driven this group of soldiers to mutiny, and, having killed their Commanding Officer, they were now a band of outlaws marauding the countryside, robbing and looting as they went. Eventually they arrived at Tachienlu and laid siege to the unfortunate town.



At the request of General Ch'en Hsia-ling (pictured above), who was then the appointed Chinese Border Commissioner of the region, Louis King, along with two missionaries, Theo Sørensen and Père Francis Goré, and five delegates of the local Chamber of Commerce, set out as a peace-making deputation. They were met by the mutinous soldiers and in a heated interview with the rebel leader, Ch'en Pu-san and his men, they established that the rebels would surrender under terms of an unconditional pardon, re-instatement, and the full payment of arrears of pay. The peace-making delegation thus returned to the town only to be fired upon by the understandably skittish soldiers who were very vigilantly on guard at its gates. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

The Commissioner was surprisingly amenable to the rebel's terms. But, he said the final decision was ultimately beyond his local power. The matter would have to be referred to a higher

authority in Chengdu. Louis King and the two missionaries set out the following morning to meet the rebels once more. Hearing of the Commissioner's positive response Ch'en Pu-san decided to act immediately and told the peace delegation that he intended to enter the town with his men. Louis cautioned the rebel leader that this would be taken as an act of open hostility and warned that they would be fired upon by the Commissioner's soldiers as soon as they were in sight of the town. *Not if they were in the company of the British Consul,* Ch'en replied! – And so, Louis and the two missionaries were taken hostage by the rebels.



A fierce battle duly ensued and eventually under the cover of nightfall the Commissioner and his soldiers withdrew from the town. Tachienlu fell to the rebels, who began looting the town. Seeing that the rebels were moving further away from their real aim of a pardon, King attempted to reason with Ch'en Pu-san. He proposed that if Ch'en were to maintain order in the town, so that it could be handed back to the Chinese authorities intact, it would go some way towards vindicating them; demonstrating their repentance and good intentions towards their re-instatement. Ch'en apparently saw the sense in this suggestion and immediately ordered his men to cease looting. He then released Louis and asked him to go to the Commissioner once more to renew the rebels' petition for pardon and re-instatement. King rode out of Tachienlu and caught up with the Commissioner at the town of Luding, where he found the General and his soldiers consolidating their position. Reinforcements having just arrived from Chengdu.



Luding Bridge, photo by Ernest Henry Wilson, 1908, & the same view in 2010





Ch'en Pu-san (seated), with one of his men after their capture

The Commissioner was apparently still willing to seek a pardon for the rebels and he telegraphed his superiors in Chengdu to this effect. But, unbeknownst to either side of this stand-off, a second garrison under the command of another General, who was unaware of these negotiations, was at that moment descending on the rebels from the opposite flank. In an early morning attack, this force routed the band of rebels completely. Those rebels who did not fall in the fight, fled. The rebels disbursed as best they could, some even continued in their lawlessness, but there was nowhere for them to hide. One by one, they were eventually picked off or rounded up, and those who had tried to go incognito and disappear were eventually caught too, and were later brought to justice. Ch'en Pu-san was executed along with his men. *"The last I saw of him,"* Louis recounts, *"was his head only, brought back and paraded in the town he had taken, and spared."* **[3]**



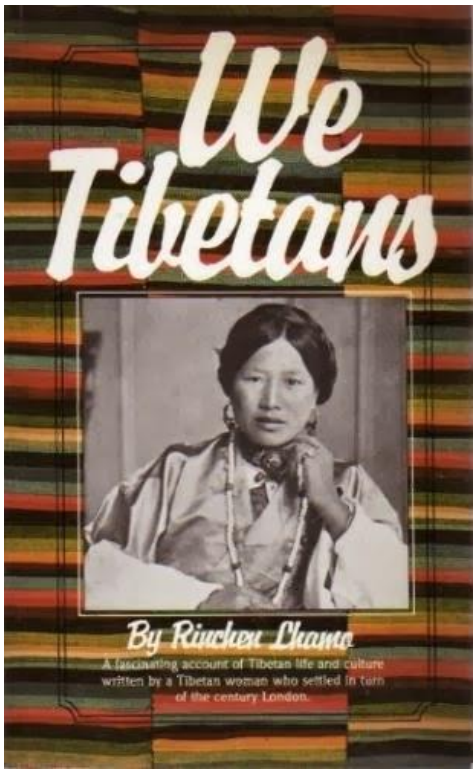
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[1] See, Jung Chang & Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (Jonathan Cape, 2005)

[2] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *America and the New Asia* (Transcription of the Michel Oksenberg Lecture, March 9th 2005, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford Institute for International Studies), p. 3

[3] Louis Magrath King, *China in Turmoil* (Heath Cranton, 1927), Chapter 3, 'The Brigand', p. 44

Rinchen Lhamo - A Woman of Kham



Part VIII

So far, I've not yet written much about Rinchen Lhamo. Partly because I think she is perhaps better known today than her husband, and partly because her husband's story is perhaps more easily traceable. At some point though, I would like to publish something about her as she is a truly remarkable woman. For the time being though, I shall write a little more here (and in my next post) on what I know of her life, and what I have discovered about her so far.

Rinchen Lhamo ('Precious Goddess') is best remembered as the author of *We Tibetans* (Seeley Service, 1926). The book begins with a memorable opening line: *"I am a woman of Kham, the eastern and most populous part of Tibet. My husband is an Englishman who was formerly British Consul on the Chinese frontier of Tibet."* – Her book is remarkable because it is one of earliest accounts of Tibetan life and culture written in English by a Tibetan. It is certainly one of the fullest accounts too. In its pages, she discusses a wide range of topics relating to all areas of contemporary Tibetan life in the early 20th century; from the Tibetan landscape, farming, food, architecture, costume, women, religion, and family life, to examples of traditional Tibetan games and folktales. She even ventures to make comparisons between what she has seen and experienced of life in Tibet and life in the West. Hers is a distinctly astute eye.



In the book's *Preface* Rinchen states why she has chosen to write her book on Tibet:

"It has long been [my husband's] *custom to translate to me what is said about Tibet in your books and newspapers. And so I have learnt how you regard our country and people. Some of your writers have written of us with knowledge and sympathy. They have known us and liked us. But they are just a few. The others seem to have said just what they liked or what they thought would attract notice. Some of the statements made about us display great ignorance, and others malice. Some are wrong but harmless; others made me laugh at the absurdity of them; still others made me angry. Why should people write falsehoods about us, why should they write at all of things they do not know? And I would urge my husband to write to the papers and contradict this statement about us and that.*

But he said it would be of no use. Many books would have to be written by many kinds of people before my country was justly appreciated abroad. But that would come in time, the sooner if the Tibetans would write about themselves as the Chinese and the Japanese have long done. Why should not I myself write a book?"

As good historians, we are taught to evaluate our sources clearly and keep an open mind, yet sadly some commentators have judged Rinchen's book on that very question she posed herself in her opening *Preface*, attributing the greater portion of the book's contents as well as its composition to her husband's hand. **[1]** Yet why should she *not* necessarily have written the book? – She clearly states the manner in which the work was composed:

"He [Rinchen's husband, Louis Magrath King] *would do all the work. I should just say what I wanted to say, and he would write it down and arrange it.* [...] *So we set to work. That was about a year ago, and this book is the result. It has not been as easy as it sounds. There was, for instance, the language difficulty. I know very little English, and my husband still less Tibetan. We usually talk to each other in Chinese, in which language we are both fluent. And that was the medium through which this book passed."*



I realise, with my extended-family connection to Louis and Rinchen, I could well be accused of bias in this regard – but, having read *We Tibetans,* as well as Louis's factual and fictional works, several times over already, I would say that a distinction of authorial voice is clear. Certainly, echoes of Louis can be

heard in the pages of *We Tibetans,* sometimes beyond a simple turn of phrase – but why shouldn't that hint that he and his wife were of one mind on certain matters? – Likewise, if one really reads Rinchen's words closely and compares them to those of her husband's published works, a clear difference in tone and thought can be heard and seen. And certainly, anyone who has read Louis's fiction may well agree that if Rinchen's voice were entirely his creation, it would have been an unparalleled feat of characterisation on his part!



PRINCESS OF TIBET IN LONDON.

THE FIRST TO VISIT EUROPE.

HER IMPRESSIONS.

"THE JEWEL OF GREAT GOODNESS."

THE first Tibetan woman to arrive in Europe landed at Victoria Docks yesterday from the Japanese steamer Kitano Maru. She is Mrs. King, a daughter of a princely Tibetan family and the

MRS. KING AND HER DAUGHTER.

Personally, I think that there is little doubt that Rinchen's is the real and genuine voice behind her book. Its thoughts, views, ideas, and reflections are undoubtedly hers. To write her off as completely incapable of creating such a work wholly overlooks the unique fact of her own individuality. She was clearly a resourceful woman of singular character. She left her homeland to accompany her foreign husband into a life entirely removed from much of what she would have taken for granted growing up in Kham. Why should she not wish to write a book about what she knew of such a unique and remarkable life?

And, needless to say, such a singularity was not lost on her contemporaries either. Both she and Louis were feted by the English Press on their arrival in England in 1925. **[2]** Numerous newspapers carried her photograph (with her wearing both Tibetan and Western dress) and interviews with her. And much to the couple's annoyance, although she was descended from Tibetan nobility, she was often promoted to the ranks of royalty and dubbed a 'Princess' to furnish a good story with an eye-catching headline!



Rinchen was not the first Tibetan to travel to Britain though. Perhaps most notably, she was preceded in 1913 (the same year that Louis first went to Tachienlu 打箭炉/ Dartsendo དར་རྩེ་མདོ།) by four young Tibetan boys who travelled to England to be educated at Rugby School. And, oddly enough there's a further but completely separate connection here – this time between my immediate side of the family and Tibet, in that a close family friend is the daughter of a British doctor who was stationed at Sikkim (who recalls living there as a child), when Sir Basil Gould (1883-1956) was the British Poltical Officer there in the 1930s-1940s. Sir Basil was the British official charged with accompanying the four Tibetan boys to England in 1913.



Lungshar, Gongkar, Ringang, Möndro and Kyibu II at Buckingham Palace where they met King George V - June 1913

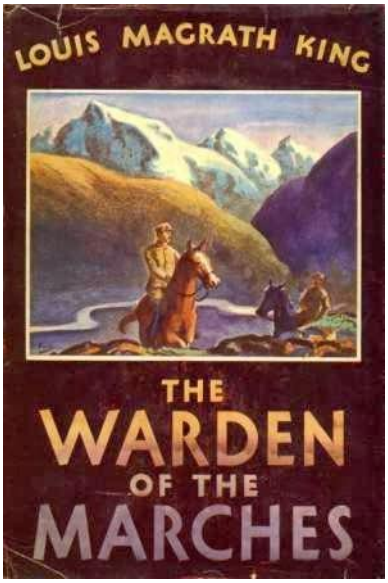


Sir Basil Gould, photographed in 1938

In 1940 Gould was one of two British officials who attended and filmed **[3]** *the installation of His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama*

Yet Rinchen was almost certainly the first Tibetan to marry an English national, and quite probably the first Tibetan to make England her permanent home. Such cross-cultural relationships, particularly at this time, are fascinating. I'd very much like to know more about how they first came to meet, but here I fear there might yet remain a great and unbridgeable of lacuna in my researches. So far the few facts I have been able to find point to the likelihood that Louis and Rinchen originally met during his second term on the Sino-Tibetan frontier, when he returned from the First World War, and soon after he set off on his second extended tour of the region –

however, another source would seem to hint that they may have met earlier than this.* And other source material also seems to indicate that she accompanied him on his travels through eastern Tibet.



It seems likely that such a cross-cultural partnership wasn't altogether as unusual as we might be given to suspect. What is unusual is the fact that they married and that Louis still sought to pursue his career even though he must have anticipated that the social mores of the time would be set against such a situation. Sadly, it seems Louis has left little record of his first marriage. His one foray into fiction, based on his time in East Tibet, certainly plays up the romance of his adventures, negotiating with bandits and renegade soldiers, as well as his embroilments in military battles and skirmishes. Yet, very proudly, he leaves out the one aspect of his time on the frontier that remains perhaps the most intriguing. Indeed, the book jacket blurb for *The Warden of the Marches* (Houghton Mifflin, 1938) rather baldly states that the novel: *"is unusual not only for its brilliant writing and authentic background but for the fact that every character is a man and there is no love interest to impede the swift march of the narrative."*

Would that this were not so! – But, for whatever reason Louis left this part of his and Rinchen's story untold, hopefully my on-going researches might eventually bring to light more of what must have been a very special marriage between two truly remarkable individuals who managed to bridge two very different worlds into one, for all too short a time. Rinchen was just 28 years old when she succumbed to tuberculosis and was finally laid to rest in an English churchyard.

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[1] For example, see P.D. Coates, *The China Consuls* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 417-423
[2] Tim Chamberlain, *Edge of Empires* (The British Museum Magazine, Number 66, Spring/Summer 2010), pp. 50-52
[3] For more information on Sir Basil Gould and Frederick Spencer Chapman's footage of Tibet and the installation of His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, see: Clare Harris & Tsering Shakya, *Seeing Lhasa* (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2003)

* This source is Emil Fischer, whom I believe (due to the date he gives, c.1917) mistook Oliver Robert Coales for Louis King.

In Search of "Ci Ma Tang" (次馬堂)



Part IX

I began this series of posts on my research trip to Kangding (康定) in Shanghai, but the trip actually began with a visit to a quiet corner of a leafy churchyard in Kent. A week or two before setting out for China I took a train from London Bridge to Hildenborough, not far from Tonbridge. The village of Hildenborough is a short walk from its railway station, and Saint John's Church is one of the first buildings you come across on the main road through the village. Passing through an ornate lych gate, the roof beams of which were decorated with garlands of local, dried hops, I looked up at what is a solid and imposing building with flint walls, tall windows, and a tower topped by an impressively tall spire. The two heavy wooden doors to the church stood open and I could hear music gently wafting out from the organ being played inside. It was evident from the various people arriving and already bustling about that preparations were underway for a wedding.



I wasn't here to attend a wedding though. I was here because some 80 years before my visit, a much less happy ceremony had been held at this very church. Dated November 22nd 1929 the *Tonbridge Free Press* carried the following notice of Rinchen Lhamo's funeral: *"Ex-Consul Bereaved – Buried in a Christian grave, the first Tibetan woman ever to live in England was laid to her last rest on Saturday. She was Rin-chen Lha-mo, which translated means Jewel of Great Goodness, and she was the wife of Mr Louis Magrath King, late of H.M. Consular Service in China. She died on Wednesday of last week, as previously reported in this paper, at the early age of 28.* **[1]** *She was the daughter of a chieftain and Mr King, who has been out*

in the East for 20 years, met her while acting as H.M. Consul on the Chinese frontier of Tibet. They were married over ten years ago and first came to England in 1925, when her arrival caused much interest. Shortly afterwards they settled down in Hildenborough, where they lived the greater part of the time when not in London. In 1926 a book was published by Mrs King entitled "We Tibetans", which commanded a large sale. She leaves four children, two sons and two daughters. The funeral, which took place on Saturday, was conducted by the Rev. L.G. Chamberlen. The mourners were: Mr L.M. King (widower), Mr Namkha Tendruk (brother), and Mrs Houghton. A large wreath of carnations, lilies and chrysanthemums was laid on the grave, inscribed "To Mummie, from those who love you, your husband Louis, your children Irene, Paul, Martha and Alexander, your brother Namkha."





A few months later, on January 10th 1930, the *Peking & Tientsin Times* carried a lengthy obituary (excerpt here): *"[…] The daughter of a Chieftain, Mrs King was a woman with great charm and of arresting personality. Like most great personalities she was somewhat shy and retiring, but to those who were fortunate enough to be included in her circle of friends she was a revelation. A devout Buddhist, her outlook on life in its totality was characterised by a quiet conviction that induced reality in both worlds. In manner she was charming and could never be surprised by any situation. Her brilliancy and quiet powers of repartee and her insight into human nature made her an exceedingly bright and imposing personality. She lifted the curtain on a whole world of veiled experience, and if she was typical of her own people there must be a wealth of essentially fine traits of character waiting exposure. […]"*



The fact that Rinchen remained a devout Buddhist perhaps explains the situation of her grave, which is tucked away at the far end of the churchyard. For a long time, her gravestone must have stood alone in that shaded corner. The closest graves are dated some fifteen years later, and it wasn't until twenty years after her passing that Louis was finally laid to rest with her. **[2]** There's nothing at all remarkable about their grave now, and, unless you went looking for it as I did that bright summer's day, there's nothing which would mark it out as in any way different from those around it.



The S.S. Kitano Maru

When they arrived in Britain on August 11th 1925 at London's Victoria Docks having sailed from Yokohama (or perhaps joining the ship at Kobe **[3]**) on the Japanese steamer, *Kitano Maru* **[4]**, sailing via Shanghai, Singapore, Suez, Marseilles, Gibraltar, Moji, and Port Said, they lived first in Kensington before moving to the countryside at Hildenborough. The house in which Louis and Rinchen made their home, called 'The Yews', still stands at the edge of the village at the end of a quiet lane lined with tall, old oak trees.





Rinchen's brother, Namka Dendru (Namkha Tendruk), known among the family as 'Jo-Jo', accompanied them, intending to study engineering. He returned to Kham in 1932-3, where contemporary newspapers indicate he was quite a prominent citizen. He acted as a guide and interpreter to a team of Chinese scientists (geologists, biologists, and sociologists); a Swedish botanist; and, a German Consul – all of whom made various research trips at different times in the borderland regions. One of Namka's claims to local fame which made it into the papers was that he shot "a magnificent black bear quite near the road outside Jedo" (it was thought that this bear may well have returned with the Swedish botanist to Upsala in Sweden. One can't help wondering, if it was stuffed, and whether it still stands in some museum display case there?). Interestingly, another newspaper report states that, unlike Rinchen, Namka converted to Christianity whilst he was living in Britain. As yet, I've not managed to find any information as to how long Namka lived or when he died – but his life certainly seems no less interesting, nor less eventful, than that of his sister.



Records of births and deaths are often key sources for genealogists and historians tracing personal histories. Curiously enough it was just such a document which in-part spurred my initial researches into the lives of Louis and Rinchen; and it was also this same document which lead me to staying an extra day than I'd originally planned in Kangding 康定 (Dartsendo དར་རྩེ་མདོ།).

Around ten years ago I was asked to see if I could assist in getting a very fragile Chinese document translated. There was a vague idea amongst the family that this document might be "the deeds to a monastery or a mountain." This idea was not too far from the truth, as it turned out. The document was in fact a 'deed of purchase' to a plot of land '5 zhang and 1 chi in circumference' (approximately 60 English feet) on the 'shaded' (陰庇) side of a mountain at a place named 'Ci Ma Tang' (次馬堂). The piece of land which belonged to a Mr Bao Guangming was sold for '10 large foreign-style dollars' (i.e. – imported Mexican silver dollars) to 'Lang-Ka-Deng-Zhu' – the Chinese

phonetic rendering of Namka Dendru – to own in perpetuity and enclose with boundary walls as a burial plot for his parents. **[5]** The only other name recognisable on the deed is that of a Mr He Jianbin, presumably a witness. The deed is dated: 'Republic, 9th Year, Lunar Calendar, 10th Month, Beginning of 10th Day' [1920]. The deed also has a handwritten text in Tibetan as well as a number of Tibetan and Chinese seals, including that of Kangding County (康定縣印).



I happened to mention 'Ci Ma Tang' to Kris Rubesh (owner of the Zhilam Hostel in Kangding) on my last morning whilst I was having breakfast (after which I was planning to head down to the bus station to take a bus back to Chengdu). Kris suggested we go and ask his neighbour, Mr Lao, if he knew or had ever heard of 'Ci Ma Tang'. Two minutes later we were outside talking to Mr Lao, his wife, and a number of other older Chinese folk – all of a sudden, they seemed to light up and there was plenty of pointing and animated discussion. I could hear them all shouting the name 'Ci Ma Tang' over one another. After what seemed like a bit of confusion, they all finally came to agree that 'Ci Ma Tang' wasn't too far away. Apparently it was somewhere near the hot springs at Erdaoqiao (二道桥温泉) in a nearby valley. Their best advice was that I should go there and "ask someone *really old"* exactly where 'Ci Ma Tang' was! … This was interesting though – because, whilst I understand the name might not necessarily infer a direct meaning, it does appear to suggest some kind of stopping place or building (堂) associated with horses (馬) – which chimed with me in that I'd read mention of horse racing in connection to religious festivities which used to be held at Tachienlu (Dartsendo). Similarly, Kris said that horses were used today for taking tourists up and down the mountains in summer and that these horses were put out to pasture near Erdaoqiao in the winter.



So, surprised at this last-minute revelation, I returned indoors to finish my breakfast and was asked: "What are you going to do?" … There was room for

me to stay another night and *that* decided it – no bus station or bus for me that day! Instead, I headed out on foot along the 'Lu Ho' valley – in Louis's time this was one of the principal routes towards Dawu (Taofu), Drango, Driwo, Kantze, Rongbatsa, Derge, and ultimately Chamdo. Sir Eric Teichman begins his book *Travels of a Consular Officer in Eastern Tibet* (Cambridge University Press, 1922) with a description of his journey along this very route. It took Teichman and his party 3 days to walk this valley to the pass at 'Zhara La (Haitzu Shan)', Mount Zhara Lhatse. I spent the best part of a day walking as far as I could. Erdaoqiao is reached fairly quickly, but passing over the bridge there, I didn't find anyone, let alone anyone *really old,* to ask about 'Ci Ma Tang.' But it was enough to walk along this valley, to look at the steep hillsides, and know that I was close to it. Even today, just as Teichman says: *"There is some beautiful scenery in this valley, which consists of forest, cultivated fields, and park-like grass-lands. Numerous farms and hamlets and good camping grounds are passed, and one can make the stages as long or as short as one pleases."*





The hillsides were all quite densely forested. One of which – not far out from Kangding – bore a huge fresh scar of a landslide which had exposed an enormous expanse of clean, fresh slate rock, which was extremely iridescent and was quite blinding at times when it caught the sunlight. A few of the hillsides were dotted with strings of prayer flags. I wondered if some of these might be associated with the small burial plots which I'd been told dotted many of the hillsides around. I'd seen some of these at closer hand on the slopes above Kangding. Maybe one of these still marked Rinchen and Namka's parents' final resting place, or perhaps all trace of their grave had long since been swallowed up by the trees?







I decided to press on as far as I could to see what there was to see along this old route to Tibet, and apart from the neatly metalled road, the further I went the more it seemed like little had really changed since Teichman and King and their contemporaries used to travel this way. There were still plenty of stone walled farm houses and little hamlets. As I walked, almost every passing vehicle stopped to offer me a lift and then seemed to marvel at the mad Englishman indicating that he was happy to walk! … Everyone I met along that road seemed cheerful and friendly, and the few words of Chinese which I'd become accustomed to using in answer to the same friendly enquiries, describing myself and where I was from ("Yīngguó" 英国), seemed to satisfy their curiosity. In one hamlet, I was greeted with by a small crowd of giggling children all saying "Hallo", and grinning from ear to ear when I said "Hallo" back.

And then, further on, passing through another hamlet, a smiling group of weather beaten women with traditional Khampa hairstyles returning from their fields stopped and asked me where I was from.







Each rise in the road seemed to entice my feet ever onwards, proving that old allure of wanting to know what might lie just beyond the horizon. Having timed myself out in order to calculate when was best to turn back (factoring in the negative value of my aching feet), I constantly found myself allowing myself "just one" more bend or rise in the road – just one more, just one more, and then another … Eventually, I reached a very weather-worn white monument. And here I decided that this was a good marker point at which to stop and reluctantly turn back. Hoping that someday I might get the chance to return to this particular place and continue on to what I've heard is a very beautiful lake at the far end of the valley, and maybe then even further beyond – to Derge and Chamdo. I would very much like to go back at some point and try to re-trace some of Louis's journeys, to see more of this region for myself in order to better understand it, as well as Louis and Rinchen's time here.





When I got back to Kangding, I crossed the river and climbed up the hillside to see a small monument (similar to a ལབ་རྩེ། *labtse* **[6]**) set in a low walled enclosure which was festooned with prayer flags that were fluttering in the constant breeze. On my way back down, I was hailed by a smiling old Khampa woman. Seizing the chance, I tried to ask her about 'Ci Ma Tang' – there then followed a strange kind of mime show between the two of us in which, talking in Tibetan, she did her best to dissuade me from climbing the mountain whilst miming with her fingers someone climbing up and then falling down, pointing up at the mountainside (even though I was already safely back down on the flat ground!); all because a foreigner had fallen off the top only a few days before. I nodded. I knew this already because the young lad in question was staying at the same hostel as me; where he was now resting up, nursing a broken ankle. I took out my pictures of Louis and Rinchen, and, showing them to her, I tried to see if she'd heard of them, or 'Ci Ma Tang'? – My small stock of Chinese phrases all failed me here, and, to be honest, I got the feeling she probably didn't speak much Chinese anyway. After looking at the pictures for a while she handed them back, looked at me, and shrugged sadly. And then, to my complete surprise, she said "sorry" in English! … We smiled, I said *"Thuk-je-che"* (ཐུགས་རྗེ་ཆེ།) "thank you" in Tibetan, and we waved goodbye as we parted.



I had no idea what I might find when I first set out for Kangding. I'd certainly not expected to find 'Ci Ma Tang', and so I was amazed that I'd got this close to *almost* finding it, and at the very last moment of my trip too.

