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The Long March of “Orientalism”: Western Travelers in Modern China

Graves, graves, graves, countless ancestral graves in countless ancestral fields! Always the presence of death! A few naked trees along the railway embankment . . . now and then the dark crenellated walls of some ancient city . . . (Agnes Smedley, 1943).

The fact is that many of the worst rogues, scoundrels and traitors have climbed to power under cover of respectability, the putrid hypocrisy of Confucian maxims, and the priestcraft of the Chinese classics . . . and all this is still more or less true today. (Edgar Snow, 1938).

Among the peasant workmen, decades of deepening poverty had created such superstitious timidity and conservatism—you might say such stupidity—that they suspected anything new, even when it was to their benefit. (Graham Peck, 1950).

They are drawn conventionally enough, these pictures. Travelers finding in a foreign land—here, the China of fifty or sixty years ago—a waste of unchanging hopelessness: a land perceived as corrupt, superstitious, and burdened by a conservatism so rigid it might be taken for stupidity. The images themselves betray a frustration, a kind of fed-upness by the observer with the observed. In no sense are they original, for their pedigree reaches back a century and more, each succeeding generation adding its own detail and coloration to the features conjured up by Western fancies of the country. In such reflections, as Mary Louise Pratt writes, “[s]tudents of colonial discourse will recognize . . . the language of the civilizing mission, with which North Europeans produce other people (for themselves) as ‘natives,’ reductive, incomplete beings suffering from the inability to have become what Europeans already are, or to have made themselves into what Europeans intend them to be.”

But wait. Can the writers quoted here really be packed in together with those nineteenth-century travelers of whom Pratt writes, whose views, she argues, reflect the way “the capitalist vanguard read themselves into the futures of those they sought to exploit, as a kind of moral and historical inevitability?” Surely Edgar Snow and Agnes Smedley, radicals both, would hardly be pleased to find themselves numbered among the agents of the exploiting “capitalist vanguard.” Or indeed to hear their language charged with lapsing into a rhetoric classifiable by today’s critics as “colonial discourse,” as if they were no different from the dollar diplomats of President Taft and his secretary of state Philander Knox, the imperial administrators of Lord Alfred Milner’s South African “kindergarten,” or the white planters who settled the dusky...
world beyond the shores of Europe and North America. Yet the similarities are unmistakable. How can they be accounted for?

What is revealing itself here has less to do with self-defined political stance or self-chosen ideology than with the genre of travel writing in general. All travelers must be translators, mentally processing the foreign in ways that often encompass it within the comforting categories of the familiar (the natives are just like us!), or else constructing it as Other: exotic, erotic, inferior, superior, dangerous. This is the case even if the translations offered by travelers are made only for themselves. But travel writers inevitably respond to a public need: they must turn the strange, the wonderful, the outlandish, the threatening, into an idiom that makes sense not just to themselves but to their audiences back home. “Our observation in any foreign land is extremely superficial,” wrote Henry James of Italy, “and our remarks are happily not addressed to the inhabitants themselves, who would be sure to exclaim upon the impudence of the fancy picture.” His comment applies not simply to travelers, but to all those who undertake descriptions of other peoples, other landscapes, other climes, or other times. Such descriptions may come in various forms: historical, anthropological, literary, journalistic, autobiographical.

When it comes to China, travelers, of course, were not—and are not now—the only people engaged in representing that part of the world for the West. Journalists, scholars, military men, diplomats, traders, missionaries, memoir-writing Old China Hands—they have all provided significant accounts. But as distinct from such reports, the testimony of the travel writer, to the extent that we encounter it in an unalloyed form, has a directness, even a physicality, which is often lacking in the work of other kinds of observers. The journalist is trained to ferret out tomorrow’s story, which all too soon becomes yesterday’s; and the scholarly expert is bound by his academic sources and the dry rationalism of his training. But the writers of travel accounts purport to give us a direct and largely unmediated access to the reality of the place: here is my direct experience, dear Reader, here is what I saw and heard with my own eyes and ears.

Such accounts invite us to trust in their authority, because their insistence on immediacy promises us a direct apprehension not permitted by the conventions of the daily paper or the density of the scholarly text. In the end, it is this that distinguishes travel writing from the range of representations that rely more heavily on what their authors have learned from books, from interviews with leaders, from photographs, from documents lining the dusty shelves of archives, from artifacts glimpsed dimly behind the glass cases of anthropological museums. We expect travelers to sort out for us the confusing and seemingly infinite new perceptions and fresh assaults on the senses, the stories told, the explanations given and withheld—to order all these elements of first-hand experience and make sense of them. Of course, whenever travelers venture beyond such reports to speculate on China’s past or China’s future, they may cross over into areas already staked out by historians or journalists or anthropologists, sovereign territories for which their own passports carry visas of questionable validity. But when they stick to their proper business, they give us—and have always given us—a vivid sense of place, so that we can imagine for ourselves what it feels like to
move through a Chinese city and to engage in conversation with its people face to face.

In this way, travel writers offer us a certain kind of truth. But exactly what kind is it? Consider this statement by one of the greatest—perhaps the greatest—of all the travelers of the late Victorian period, Isabella Bird Bishop, who published her *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* in 1899. "I cannot hope to escape errors," she wrote, "but I have made a laborious effort to be accurate, and I trust and believe that they are not of material importance, and that in the main this volume will be found to convey a truthful impression of the country and its people." It's a wonderful statement, seemingly ingenuous but also with an unintended ambiguity: are we to take the book simply as a truthful account of her own impressions as she traveled up the Great River into western China? Or is she asking us to believe that her impressions of China convey a truthful account of a particular social and natural landscape at a particular time?

Today when we read such texts, we know that we have lost our innocence, an innocence stolen away from us by a whole host of historians, and by the repeated remonstrances of many contemporary literary and cultural critics. Many follow in the footsteps of Professor Edward Said, who back in 1978 first published his critique of what he called "Orientalism." To him, the word signifies not simply Western ethnocentrism, but more importantly the use of a particular set of assumptions and linguistic and descriptive conventions designed to ensure a Western control of the non-Western world. Since then have come the postmodernists, postcolonialists, and if you believe Stanley Fish, post-contemporary-ists, who have ensured that words like "accurate" and "truthful" now make us nervous. So if we still feel obliged to make some use of such words, we tend to set them off