My journey though had begun at a grave on one side of the world, and ended with another on the other side. And so, when I returned to Britain, I took the train once again, on another sunny summer's day. Walking back down the leafy Kentish lanes to the little churchyard in Hildenborough, where I placed two small mementos of my trip by the headstone in the corner. A small shard of iridescent slate from Paoma Shan (Dentok Ri) and a fragment of roof tile from old Tachienlu (打箭爐). Connecting two places and two points in time together once again.

[1] Rinchen Lhamo was born on August 18th 1901 at Rayaka in Kham (which I think might possibly be present day Xinduqiao, 新都桥). She suffered tuberculosis and died on November 13th 1929.

[2] Louis Magrath King was born on December 16th 1886 at Kiukiang (九江 Jiujiang), and died on his 63rd birthday, December 16th 1949. A year or two after Rinchen Lhamo passed away Louis remarried.

[3] The list of Incoming Passengers compiled by the Board of Trade for the '*SS Kitano Maru* (Nippon Yusen Kaisha Line)' does not detail whether the family boarded at Yokohama or Kobe, but a Japanese stamp in their passport is that of Hyogo Prefecture, where Kobe is located.

[4] Three years before, on October 8th 1922, Albert Einstein and his wife, Elsa, sailed to Japan from Marseilles on board the *Kitano Maru*. Photographs of Einstein posing on deck with a life ring bearing the ship's name can be seen in: Josef Eisinger*, Einstein on the Road,* (Prometheus Books, 2011). Built in 1909, the *Kitano Maru* was twice mentioned in *The Times* newspaper; first on December 6th 1915, when it ran aground at North Shingles, near Margate, and was assisted off by two tugs; and then again on August 14th 1928, when it collided with another liner (the *Otranto*) in the North Sea, an accident in which a Japanese seaman from the *Kitano Maru* was injured and later died at Hull Infirmary (another report seems to indicate that two seamen died). The ship was repaired in dry dock at Hull. The *Kitano Maru* was eventually lost whilst working as a transport/cargo ship off Luzon in the Philippines (at Mabilao, Lingayen Gulf, 16° 10'N, 120° 24'E), sunk by a Japanese sea mine on March 27th 1942.

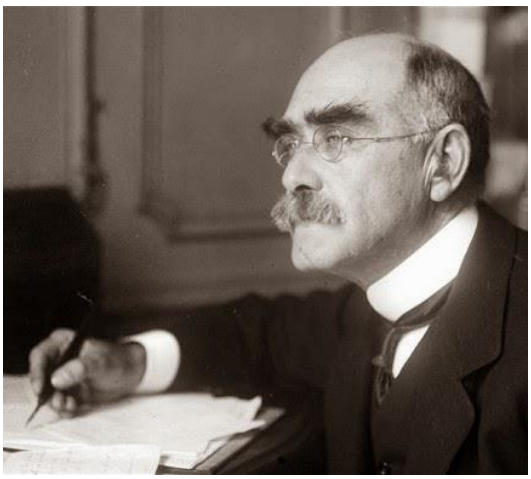
[5] Rinchen and Namka's father was named Pade Jangtso.

[6] A 'labtse' (lab rtse) cairn, is more correctly a heap of stones with flagstaffs and prayer flags, often set up to protect travellers. See, *An Abandoned Mountain Deity* by Limusishiden, in *Asian Highlands Perspectives*, 35 (2014), pp. 159-193



Special thanks to Kate Down who translated Namka's 'Deed of Purchase', and to Robert Bickers, who helped me trace some of the Chinese newspaper reports regarding Namka Dendru. Thanks also to Andrew Quintman, Michael Sheehy, and Sam van Schaik.

Reflections on Travel & Research

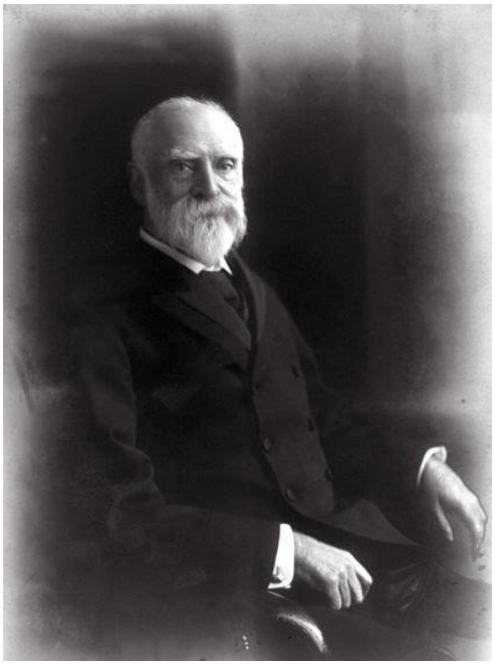


Rudyard Kipling

Part X

"I would like to try to deal with some of the more intimate and personal aspects of travel. They may be trivial or absurd, but one must remember that in a few years, most of our existing methods of transport, together with the physical and mental emotions that accompany them, will be profoundly changed. The time is near when men will receive their normal impressions of a new country suddenly and in plan, not slowly and in perspective; when the most extreme distances will be brought within the compass of one week's – one hundred and sixty-eight hours' – travel; when the word 'inaccessible' as applied to any given spot on the surface of the globe will cease to have any meaning."

These words were spoken a little over a hundred years ago by Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) in an address to the Royal Geographical Society in London. The exact date was the evening of February 17th 1914. **[1]** When reading travel accounts from this era, I'm often struck by how remarkably forward-looking they are; something which is notably in contrast to similar travel accounts published in our own time, which often strike me as being rather more nostalgic. Perhaps it was a characteristic of the age of Western imperialism? – Notions of modernity infusing a sense of purpose and a sense of faith in human progress. Boundaries were busily being pushed back. Frontiers were falling. The project of globalisation was proceeding apace. And now, in our own era, when that project has perhaps faltered or reached some sort of equilibrium, faced with newly dawning uncertainties, what else can we do but look back? **[2]**



James Bryce

Commenting on Kipling's talk that evening, Lord Bryce (1838-1922) – who was asked by Lord Curzon (1859-1929), the President of the RGS, to express the meeting's thanks to Kipling – he continued the observation quoted above with which Kipling opened his talk: *"If any of you are inclined to envy the men and women of the future who will be able, in the course of an afternoon to reach the United States, and South Africa to-morrow morning, and to wish that you had been born in those days, let us comfort ourselves with the thoughts that at those heights which the airships will traverse, there will be no colours of landscape to enjoy, for colour fades out of things when you pass over them at a height of 5000 or 6000 feet. Neither will any scents reach the future high-level travellers. So let us come back to the old conclusion that we may be well content with the world in which we live, even if it be not the best of all possible worlds."*

One can't help wondering what Lord Bryce would have made of the realities of travelling long-haul economy class at 35,000 or 36,000 feet (!) today – with the blinds all pulled firmly down in accordance with the cabin staffs' instructions, and everyone with headphones on, plugged into their TV sets and tucking into their in-flight meals, whilst assailed by the stifling dryness and the occasional odd aromas circulating in the recycled air of the closed cabin. Kipling's talk had made a point of emphasising the evocative nature of smell as a distinctly remembered characteristic of travel. Perhaps this shows that some people a hundred years ago had a clearer vision of 'human progress' than others! – I don't suppose Lord Bryce would have been a fan of modern air travel. For all its gruelling convenience, how many of us in our hectic and evermore time-pressed lives can conceive of the same journey taken by steamer over weeks through both choppy seas and fine weather? How does our experiences of turbulence compare to a howling gale on the water? Or the spun body-clock of jetlag to the forced idleness of days spent in a cabin or strolling the promenade deck with nothing but a desolate expanse of water to meditate upon?



Travel is always an experience. Often, travel is defined by its modes of transport as much as its duration, and by our company too – all these elements essentially combine. In the early 1990s, I went on two separate student exchange trips to the newly re-unified Germany.

For the first of these, we travelled out from the UK overland by bus; for the second, we flew. On the first, we had a two-day trip before we reached our destination in which to get to know one another better than we previously had in the normal day-to-day routines of our school life; and, consequently, it induced a tight-knit camaraderie which totally transformed our subsequent stay in Germany. On the second exchange trip a few years later, which was made with a different group of students at a different school, we were very much flung instantly into our new situation overseas in a much more immediate and isolated sense as the flight lasted less than two hours. An hour in the departure hall wasn't enough time to make us feel like the solid intrepid band which had been forged and united by the previous bus and ferry ride across the Channel, and the long jaunt by *autobahn* to Germany. In a similar way, my trip to Kangding 康定 (Dartsendo དར་རྩེ་མདོ།) was defined by the effort required to reach the town.

It took only a few hours to fly from Shanghai to Chengdu, but (on average) an eight-hour bus ride out to Kangding and the same back again. A journey which a hundred years ago would have been made over a number of days, and mostly on foot. Reaching Kangding really felt like reaching *somewhere* partly because of the effort required and partly because it is still quite an 'out of the way' sort of place; not quite altogether off the beaten track, but still, comparatively speaking, fairly remote.







Here though, I was travelling alone. There were only a handful of other Westerners staying or living in Kangding. Most of the travellers (as we were all independent travellers rather than package tourists) were holed up at one of either two hostels, and a lot of these folk seemed to be just passing through or

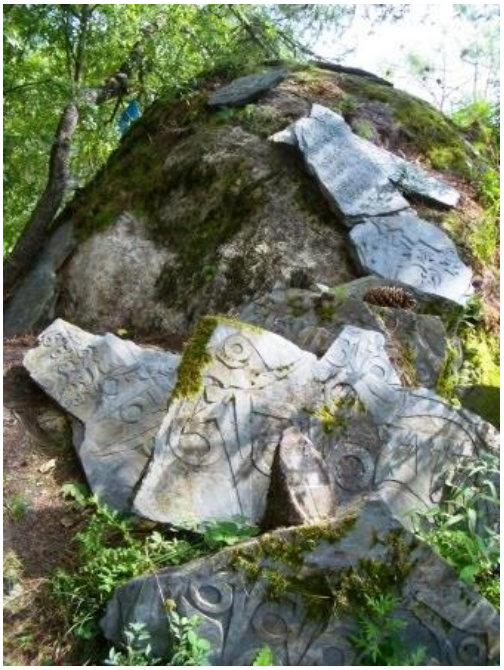
taking a couple of days' break to catch up with laundry and internet. I spent a lot of time wandering around the town, with a sheaf of old photos printed out from my computer, trying to match old views to the present, seeking to orientate myself and get my bearings, piecing together an old version of Kangding which had long since been transformed, buried, or disappeared. Every now and then, I'd find a former trace of that past place, and as such, a little more of the history which I'd either heard or read about from family, or books, or archives would fall into place. But reflecting on this now, it wasn't so much the cliché of *bringing history to life* – it was more like a process of conjectural surveying and factual mapping. In my mind, I was constantly pegging reference points and trying as best as I could to connect them together to form a clearer understanding. Continually stopping to remind myself that it was easy to make assumptions, and that one should always qualify oneself with the thought that an idea or link could later prove incorrect or wrong.





Trying to place the old French Catholic Church was a case in point. Having climbed a flank of one of the hillsides overlooking the town to a precarious vantage point, I managed to convince myself that the location of the old church might well have been on the site of the present one (which on the face of things seemed logical enough) – yet later on it became apparent from carefully scrutinising another photographic source that the geography of that particular theory was probably all wrong; as such, seen from a different angle, the old church was more likely to have been situated on the other side of the river and further downstream (perhaps near where the modern town square or piazza is presently located?). As with a lot of conjecture, it's probably hard to ever be certain when speculating without adequate information or unambiguous source material.

Something which I've yet to come across, is any old, officially printed or even roughly sketched maps of the town's former layout. But that's the point of research, you never really give up – you keep looking; and you keep your mind open to revising your findings in the light of new discoveries. As with my last stroll along the Lu Ho Valley, there's always the lure of that next bend in the road or the next rise on the horizon, tempting you ever forward, wondering what you might find just around the corner. The difficulty and perhaps the greatest sadness is deciding when to stop and draw a line. Maybe you'll decide to keep travelling forever, or maybe others travelling with you, or after you, will take your journey further – but in the end, that is something which only time will tell.





Such journeys aren't all about the past though. Our notions of history say as much about the present as they do about the reality of the past. It's a fascinating angle to explore the 'here and now' just as much as it is to seek out the past. Chatting to Mr and Mrs Lao in their front room; or being welcomed in by Tibetan monks eager to practice their English with an interloping foreigner; or being hijacked and lead on a happy, whirlwind tour of a lamasery by some local children – for whom the lack of a shared language didn't seem to be any sort of a barrier; or, similarly, being invited to take shelter from the mountain rain in a farmer's house and managing to use my battered old Japanese/Chinese /English vocab' book to communicate with him and his family over copious cups of hot tea and warm-natured smiles. All of these experiences combined to make my own trip to Kangding a memorable and personally rewarding one. I found much more than I'd dared to expect travelling to Kangding. And, as

such, I hope it will in time prove to be but the first of several – perhaps longer – trips yet to the town and the regions beyond.











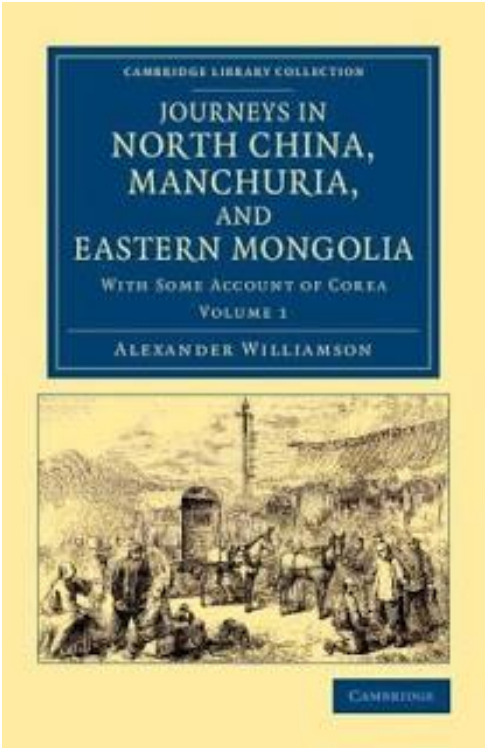




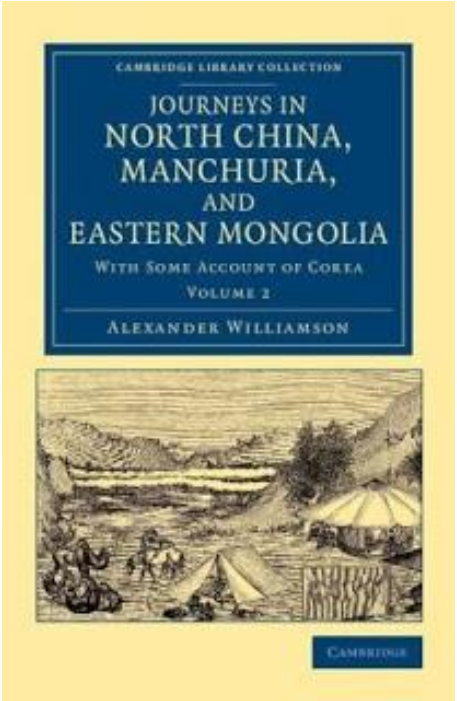


[1] See: *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. XLIII, No. 4 (April, 1914), pp. 365-378
[2] I think there's the germ of an idea for a paper waiting to be written here!

Further reading:



Rev. Alexander Williamson
Journeys in North China, Manchuria, and Eastern Mongolia; with some account of Corea (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1870) Recently republished (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)



Isabelle Williamson
Old Highways in China (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1884) Recently republished (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2010)

Madge King [Veronica King]
Cousin Cinderella: A novel (London: R. Bentley & Son, 1892)

William A. Rivers [pseudonym of Paul & Veronica King]
Anglo-Chinese Sketches (S.R. Menhenott: London, 1903)

Eurasia: A Tale of Shanghai Life (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1907)

The Chartered Junk: A Tale of the Yangtze Valley (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1910)

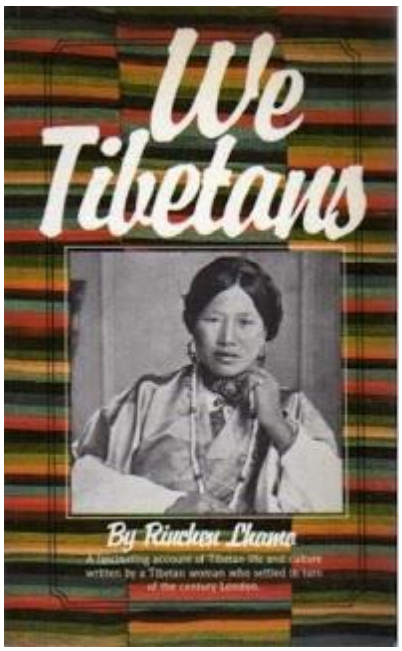
Paul & Veronica King
The Commissioner's Dilemma: An International Tale of the China of Yesterday (London: Heath Cranton, 1929)

Paul King (edited by) [Two travel diaries written by Rev. Alexander Williamson & Veronica King]
Voyaging to China in 1855 and 1904: A Contrast in Travel (London: Heath Cranton, 1936)

Paul King
In the Chinese Customs Service: A Personal Record of Forty-Seven Years (London: Heath Cranton, 1930) First published in 1924, by T. Fisher Unwin, London

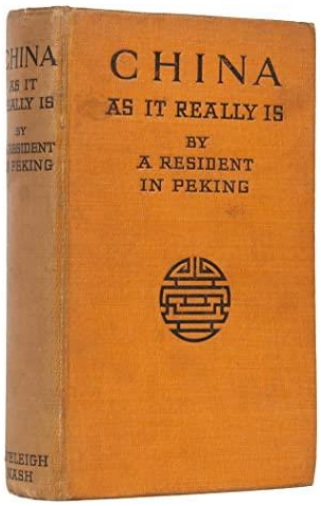
A Resident in Peking [Louis Magrath King]
China As It Really Is (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1912)

Mrs Louis King (Rin-chen Lha-mo)
We Tibetans (London: Seeley, Service Co., 1926) Subsequent reprints have been published under the name: Rinchen Lhamo (New York: Potala Press, 1985)



Louis Magrath King
China in Turmoil: Studies in Personality (London: Heath Cranton, 1927)

By Tophet Flare (London: Methuen & Co., 1937) Also published in the USA under the title: *The Warden of the Marches: A Tale of Adventure on the Chinese Frontier of Tibet* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938)



Tim Chamberlain
Edge of Empires in The British Museum Magazine, 66 (Spring/Summer, 2010), pp. 50-52

Books of Change: A Western Family's Writings on China, 1855-1949 in The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China, Vol. 75, No. 1 (2013), pp. 55-76

In Search of the 'Hamilla Mitchell'

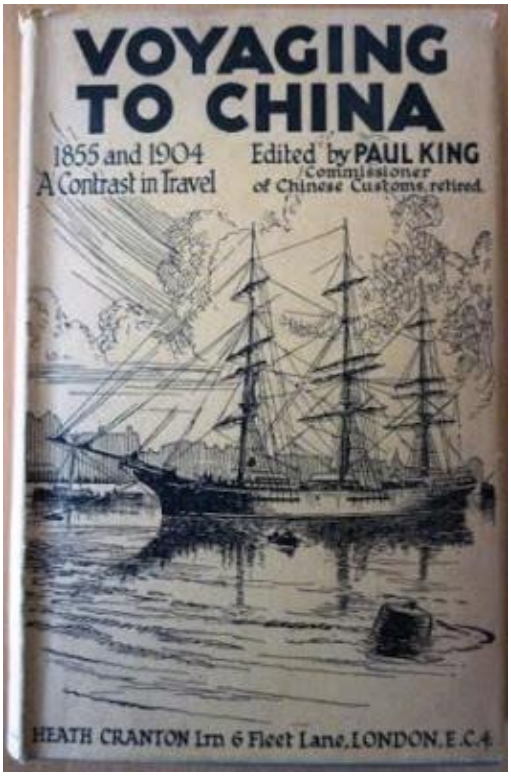


Every historian has lingering amongst their files and papers intriguing half-followed-up leads. These curious notes or stray references which get jotted down may never be fully explored because they diverge too far from our main research projects, or there just isn't enough time. Occasionally though, the sense of intrigue is too much and the researcher is tempted from the path – often it's a wild goose chase which amounts to nothing, but sometimes it's these irresistible tangents which make *'doing history'* so interesting. And, I have to admit, I'm forever wandering off on tangents.

When buried deep in 'research-mode', the historian needs to keep a clear head and an open eye. Half the fun of research is following up on obscure footnotes. We lose ourselves in the library or archive, pursuing our particular path, but often we hit dead ends. Developing a nose for pursuing hunches can sometimes unearth unexpected connections. Thinking laterally is essential. But sheer fluke or chance can sometimes play its part too. I had just such a chance encounter this week. I was idly perusing an old book, when a familiar ship unexpectedly strayed into view – literally – because this was a ship I'd sailed upon, so to speak, in another completely unrelated book. But, like all good sea tales, if I'm to tell this one properly, I'll need to start at the beginning.

Last summer I wrote a paper for the Journal of *The Royal Asiatic Society China in Shanghai* – entitled: *Books of Change: A Western Family's Writings on China, 1855-1949*. The paper looks at three generations of the Williamson-King family, each of which had a number of writers who published works on their life and times in China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The first writer from this hereditary line which my article examines is the Rev. Alexander Williamson (1829-1890). Williamson was a prominent Scottish missionary working in China, perhaps best known for his two volume *Journeys in North China, Manchuria, and Eastern Mongolia, with some account of Corea* (Smith, Elder & Co., 1870) – an amazingly detailed account of his travels as one of the first foreigners to be permitted to travel in China after the first Opium War. The two volumes note in (sometimes stupefying) detail points of scientific and economic interest

concerning the mineral and botanical resources of the provinces he travelled through, as well as descriptions of the people he met, and the towns he stayed in, whilst preaching and distributing Christian literature (in Chinese translation) along the way – it's a monumental travelogue/geographical gazetteer of late Qing China.



When Williamson first travelled to China in 1855, he kept a diary of the voyage. He and his wife, travelling in company with fellow missionary Griffith John (1831-1912) and his wife, took passage on a small wooden sailing ship called the *Hamilla Mitchell*. Built in 1850, the 540-ton ship took four months to sail from London to Shanghai, via the Cape of Good Hope. On the whole, the diary (which was published in 1936 by Williamson's son-in-law, Paul King) describes a voyage in which Williamson shows his keen interest in the workings of the natural world, as well as his religious piety. There's a glimpse of his lighter side too, as he describes some of the inconvenient amusements of life on-board:

"What would you think if your seat were to take it into its head to walk away to the other side of the room without a moment's notice while you were busily engaged at your desk? And then repenting of its evil deed to return as unceremoniously?"

It must have been a hard and tiring journey on such a small ship. And the unpleasantness only seemed to increase – the Captain's ability to command his vessel became more and more erratic as the ship progressed further and further from home. The Captain's fondness for the bottle appeared to grow in equal measure with the lengthening distance. But happily, after a few bumps and scrapes, the Williamsons reached Shanghai in one piece, and so put to shore for a new life in China.


SHIP OF SAME TYPE AND PERIOD 1855 AS "HAMILLA MITCHELL"

Having written and submitted my paper, I thought no more of the *Hamilla*

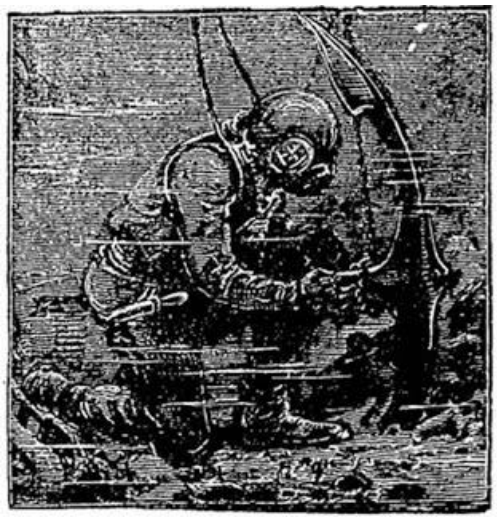
Mitchell, until to my amazement she seemed to hove into view once again, like a long-lost ghost of the past emerging from the mist, this time on the pages of another venerable old tome. The book in question – which has nothing to do with my China researches – (bought on a mere whim for a couple of quid from a second-hand bookshop I happened to stray into during a lunchtime stroll earlier this week) is titled *The Wonders of Salvage* by David Masters (The Bodley Head, 1924). Masters, who was previously unknown to me, appears to have been a fairly prolific writer of books concerned with deep sea diving – the lead boots and copper helmet with air hose kind of diving. *The Wonders of Salvage* tells various stories of deep-sea diving quests for sunken treasure, salvaging bullion from wrecks thought lost by their underwriters, or valiant tales of raising ships torpedoed during the Great War. To my astonishment, I found that several pages of the book are devoted to the *Hamilla Mitchell.*



TREASURE-SEEKERS CHASED BY PIRATES.

To go to enormous expense and trouble, not to speak of danger, in raising treasure, only to find yourself swooped down upon by a horde of villainous pirates, must be admitted to be about as evil a slice of luck as usually falls to the lot of a diver, says Mr. W. F. Wright in his "True Yarns of Diving Heroes," appearing in *Chums.* It happened some years ago, but owing to the acuteness of one of the party—however, I will tell you the story, which sounds like fiction, but is perfectly true. A vessel named the Hamilla Mitchell was lost on the Leuconna Rock, Shanghai, having aboard her no less than £50,000 in specie. On examination, it was reported that the raising of the vessel was an impossibility,

Here is Masters' highly engaging account of the salvaging of the *Hamilla Mitchell* in full (pp. 58-64):



"Thrilling as were these treasure-hunts, the most romantic story of all is that of the 'Hamilla Mitchell.' Here we have treasure and pirates and a desperate chase all mixed up in the most approved adventure-story style. Only, unlike a work of fiction, this story happens to be true.

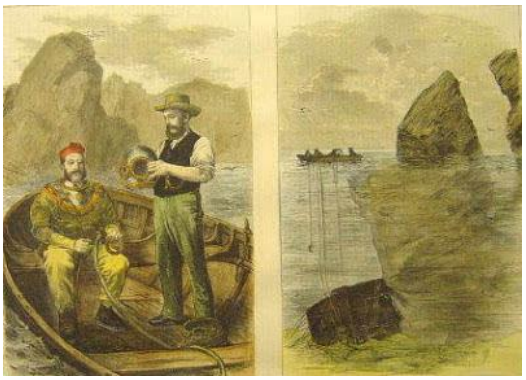
The 'Hamilla Mitchell' came to grief on the Leuconna Rock, near Shanghai, and carried down with her £50,000 of specie. She was a total loss, and the underwriters, after paying the insurance, considered the question of trying to salve the treasure. They instructed an expert to visit the scene and report on the case. The expert in due course considered that the case was hopeless, that the specie was lost for all time, and that the wreck had gone down in such deep water in so exposed a position that it was much too dangerous for divers to work there – not a very cheerful report for the underwriters to receive.

There, for a time, the matter rested. Then upon the scene came a Captain Lodge with an offer to do his best to recover the treasure. The underwriters, unwilling to allow the specie of which they were the owners to remain at the bottom of the sea, agreed gladly to the proposal that was placed before them. Captain Lodge considered the problem most profoundly. He knew that what was lost would not be won back easily, that the odds were, indeed, very much against a single ounce of the precious metal ever again seeing the light of day. This did not dismay him. Securing the services of two clever divers, named Ridyard and Penk, he made the trip to Shanghai, taking out with him some special diving apparatus – the finest and most powerful equipment to be found in the world.

He wandered about Shanghai looking for a vessel that would suit his purpose, and, coming across a small sailing craft, chartered her and proceeded on his quest for the wreck. Small as was the salvage vessel, she was yet too large to take in-shore among the high rocks, and so the divers had to prosecute their search from the small boat which they towed behind. They searched here, they searched there, dropping over the side of the boat in their cumbersome dress, facing all the unknown perils of the unknown depths. Now they were carefully exploring a ledge perhaps only 20 feet deep, and a little later they would be slipping down the face of a chasm that plunged sheer into the sea for another 100 feet or more. They did not spare themselves in that search, for at times they penetrated to a depth of 160 feet.

They were investigating a ledge one day when a dark mass loomed up at one end. They approached it, to find the wreck at last, noting with satisfaction that it was in a comparatively shallow depth which made the prospect of salvage fairly easy. Their jubilation was cut short, however, as they drew nigh. It was the stern that held the treasure, and the stern was missing!

Fate had once more been up to her tricks. The 'Hamilla Mitchell' had settled with her stern over-hanging deep water. Not for long did she remain intact, for the gales soon broke off the unsupported after end, which slipped off the ledge into the abyss, where the divers managed to locate it in 156 feet of water.



The never-ending lines of bubbles from their outlet valves flowed upward to the surface as they slowly explored the stern and prepared for their assault on the treasure-room. It was a most dangerous as well as a most difficult task to work in that treacherous chasm. The currents were strong, the

rocks were sharp, and the possibilities of air lines being cut or fatally fouled were not pleasant to dwell upon. Nevertheless, they stuck to their task and eventually Ridyard managed to break a way into the strong room.

The sight which met his eyes as he gazed through the windows of his copper helmet was like a scene from some fairy tale. The light, filtering through to that great depth, enveloped the hold in a sort of twilight gloom, all over the place he dimly saw heaps of dollars scattered about. He stooped down to the treasure chests, to find woodboring worms had eaten many of them quite away and the contents of the boxes were spilled in all directions. He walked about on a floor of solid gold; golden coins slipped about under his leaden soles.

Anything more romantic would not be easy to find, yet the romance did not appeal to Ridyard. He was working against time, knowing that he would not be able to stand the pressure for long. Every movement was slow and difficult. The water was striving to crush him; he was being saved from this terrible fate solely by the continual flow of air coming down the rubber pipe to his helmet.

Four times Ridyard underwent that ordeal of getting into the treasure-room and working under the enormous pressure until he was quite exhausted. On the last occasion he surpassed his previous feats of endurance and struggled doggedly on, loading up the treasure and watching it disappear towards the surface until he had sent up the contents of sixty-four boxes.

Strong and fit as he was, he became thoroughly worn out with the toil, so he signalled to those above and made his way slowly to the surface. They dragged him to the deck of the salvage craft and unscrewed his helmet. His face was lined, his eyes were very tired, and his body clamoured for moisture, although he had been immersed in it for a long time. Not a glance did he give to the treasure lying about, the fortune at his feet did not interest him.

"Give me a drink," he said. "I'm dying for a drink of water."

Penk nipped up a bucket and made his way to a spring at the top of the island under which they were working. Putting down his bucket to fill, he scanned the horizon, as sailormen will. A sudden amazement came over him. The sea was dotted with sails, all making in the direction of the island.

Wasting no time, he picked up his precious pail of water and ran down to the ship.

"What's up?" asked Captain Lodge, as Ridyard took his much-wanted drink.

"The sea's full of junks, hundreds of them," Penk replied.

Taking his glasses, Captain Lodge quickly identified the oncoming ships as the junks of Chinese pirates who were making their way towards the island from the farther side to avoid being seen. There was no doubt in his mind what they were after. There was

but one thing in that quarter worth having, and that was the treasure stored in the salvage craft. It was obvious that the pirates had been watching operations carefully. They had undoubtedly planned to allow the divers to recover the treasure, then they purposed stealing down upon the expedition unawares, wiping it out and looting the gold.

The pirates were in overwhelming numbers, and Captain Lodge realized instantly that the only thing to do was to run for it. Slipping the anchor to save the time required to haul it up, the salvors hoisted sail. Gradually they gathered way and stole from under the cover of the island. Directly the salvage craft appeared in the open, the junks altered course and started to pursue her.

Pity the poor salvors! The wind had practically failed them, yet they could see some of the junks bending to a lucky breeze and overhauling them. In desperation they put out the big sweeps and toiled like galley-slaves to force their craft through the water. Ridyard, tired as he was, took his turn at the oars to try to save the treasure he had salved at such risk. So the salvage boat crept along, with the pirates slowly gaining.



More exciting grew the chase. With anxious eyes the salvors watched the distance between their own craft and the Chinese junks growing gradually less. Harder than ever they strained at the oars, dipping them into the sea, throwing all their weight upon them, pulling until the muscles of their arms ached and their backs were nearly breaking.

It looked as though the salvors would lose their lives as well as their treasure when the sails, which had been flapping idly, began to swell. A puff of wind stirred their flag, and a steady breeze began to blow. It was none too soon. The salvage craft started to gather way again and forge through the water. Still the junks hung on. They were not going to relinquish their prize without an effort.

The pirates continued to chase the salvage craft right until sundown, when a friendly darkness hid pursued from pursuers and enabled Captain Lodge to shake off and lose the bloodthirsty Chinese pirates. In the end he managed to make Shanghai in safety with the rich treasure of £40,000 aboard, thus bringing to a happy ending one of the most exciting treasure-hunts ever known.

If Ridyard had not worked quite so hard and grown quite so thirsty, and if Penk had not gone to fetch that pail of water, the salvors would have remained in ignorance of the approaching pirates and would have met a tragic death at their hands.

That lucky drink of water saved a fortune of £40,000."

… Perhaps this also means there's £10,000 of bullion (or whatever today's equivalent value would be) still out there somewhere beneath the waves? **[1]**

The co-incidence of my stumbling across the deep-water demise and amazing after-story of the *Hamilla Mitchell* following on from my previous research seemed remarkable. I couldn't help wondering if the Williamsons had perhaps seen reports of the ship's loss and the subsequent adventure of its salvaging in the Shanghai newspapers. My interest was piqued, and so I decided to see if I could find anything more on the story. Masters was writing some fifty-five years after the event and I wondered what other, more contemporary, sources there might be. It turns out that there are quite a few. Two of the most detailed (and readily available) being *The Brisbane Courier* (November 12th 1870) and *The Capricornian* (June 11th 1898), from which I learnt that the *Hamilla Mitchell* was lost in August 1869, and the subsequent salvage operation was undertaken in March 1870 by Messrs R. Ridyard and W. Penk of Liverpool, using state-of-the-art diving equipment procured from a specialist company called *Siebe & Gorman, Submarine Engineers and Sole Contractors to the Royal Navy,* based at Denmark Street, London, and established in 1820. Another account which mirrors quite closely the re-telling given in Masters' book was published in *The San Francisco Call,* December 26th 1910.



INVALUABLE FOR SHELL AND PEARL FISHING

PRIZE MEDALS.

London, 1851, Prize Medals; Paris, 1855, Silver Medal; London, 1862, Prize Medal Dublin, 1865, Prize Medal; Naples, 1871, Silver Medal; Vienna, 1873, Medal for Merit.

SIEBE AND GORMAN

(Established 1820),

Submarine Engineers and Sole Contractors to the Royal Navy.

No 5 DENMARK STREET, SOHO,

London, W.C.

PATENT DRESSES, with VULCANISED PATCHES.

Floating Air Pipes.

Messrs S. and G. beg to call the attention of their patrons and public in general to their PATENT DIVING APPARATUS, by which two divers can work simultaneously and at different depths, entirely independent of each other, and in the case of one diver being entangled in cordage of wreck &c., another diver can be sent down from the same pump to clear him. We are the only patentees and sole makers of this apparatus, to work to a depth of 180ft. Price complete £130.

The above apparatus has been entirely adopted in preference to all others by the Royal Navy and the Military School of Engineering (vide "Times," May 20, 1868); also by the principal civil engineers and contractors; also at the recovery of treasure from the Hamilla Mitchell, when the diver worked four hours consecutively at a depth of a 144ft (vide "Times," September 1, and "Graphic," November 5, 1870.

A trained staff of divers for home and foreign service.

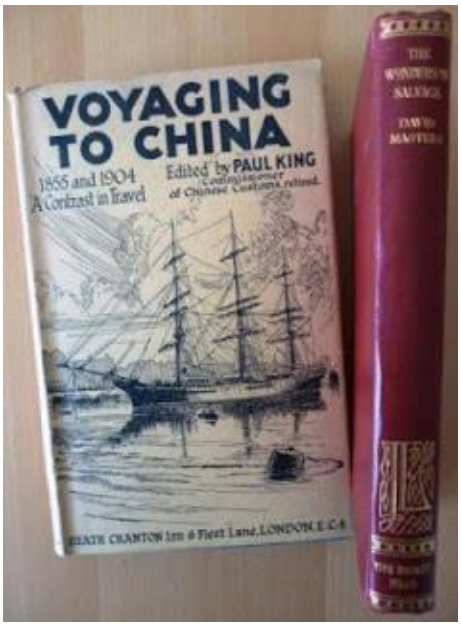
Engineers and Machinists. Ice-makin gMachinery, Steam-Engines, Boilers, Diving Bells, Pumps, &c.

Yet – on closer inspection – the connection isn't quite as neatly clear-cut as it might at first seem. An entry in *The Illustrated London News* published in the month after the *Hamilla Mitchell* was lost doesn't quite tally to the ship described in the Introduction of *Voyaging to China* (Heath Cranton, 1936), the book in which Williamson's travel diary was published. *The Illustrated London News* (September 25th 1869) states:

"The British ship 'Hamilla Mitchell', belonging to Glasgow, outward bound from London to Shanghai, has been wrecked on the Leuconna Rock, within 130 miles of her destination, with a cargo valued at £150,000 and specie to the amount of £50,000. The 'Hamilla Mitchell' was a first-class iron ship, of nearly 1000 tons, owned by Thomas Mitchell, of Glasgow, and was commanded by Captain Branscombe. Lloyd's register describes her as having been built in Dundee in 1864, under special survey. She sailed from*

Gravesend on April 5th. The date of her loss is not mentioned, only the spot where it occurred, known as Leuconna Hammocks, a cluster of rocks in lat. 30.25 N., long. 122.33 E., in the fairway to the entrance to the river Yang-Tse-Kiang, and about 130 miles from Shanghai. The crew appeared to have saved themselves by the ship's boats and reached the port in safety."

*[The Lloyd's Register for 1869 actually gives Dumbarton as the place where the 'Hamilla Mitchell' was built.]



Voyaging to China (1936) gives quite a different description of the ship as detailed in the Lloyd's Register for 1855:

"Wooden Ship, 'Hamilla Mitchell'; 540 tons; Master, H. Bradley; built by Lunnan & Robertson at Peterhead in 1850; Owners, Thomson & Co.; Port of Registry, London; Voyage, London to China; Class, 13AI."

So, it appears there were two ships (of different type and size) named *Hamilla Mitchell* serving the same shipping routes at around the same time. A further hunt through contemporary newspapers indicates that as well as the London-China route, the two ships also served as emigrant ships to Australia and New Zealand. But if the younger, larger iron-hulled *Hamilla Mitchell* was the one lost near Shanghai, whose salvage story sounds like something straight out of the pages of a *Boy's Own* adventure magazine – what was the fate of the older, smaller wooden ship named *Hamilla Mitchell* which had brought the Williamsons to Shanghai some fifteen years earlier?

Well, as always, there are hints and echoes out there. A general sounding of the internet has also turned up the suggestion of a third *Hamilla Mitchell* – one pre-dating our particular vessel. This third ship, of 145 tons, sank off the coast of South Africa in 1844. But there are also a few tantalising hints as to the possible end of our *Hamilla Mitchell*. Her demise was possibly just as dramatic – and indeed more gruesome and unhappy – than that of the ship of the same name wrecked on the Leuconna Rock. Two separate leads seem to suggest that our ship may have been lost around 1859. A recent, fleeting mention in *The Korean Times* (November 14th 2012) speculates that a ship of the name *Hamilla Mitchell* was lost somewhere off the coast of the Korean peninsula

sometime before 1869, where its luckless surviving crew were brutally murdered.

Yet hearsay isn't the kind of source material to satisfy a historian. There are probably historical records out there which might definitively answer the question (which now niggles to be answered). A proper ranging quest through the lists of the Lloyd's Register may well reveal the fate of the *Hamilla Mitchell* of the Williamson's journey of 1855. And so, like a loose thread waiting to be tied off, until I get the time to salve the appropriate archives in greater depth – my research file remains far from closed. Sometimes, these tangents to our main-research-aims can become fully fledged projects in themselves – and that's often the real joy of historical research. The past is a vast and fascinating book, full of obscure and forgotten footnotes; unfathomable depths, just waiting to be plumbed!



[1] *A newspaper article published in 1910 states that: "The balance of the treasure was recovered some time later." (See, 'The San Francisco Call', 26 December 1910, p.11)*

Permission to reproduce the colour print of Messrs Ridyard and Penk salvaging the treasure of the 'Hamilla Mitchell' (dated 1870) was very kindly given by Kevin F. Casey of Sub Aqua History Prints. The Siebe & Gorman advertisements are credited with thanks respectively to The National Library of New Zealand and Grace's Guide. The newspaper clipping 'Treasure-Seekers Chased by Pirates' is taken from 'The Capricornian', Saturday 11 June 1898, p.25 (see also: 'The Illustrated London News', 25 September 1869. p.315)

Postscript: Combing the Lloyd's Register, I've since found several references to the *Hamilla Mitchell* built in 1850 at Peterhead (540 tons); one, to the voyage taken by the Williamsons in 1855; and another reference which shows the ship was still sailing in 1867-1868. Lloyd's Register also shows the *Hamilla Mitchell* built in 1864 was lost in 1869, *en route* to India.



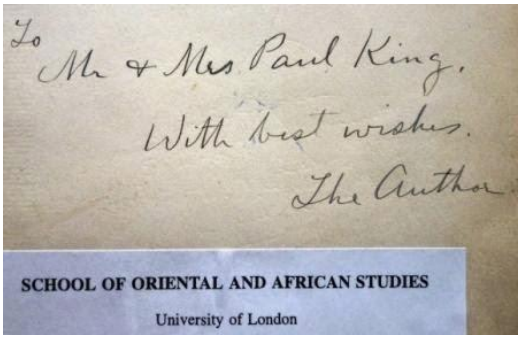
The Lutine Bell at Lloyd's of London

Unexpected Encounters with the Past



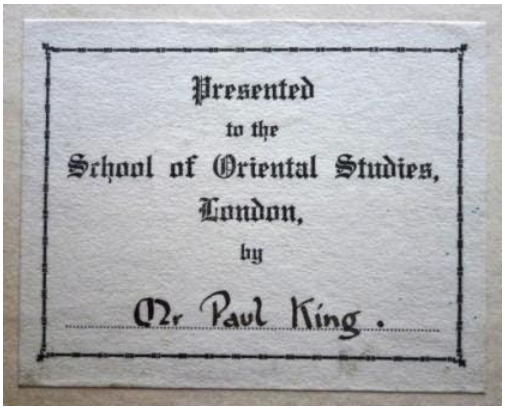
A couple of weeks ago, late one Friday evening, I was perusing the shelves in SOAS Library when I made an unexpected find of a book with a personal family connection. I was there searching out some books for an essay I'm currently writing on China's Boxer Uprising of 1900. Having found the specific titles I was looking for, my eye was scanning along the book spines to see if there might be any other titles of interest, when my attention was caught by the faded lettering on a slender spine sandwiched between two heftier tomes, the book was: *China and the Boxers* by the Rev. Z. Chas. Beals (M.E. Munson, 1901).

It looked like an old binding, which is probably what really drew the book to my attention rather than its somewhat perfunctory title. The essay which I'm writing is a study of diaries kept by members of the diplomatic corps, who were trapped inside the foreign Legations during the Boxer siege of Peking (Beijing) from June to August 1900. Consequently, I've been keenly hunting down as many primary accounts as I can find (SOAS Library is a gold mine for original copies of texts by old 'China Hands'). I took the book down from the shelf, and, finding it was in a rather fragile state, I carefully opened its cover to take a look at its contents page, when instead my eyes fell on this:

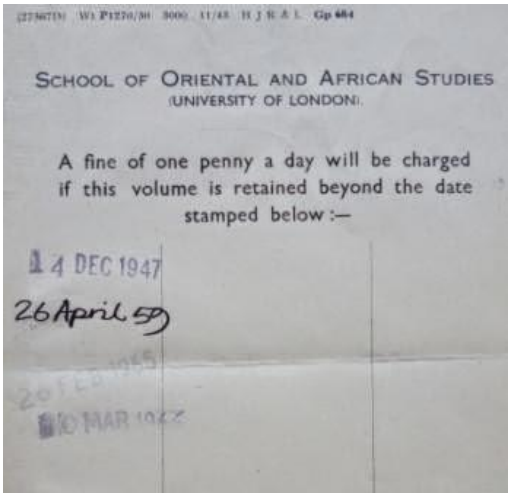


My happy find wasn't so much that the book had been inscribed by the author, but rather the couple to whom he had inscribed it: "Mr & Mrs Paul King" (collateral relations of mine, whom I've written about on this blog before). On his retirement, after a career of almost 50 years, Paul Henry King had been a senior member of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service – he and his wife, Veronica, were also both well-known writers on China in their time. This particular copy of Beals' book was evidently a gift from one 'China-Hand' to another.

But this wasn't the only find. Opposite the author's dedication, on the inside of the hardboard cover, was this bookplate:



There are a couple of date stamp tabs glued into the book and the oldest of these seems to indicate that the book was donated to SOAS sometime before the end of 1947. Nearly half a century after the events it describes. In light of this unexpected discovery, I now can't help looking at the many bookstacks in SOAS Library devoted to China and wonder if any of the other books shelved there might also have been donated by the Kings?



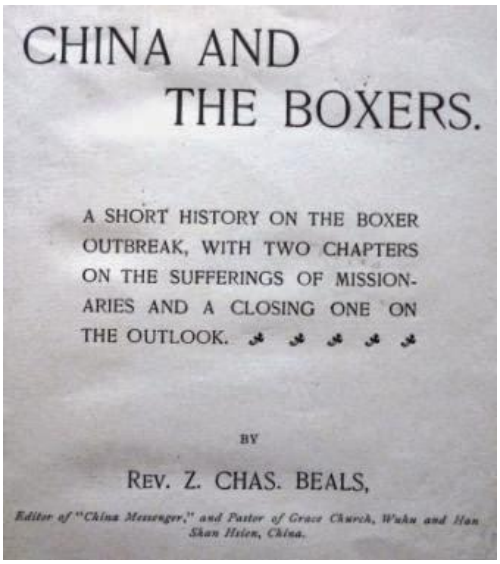
Paul and Veronica King were both present in China during the Boxer Uprising. Paul King was appointed Commissioner of Customs at Canton in April 1900. The Boxer troubles had slowly been fermenting over the previous couple of years, and the touch-paper was lit some two months later, culminating in an all-out assault on the foreign communities in China. The conflagration was brought about because of a complex number of reasons, as Beals rather bluntly recounts in his book:

"The Boxer movement has unquestionably had as its chief reason the hatred and contempt of the foreigner. As such it received the smiles of the dominant party in Peking; on such it based its hopes of success. I think we may be safe in giving besides the first or great central cause five others which helped to bring to an issue the present state of things in China. We will give them in order, as follows:

First, or great central cause, contempt and hatred of foreigners. The reason for this hatred was brought about, first, by abuse from foreigners themselves. Second, political 'land grabbing.' Third, oppression and lawsuits by the natives who entered the church (especially Roman Catholic) for that purpose. Fourth, Boxer superstition. Fifth, inability of our Consuls and Ministers to deal with Chinese officials as they should have been dealt with."

A curious mix of Western 'mea culpa'

allied with an unapologetic reassertion of the colonialist's *raison d'être*.


CHINA AND
THE BOXERS.

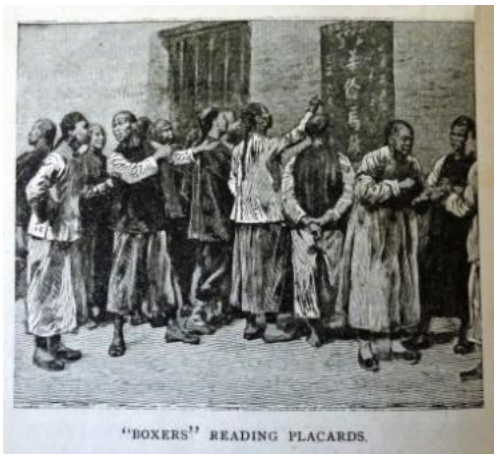
A SHORT HISTORY ON THE BOXER OUTBREAK, WITH TWO CHAPTERS ON THE SUFFERINGS OF MISSIONARIES AND A CLOSING ONE ON THE OUTLOOK.

BY

REV. Z. CHAS. BEALS,

Editor of "China Messenger," and Pastor of Grace Church, Wuhu and Han Shan Hsien, China.

The Reverend Z. Chas. Beals, an American Pastor of Grace Church, Wuhu and Han Shan Hsien (also Editor of the '*China Messenger*'), was writing immediately after the event – his book was published in 1901 (which also suggests it may have been in the King's possession some forty-odd years or so before it was donated to SOAS Library). The Boxer movement – a loose association (or succession) of secret societies practicing ritualised martial arts, combined with beliefs in their own magical abilities which supposedly fortified them and made them invulnerable to bullets, arrows, and swords, etc. – drew on the largely uneducated and restive peasant class, possibly further stirred by the hardships brought on from an extended period of drought. Discontent at what they perceived to be the ineffective way in which the Qing Dynasty was handling the increasingly aggressive infringement of China's sovereignty by the various Western Powers, they rallied under one banner with the motto: "Restore the Qing, Destroy the Foreigner."

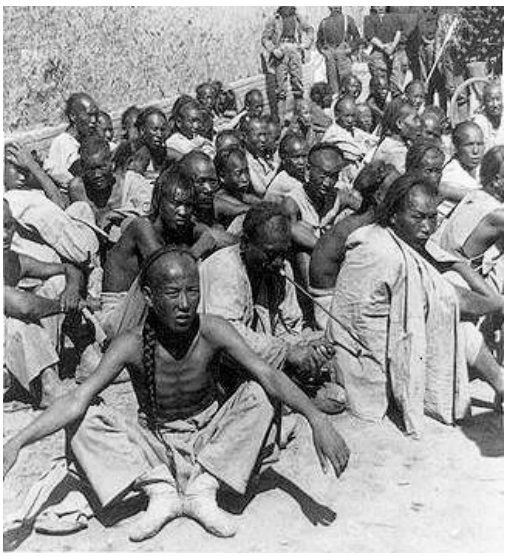

"BOXERS" READING PLACARDS.



Empress Dowager, Tz'u-hsi (Cixi)

Initially, their ire seemed to be focussed and directed at the Chinese converts of the Western missionaries, who, protected under the provisions of Western 'extraterritoriality', were

popularly perceived to be given preferential treatment over ordinary, orthodox Chinese subjects – particularly when it came to matters concerning the native Courts of Law, from which the converts were exempted, as well as their gaining other entitlements denied to their non-converted compatriots. The Qing authorities at first attempted to suppress the movement, arresting the local leaders and disbursing their groups, but in time, and with the restoration of the Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi (Cixi) as the highest authority in the Manchu Court, the Boxers were eventually 'co-opted' into what some contemporary Westerners referred to as the 'Boxer War,' in which the Boxers were joined by certain anti-foreign factions of the Chinese Imperial Army, and together they waged all-out attacks on the foreign communities in Chinese cities and towns across north-eastern China throughout the scorchingly hot summer of 1900. Eventually, an international military force – made up of troops from Britain, America, Russia, Austria-Hungary, France, Italy, and Japan – was sent to relieve the besieged foreigners, and a hefty indemnity was demanded from China, which only deepened the discontent and disadvantage the Chinese Empire faced under the existing system of 'extraterritoriality' – the system by which China was effectively colonised by stealth; a system which has since been described as one of 'informal empire.'



Boxer fighters captured near Tientsin (Tianjin), photographed by James Ricalton

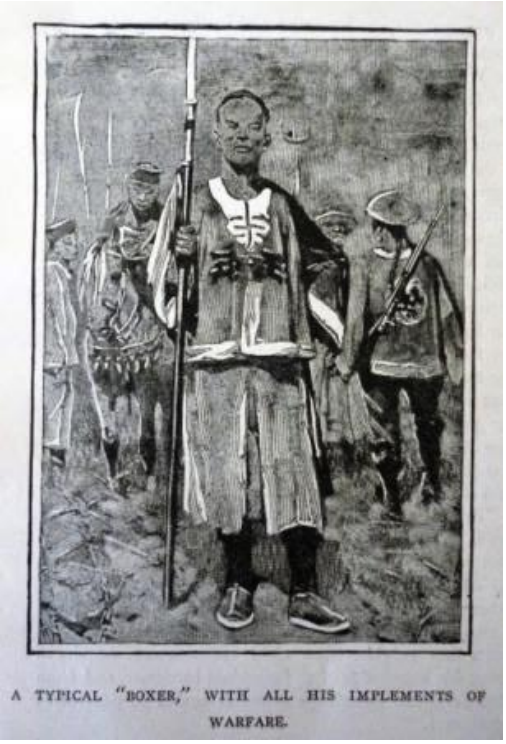


Li Hung-chang (Li Hong-zhang)

The period of the Boxer Uprising, however, brought Paul King to the notice of one of the most revered and respected statesmen in China's history – Li Hung-chang (Li Hong-zhang). When all means of communication with the Legations in Peking were lost in July 1900, as the Boxers and Imperial troops laid siege, the worst was feared for those trapped within. It was generally assumed that a massacre had taken place. An obituary for Sir Robert Hart, the chief of the Maritime Customs Service, even appeared in the newspapers in London.

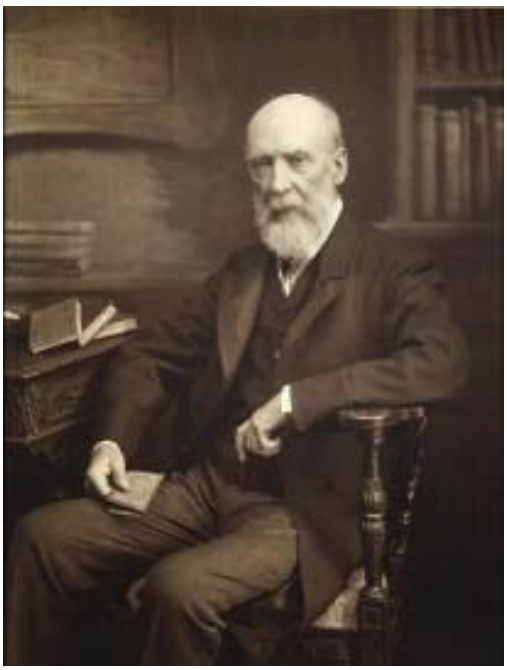
Writing about this time in his autobiography, Paul King records how on:

"July 3rd, at 10:30 am, I received the Chefoo Commissioner's telegrams confirming the miserable news of poor Von Kettler's murder, and stating that all the Peking foreign residents were in the British Legation, and in great straits. I took the telegrams at once to the Viceroy [Li Hung-chang]. *He was much upset, especially as he had evidently received some confirmation, and did not hold out great hopes of safety for the unfortunates in the Legation. I told him I had wired three times to inquire about the Inspector General* [Sir Robert Hart], *but Chefoo did not appear to have any news. Li threw up his hand, a gesture he often used if deeply moved, and said: 'Who can know what has become of him?' I naturally asked if I could be of any help, little thinking of what his answer would be. He put his hand on my shoulder and said: 'You as Canton Commissioner must superintend' (or take charge of – the expression used was 'Tsungli'* [综理 zòng lǐ = administer, direct control] *) 'all the Customs Offices in the Two Kwang until we hear again from the Inspector General.' He spoke kindly but solemnly. I accepted this mandate and told him I would do my best to keep things going until better days should dawn."*



A TYPICAL "BOXER," WITH ALL HIS IMPLEMENTS OF WARFARE.

It later turned out that the obituary was somewhat premature. Sir Robert Hart, the Inspector General of the Chinese Customs Service, did indeed survive the siege of Peking. And it seems he didn't appreciate Paul King's having stepped into the breach. Indeed, Paul King lists a fair few grumbles about "the I.G's" character in the 'pen portrait' he gives of Hart in his autobiography:



Robert Hart

"I remember at a ceremonious dinner at his [Sir Robert Hart's] *house the conversation was on investments. He looked over my way and said: 'And pray, how do you invest your money?' No doubt, I should have smiled and said something different, but I was smarting under deferred promotion and many transfers, and even a worm will turn when trodden upon, so I blurted out: 'In boots and shoes for my family, Sir Robert.' A roar of laughter followed, for the size of my small, large family was well known, but the great man was not amused. His mouth turned down ominously, and promotion came to me afterwards even slower than before."*

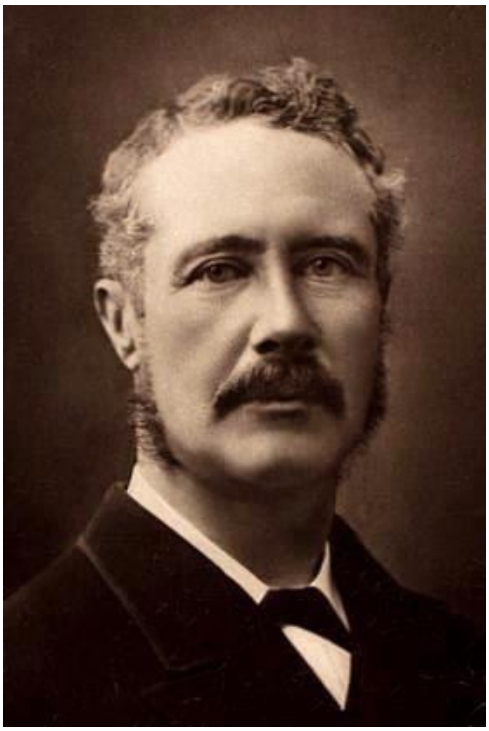
Li Hung-chang died in 1901, not long after he had represented the Imperial Chinese Government and overseen their part in the Boxer Peace Settlement. Yet, curiously enough, he makes a second – somewhat supernatural – appearance in Paul King's memoir in the year 1910. Paul and Veronica King were in London, on home leave at the time, attending one of W.T. Stead's "Julia" séances.



W. T. Stead

William Thomas Stead was one of the foremost journalists of his day. He is credited with revolutionising investigative journalism. A dedicated social reformer, he used his journalistic influence to campaign on issues of child welfare and to reform the criminal justice system. It was the kind of journalism which, it has been claimed, paved the way for today's shock and shame "tabloid" Press. Stead was also strongly drawn to spiritualism (some would say, rather too credulously). He founded a quarterly magazine on spiritualism and supported various kinds of psychical studies, including telepathy, séances, and automatic writing. Paul

King doesn't give any background as to how he came to know Stead, but he does describe attending some of Stead's séance sessions, and gives the following rather remarkable account of one such occasion:



Charles George Gordon

*"I had brought a high Chinese official with me, referred to in the dialogue as His Excellency. I must compress what followed, but the original detailed notes of the various conversations are in my possession.**

The Psychic said: 'I see a tall, thin figure, dressed in a Chinese costume. There is an air of dignity about him. I don't know who he is. The figure comes and stands between Mr King and His Excellency.'

*The Psychic then said: 'I see General Gordon. He stands behind His Excellency and says he knew him many, many years ago.***

Question by Paul King to His Excellency: 'Did you know General Gordon?'

His Excellency: 'I met him in Hong Kong.'

The Psychic: 'General Gordon says, 'It was at an official reception of some sort. I forget the exact details.'

His Excellency: 'I remember he spoke to me at an official reception.'

General Gordon: 'I'm trying to throw my memory back. Yes, I remember. Is there anything he would like to ask me?'

His Excellency: 'Have you seen Li Hung-chang, our old friend, on the other side?'

General Gordon: 'Yes, often, often, often. He will be with us presently.'

Gordon then said that Li had a difficulty in communicating with us, although he was actually present with him. The Psychic continued to speak and was apparently now in touch with Li.

Li said to His Excellency: 'Go to Peking in July. Prepare, do not force things.'

Later on the Psychic said: 'Li Hung-chang is speaking to Mr Paul King. 'You know I thoroughly trust and rely upon you. Fail me not when I desire to use you for the good of my race. You are English. Fail me not.'



Yikuang, Prince Ch'ing

His Excellency asked Li: 'Do you think Prince Ch'ing will be in power long?'

Answer: 'No, he will not.'

His Excellency: 'Who will succeed him?'

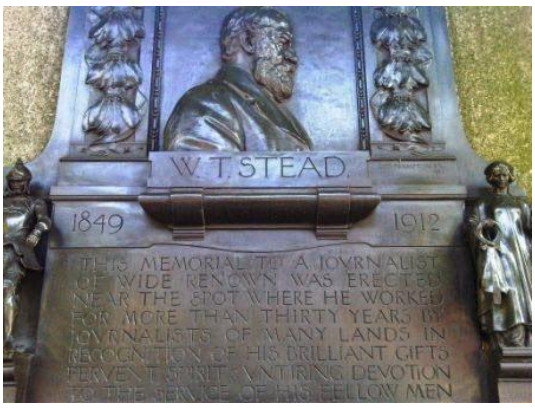
Answer: 'That for the moment I cannot tell you. I hope in the confusion that will result at that time we shall have the opportunity of pressing forward those schemes we desire should be accomplished.'

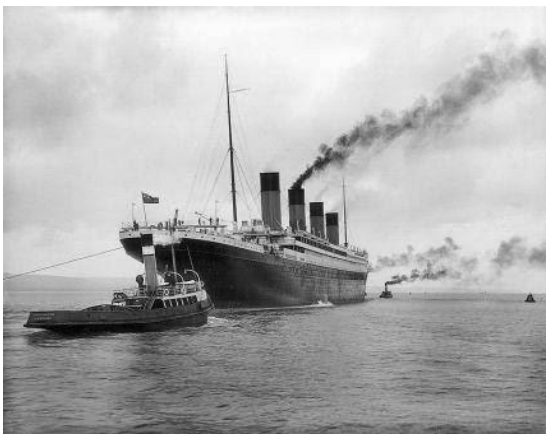
His Excellency said: 'I am returning to China. I wish you well, Li Hung-chang. I hope you will help us.'

Li: 'I will. I still live for my country.'

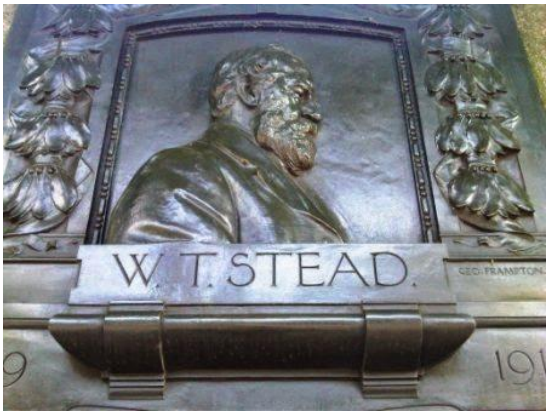
Reading this, one can't help wondering whether or not "Li Hung-chang" spoke through the Spirit Medium in English or Chinese (this detail isn't given) – but King goes on to relate how Stead would write to him whenever Li appeared to Stead at subsequent séances held privately by him and his daughter, Estelle. All of his utterances appear to relate to the apparent premonition of the revolution of 1911-1912 hinted at in the quote given above. King gives no real comment or reflection on what he made of these 'appearances', or of the messages and the advice they seem to impart, but he does offer this memorial comment upon the great journalist, Stead, who passed away not so very long afterwards:

"It was in Stead's mind to visit China and take a hand in reform matters there, and he had been urged to do so by influential men in the new régime. He might have been an evangel of great good; but Fate ruled otherwise, and we may borrow for him the words Tennyson wrote for another. He "passes on his happier voyage now," leaving a wonderful memory behind in the hearts of those who were privileged to know him – a memory of a sympathy that never failed any human creature, and a courage that would face the last extreme in this or any other life!"





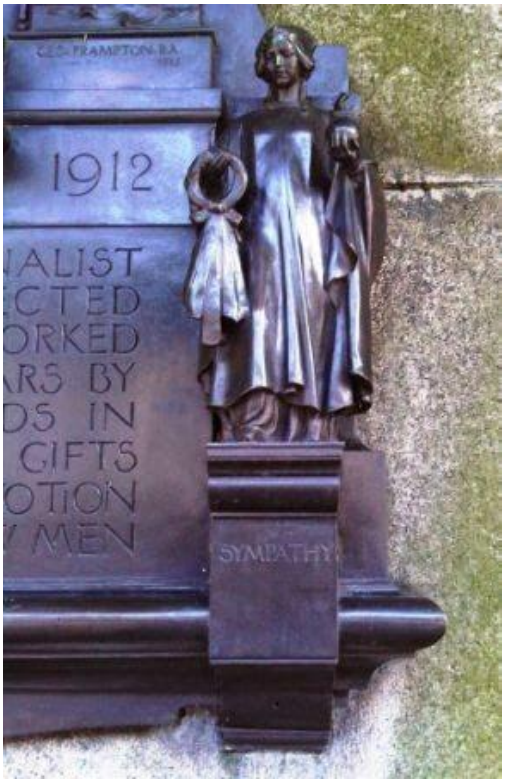
Not so long ago, rather like the chance discovery of Paul and Veronica King's copy of Beals' book in SOAS Library, I happened to come across this bronze memorial plaque to W.T. Stead on the Victoria Embankment, beside the River Thames in London (close to Temple Tube Station). It was erected by his fellow journalists *"in recognition of his brilliant gifts, fervent spirit, & untiring devotion to the service of his fellow men."* There is no word, nor hint – save perhaps for a small sailing boat set atop the globe in the figure of "Sympathy's" hand – as to how Stead departed this life. He was a passenger on board the *RMS Titanic* which sank in the freezing water of the mid-Atlantic on April 15th 1912, after colliding with an iceberg on its maiden voyage. An event which some believe Stead may have unconsciously predicted in one of his earlier writings (in 1886). He was last seen clinging to a raft with John Jacob Astor IV. His body was never recovered. A copy of the London memorial also stands, with a different inscription, in New York's Central Park.











* *Footnote:* Unfortunately, I have no idea what became of Paul King's personal papers, he does mention keeping a diary in his memoir – I expect they'd make for fascinating and insightful reading (NB – see postscript to following article).

** *Footnote:* Paul King's uncle (on his mother's side) "Jack", Colonel John Alexander Man Stuart (1841-1908), served in China under General Gordon in the 'Ever Victorious Army' which helped to put an end to the Taiping Rebellion in 1864. Jack Man Stuart was also himself in the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, acting as Private Secretary to both Horatio Nelson Lay and Sir Robert Hart. He later went on to become Commandant of Local Forces in Trinidad and Tobago, possibly also serving for a time as Acting Governor there.

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Rev. Z. Chas. Beals & Rev. E.P. Woodward, *The Yellow Dragon & The Yellow Peril* (Portland, Maine: Safeguard Publishing Co., 1902)

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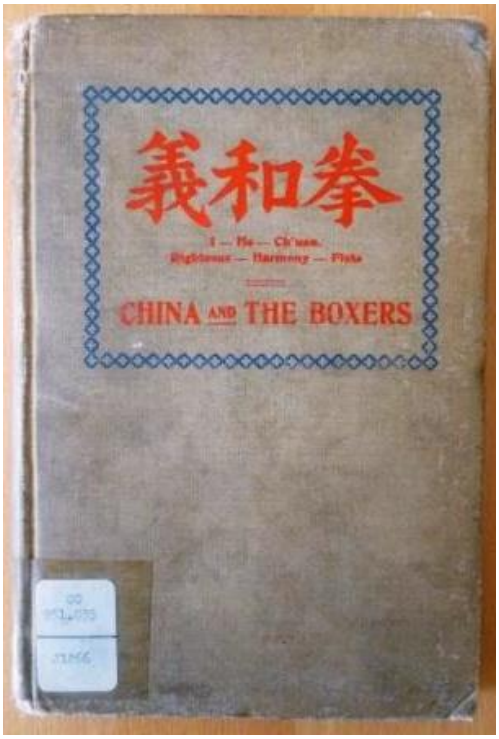
Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997)

Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987)

Peter Fleming, *The Siege at Peking* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001 [1959])

Paul King, *In The Chinese Customs Service: A Personal Record of Forty-Seven Years* (London: Heath Cranton, 1930)

Hans van de Ven, 'Robert Hart and Gustav Detring during the Boxer Rebellion' in *Modern Asian Studies,* Vol. 40, No. 3 (July, 2006), pp. 631-662



My essay on the Boxer Siege in Peking was subsequently published:

Tim Chamberlain, 'The View from the Legation: British Diplomatic Diaries during the Boxer Siege of 1900', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (2017), pp. 5-28



Paul King, in fencing mode – as drawn by Shanghai cartoonist, H.W.G. Hayter

Cold Case - Kowloon-Canton Railway



Most historians, like all good noir-ish detectives or private eyes, have cold-case files piled up in a desk drawer somewhere. As I've said before, these are the research projects that never got properly started, or had to be abandoned for lack of evidence. Promising leads that tailed off or simply led to dead ends. They get shelved rather than binned in the hope that something will eventually turn up which will set the wheels in motion again. Flipping a blue flashing light on the roof. Spurring us into action as some new source material provides us with a fresh scent to set the tracker dogs onto. Something which might enable us to pursue our enquiries to a successful conclusion.

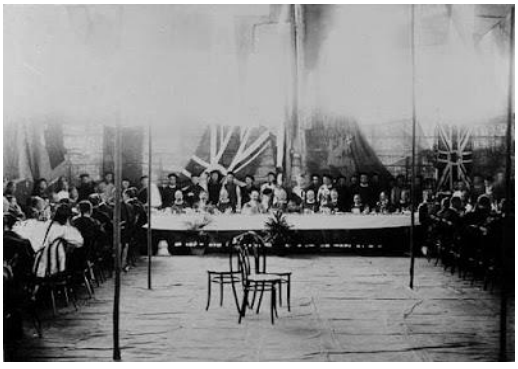


Kowloon Railway Terminal

I have one such cold case regarding the opening of the Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) in 1910. And, as with all good noir-ish detective stories, it begins with a location, a suspect, a probable motive, and a part confession. All the signs are there, but I still just need that one crucial bit of evidence to clinch it and make my case watertight. It all began with a passage in Paul Henry King's memoir, *In the Chinese Customs Service: A Personal Record of Forty-Seven Years:*

"The last Viceregal function I assisted at was on the 7th April, 1909, on the occasion of laying the foundation-stone of the Terminal Station of the Canton-Kowloon Railway at Tai-sha-tan, just outside the East Gate of Canton City. The Governor of Hong-Kong and the Colonial Secretary came up for the ceremony, which was very well staged and came off without a hitch as far as the Chinese were concerned. It struck some of us that the Hong-Kong Governor's speech seemed to insist rather too much (for good taste) on the benefit to China of railway connection with Hong- Kong. His whole attitude reminded me of Sir Robert Hart's anecdote about Wen Hsiang's remark — "That the British invariably gave good advice to China in an unpalatable form" — and almost produced the impression that he was taking advantage of the occasion to let the Viceroy know what he thought of the Canton Government. However, His Excellency Chang seemed not a penny the worse and beamed on the just and unjust alike, as only a man with a swivel eye can. I was close by their two Excellencies most of the time and enjoyed the situation not a little."

This passage came to mind when I was working in Hong Kong over ten years ago. I'd often walked past the old clock tower down by the Star Ferry terminus. It's all that's left of the original Kowloon terminal of the KCR line (which still operates today). But it was only when I had a spare day free, and was wondering what to do, that I decided to visit the Railway Museum at the old Tai Po Market Station. This station was taken out of service when the KCR was electrified in the early 1980s. It was decided to preserve the station building, which was built in 1913, due to its unique architectural style which is reminiscent of typical south China temple buildings. Now run by the Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), the museum is free to visit and consists of the main station building with its original ticket hall, plus a number of railway carriages and a couple of locomotives, all preserved from different eras. It was in one of the station side rooms, in which there are display panels explaining the history behind the foundation and construction of the KCR, where I came across the following photograph:



Banquet to celebrate laying the foundation stone of the Canton Terminal, 1909

This image shows Chinese and British officials at a banquet in 1909, celebrating the laying of the foundation stone for the Chinese Section of the line at the Canton Terminus (Tai Sha Tan). Given Paul Henry King's account of this event in his memoir it seems almost certain that he is present somewhere in this image (or in the close vicinity of it), but where exactly is another question altogether! – I've no idea if he'd be seated at the top table, or if, perhaps, he's one of the chaps seated at the two tables flanking the sides, possibly with his back to the camera? All the versions of this photo which I've since found are far too grainy or faded to see sufficient detail. Nevertheless, it's fascinating to think he's there and that this is a photograph he'd recognise intimately. But what really caught my eye that day were the following two photographs which the caption indicates were taken about a year or so later:





Lo Wu, 1st Ocober 1910

The first shows the Acting Governor of Hong Kong, Sir Henry May, and his wife "inspecting the tracks", and the second is a more general view of the guests



Lo Wu, 1st October 1910

attending the opening of Lo Wu station on 1st October 1910, where the Chinese and British sections of the KCR met. You've probably noticed that the same unnamed yet clearly eminent Gent appears front and centre of both images. In the second photo, he appears to be standing with a woman whom we might suppose to be his wife, and to his left are three Chinese officials, who – to my mind's eye – look like they might possibly be local Customs officials. This could also make sense if the unidentified Gent is Paul Henry King, then Commissioner of the Chinese Customs Service at Canton. In terms of dress and demeanour, the couple do look a lot like the photos I've seen of Paul Henry King and his wife, Veronica (also known as Madge, but whose real name was Alice Margaret). His moustache and his distinctive collar, neck tie and dress coat do seem similar to one of the fellows seated at the top table of the 1909 Canton photo – if you squint *really, really* hard! … Initially, I couldn't help feeling really excited – but I knew I'd have to check my facts before I properly congratulated myself on the 'sure certainty' of my remarkable find. It's important never to let imagination impinge too far upon instinct and so over-determine an inclination towards an idea, no matter how probable or likely it might outwardly seem … Nothing is ever certain until it is totally clarified beyond any doubt and backed up by genuine, demonstrable proof.

So firstly, I went back to Paul King's memoir. Naturally, I didn't have a copy of the book with me at the time of my visit to Hong Kong. I could only very vaguely remember the passage in its broadest outline. And so, later on, re-reading it closely, I encountered a problem. The passage quoted above was preceded by the following sentence: "*But my sands at Canton were now running out, as I had been granted two years' leave of absence as soon as my successor could take over the port."* And the concluding lines of the passage (and of that chapter) only reinforced the fact: "*I handed over charge of the Canton Customs to my old friend and colleague, J.F. Oisen* [sic] *(now Danish Minister in Peking), on the 8th May, 1909, and left for Hong-Kong on the 11th May. I had paid a farewell visit to the Viceroy on the 10th, and he did me the great honour of coming in person to see me off. All our friends—native and foreign—did the same, and overwhelmed us with kindness and regrets."*



Lo Wu, 1st October 1910

The pages of the subsequent chapter only bore this point out further. The Kings

were "back home" in the UK when the event at Lo Wu had taken place. They didn't return to China until March 1911. But I couldn't help staring at the figure in the two photos. The more I looked the more I *wanted* to doubt the published memoir with its black and white dates regulating the text to a clear timetable of events. I suspect Paul King may well have kept a diary which he'd most likely referred to religiously whilst writing his memoir, like a metronome keeping the chapters neatly and orderly to time. But I kept coming back to those images of Lo Wu. The chap in the photos looked *so similar* to Paul King to my mind's eye that it *niggled* me – I wanted to be sure. If this fellow wasn't Paul King, *who was he?*



The inaugural train at Lo Wu, 1st October 1910

The only other way I could think of to be completely certain was to go back to the original source and see if anyone I knew in the LCSD might have access to the original photograph, and to ask them what records there might be connected to it which might name the individuals it pictures. A friend of mine who works at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum very kindly said she'd look into it for me and see what she could find. A few weeks later I received an email from her. She'd spoken to a couple of colleagues, but all they could find amounted to much the same information as that which was used in the captions given on the wall at the Railway Museum. There were no names known other than that of the Acting Governor and his wife. Hence all my lines of enquiry and all my leads in this process of investigation didn't just reach the end of the line, but rather firmly hit the buffers and could go no further. Whoever this couple is remains a mystery to me. – Unless something else turns up, in due course, which manages to get me back on the tracks and under full steam again. Until then, all I can do is stare at these black and white figures in these grainy old photographs and wonder who these people are.



Lo Wu, 1st October 1910

Meanwhile, despite the clear evidence of Paul King's own memoir, there's still a part of me that doubts the seemingly incontrovertible evidence of his own writing. Hence, whenever I look at these photographs, I still can't help vacillating between my *ardent wish* for it to be the Kings (simply based on the similarities of their looks, their dress and their demeanour – but then, how many eminent Edwardians all look exactly like this? – Answer: *Lots of them!*), and my equally *strong scepticism*, which wonders if either the photos or the

memoir might perhaps have been incorrectly dated? – The fact-checking historian in me still obsessively requires that I see the names (theirs, or someone else's) pencilled on the back of the photograph, or typed up on a guest list published in some forgotten contemporary local newspaper, or someone else's memoir which says they were or weren't there in the same company as Paul and Veronica (or, more likely, their doppelgangers) at this event on that particular day in October 1910 …



Canton Railway Terminal, 1st October 1910

But then, these are exactly the kind of sources which might very well suddenly appear as if out of nowhere; stumbled upon in some obscure publication, hidden in some library somewhere; chanced upon by accident whilst looking out for something else entirely. The key documents that will answer the riddle as to who this man really is and why he was there. Was he the man who replaced Paul King in his post at Canton? – Quite possibly. If I look at all the facts, my prime suspects are much more likely to be 'J.F. Oisen' [James Frederik Oiesen, AKA Janus Frederik Øjudsen (1857-1928)], or the unnamed Colonial Secretary. – But the niggle is that need to know. And that's the joy and the frustration of doing this kind of research. It goes in fits-and-starts sometimes. Answering one question may well simply end up posing another in its place. Hence, tugging at threads which get knotted for a time, but then someday suddenly and unexpectedly start to unravel again. Like all good detective yarns, *cold* cases are never truly *closed* cases, just stories which haven't been concluded – *yet*. Best to "keep 'em peeled", eh! – You never know what might turn up …








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Paul Henry King, with Chinese Customs Staff, 1906 *(photo courtesy of Jamie Erskine)*

Postscript: **(2020, updated 2023)** – Well, at long last it seems like the 'cold case' which I've described above might finally be closed … Late last year, I was made aware that Paul Henry King's diaries were due to be sold at an auction at Sotheby's in London, which was held on 12th November 2019 (Sale L19405 – Lot 277); and so I was given a chance to see the contents pages fronting each diary, including the volume covering 1910 – and yes, it seems clear that, as indicated in his published memoir, Paul King was not in China at the time of the ceremony at Lo Wu. Hence, it very likely is not him, nor his wife, in the photos of that event. Who these individuals are remains an open question. Maybe it is J.F. Oiesen, who took over from King as Canton Customs Commissioner (whose wife, Akwai Yang (1866-1942), was Chinese), or perhaps – most likely – it is someone else entirely? … As is often the way when conducting historical research, answering one question, more often than not, tends to beget yet another question – and so it goes, question after question after question …



The modern Kowloon-Canton Train passing through Sha Tin Station, 2008

Red Fort at Tamsui



My first visit to Taiwan was unexpected and entirely unplanned. I'd been working in Beijing and then Shanghai for over a month in the summer of 2006, when I was suddenly asked to fly onwards to Taipei to attend a meeting at the National Palace Museum. I had been due to travel onwards to Tokyo on leave once I'd finished in Shanghai, but thankfully my leave was delayed rather than cancelled in order to accommodate this little detour. The changes to my travel arrangements all happened so quickly that it was only whilst I was in transit (i.e. – actually sitting on the plane flying to Taipei, via Macau, and now about to land), when it first occurred to me that I had no idea whether or not I needed a visa to enter Taiwan! – Looking back, I don't suppose they would have let me board the plane had I needed one; but, nevertheless, I still felt a little uneasy as I wandered through the airport terminal towards the immigration counters not knowing what to expect – but then I saw a big sign directing (and more importantly listing) the visa exempt countries (which included the UK) to a particular queue. I breathed a huge sigh of relief. It felt like a minor diplomatic *faux pas* had been narrowly averted.











It was around this time too that I was just getting started on my research into the colonial era in China and Tibet, and the history of the British Consular Service in China in particular – hence I was rather intrigued to see the flag of the old Republic still flying proudly over the airport in Taipei. Indeed, the landing card I had to fill out was headed 'The Republic of China (ROC).' I'd never really thought about this fact before. I knew this island was where the KMT (Kuomintang) had retreated to in 1949 when they were ousted following the civil war with the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), but growing up in the UK it had always been referred to as 'Taiwan', and so that's how I had always thought of it up until that moment. Realising I still had much to learn, this initial trip only served to deepen my curiosity. I'm sure it was in a large part due to this quirk of fate, working on so many museum exhibitions in Asia at this time, that I was drawn deeper and deeper into the topic which would eventually turn into the research for my current PhD studies. Indeed, this was only the first of many such trips to Taiwan, working on a number of different exhibition projects with colleagues who have since become close friends at the National Palace Museum. And similarly, several more times working in Shanghai with good friends at the Shanghai Museum as well. In both cities, I spent my free time exploring the old colonial remnants. Hunting out old buildings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, built variously by the banks, trading companies, and government officials of America, Japan, and several different European countries, including Britain. The colonial building which interested me most in Taipei was the Red Fort at Tamsui (or Danshui, meaning 'fresh water' 淡水).







Tamsui is actually situated some ten miles or so downriver from the centre of Taipei. It is very easy to reach on the city's Metro system, with Tamsui located at the end of the Tamsui-Xinyi (or Red) line. The last couple of miles of the train ride into Tamsui has some spectacular views of the river, which has stretches of mangrove trees growing along the water's edge. Taiwan is the most northerly latitude at which you will find mangroves. It makes for a wonderful sight with the towering peak of Guanyin Mountain rising up from the opposite shore. There's quite a lot of wildlife to see here too. My friends and I were all mesmerised to see an army of colourful crabs, each with one enormous claw hand, aggressively picking rather comical-looking fights with one another in the mud at low tide. Being so close to Taipei, Tamsui is a popular spot for a day-out at weekends. It has the feel of a seaside holiday town with souvenir shops, restaurants and cafes lining the riverside promenade, with people strolling along eating ice cream and candyfloss in the sunshine. Regular boat trips head across the river, and then carry on down to the point where the river meets the open sea before turning back. You can hop on and off the boats in order to explore along the way. It was on such a boat trip that I first caught a glimpse of the Red Fort – rather fittingly, as this is how most old colonial types would have first seen it when arriving by steamer, as the Tamsui River was the main northern trading port on Taiwan, or Formosa, as the island was more commonly known at the time (the principal southern port being at Takow, or present day Kiaohsiung).

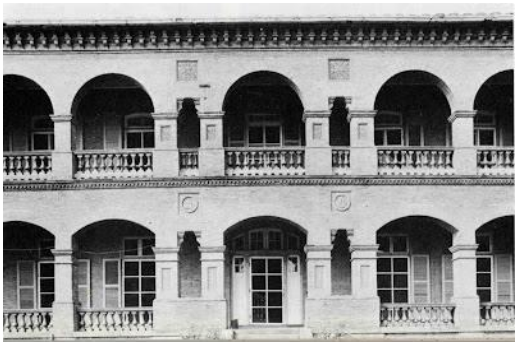


Red Fort, Tamsui, 1925

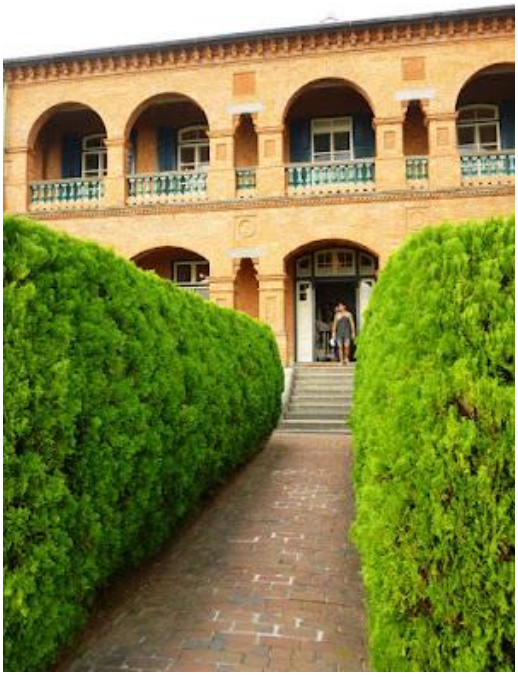




The Red Fort has a long history dating back to 1628, when a wooden fort was built here by the Spanish, who originally named it Fort San Domingo. The fort was later destroyed by the Spanish shortly before they quit it in 1642, when conceding defeat in a short battle with the Dutch who felt that the Spanish were unjustly impinging upon their established trade interests in the region. The Dutch rebuilt the fort, but this time it was much stronger and more substantial having been built using brick and stone. The Dutch renamed it Fort Antonio, after the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, Anthony Van Diemen. Essentially, excepting a few architectural modifications carried out over the intervening years, it is still this building which stands today. The government of the Qing Dynasty took over control of the fort from 1683 to 1867. During this period the Chinese added a stone wall to enclose the entire compound with four gateways (only one of which still survives). The fort became the diplomatic base of the British at the close of the second Opium War in 1868. The British took on a lease of the site in perpetuity, paying the Qing government "10 silver coins" a year to use the site as a Consulate (I'm not sure if that's ten *taels* or ten silver dollars Mex., but I suspect the latter). And it was the British who first painted it red, however, it had been known as the red fort before this because the locals had referred to the Dutch as "red-haired people" – although previously the fort had always been painted white. Wandering around the place today it can feel eerily evocative, especially if you find yourself alone in some of the long-forgotten rooms. The fort and consular residence still have that faded air and atmosphere of exile characteristic of a good setting for a short story by Joseph Conrad. It's easy to imagine stumbling upon a Kaspar Almayer, an Axel Heyst, or a Lord Jim-type lounging in the humid torpor of one of the back rooms, with a ceiling fan turning languidly overhead as our despondent colonial antihero sits dosing in an armchair, his head resting on a starched anti-macassar, and the half-smoked stub of a forgotten cheroot lazily smouldering between his dangling fingers …



Consul's Residence, Tamsui, 1891







Consul's Residence, Tamsui, 1911



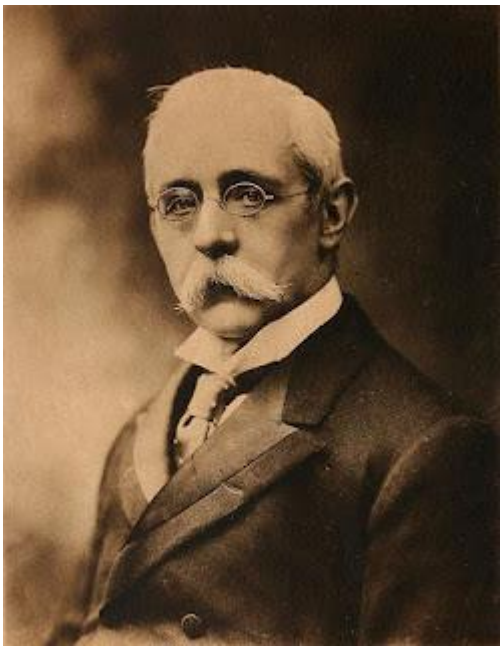
In 1891 the British upgraded the Consul's residence, adding a second storey. Built of red brick it is a classic example of Victorian-era colonial architecture. Wide verandas with ornate green ceramic balustrades surround each floor, helping to keep the interior shaded and cool during the intense heat and humidity of the summertime. It looks very similar to the old consular residence, built around the same time, which still stands in the grounds of the British Embassy in Seoul. I had a good view of this old building from my hotel room during one of my stays in Seoul whilst working on an exhibition at the National Museum of Korea in 2010 (I was sure I'd taken a photograph of this building, but if I did – frustratingly – I now can't find it!). We were lucky enough on that trip to get to know the Ambassador and were even invited to drinks at the Embassy, but delays caused by the eruption of the Icelandic volcano, Eyjafjallajökull, meant we had to work late in order to get the exhibition open on time, and so, sadly, we weren't able to take up his very kind offer. I was deeply disappointed at the

time (and still am actually) as I was dying to get a closer look at this old consulate building. – I was also dying to know if the Ambassador *really would* "spoil us with Ferrero Rocher chocolates" too!





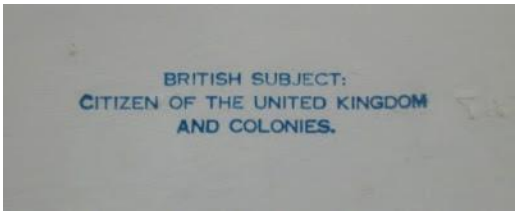




Herbert Allen Giles

The red fort and consular residence at Tamsui were staffed by a number of different consuls through the years, some more notable than others. The most notable for my family was Sir Alwyne Ogden, who was here for a time in the mid-twentieth century. In 1922 he was the acting-consul at Chengdu in Sichuan who officiated at the marriage ceremony of Louis King and Rinchen Lhamo, apparently amidst exploding shells – rather like the dinner scene from *Carry On Up the Khyber*, one imagines! – The most notable resident at Tamsui though was undoubtedly Herbert Allen Giles. He was Consul at Tamsui from 1885 to 1891. Giles went on to become the most famous sinologist of his time. He was later Professor of Chinese at Cambridge University for 35 years. His greatest work was perhaps his modification of the romanisation system of Chinese, originally devised by Thomas Wade, which remained the standard form until the official introduction of Pinyin in 1958 by the government of the People's Republic (mainland China). Use of the

Wade-Giles system persists in the instance of certain well-known personal and place names, particularly in Taiwan. One of Giles' sons, Lionel, also a sinologist, was Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum from 1936 to 1940. Another son, Lancelot, like his father before him entered the Consular Service in China. Soon after joining the Service, Lancelot was present at the siege of the Legations in Peking (Beijing) during the Boxer Uprising in the summer of 1900. He wrote a diary of the siege in the form of letters to his father, which I wrote about for the Royal Asiatic Society in Shanghai's *China Journal*.* The National University of Australia holds a fantastic archive of photographs of early twentieth century China from Lancelot's family.









The old fort and consular residence were eventually returned to the authorities in Taiwan by the British Government in 1980. It has been listed for preservation as a site of important cultural interest, and following the completion of restoration works in 2005, it has been open to the public as a museum. I've visited it several times since my first glimpse of it from a boat zipping up the Tamsui River in early 2007. As a British person it's quite interesting (and rather amusing) to see the urban archaeology of what odds and ends HM Government left behind which have been exhumed and dusted off for display – I was particularly tickled by the "official chops", or rubber stamps "supplied for the Government Service" by HMSO, which the museum now have neatly arrayed in showcases. Even today official stamps very similar to

these ones are still in daily use where I work at the British Museum! … It's interesting too that even the Monarch herself (in the form of a framed portrait) got left behind in this seemingly long forgotten old colonial outpost … *God Save the Queen*, eh! – I'm glad though when lovely old buildings, such as this one, have been saved and preserved for the future. So often these days the fate of such historic buildings is that they are knocked down, or gutted and converted into a swanky bar or restaurant. I wonder what old Herbert Allen Giles would make of the place now?





*Tim Chamberlain, 'The View from the Legation: British Diplomatic Diaries during the Boxer Siege of 1900', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (2017), pp. 5-28

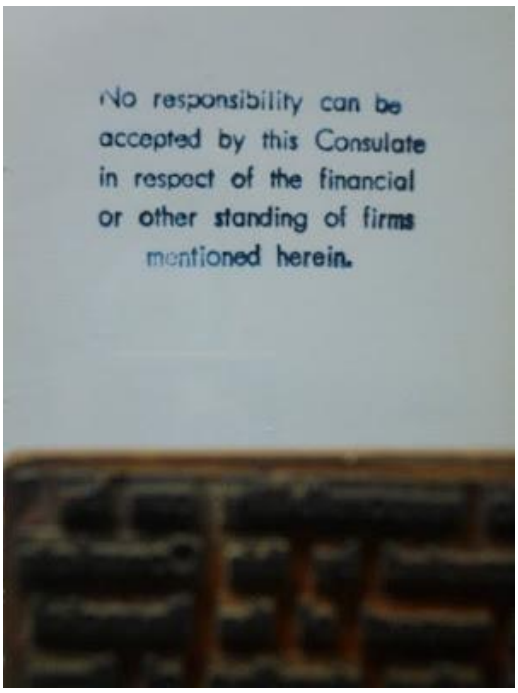


Further Reading:

P. D. Coates, *The China Consuls: British Consular Officers, 1843-1943* (Oxford University Press, 1988)

D. C. M. Platt, *The Cinderella Service: British Consuls since 1825* (Longman, 1971)




No responsibility can be
accepted by this Consulate
in respect of the financial
or other standing of firms
mentioned herein.



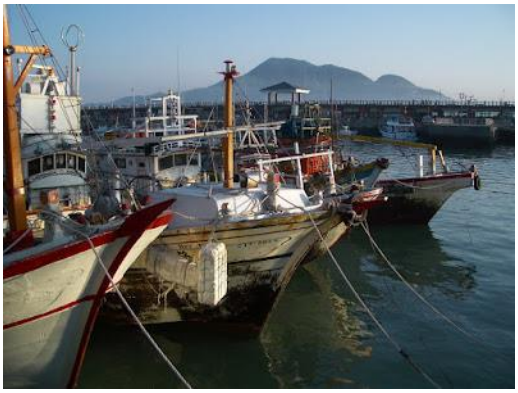
















Boxer Rebels & British Diplomats - Peking 1900



Boxers Captured at Tientsin, 1900, photo by James Ricalton

Serendipitous family connections to the past are not normally the kind of things which most historians expect to encounter in the course of their research – unless, of course, you happen to be William Dalrymple and have a host of illustrious ancestors! … But the past is essentially a web of connections and networks which link the lives of individuals to the great events of their day, connecting us and them by the many threads which make up our shared histories. Archival research is the thing which most often makes history directly tangible, but (as I've explored in previous posts on this blog) it's the occasional tangents which one stumbles across in the archive that can spin out into multiple webs which end up netting us the most unexpected stories. If these connected stories link directly to our own lives through family ties it adds an immediacy that certainly makes the past seem much less distant and remote.

Recently I had my second peer reviewed article published in an academic journal. The article is an examination of three British diplomatic diaries which were written during the eight-week siege of the foreign legations in Peking in the summer of 1900. One of the diaries was written by the most senior British diplomat there, Sir Claude MacDonald, and the others were written by two of the most junior members of his staff, the student interpreters, William Meyrick Hewlett and Lancelot Giles – both of whom would later go on to long and successful careers in the China Consular Service. The article focuses upon the marked contrast in cultural perceptions which these three men, as agents of British colonialism, held with regard to their Chinese and Japanese contemporaries. Rudyard Kipling famously stated that: *"East is east, and west is west, and never the twain shall meet."* But as the siege of the legations demonstrates – notably through the Western eyes which inform these personal diaries – places such as Peking, where the East and the West met, were pivotal because it was here that socio-political forces collided – bringing two opposites together (Britain and Japan), while simultaneously they pushed two others (Britain and China) apart.

The Boxer Uprising was the last major internal political upheaval within the old Chinese Empire, occurring shortly before the demise of the Qing Dynasty with the Xinhai Revolution of 1911. In its last few decades, the ailing Qing Court was beset with political difficulties both from within and without. Politically weakened by the Opium Wars of the mid-late nineteenth century, the combined

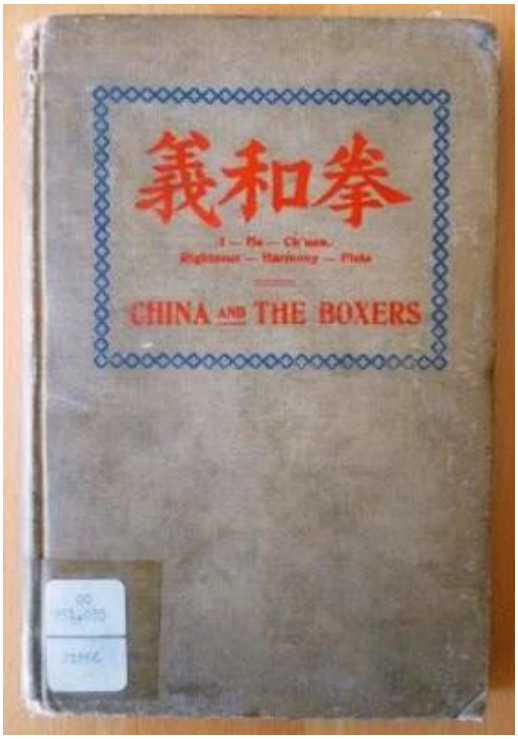
pressure exerted from the European, American, and Japanese Imperialist nations had forced China into a diplomatically awkward corner. Many people at the time thought China was poised on the very cusp of dissolution. It was merely a matter of waiting. Eventually, China would be carved up and colonised by the Imperialist nations who had been gathering in steadily increasing numbers, circling overhead like waiting vultures, simply bidding their time until the ruling Qing finally expired from exhaustion. As such, originally fomented out of extreme social discontent, welling up from within, the Boxer Uprising began as an anti-Qing rebellion which was cleverly (but only very narrowly) subverted into a violent campaign which united Boxer rebels and the Qing military against the foreign communities who were then residing under 'extra-territorial' privileges within China's sovereign borders. The eight-week assault upon the foreign legations in Peking during the searing hot summer of 1900, subsequently became the stuff of jingoistic legend. John K. Fairbank statistically sums up the siege as confining: *"about 475 foreign civilians, 450 troops of eight nations, and some 3,000 Chinese Christians, also about 150 racing ponies, who provided fresh meat. An international army rescued them, not without bickering, after rumours they had all been killed. The Empress Dowager with the Emperor safely in tow took off for Sian by cart. The allied forces thoroughly looted Peking. Kaiser Wilhelm II sent a field marshal, who terrorized the surrounding towns, where many thousands of Chinese Christians had been slaughtered; 250 foreigners, mainly missionaries, had been killed across North China. Vengeance was in the air." – John K. Fairbank, "The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800-1985" (Harper Perennial, 1987, p. 138).*



The Interior of the North Taku Fort near Tientsin (Tianjin) after the battle with the International Relief Force, 1900, photo by Felice Beato

My interest in this incident was kindled for two reasons. Firstly, as an historian, my interest in the British Consular Service in China had already acquainted me in passing with Hewlett and Giles. Hewlett was the consul who later indignantly refused to officiate the marriage of my brother-in-law's grandparents, which had partly been the focus of my first published peer-reviewed paper; and Giles was the son of the famous sinologist, Herbert Allen Giles. Secondly, perhaps because of my original academic grounding in anthropology, I'm very interested in cross-cultural readings of colonialism and cross-cultural relationships in particular – how the 'West perceived the rest', and (more difficult, in terms of the historical record) how non-Western peoples perceived the cultural and political incursions of the Western imperialists. Hence why I chose a module for my MA studies entitled: "Western Images of China and Japan" – the final essay I

wrote for this course was later adapted and transformed into my recently published article.



The siege of the Legations lasted from June 20th to August 14th 1900. My writing of this article spanned much the same period of time during the summer of 2014. There were a couple of curious happenings during my research for and writing of the original essay, and also my subsequent preparation of the article for publication, which are not readily visible from reading the paper itself. I've already mentioned the family connection to Meyrick Hewlett and my brother-in-law's grandparents, but there is also a more direct personal connection between me and the man himself, as the Hewlett family home was at Harrow-on-the-Hill. Indeed, for over forty years Hewlett's grandfather, Thomas Hewlett, was school surgeon at the famous Harrow School, where Hewlett had once been a pupil – hence this was how his private diary of the Boxer siege, which he'd originally written as an extended letter to his family, was later published by the school. Harrow-on-the-Hill is also where I was born and where I went to Sixth Form College (a different institution to the famous school, I hasten to add). This means I walked past Hewlett's family home [Peterborough House] on many occasions if not every day during my late teens.

A further, and all the more uncanny, family connection to the events examined in this essay oddly enough arose whilst I was browsing the bookstacks of SOAS library in search of books on the Boxers. I chanced upon a first-hand account of the Boxer Uprising by an American missionary. When I opened the book two inscriptions inside the cover showed that this particular copy had originally been gifted by the author to my brother-in-law's great grandparents, who in turn had themselves later gifted it to one of the colleges of my university. I've written in greater detail about this curiously idiosyncratic discovery, with its further tangential links to spiritualist séances and the sinking of the *RMS Titanic* (see the blog post above, titled: *Unexpected Encounters With The Past*). Personal connections to the past rarely get more serendipitous than this!

Meyrick Hewlett crops up once again as a person on the periphery of my current PhD research. He was H.M. Consul-General at Chengdu in 1922 when he refused to officiate the marriage of Louis King and Rinchen Lhamo – indignant at the fact that they were a mixed-race

couple, and, moreover, scandalised that they had already conceived one child out of wedlock and were imminently due the birth of another. Hewlett often appears in the Foreign Office records through which I have trawled – perhaps most unusually when he wrote to report the curious discovery of a rock formation which he and a group of companions found in a cave complex somewhere in West China which resembled a fossilised dragon (very similar in shape and form to those depicted in Chinese paintings or lavishly embroidered into the Emperor's silk robes). It seems the subterranean find had suitably stunned and impressed the party of Westerners he was with as much as their Chinese friends, and although he dismisses the formation as a natural geological anomaly rather than an actual fossil, he conjectures that such oddities might have provided the inspiration for these mythical, serpent-like creatures in the more superstitious mists of the distant past.

I recently bumped into Hewlett again in the 1932 issue of the Journal of the West China Border Research Society, an amateur scientific society run by the missionary scholars of the West China Union University in Chengdu, where the following photograph of a volume of the *Yung Lo Ta Tien* (Yongle Dadian), which he salvaged from the Hanlin Library during the siege in June 1900, was published. Hewlett donated the volume to the West China Union University Museum, which is now the Sichuan University Museum – it would be interesting to know if they still have it in their collection. Two letters relating to this volume of the Yongle Dadian, one by Herbert Allen Giles (Lancelot Giles's father) and one by Hewlett, quoting the relevant passages from his diary of the siege, were published alongside the photograph below (D.C. Graham, 'A Volume from the Hanlin Library in the West China Union University Museum', in *The Journal of the West China Border Research Society*, Vol. 5 (1932), pp. 150-152). Another photograph can be viewed in the Giles-Pickford Collection at the Australian National University.



Pictured on the right: A page from a volume of the Yongle Dadian rescued from the Hanlin Library in Peking which was burnt down during the Boxer Siege of 1900

These days, among historians, there is a lot of discussion about historiographical approaches, with some decrying the recent vogue for 'micro-histories', which tend to focus on individual persons or small scale, local events in the historical record, and others who favour a return to the larger canvases and more broad-brush approach of painting 'grand narratives' once again. But personally, I think there's more than enough room for both, and certainly if we look at the current trend for 'global histories' I feel that micro-histories are an excellent 'way in' to examine larger ideas by looking at how such ideas (e.g. – colonialism) affected and were acted out by individuals and how these compare

across vastly different domains. In many cases the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts, but certain systems, such as colonialism, could not exist if it weren't for the actions of those ordinary individuals making their way in the world of their own time. Essentially, it's people that make history interesting to me. It's *the people* that I feel I connect to most, and listening to their voices is what brings history to life. Listening to their stories helps me to try to comprehend what it might have been like had I shared their worldview, had I lived in their time, facing the challenges they faced, trying to understand and negotiate their world just as they themselves did. Because, ultimately, in our own lives too – we are all only ever trying to write our own stories in order to understand ourselves and the world which is shaping us day by day.



'Stepping Stone To China', from Judge Magazine, c.1900-1902, by E. Flohri

In this sense, writing history is also a process of telling stories. To do so without empathy is impossible, but to empathise isn't necessarily to automatically agree or condone. I have no idea how I would have coped with living my life in an overtly colonial world. Undoubtedly, had I lived then, I'd have had no choice other than to navigate it as best I could. Whilst the colonialist exploits of the imperialist nations from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries undoubtedly shaped the world, it would be a disservice to the people of the past not to look for those within its system who sought to temper it or those who even opposed it altogether. As empires were built and fell by the actions of individuals, so too history in its grand narratives is made up of all those micro-histories, the actions of the individuals which personalise the story; and if we care to listen to them, they will help us to make the bigger picture all the more clear and balanced.

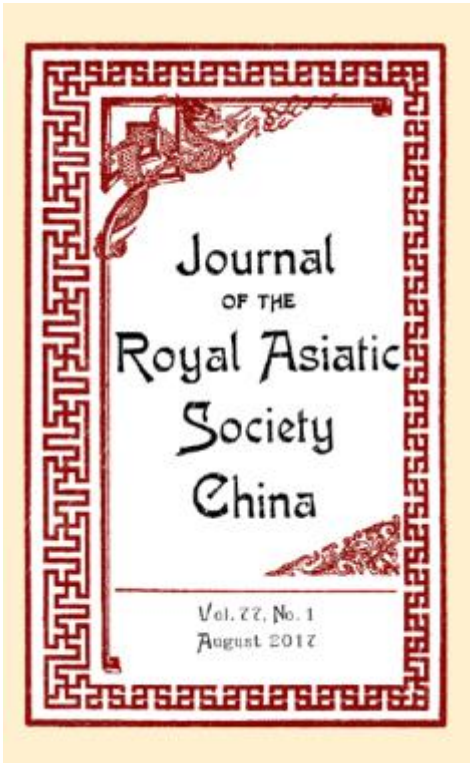


An illustration from supplement to Le Petit Journal, 16th January 1898, by Henri Meyer

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Rev. Z. Chas. Beals, *China and the Boxers: A Short History on the Boxer Outbreak, with Two Chapters on the Sufferings of Missionaries and a closing One on the Outlook* (New York: M. E. Munson, 1901)







Peterborough House, Harrow-on-the-Hill, 2021

China & The Great War - A Symposium



To the Great Emperor of the German Empire.

The war in Europe is a matter that does not concern us, the Chinese people, and as Your Majesty knows the world is full of people with greater talents than we have.

However, as the ancients have said, a model emperor would be a brave warrior and merciful: however, if one loves war for its own sake and treats human lives as blades of grass, you will invoke the anger of the gods.

We Chinese came to Europe as neutrals, our aim is to make a paltry living; however, the war made our journey to Europe somewhat less than peaceful.

*An examination of the world situation now shows that within the universe we are all one family, and a virtuous ruler would seize this opportunity to put righteousness before profit, to follow the will of the gods and the wishes of men, to stop the evil of the world and together with other nations create a new world. A virtuous ruler's name will be remembered for ten thousand generations, so why not halt your troops and select an auspicious location to build a palace [of peace] where all the world's powers could meet and create a peace that will last ten thousand years.**

This letter to Kaiser Wilhelm II was written by a Chinese labourer named Yuan Chun. No one knows if it was actually sent to the Kaiser. The text, quoted above, was transcribed into a notebook which is preserved in the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London. But, as a voice from the time, it tells us something of the attitude of an ordinary Chinese man who was working behind the Allied front lines in the closing years of the First World War. He was one of some 135,000 similar men who worked as contracted labourers, mainly in France – but also in other parts of the global conflict zone. They didn't fight – at least not in the sense of seeing active combat, they weren't soldiers – but they did help the Allied war effort by digging trenches, filling sandbags, loading and unloading supplies from ships and trains; as well as undertaking more skilled labour, such as repairing tanks and artillery. After the war, completing the full terms of their original work contracts, they stayed on into the early 1920s, and played a vital part in the recovery efforts. They repaired roads, cleared the battlefields of unexploded ordnance, collected the bodies of the dead, dug the neat rows of graves in the vast cemeteries. Indeed, some were skilled stone masons, who carved the distinctive white headstones. And yet now, almost one hundred years on, they are almost all but forgotten.



Very little mention has been made of them, or of their undoubtedly important contribution to the Great War in the official record or the many histories of the conflict which have been written in the years since 1914-1918. Indeed, until very recently, I could only find one book which looked at the British Chinese Labour Corps (CLC), and that book was privately published and so hard to find. But happily, perhaps with the approach of the Great War's centenary, over the last few years a number of works have begun to appear (some of these new titles are listed at the end of this piece). Other efforts are also in process with the aim of raising a greater awareness of the involvement of the Chinese labourers, as well as initiatives to ensure that recognition is suitably preserved, thereby commemorating the hardships they endured and the great sacrifices they made. Many of the labourers were laid to rest in war cemeteries across the globe (particularly in France), looking identical to the graves of the soldiers their work supported.





The Imperial War Museum, London

Earlier this month, on May 4th in fact [2016], I attended a one-day symposium at the Imperial War Museum, organised by Anne Witchard of the University of Westminster, entitled: *China & The Great War*. A number of academics spoke on different aspects of the Chinese labourers (and the British Chinese Labour Corps, in particular), sharing resources and giving insights into new topics of current research, with interesting and challenging discussions following on from most of the presentations. Paul Bailey (University of Durham) began the day with a paper entitled 'From "Coolie" to "Transnational Agent",' looking at contemporary discourses which have centred on the Chinese labourers within China, attempting to place these in the context of broader, global labour movement studies of the period. The Chinese involvement with the First World War came at a pivotal moment in China's national history, with its transition first from a monarchy to a republic, then through civil war to the 'socialist republic' that it is today (with exception of the island of Taiwan, which still remains under the political control of that first Republican Government). Hence the significance of this key moment in China's history subsequently remains a

real problematic for China's national discourse even to this day.



Paul Bailey's talk paired neatly with a later talk given by Xu Guoqi (Hong Kong University), and sparked a lively debate in the questions afterwards, asking "what is China?", and "what is Chineseness?" – questions which form the focus of Xu's current research. As already noted, the Great War came at a crucial time when China was in the process of redefining itself in response to pressures from within, but also overwhelmingly due to pressures imposed from without as the forces of Western imperialism, which had been increasingly encroaching on China's sovereignty since the 19th century, were now pushing China almost to the brink of break-up and dissolution. Hence too, the significance of the date on which this symposium was being held – May 4th, with its historic, student-led uprising on that date in 1919. If China needed to reshape itself in the wake of the Great War, particularly given the disappointing outcome for China of the Treaty of Versailles, in order to properly join the global community of nations on an equal footing, how should it define itself? – In that sense, Chinese society at the time was asking itself – what essentially is this unique notion of "Chineseness" and how should it inform China's new geopolitical identity?



Elisabeth Forster (Oxford University, China Centre) continued this theme with her examination of the "New Culture Movement" which arose from the events of May 4th 1919, largely shaping the "brand of modernity" which we find very much embodied in the China of today. Examining the role of contemporary newspapers in bringing together the students and academics of the May 4th Movement with the popular embrace of the ideas informing the New Culture Movement raises interesting questions concerning the connectedness of culture and politics at the time, perhaps highlighting how Confucian notions coincidentally became allied to the popularisation of Marxism, and the rise of 'plain language' (*baihua*) in ordinary Chinese society.

Other talks given as part of the symposium largely focussed upon the British Chinese Labour Corps. Established by the British Government in the closing years of the conflict, with the approval and encouragement of the then Chinese Republican Government, the British War Office recruited a force of some 96,000 labourers, who were transported to Europe and Africa to work under contract 'safely' behind the lines to support the war effort, thereby freeing-up able bodied servicemen to concentrate on the business of fighting at the Front. By no means soldiers, paradoxically these men were drilled and lived under army rules and strict discipline in closed camps under the

charge of British military officers. As such, and despite a narrowly regimented work system, these men still retained their own sense of self-worth and often collectively organised themselves to take action when needed to assert their rights. For instance, through organised protests or strike action (a fact which has since proved problematic to those who might wish to portray them wholly as victims of Western imperialism).



Mauriuz Gasior (Imperial War Museum) gave an introduction to the IWM's photographic archives, both official and unofficial, relating to the CLC – prompting helpful discussions over some of the descriptive captions accompanying the documentation of some of these images regarding the activities and details they depict.

Laura Spinney (independent science writer & journalist) gave a fascinating insight into the 'Spanish Flu' pandemic of 1918 (which killed more people globally than each of the two World Wars put together), examining how this might or might not have been connected to the movement of US soldiers, and/or the Chinese labourers, and the camp-life to which they were each largely confined as perfect containment and breeding grounds for 'Spanish Flu.'



Gregory James (University of Exeter, now retired) gave a surprisingly exuberant analysis of the statistical realities of the number of Chinese fatalities which occurred. Using the enormous figures frequently claimed in the media as his launching point, he then proceeded to elaborate the documentary records which belie the realities concerning the fatalities which occurred among the Chinese labourers during the war, and in the years immediately after, when they were still under contract. He has done this by means of an exhaustive trawl through the official War Office records, correlating them alongside other primary sources, such as the records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, ship's records, and the like, in order to produce an impressively detailed and comprehensive computerised and searchable database. This dataset reveals that the number of Chinese who were killed or died by other causes during the conflict are not anywhere near as high as some of the inflated claims of around 10,000-20,000 (even 30,000 in one instance), with the actual estimate being closer to somewhere around 5,000-6,000. Although – given the gaps, potential errors, and mismatches in the records – ultimately, the real figure will probably never be known. This database is clearly an important historical resource, but sadly at present it is not publicly

accessible. During the final Q&As, the audience expressed the hope that this resource might eventually find a suitable home at some point in the future, so that this valuable dataset isn't lost.



Initially, I was drawn to the topic of this symposium as the result of a tangent to my own on-going research. I'm very interested in the British Consular Service in China, as well as the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, and many of the personnel of both institutions 'joined up' in order to contribute to the war effort by serving with the CLC. Their language skills and their cultural knowledge of China was seen as a key element in the smooth functioning of the CLC battalions, with many of them teaching fellow British Officers basic Chinese language, as well as liaising with, and organising the labourers themselves. Several of the British consular officials I have been researching, including Louis Magrath King, served with the CLC in France. King's father, Paul Henry King, who was based at the Maritime Customs office in London at the time, even facilitated and organised the sending of Chinese musical instruments to the CLC labourers in France for their recreational amusement, hoping to help them feel less far from home. Hence, this study day helped broaden my knowledge of the topic and gave me a number of insights and pointers to resources which might be of future use, if I am able to expand and make something concrete out of the few things I've found so far in the official archives. Who knows – watch this space, as they say!

Two films were shown during the course of the day. The first, which was screened in the middle of the event (just after we returned from a fantastic buffet lunch), gave some background to the 'Ensuring We Remember' campaign which hopes to establish a permanent memorial to the Chinese labourers, as well as efforts and initiatives to promote education and better awareness.

The symposium was rounded off with a short documentary film about a play, *The Forgotten of the Forgotten,* which the theatrical creative team at 'Moongate Productions' hope to develop, similarly to shine a greater light on the Chinese labourers, their crucial contribution to the Great War and the sacrifices entailed.



The symposium was an interesting and enjoyable event which was clearly very useful to all those who attended it. Warm thanks are due to Anne Witchard. I've attended a number of conference events which she has organised, particularly her 'China in Britain' series at the University of Westminster, and I've always come away from her seminar events with masses of useful notes, piles

of new contacts, plus heaps of new ideas and inspiration for my own research.

Further Reading:

Patrick Boehler, 'The Forgotten Army of the First World War: How Chinese Labourers Helped Shape Europe' (*SCMP Chronicles, South China Morning Post*, 2016)

Brian C. Fawcett, 'The Chinese Labour Corps in France, 1917-1921', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* (Vol. 40, 2000), pp. 33-111 [* inc. the letter quoted at the start of this piece]

Gregory James, *The Chinese Labour Corps, 1916-1920* (Bayview Educational, 2013)

Daryl Klein, *With the Chinks* (Bodley Head, 1919)

Mark O'Neill, *The Chinese Labour Corps* (Penguin, 2014)

Michael Summerskill, *China on the Western Front* (privately published, 1982)

Xu Guoqi, *Strangers at the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War* (Harvard University Press, 2014)



To mark the centenary of the Great War, Penguin have published a series of 'Penguin Specials', which are short books examining various themes and topics relating to China and the War of 1914-1918. I've read quite a few of these, and they do make very good and highly readable (accessible, rather than heavily academic) introductions.

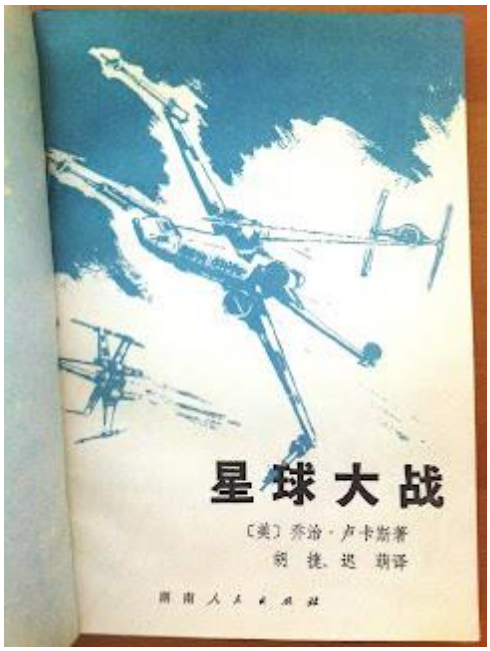


May 4th - Star Wars & China



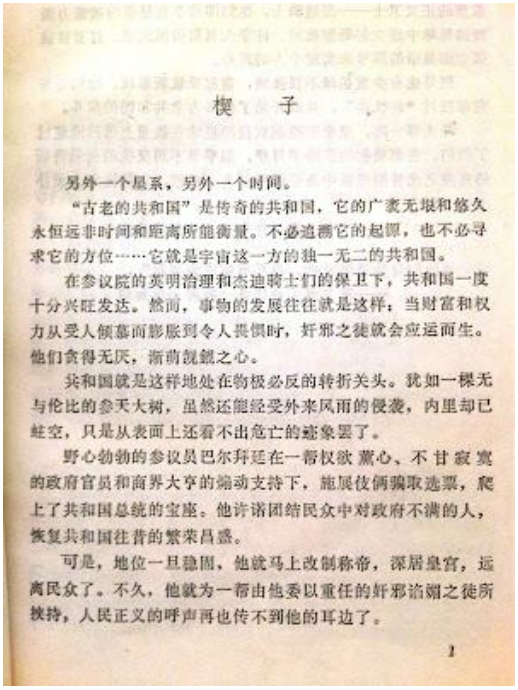
In honour of today [4 May 2016] being 'International *Star Wars* Day' (… *"May the 4th be with you!"*), I thought I'd take the opportunity to jot down a few thoughts on a curious little tome I was given (now almost half my lifetime ago!), by a close friend of mine as a very special gift for my 21st birthday: – An original copy of *Star Wars* … in Chinese.

The original *Star Wars* film came out in 1977, and this book, rather remarkably, was published only three years later, on 1st June 1980. It's amazing to think that a piece of popular Western culture like this could have found its way into Communist China so soon. The Cultural Revolution had only very recently ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, but perhaps the existence of this book shows that cultural boundaries can never be completely closed off. Certainly, Western literature was never totally eradicated from China, as Jie Li's recent book, *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* (Columbia University Press, 2015) amply attests. Dissident literary activity is something which has always interested me. As part of my undergraduate degree in Anthropology, I wrote a short dissertation on the *samizdat* literature of the Cold war era in Czechoslovakia. Censorship and the control of information is a fascinating topic to study on a number of differently levels, whether we look at it from a political, a sociological, or a philosophical point of view, it seems human curiosity cannot be contained. Human beings always seem able to find a way to connect and share their thoughts and ideas.



As a notable date in history, however, May 4th has a much deeper and different resonance in China than it does in the West. May 4th 1919 witnessed a massive student uprising in Peking (Beijing). Protesting against Western imperialist incursions into China which began in the

late 19th Century, and also against the weakened geopolitical situation which the relatively new Republican Chinese Government found itself confronting after the Treaty of Versailles was signed at the close of the First World War. Many of China's youth at that time felt betrayed by the West and by their own Government, despite China having rendered its assistance in joining the allied war effort during the last two years of the global conflict, not least in the non-combat orientated support efforts of the Chinese Labour Corps. As such, May 4th remains a poignant date which is publicly marked and remembered to this day in modern China.



梟　子

另外一个层系，另外一个时间。

"古老的共和国"是传奇的共和国，它的广袤无垠和悠久永恒远非时间和距离所能衡量。不必追溯它的起源，也不必寻求它的方位……它就是宇宙这一方的独一无二的共和国。

在参议院的英明治理和杰迪骑士们的保卫下，共和国一度十分兴旺发达。然而，事物的发展往往就是这样：当财富和权力从受人倾慕而膨胀到令人畏惧时，奸邪之徒就会应运而生。他们贪得无厌，渐萌觊觎之心。

共和国就是这样地处在物极必反的转折关头。犹如一棵无与伦比的参天大树，虽然还能经受外来风雨的侵袭，内里却已蛀空，只是从表面上还看不出危亡的迹象罢了。

野心勃勃的参议员巴尔拜廷在一帮权欲熏心、不甘寂寞的政府官员和商界大亨的煽动支持下，施展伎俩骗取选票，爬上了共和国总统的宝座。他许诺团结民众中对政府不满的人，恢复共和国往昔的繁荣昌盛。

可是，地位一旦稳固，他就马上改制称帝，深居皇宫，远离民众了。不久，他就为一帮由他委以重任的奸邪谄媚之徒所挟持，人民正义的呼声再也传不到他的耳边了。





Given my prior interest in *samizdat* I was fascinated to read how *Star Wars* was so quickly assimilated and re-imagined in Communist China. Maggie Greene, who is an Assistant Professor at Montana State University, where she specialises in Chinese history, has written two fascinating pieces on her personal homepage examining this topic in greater depth. The *lianhuanhua* 连环画 which she writes about contain some very curious and highly unusual visual adaptations, suggesting these images were created by Chinese artists and illustrators who may only have had a very limited exposure to the original *Star Wars* film as a visual source, or perhaps they may not have seen any of the original images at all and so simply re-imagined the story for themselves from hearsay alone. As such, the everyday elements of cooking utensils or the incorporation of other kinds of modern cultural markers, such as the reference to the "Kennedy Space Center" on a wall map which is being studied by Darth Vader himself, is all equally fascinating.

But we should be wary, perhaps, of reading too much of our own cultural interpretations into this particular text. It may well have been an acknowledged cultural import from the 'decadent' Capitalist West, but this does not mean that Chinese readers would necessarily have interpreted this particular text in the same way as a Western audience. It might seem starkly obvious to us, in the West. Where we might see this story as a simple parable of good versus evil, the freedom loving rebels pitted against the vast, overbearing and oppressive evil empire which seeks to control all aspects of the people's daily lives (i.e. – Totalitarianism) – these are themes which the Chinese proletariat would have been very familiar with themselves. If we look at China's recent history in the political context of revolution and dissent, *Star Wars* can easily be assimilated into a long lineage of this kind of exemplary rhetoric. The evil empire could just as logically equate to the corrupt Imperial Dynasty of the Qing which was overthrown in 1911, or, as Maggie Greene has suggested, it could even be the 'Gang of Four', who were deposed at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Parallels to the Sino-Soviet split could just as easily be found. The Rebel Alliance could even be those brave, self-sacrificing students of the May 4th movement, who rose up and challenged the Unequal Treaties imposed upon China by the imperialist West. Anthropological interpretations of social and cultural phenomena are always relative. Often, we need to look with eyes other than our own if we are to make sense and properly understand.









After the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Chairman Mao, perhaps the importation of this fantastical tale from the modern West was a small token in the opening-up of Chinese political life and the normalisation which needed to begin in order to stabilise and start the rebuilding of Chinese society and the Chinese economy anew. The few illustrations in the Chinese novel of *Star Wars* which my friend gave me seem to suggest they were very much based on official stills released alongside the film itself, but it's wonderful to see these images, so familiar to us today, transformed almost into ancient woodcuts, much like the earliest printed texts which originated several millennia ago in China itself. This may, of course, be attributable purely to the technologies of mass publishing which were available at the time as much as to the conscious cultural appropriation and assimilation of a particular cultural aesthetic into an established Chinese tradition. The novel, which was published in Changsha, Hunan, was bought by my friend in Beijing's Wudao Kou area whilst visiting as a student studying Chinese at the Foreign Languages Institute in the 1980s. It's intriguing to wonder how many copies of this work were published at that time, and just how many of those original copies might still survive on people's bookshelves to this day.





Further Reading (On-line):

'A Long Time Ago in a China Far, Far Away ...', & 'Giving pleasure, not a political lesson', by Maggie Greene (author's personal homepage, 2014)

'Darth Vader & the Triceratops - A Q&A with Maggie Greene on "Star Wars" in China', by Jeffrey Wasserstrom (The LA Review of Books, 14 January 2016)

Chinese Star Wars Comic (Parts 1-6), translated by Nick Stember (author's personal homepage, 2014)

Encyclopedia of Unauthorized Star Wars Lianhuanhua, by Thomas Bini (Paradise Systems, 1 July 2022)




星 球 大 战

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'Star Wars' (novel), translated by Hu Jie & Chi Meng-Hunan (People's Publishing, 1980) – given to me by Kate Down (1956-2017) in 1997.



The First British Embassy to China, 1793-1794



Earlier this week, I gave a talk on the first British Embassy to China. My talk looked at how historians in the West have viewed the embassy, as well as a short survey of some of the imagery which was created during and after the mission, including a brief look at an exhibition I worked on in Beijing in 2007, which featured some of the original gifts that were given as part of the embassy in 1793. Adapted from my talk, this present blog post will take a look at the embassy, the exhibition, and the theme of 'cross-cultural' exchange. And then my next post will examine the work of William Alexander, an artist who accompanied the embassy; as well as some of the artistic responses to the mission, once it had returned to Britain.

Part I - The Embassy

As with the first British mission to Japan 182 years before, the embassy sent to China in 1793, which was led by Lord George Macartney, set out in three ships – the *Lion*, the *Hindostan*, and the *Jackall* (which became lost in heavy weather in the Bay of Biscay, but happily managed to rejoin the group again in the Sunda Straits, near Batavia). The purpose of the mission was to try to open China up to the burgeoning new system of global 'free-trade' which was then being forged by the nations of the West. Several European nations had already established trading *hongs* (warehouses) at the southern Chinese port of Canton (Guangzhou), the only place in China at that time where foreign sea trade was permitted (there was also an inland trading post, officially sanctioned by the Chinese court, at Kiakhta, where Russians came overland to buy and sell goods). But the British in particular were not content with this single point of exchange, they very much wanted to expand their access and trade network to other parts of the vast Qing Empire. The Qing, on the other hand, were very wary of this and they consistently refused such overtures. Other western nations had already sent diplomatic missions to China, notably the Dutch, the Portuguese, and, of course, the Russians, as already mentioned. 'The Macartney Embassy', as it's now more commonly remembered, was the first trade mission which sought to break the mould of those which had gone before; and, as such, it has become a notorious episode, often cited, in the history of East-West relations.

Traditional historiography has consistently framed the encounter as a spectacular failure on the British part. Best summed up as the result of a clash of cultures, in which the British and the Qing simply failed to understand each other. My talk and the seminar which followed looked at this traditional view and examined how more recent historiography has since sought to balance this perception by looking at various Chinese archival sources relating to the famous encounter. In the past, and even quite recently (cf. Peyrefitte), historians have taken contemporary Western reports of the mission very much at face value. The idea being that rational, 'progressive' Westerners were seeking to engage with irrational, 'backward' Easterners by impressing them with their advanced scientific knowledge and new technologies. But as the Emperor Qianlong famously stated in his letter to King George III, replying to this overture for closer international relations: *"As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures."*





The rebuff was not taken lightly, and Macartney's certainly was not the last British trade mission to China either – another was led by Lord Amherst in 1816, but was refused an audience with the Emperor entirely. As many historians have stated the major point of contention between the two sides was a question of differing cultural perceptions. The British believed in a new world order of sovereign nation-states whose authority was derived from a secular-based system of laws; and so, with the precedent already established in Europe, the British duly presumed to expect that they should deal with other great nations on an equal diplomatic footing – indeed, in their eyes, this was very much the mark of *civilised* societies. The Chinese world order, however, maintained that China was the centre of civilisation and the Emperor was the 'Son of Heaven', therefore all the peoples of the world owed varying degrees of fealty to the Emperor. The Emperor, of course, was a just and benevolent ruler, and as for those distant, outer barbarians (such as the Europeans) who were not fortunate enough to come under the Emperor's direct rule, it had been decreed that they were permitted to acknowledge the Emperor's universal supremacy by periodically offering *tribute*. As such, Qianlong viewed Macartney's trade embassy as a mission to deliver tribute. There were certain protocols and ceremonial rituals which needed to be adhered to, naturally – and as the British

mission progressed, travelling through China to meet with the Emperor himself, the Qing knowledge network sent back reports to the Manchu Court which seemed to present certain frustrations. It appeared that the British were entirely ignorant of these rituals and so they would need to be guided onto the right path.



However, from the British point of view it was these 'archaic rituals' and protocols which became the major sticking point. There was one ritual in particular which did not align with their ideals, nor their intentions. It became a stubborn point of pride – it was of course the ritual of the *kowtow*, in which the British envoys were expected to ceremonially prostrate themselves before the Emperor. This, of course, was seen as an acknowledgement of inferiority, and, consequently, it was something which the British plenipotentiaries simply could not countenance. The Qing were quite rightly baffled – the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the Russians before them did not seem to have had any problems with performing this ritual gesture. Interestingly enough, and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, after much discussion it seems the Qing did eventually give way – according to some accounts Lord Macartney simply went down on one knee when he met the Emperor (other accounts state that when finally admitted into the august Son of Heaven's presence Lord Macartney was naturally overwhelmed by the great Emperor's majesty and so he instinctively performed the *kowtow* without any hesitation).



The attitudes on each side are worth considering in more detail. Macartney was no inexperienced envoy, he had served overseas in various British domains and he had been a successful ambassador to the Court of Catherine the Great in Russia. Similarly, he had certainly done his homework on the voyage out, reading as much as he could of contemporary accounts of China from a well-stocked library on-board his ship put together for this express purpose. His journals initially seem quite sympathetic towards the Chinese, yet he appears to have made no effort to learn the Chinese language. He rather condescendingly states: *"We are quite ignorant of their language (which, I suppose, cannot be a very difficult one, for little George Staunton has long since learned to speak it and write it with great readiness, and from that*

circumstance has been of infinite use to us on many occasions).”



‘Little’ George Thomas Staunton was the 12 year old son of the embassy’s principal Secretary, and the young boy’s command of the Chinese language (which he’d learnt from native-born teachers on the voyage out) certainly seems to have impressed the Emperor Qianlong, who it is reported broke with protocol again by directly bestowing a gift upon the boy from his own hand. Indeed, Qianlong himself was by 1793 already a long-lived and therefore highly astute ruler. He observed of the British that: *“Among the Western ocean states, England ranks foremost in strength. It is said that the English have robbed and exploited the merchant ships of the other Western ocean states so that the foreigners along the Western ocean are terrified of their brutality.”*

It is intriguing to note that of all commentators, perhaps one of the most unlikely was Napoleon Bonaparte, who thought that Lord Macartney ought to have complied with the local customs as he believed each sovereignty had the right to dictate how it was to be diplomatically approached on its own soil. It was later claimed that the Qing’s arrogant insistence regarding its own sense of superiority over all other peoples was a rod which it made for its own back, and that this was the root cause of several subsequent, devastating conflicts with the West, not least the Opium Wars and the ‘gunboat diplomacy’ of the 19th Century. Yet recent historiography has sought to show that this was less of a *clash of civilisations*, nor the case of a simple *cultural misunderstanding* being conflated into an immoveable diplomatic obstacle; it was in fact more a case of a *deliberate* and *wilful* misunderstanding on the part of each party for its own *political* ends (cf. Hevia). This was ultimately a clash of two *imperialist* powers with similar *colonial* mindsets. Thus, the British and the Qing actually had a lot more in common with one another than either of them openly cared to acknowledge.





In 2007, I was involved with taking an exhibition, entitled *'Britain Meets the World, 1714-1830'*, from the British Museum in London to the Palace Museum in Beijing (perhaps better known to many of its visitors as 'The Forbidden City'). Curated by my colleague, Sheila O'Connell, the exhibition was billed as an 'examination of how British artists, travellers, scholars, and traders engaged with new cultures through world exploration.' It focussed on the 18th Century and the work of collectors and explorers such as Sir Joseph Banks and Captain James Cook, as well as the work of the Royal Society, and men such as James Cox, Josiah Wedgwood, and James Watt. The exhibition also contained a showcase that was filled with some of the original gifts which Macartney gave to Qianlong in 1793, which are now part of the Palace Museum's collection. It was fascinating for me working inside the famous 'Forbidden City.' I was fortunate enough to spend several weeks there over the course of the year, exploring parts of the palace complex which are off-limits to the public – I even rode a bicycle from one end of the Palace to the other, just as Puyi is famously depicted doing in Bernardo Bertolucci's 1987 film, *'The Last Emperor.'* Interestingly enough, the exhibition was itself very much all part-and-parcel of the modern 'cultural diplomacy' which is increasingly taking place today. The exhibition was a direct result of the first ever cultural agreement between the UK and China, which was signed in the presence of the then Prime Minister Tony Blair and Premier Wen Jiabao in 2005. At the time, reporting on the opening of *'Britain Meets the World',* The China Daily newspaper stated that: *"Cultural cooperation and exchange are as vital as any other relationship between cultures … the more we understand each other the less we will clash. This is truly the message of culture."* Evidently Lord Macartney's gifts are still serving a quasi-'diplomatic role' some 200 years after they were first given to China. Hopefully, remembering them and thinking about such historic encounters will indeed help to shape a better and less confrontational future … but then again, as the recent misunderstanding of cultural symbols evidenced in the wearing of Remembrance Day poppies during David Cameron's 2010 trade mission to China reminds us, diplomacy remains – even today – the most delicate and nuanced of arts.



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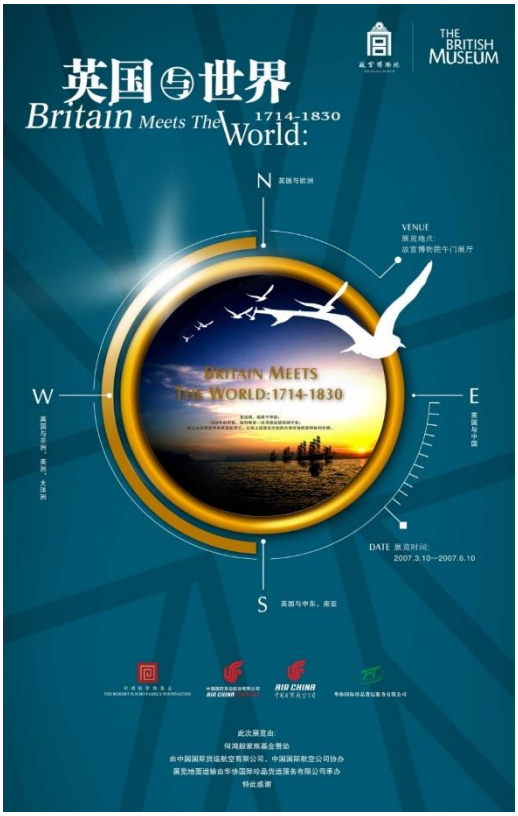
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British Artistic Impressions of Qing Dynasty China



The First British Embassy to China, 1793-1794

Part II – The Art

William Alexander was one of only two artists who were officially appointed to record Lord Macartney's embassy to China. Of the two, he was the junior draughtsman, yet his artistic impressions of China have since become the most familiar depictions of the mission. He made over two thousand sketches and paintings whilst travelling through China. And, rather like David Roberts, his near contemporary's paintings of Egypt – made some 50 years later, Alexander's sketches and paintings of China have become quintessential as representations of the Western encounter with Asia. They were primarily done to illustrate Sir George Leonard Staunton's official report of the mission (1797), as well as Sir John Barrow's *Travels in China* (1804). But Alexander also published two notable books of his own, *The Costume of China* (1805) and *Dress and Manners of the Chinese* (1814), both of which proved to be very popular. Alexander was apparently able to support himself for a decade after returning from the mission on the proceeds of exhibiting and publishing his China works. Between 1798 and 1804, he exhibited thirteen watercolours at the Royal Academy. In stark contrast, the principal artist of the embassy was Thomas Hickey, who was a portrait painter and a personal friend of Lord Macartney; although noted as a great conversationalist, Hickey's idleness has since been remarked by historians. Rather curiously, he apparently painted only one picture in the entire course of the trip – whereas his junior colleague had managed to draw and paint around 270 sketches of the voyage before the mission had even set foot on Chinese shores.





William Alexander was born in Maidstone, Kent in 1767, the son of a coachmaker. He moved to London at the age of fifteen to study art and was later admitted to the Royal Academy Schools where his talent was duly noticed by Sir Joshua Reynolds. He was 25 years old when the Macartney mission set out for China, and his diary of the mission shows he was an energetic and engaged member of the party – yet he was rather underrated and overlooked by Macartney himself. Indeed, much to Alexander's disappointment, Macartney left the two artists in Peking when he went to meet with Qianlong for the first time at Chengde, and so it seems likely that Alexander only once, very briefly got to glimpse the august figure of the Emperor, and so he had to rely on the descriptions furnished by other members of the party when completing some of his more famous portraits and landscape views, such as those of the Great Wall. It is perhaps because of this reason that the accuracy of some of his likenesses were later criticised by Sir George Staunton. This fact not withstanding, the overwhelming majority of Alexander's artworks are clearly keenly observed; indeed, as were his diary descriptions too. The following is an extract in which he describes glimpsing Qianlong on the occasion of the Emperor's return to the capital, Peking:



"As soon as the Emperor and his retinue was seen in the distance, the Ambassador and his suite moved toward the road and were placed within the line of soldiers. Once the Royal procession was in earshot the Chinese band struck up a martial air interrupted as ever by the most discordant percussion … His Imperial Majesty was preceded by a body of horse. His sedan, surrounded by Mandarins and cavalry, was of a rich yellow carried by 8 bearers … He looked eminently towards us kneeling on one knee and bowing, and as he passed he sent a message to the Ambassador regretting the Ambassador was not well, and as the cold weather was approaching it would be better for him to return immediately to Peking, rather than make any stay at the Yuan Ming Yuan … Next followed his Chief Minister in a green sedan chair. He gave the Ambassador a very gracious salute … The Mandarins employed and connected with the Embassy stood behind us, dressed in their habits of ceremony, while we were kneeling when the Emperor passed by.

One of these, thinking my bow was not sufficiently respectful to his monarch, actually put his hand behind my neck and lowered my head almost to the ground. Perhaps my eagerness to see all that was possible of this splendid sight might shorten the inclination of the head on this memorable occasion."



The last few lines are fairly striking in view of the fact that the ceremony of the *kowtow* was such a major point of contention for the British. Indeed, Alexander had a similar run-in of his own with this particular matter of court etiquette when he met a Qing official of the Imperial family on the road whilst out on one of his trips to record scenes of Chinese country life, he was forced to dismount but then refused to kneel and *kowtow* in the mud. On the whole though, Alexander's depictions of China and the Chinese speak for themselves, and much as his verbal descriptions, they tend to be acutely observed, largely accurate and even-handed in their representation. – As such, they remain an invaluable record to modern scholars of the period. On his return to England, Alexander went on to enjoy a successful artist's career as a professor of drawing, teaching in the Military College at Great Marlow, and then subsequently becoming the first Keeper of the Prints and Drawings Department at the British Museum.

Once the embassy had returned to Britain, it did not take long for the information its members brought back to gain a wide circulation. Indeed, just four months after their return this painting (shown on the left) of the Emperor Qianlong was done by Mariano Bovi (an Italian artist then working in London) and curiously, although nothing is known of how it originally came to be produced, it is clearly a very faithful likeness of one of Qianlong's official court paintings (shown on page 146) – which were painted on silk and mounted on hanging scrolls, an example of which from the Palace Museum's own collection was included in the *Britain Meets the World* exhibition in 2007.





The European fascination with China goes back a long way. From first contacts with Chinese wares brought along the Silk Road trading routes as far back as the Roman, era to the well-known travel accounts of Marco Polo in the 13th Century. However, it wasn't until the Jesuit missions of the late 16th Century that sustained contact was established. Much of Europe's earliest knowledge of China came from the accounts returned by these Jesuit priests, most notably Matteo Ricci. The Jesuits gained quite a significant footing in China, where their scientific knowledge, particularly in the disciplines of mathematics, astronomy, geography and cartography, were highly esteemed and utilised by Chinese scholars and court officials.

Chinese commodities, such as silks, porcelain, and spices, were highly prized items in Europe from the 14th Century onwards. And, even as early as 1604, the first Chinese books found their way into the collections of the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Such curious wares naturally fuelled an interest in a seemingly fabled faraway land of scholars and artists, and the tantalising glimpses these items gave blended with fantasy and stirred the desire to know more. From the 17th Century onwards, European craftsmen began to design ceramics, fabrics, and furniture based on Chinese archetypes. At the start of the 18th Century the French painter, Antoine Watteau, devised a fanciful decorative style known as *chinoiserie* which soon became all the rage in Europe. A vogue for all things 'Chinese' from porcelains and interior décor, to pagodas and dragon motifs adorning parks and palaces ensued. A Chinese-style bridge was even built over the River Thames at Hampton Court.







The fashion for *chinoserie* in Britain initially peaked in 1750s and 1760s, but was revived by the excitement surrounding Macartney's embassy, and perhaps reached its apogee in the manifestation of George IV, the Prince Regent's sumptuously extravagant and distinctly over the top Royal Pavilion at Brighton. Built between 1787 and 1823 in the "Hindoo style", looking rather like the Taj Mahal outside, inside it was decorated (in 1802) with a profusion of Chinese motifs, some of which were directly based upon William Alexander's artworks from the embassy, as well as an enormous chandelier weighing over one ton which was decorated with silvered dragons. Such lavish 'orientalizing' provided ample fuel for stoking contemporary satires, mocking both Macartney and the famous contretemps over the *kowtow,* and later on mocking George IV by depicting him as an 'oriental despot' surrounded by opulence and 'oriental luxury', whilst receiving Lord Amherst, Britain's second failed Ambassador to China in 1816.

Such images, whether scientifically framed – as was the case with those produced by the members of the Macartney embassy, or those which were exaggerated or embellished in the contemporary trends of *chinoserie* and political satire, speak reams to the cultural divide between East and West in the early modern era and the notions of the objectified 'self' and 'other' (as proposed by scholars such as Edward Said) which informed the Western view of the world at a time when distances and barriers between peoples – for better or worse – were beginning to be bridged or broken down.





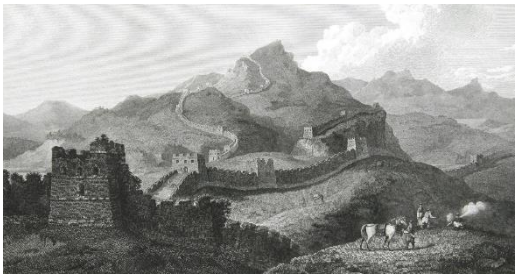


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'Britain Meets the World' at the Palace Museum, Beijing – 2007





The Chinese Pagoda at Kew Gardens, built in 1762





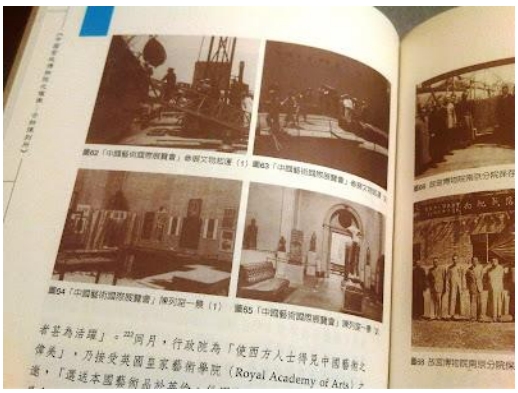
Amitabha – Buddha of Infinite Light



When not travelling to exotic climes, by far the majority of my time working at the British Museum is spent at a desk. But every now and then it's nice to escape the endless emails and infinitely multiplying spreadsheets and take a look at some of the more exciting things my colleagues are working on. It is all too easy "to lose sight of the objects for the museum" when subsumed by the day-to-day drudge of deskwork. Hence, it is a real treat to leave the computer screen once in a while and remind oneself what working in a museum is really all about. And, sometimes, you find your colleagues are working on something very special indeed. I got one of those lucky chances around this time last year, when I was invited to take a closer look at the BM's magnificent Amitābha statue.

This colossal white marble figure of Amitābha, from ancient China, stands in the north stairwell of the BM's King Edward VII building, almost 6 metres in height. Ever since I first visited the BM, when I was around 9 years old, this has been one of my favourite pieces in the Museum. There is something about the poised serenity and warmth of Amitābha's face, the neatly composed folds of the drapery of his robes, and, of course, the pure white brilliance of the luminous marble from which he has been carved. There are stylistic parallels to the great cave temple sculptures, conveying here the spiritual power and the regal majesty of the divine Buddha as cosmic saviour. He looks, to me, like a giant version of the later elegant ivory-white porcelain *blanc de Chine* figures for which China is also famous. Each morning, as I climb the empty stairs on my way to my desk, and again, as I leave in the evening, I like to say 'good morning' and 'goodnight' to Amitābha – one of the first and last familiar faces I see each day at work.





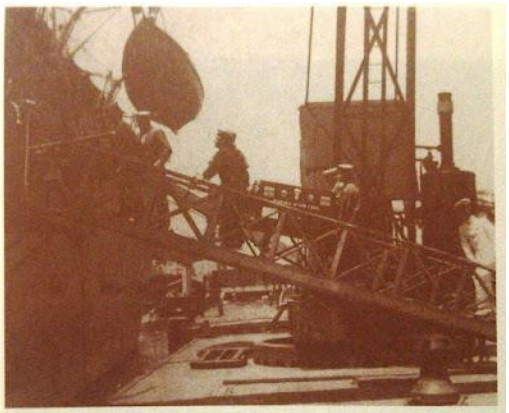


圖62「中國藝術國際展覽會」參展文物起運（1）

More than 1,400 years old, work on creating this statue of Amitābha was finished in AD 585 (the 5th year of Kaihuang), during the Sui dynasty (581-618), shortly before the high era of Chinese Buddhist art flourished during the T'ang dynasty (618-907) which followed. I'd always been interested in how this huge work of art had found its way to the British Museum. Its label states that it was a gift of the Chinese Government in 1938. But it first came to London and was originally exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1935-1936 as part of the very prestigious *International Exhibition of Chinese Art*, which at the time was the largest showing of Chinese art in the Western world. Thereafter the statue was given to the UK to mark the success of the exhibition. The importance of that exhibition is still recalled today, particularly in Taiwan, where the Republican Government of the time retreated following the Communist Revolution of 1949. Some years ago now, when working at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, I was intrigued by the very robust and secure-looking packing cases which the NPM uses to safely transport their collection. Mentioning this to a friend of mine [Dan Sung] who works at the NPM, he showed me a photograph from a book he'd written which illustrated how these packing cases were still being made today to a similar design as those first used to transport the artworks to the London exhibition in 1935 – therein lies the ubiquity of good design!



From November 2015 to January 2016, my colleagues at the BM conducted a project of detailed research and comprehensive conservation on the Amitābha statue. A series of platforms and scaffolding was erected around the statue which enabled the very close and intensive work to take place. This research project enlightened us by answering a number of unknowns about the sculpture, such as hints towards what

would have been its original polychrome appearance. Minute traces still extant on its surface suggest that the white marble of the robes would once have been painted a brilliant orange-red with bright green sleeves, similar to this painting (also in the BM's collection: 1919,0101,0.6) of the Buddha (probably Śākyamuni) preaching from Dunhuang (c.701-750).



I was lucky enough to be invited to take a closer look at the inscription on the statue's base. The Chinese characters are very finely incised. Hence they aren't immediately obvious, but they can easily be read if a raking light is used. The dedication lists the patrons who commissioned the construction of the statue of Amitābha for their village temple, called Chongguang in Hancui. Sadly, it's not been possible to identify Hancui village today, but it's thought to have been located somewhere to the southwest of Baoding in Hebei province, which is a region known for its white marble sculptures. An article in a recent issue of *The British Museum Magazine* (see below) gives greater detail and insights into the sculpture's cultural background and the science of the research project to clean and conserve this remarkable embodiment of Amitābha, the bearer of infinite light.







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Amitābha on display at the Royal Academy, London in 1935 (RA Collection)



Guandi - Chinese Guardian Deity



In an ornate showcase in the Enlightenment Gallery, the former King's Library, at the British Museum there sits a small steatite stone figure which is one of my favourite objects in the Museum (SLMisc.1174). It depicts a rather grand and imposing man seated in an elegant, bow-backed chair which is draped with a tiger skin. He wears what looks like heavy armour. Gripping the arm of the chair with one hand, the other is ponderously toying with the long strands of his beard. Deep in thought, he is clearly reflecting upon something profound.

This medium-sized stone figure (around 25cm tall) was carved in China, possibly in the province of Fujian or Guangdong, sometime during the last half of the 1600s, these were also the first five decades of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). The man depicted in this smooth reddish-brown soapstone is the General Guan Yu, who lived in the late second to early third centuries. Guan Yu's life, his heroic deeds and exploits, are described in the Chinese Classic, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms.* He was noted for his loyalty to Liu Bei, the founder of the Shu Han State, during the Three Kingdoms Era (220-280). Sometime after his death, Guan Yu was subsequently deified during the Sui Dynasty period (581-618) as the god Guandi, and was venerated as an exemplar of such martial qualities as faithfulness, fortitude and honesty. By virtue of his military background, he is seen as a god of war, but by extension of these admirable martial qualities he has also come to be seen as a patron god of both business, and of literature – hence he was frequently found depicted in literati shrines, the temples dedicated to literature and Confucian values. Guandi remains a popular deity today, featuring in all the major Chinese systems of belief, in Chinese folk religion, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. He is actively venerated in parts of China, Taiwan, and other overseas Chinese communities.* Curiously enough, Guandi is said to be a popular god for both businessmen and members of the Triad criminal fraternity … I've also read that every Police Station in Hong Kong supposedly maintains a small shrine to Guandi somewhere on its premises. Make of that hearsay (particularly at this present time [2020]) whatever you will …

Down the ages, subsequent to his deification, Guan Yu was posthumously honoured by many Chinese Emperors, who bestowed upon him many honorific titles and ranks; hence, he is known by a number of names and exalted appellations. His martial power is thought to have made itself manifest and aided later Chinese armies in several important battles throughout the succeeding centuries – for instance, helping to repulse a formidable invasion of Korea ordered by the Japanese Shogun (or more correctly, Imperial Regent), Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the last

decade of the 1500s. He was also highly venerated by General Yuan Shikai, who was briefly President of the Chinese Republic after the fall of the Qing Dynasty at the start of the 20th century, although Guandi's help perhaps later fell short when Yuan Shikai unsuccessfully attempted to install himself as Emperor before he died in 1916. In Taoist and Buddhist Temples and Monasteries Guan Yu or Guandi is often prominently set up as a guardian deity figure. He was said to have been a studious and educated man, deeply versed in the Confucian Classic texts during his lifetime, consequently one of his key attributes as a god is that he is held to be the spiritual protector of the *dharma*. Hence, presumably his appeal to the venerable old 'literati' class of Chinese scholars, who deemed Guandi to be one of the patron gods of literature as well.



The small statue of Guandi in the British Museum is notable because it was bequeathed to the Museum by the collector, Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), as part of the Museum's founding collection in 1753. It is thought to have been acquired by Sloane sometime before 1723. Such soapstone carvings featured prominently in early European collections of Chinese art, although this particular statue isn't thought to have been made specifically for export, but rather for the domestic market in China. Consequently, it is most likely that it was originally acquired by a British merchant whilst he was trading in China and subsequently brought back to England on his return, where it was later acquired by Sloane.



This statue of Guandi has a personal significance for me too, as it was part of an exhibition which I worked on in 2007. This exhibition was hosted in the former Imperial family's residence in Beijing, the "Forbidden City", now the Palace Museum. This means that almost certainly this was the first time that this statue has returned to China since it was first acquired there almost 300 years before. The exhibition, which was titled *– Britain Meets the World, 1714-1830 –* commemorated the first British Embassy to China in 1793, when Lord Macartney (1737-1806) famously chose *not* to *kowtow* before the Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799). It was an amazing experience to spend several weeks working behind the scenes in such a famous and historically significant location; being able to wander unescorted through the empty courtyards before the Imperial Palace was opened up to visitors each morning, or similarly after hours, when it was closed. I even got the truly memorable

chance to ride a bicycle through the red high-walled roads, like the young Pu Yi (1906-1967), as he is depicted in Bernardo Bertolucci's eponymous film, *The Last Emperor* (1988).

On another trip which I made around this time to Taiwan, whilst working at the National Palace Museum – where many of the Imperial treasures from the Forbidden City ended up after the Republican Government retreated there in 1949 – I found in a local market a beautifully detailed wooden carving of Guandi, similarly although more elaborately attired in armour, sitting in exactly the same pose with one hand resting on the arm of his chair and the other fondling his long beard as he frowns deep in thought. He now sits brooding on my bookcase, guarding the serried ranks of tomes behind him, many of which focus upon the long history of China; and each time I catch a glimpse of him, it triggers thoughts of the red soapstone Guandi in the British Museum, who similarly sits brooding on all the things he's seen in his 300 years of travelling from China to Britain, and from Britain to China, and back again – from the early days of the Qing, to the European era of 'Enlightenment' – down the centuries to our contemporary modern day.







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*For an interesting and comprehensive overview of the changing attributes, as well as official and popular perceptions of Guandi throughout the ages, see: Prasenjit Duara, 'Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War', in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (November, 1988), pp. 778-795



Pictured right: top, Badaling, 2006; middle: Lintong, Xi'an, 2007; bottom: Palace Museum, Beijing, 2007.

Tian Tan - The Big Buddha of Lantau





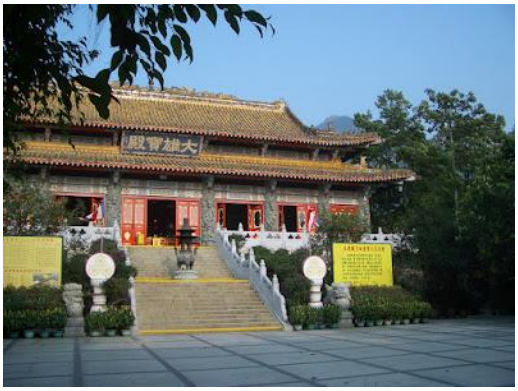
Flying from Tokyo to London in 2007, I had a stopover of a couple of hours in Hong Kong. Too long to sit about in the airport, but not really long enough to do anything else. I'd been to Hong Kong several times before, but I'd never visited the Big Buddha on Lantau – the same island as the airport. But what the heck, I thought – I'd take a chance and be adventurous. Outside it was a bright sunny day with blue skies. So, instead of waiting in the transfer terminal, I passed through immigration and with my passport freshly stamped, I headed down to the taxi rank where I jumped into the back of a turquoise cab and asked the driver to take me to the Tian Tan. Normally you would probably choose to take the cable car from the airport over the hills right up to the top of the ridge where the Big Buddha sits serenely gazing out over the green hills, but at that time, the cable car was closed indefinitely, due to on-going maintenance issues. So the quickest way that day would be by taxi. Another one of my madcap dashes to squeeze the most out of every flying visit I ever seem to make!

It was quite a long drive, through the small town streets and then slowly zig-zagging up the hillside roads through the valleys, past a prison and a reservoir. The roads getting steeper as we climbed. We had to pause part way up as there was roadworks ahead – a huge machine with an industrial hose mounted on a truck was blasting concrete against the hillside above the road, reinforcing the cliff-face to prevent landslides. I didn't know it then, but some friends of mine later said they'd got stuck at this point a few days before and had sat in a traffic jam for a couple of hours as banksmen with Stop/Go signs alternated the flow of traffic going up and coming down, everyone inching along tediously in the baking hot sunshine – little did I know the risk I was running, given that my flight was departing in just a couple of hours' time!



When the taxi finally reached the top of the ridge, I asked the driver if he'd wait for me. But he shook his head and pointed to a taxi rank at which I could see two turquoise taxis waiting, telling me I could pick up another cab there when I was done. So I thanked him, paid him my fare and watched as he zipped away, heading back down the hillside as fast as he could.





Before climbing the steps to the Big Buddha, I decided to take a look around the Po Lin Monastery. The monastery was first established in 1906, but only properly founded as the Po Lin (meaning Precious Lotus) Monastery in the 1920s. It is dedicated to Guanyin, and the main temple building houses three bronze statues, representing the past, present and future Buddhas. The Tian Tan, or Big Buddha statue on the peak overlooking the monastery was built much more recently, in 1993. The monastery itself was quite a secluded place until the 1970s when it first opened its doors to visitors – now, especially since the building of the Big Buddha, it's one of the main tourist attractions in Hong Kong, visited by coachloads of tourists daily. However, I was lucky in that it was relatively empty the day I visited. Great sticks of incense burning in the courtyard outside. It seemed blissfully quiet and peaceful.



I climbed the long flight of steps up to the Tian Tan – 268 of them according to my guidebook, not that I counted them myself. The great Buddha looming overhead is quite an imposing sight as you climb, and the view from the platform on which the Buddha sits in serene meditation is quite something else. The Buddha's right hand is raised in a gesture that signifies the removal of affliction and his left rests in his lap in an open gesture of generosity. Unlike the other great Buddha statues elsewhere which face south, this Buddha faces north. The circular stone dais supporting the giant bronze lotus flower on which he sits is modelled on the Altar of Heaven in Beijing, but unlike the Altar of Heaven it's made of grey stone rather than

polished white marble. Surrounding the Buddha are six smaller bronze figures, representing the Offerings of the Six Devas – each offering in turn, a flower, incense, a lamp, ointment, fruit, and music – symbolising the Six Perfections of generosity, morality, patience, zeal, meditation, and wisdom. The Big Buddha itself is also made of bronze – it is 34 metres tall and weighs over 250 tonnes. It was constructed of 202 separate pieces of bronze on a steel framework. Inside the statue's base I saw a set of photographs showing the statue during the various stages of its construction, each photo accompanied by a very British caption extolling the technical marvels of this feat of engineering in terms of the relevant facts and figures. A list of statistics and Meccano-set-like instructions which, I thought, rather robbed the Great Bronze Buddha of any sense of reverential awe. More a case of empirical facts and figures, rather than faith and feeling. Unlike going inside the giant bronze statue of the Daibutsu at Kamakura in Japan, which has the patina of some eight centuries long since passed to burnish that sense of deep time and the sanctity of genuine belief. Initially, I felt much the same about the Che Kung Temple and Ten Thousand Buddhas Monastery at Sha Tin in the New Territories when I first visited these too – there's just something seemingly not so very sacred about modern concrete effigies, even if they do impress by their sheer size and gaudy decoration. I wonder now though how they might mellow with the passing centuries? – Even the Daibutsu must have looked new and shiny once upon a time, long, long ago …







Time certainly was ticking, however … Glancing at my watch I realised I should be getting back to the airport, where I'd still need enough time to check-in and pass back through immigration and security, before boarding my onward flight. Heading back down the steps, I was rather dismayed to find the taxi rank completely empty. There was nothing to do but wait. The place was eerily quiet.

As the minutes ticked by, I tried not to fidget too soon with a growing sense of unease. But luckily, before the devil of my steadily-growing anxiety really got to sink its fangs in – compulsively causing me to cast increasingly fretful glances at the minute hand of my watch, which seemed to be speeding-up – a turquoise taxi appeared, and laboured round the roadway to drop off a couple of tourists arriving just in time to catch the onset of late afternoon and an enchanting sunset, if they chose to stay that long.

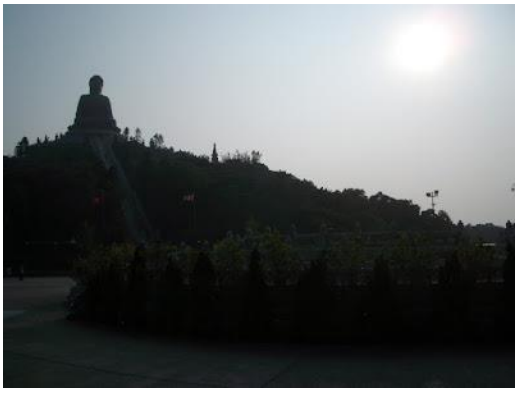








As for me though, I hopped quickly into the back of the cab and was soon whizzing back down the winding roads, descending the hillside, past the hose-like neck of the industrial dragon breathing concrete across the flank of the mountainside; zipping back through the little towns to the airport, where my onward flight was waiting to take me back to London – my little adventure having been worth the risk to pay my respects to the peaceful Tian Tan, the Big Buddha of our modern age, perched upon the hazy hillside looking far out across the green hills and valleys to a calm and serene sea.



Shikumen & Hutong Wandering



Last month I reviewed *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* by Jie Li (Columbia, 2015) for the *LSE Review of Books*. It's an excellent book. Reading it elucidated and informed much of what I recall from many hours spent wandering through Shanghai's shikumen lanes. This September [2015], it will be ten years since I first visited China. I remember how, on my first visits to Beijing and Shanghai, I became fascinated by the *hutong* and *shikumen* of each city respectively. Although distinctly dishevelled, dilapidated, and run down to look at from the outside, they seemed to have a distinctly homely air that hummed with the close-knit feeling of a genuine community.

The 石库门 *shikumen* alleyways in Shanghai were we originally constructed by foreign-owned factories to house their workers in the area of the city which was then known as the 'International Settlement', during the semi-colonial period of the city's administration, from the mid-19th century up to the end of the Second World War and the subsequent Communist revolution in 1949. In contrast, Beijing's *hutong* have a much older heritage, dating back to the Mongol Yuan era in the late-13th century. The name, 胡同 *hutong*, derives from the Mongolian term (*khôtagh*) for a 'water well', suggesting a communal focal point for a set of family dwellings.





I made several trips to Beijing and Shanghai between 2005 and 2010, working on several exhibitions in each city. A colleague and good friend of mine [Nic Lee], on our first few trips in 2005-2006, shared a mutual affinity with me for wandering these old town streets and alleyways for hours on end whenever we could get a chance, either day or night. We roamed them ceaselessly!

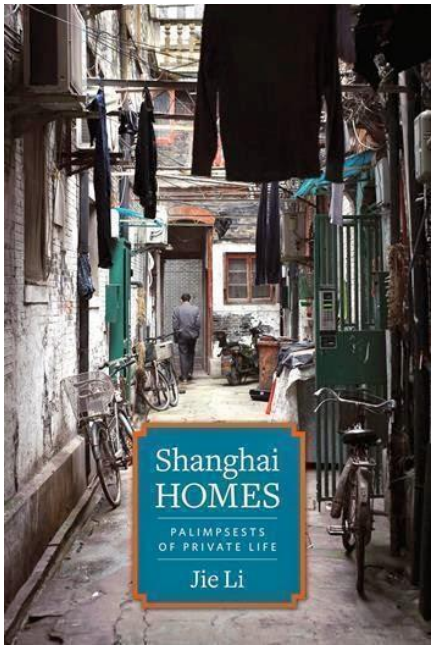




As we walked around these old areas, we were struck by how often we were met with smiling faces. At first, we'd both been rather timid, venturing into what felt like very intimate and enclosed spaces. The labyrinthine little alleyways were intriguing and unfathomable – entering one you never really knew if it would lead you through into another lane, or if you'd end up inside someone's house! – Then, turning a corner, you might just as easily be met by the unexpected. I remember my surprise at rounding one corner to find an old Mosque (Xiaotaoyuan Mosque) suddenly looming up at the end of the lane.









In other areas you'd stumble on a kerbside market, selling vegetables and cuts of meat, bustling with life. Motorbikes, laden with clinking gas canisters, trying to weave their way through the crowd. A game of *mah jong* being played at a table outdoors – with a shrill horde of cheering onlookers, suggesting that the stakes of that particular game were riding high. People all around were out strolling, or sitting smoking, chatting. Proud grandparents showing off new born infants. Kids sprinting home from running errands to nearby food shops. Lines of laundry hung up high overhead, amidst skeins of telegraph wires, bridging the narrow throughfares. Songbirds occasionally singing out from elegant bamboo cages hanging in the shade of the upturned eaves. A bucket being filled from a spluttering faucet in an outdoor communal sink. A sudden waft of unsavoury air when passing the open doorway of a public lavatory. Bicycle repair shops, busy with activity on the street corners. Open-fronted shops with steaming pots, boiling away on smoky stoves, selling dumplings and all sorts of snacks. There was always something to see.

















In writing the review of Jie Li's wonderful book, I went back to my old notebooks and photos. Digging out the sparse diary entries which I'd jotted down whilst on these first few trips to China, and looking through the photos and short films I'd made whilst wandering these back lanes.

I remember a comment my friend made about how sad it was in some ways that this way of life was swiftly being swept away in the building boom which is the "New China" – but then again, he said, these places have long been overcrowded and less than ideal. Things need to change perhaps, but, as Li's book suggests, in losing the bad aspects often it's hard to hold onto – and so, *transfer* – the good aspects, such as that close-knit community feeling, into the new faceless anonymity of the high-rise blocks which are increasingly becoming the norm not just for China, but for so many cities in other parts of Asia too.

What follows are my first impressions of Shanghai, contrasting how I saw Shanghai with my experience of Beijing. I've since been back to each city on a number of different occasions in all seasons, often staying for long periods at a time, in which I got to know each city much better. But it's always interesting to record your first impressions, so that you can look back on them later and see how they compare with what you know and feel now:







<u>Shanghai. March 20th 2006.</u>

After two weeks in Beijing, just two nights in Shanghai is a complete contrast. Beijing, although massive beyond compare, is quieter and a lot more placid. Shanghai on the other hand is truly alive! – Beijing is permeated with the military, the police, bureaucracy and regulation. Shanghai seems more open, more vibrant, and far more diverse. Wealth and poverty here stretch each end of the set of scales. Massive brand new skyscrapers have been built cheek-by-jowl to old shikumen *lanes (Shanghai's equivalent of Beijing's* hutongs*) still packed with life, living, thriving, squalid, but respectable and neat.*





Many of the old buildings in these shikumen *lanes are marked with their numbers for demolition – but, unlike the* hutongs *I saw in Beijing, they still seem to function without care. The empty* hutongs *of Beijing which I saw were forlorn places, bereft of people and life* [because many were in the process of being torn down in preparations ahead

of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games]. *Here too there is all the Technicolor, neon brilliance of somewhere like Tokyo. But also maimed beggars, many limbless and horrifically disfigured, missing eyes and wizened, weathered old faces. These are the two sides of China which I suppose I should have expected.*







Shanghai is perhaps the westerner's most expected reality of Asia. Beijing is a grey 'utopia', popped out of the same mould as GDR-era East Berlin, and the Soviet Eastern Block. Beijingers seem laid back and accepting. Shanghai people either seem completely curious or utterly disinterested. Walking back to the hotel tonight we passed a spot where couples were dancing happily together in the street to music from a loud speaker. Unlike Beijing, I don't think I've seen a single military uniform here in Shanghai yet. I now have an altered impression of China as a country of contrasts. Shanghai is perhaps the ultimate city of total transition. […]





The White Cloud Taoist Temple, Shanghai





In the summer of 2006, I spent a lot of time working and travelling in Asia. After several weeks in Beijing, I went to Shanghai, where I spent a month working on an exhibition at Shanghai Museum; then travelling on to Taipei in Taiwan, and to Tokyo in Japan, before heading back home, via Shanghai once again. In that first month-long stay, I did a lot of exploring on foot, and, consequently, I got to know Shanghai very well. I've since been back on a number of occasions, each time getting to know the city better. It's definitely one of my most favourite cities in the world. I have many magical memories of travelling in China. I hope it's not too long before I get a chance to go back at some point.

Recently, while leafing through a short diary I kept of that summer stay in Shanghai, I found a brief account of a visit I made to the White Cloud Temple (白雲觀 Baiyun Guan), a Taoist temple, the construction of which dates back to the late 19th century. The presence of Taoism in Shanghai itself, however, dates back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1386 AD). The temple stands not far from the Huangpu River, located in the area of the original Chinese walled city, which predated the 'International Settlement' that grew up around it from the late 19th to early 20th centuries.











This is what I wrote at the time:

<u>*Shanghai. June 15th 2006.*</u>

Today was a day of temple wandering on my own. The White Cloud Taoist Temple, the Old Confucian Temple, and the Peach Garden Mosque. The weather was hot and humid. A thick white pall obscuring the opposite bank of Pudong from the Bund. Surprised at the White Cloud Temple, as not piped music but rather a man playing a stringed instrument (a Zheng?). Two ladies there taught me how to make a proper prayer, guiding me simply by gestures and encouraging me to follow their lead, praying and bowing three times to the four directions with a wad of burning joss sticks held, pressed between my hands in front of my forehead, which I then left smoking away in a kind of covered metal font, filled with other burning incense sticks.









After I left, walking back along the road to Renmin Lu, I was passed by a man slow-cycling on a tricycle-trailer. The back was loaded with a couple of boxes of water melons and standing behind him was a small boy, maybe his son, of around two years old. The child looked around slowly and catching sight of me, he broke into a bright-eyed smile and waved. I waved back, and he smiled even more. An old lady pulling a trolley of goods and a young boy standing at the side of the road all smiled to see this. The small boy continued to look back and wave at me while I walked, waving back at him. I watched as eventually the tricycle pedalled across Renmin Lu and disappeared into the Shikumen *lanes across the road, the small boy still smiling and waving at me until we were both out of each other's sight.*





The Star Ferry - Hong Kong



This New Year [2012] began for me with a trip to one of my favourite cities, Hong Kong.

Hong Kong currently bills itself as "Asia's World City" and it is certainly a very diverse and cosmopolitan place. Hong Kong is famously a very densely populated city. But it is also relatively easy to escape from the bustling streets to the much quieter atmosphere of the outlying islands, or the hills of the New Territories. Amidst the tightly crowded skyscrapers and modern buildings, amongst the streets and back-alleys, it's also possible to find traces of old Hong Kong – solid colonial-era buildings and smoky, antique-looking Chinese temples. One of my most favourite things in Hong Kong, though, is the *Star Ferry*.



The Star Ferry now plies only two routes across the shimmering turquoise waters of Victoria Harbour. From Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon side, to Wan Chai and Central, Hong Kong island side. When I first visited Hong Kong, several years ago, it then plied four routes, but the routes to Hung Hom ceased last year [2011].

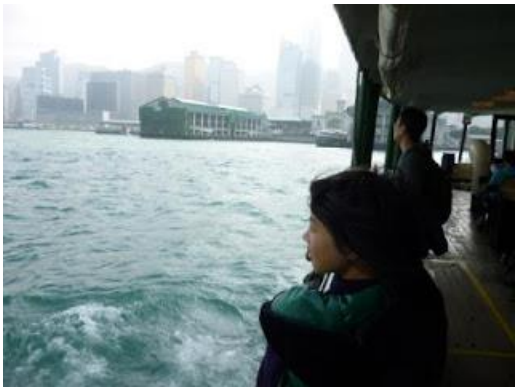
These quaint little boats, painted green and white, are quietly iconic. They are such a part of the fabric of Hong Kong that it would be hard to imagine the place without them. They are rather like a maritime version of London's old red Routemaster buses.



Before the first regular ferry service, people had always crossed the harbour strait in small *sampans*. But in 1870, a twin-screw wooden hulled boat from England, owned by a man named Grant Smith, began to ferry people from one side to the other. However, it wasn't until 1888 that a regular scheduled service was set up.

The "Kowloon Ferry Company" was founded by a Parsee merchant, a former cook, opium trader, and later hotel entrepreneur, named Dorabjee Naorojee

Mithaiwala, who bought Smith's boat. He later acquired two steam boats, one named the *Morning Star,* and the other *Evening Star*. Within ten years the popularity of the service meant he was able to expand his fleet to four steam boats; the two new vessels being the *Rising Star,* and *Guiding Star*. Each boat could take up to one hundred passengers. A local newspaper reported in 1888 that the ferry ran at all hours between Pedders Wharf and Tsim Sha Tsui on a 40 minute to one-hour trip. On Mondays and Fridays, the service halted for the boat's coaling. The first four boats were each single deck vessels, later the company would begin to run boats with two decks, like those still in service today. The company was incorporated in 1898, becoming the "Star Ferry Company," and was sold in the same year, just before Dorabjee's retirement to India. It is said that the company name was inspired by the opening lines of Dorabjee's favourite poem:



Crossing the Bar

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)



Today's twin piers at Tsim Sha Tsui were built in the early 1950s. The present piers at Central were recently relocated due to foreshore reclamation work. The new, fourth-generation building was modelled after the second-generation one, which served the route a hundred years ago.

Many of the boats currently in service in the Star Ferry fleet also date back to the 1950s, although a couple were built as recently as the late 1980s. The boats have a charm of their own which is hard to describe. It's better to experience it first-hand. They seem quaintly old fashioned in many ways, but they are still very much a functioning part of modern Hong Kong's public transport system. The company does run a 'harbour tour' route, but the ferry service itself is by no means

a mere tourist attraction; albeit that most of the current guidebooks list the ferries as a 'must see' element of a stay in Hong Kong. The Star Ferry certainly is the pleasantest way to cross from the mainland to the island or back again. It provides a picturesque view no matter what time of the day or night one chooses to cross. And the harbour itself is always so dynamic that there is always something to see – the graceful arc of a sea kite gliding on the wing and occasionally dropping to the water in the act of fishing, or a *sampan* precariously bobbing about like a popped champagne cork, looking as though it's about to get clobbered by the ferry itself as it steams purposefully ahead across the strait, only to have the danger reversed moments later as one sees a giant cruise liner or heavily laden coaster bearing down on the ferry from the other side.



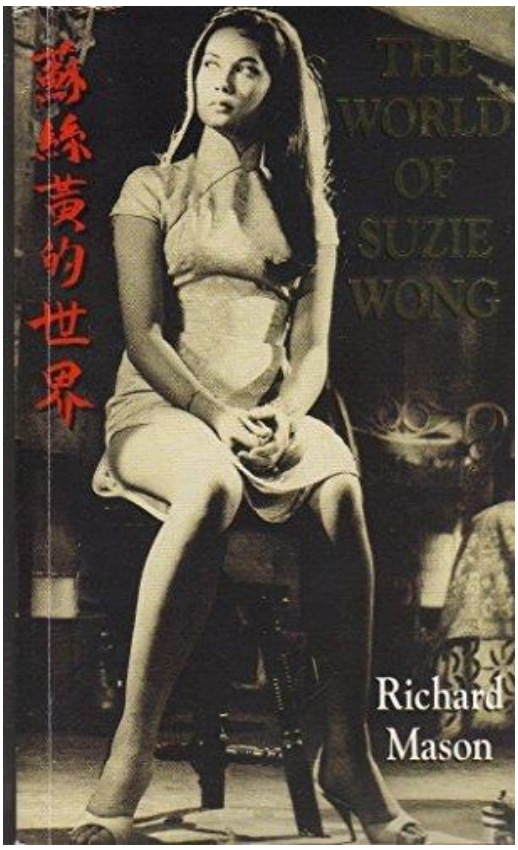
Each crossing is a lively affair with the boat usually packed to the gunwales with passengers on both decks. The upper deck (slightly more expensive) is somewhat more genteel and offers better shelter fore and aft. The lower deck (slightly less expensive) is liable to a bit more noise and pungent diesel smells emanating from the open doors of the roaring engine rooms below. But neither deck is particularly costly at either HK$2.50-HK$3.00 one way (roughly equivalent to 25 or 30 pence at present in the UK). The benches on each deck still look wonderfully Edwardian and are eminently functional with the back piece easily being tilted manually one way or the other depending on the direction of travel.



The crossing feels like a timeless part of Hong Kong's existence. One sits on the boat or stands by the rail looking out at the restless, ever-changing face of the city on either side of the harbour. This sense of timelessness is well caught in the opening pages of Richard Mason's classic Hong Kong novel, *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957):

"The ferryboat came churning alongside and the crowd moved forward. We jostled together up the gangplank and chose one of the slatted bench-seats on the covered top-deck. The ferries were Chinese owned and run, and very

efficient, and we had hardly sat down before the water was churning again, the engines rumbling, the boat palpitating – and we were moving off busily past the Kowloon wharves, past anchored merchant-ships, past great clusters of junks. Ahead, on the island across the channel, was Hong Kong, squeezed into a coastal strip a few hundred yards wide, with the miniature skyscrapers in the centre and on either side the long waterfront, stretching for miles, wedged with sampans and junks; behind rose the steep escarpment of the Peak, shedding the town and the lower social orders as it climbed, until at the higher altitudes there remained only a sprinkling of white bungalows and luxury flats inhabited by the elite."



All that has changed in this description today would be that the skyscrapers are no longer miniature, but rank as some of the tallest in the world, and – sadly – there are no more picturesque looking *junks* beyond one or two occasional tourist curiosities. There are still plenty of *sampans* though.

I took these accompanying pictures on a crossing from Tsim Sha Tsui to Central shortly before the Chinese New Year celebrations last month [2012]. The first photo shows the *Day Star*, built in 1964; and the second picture shows the *Meridian Star,* built in 1958, moored alongside the Tsim Sha Tsui pier. The remaining photos are all of the *Northern Star*, built in 1959. Each has the capacity to seat 576 people.





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NB – The articles collected here were first published on *Waymarks* blog, 2011-2020 (this revised and updated PDF version: © Tim Chamberlain, 2023). http://eccentricparabola.blogspot.com/

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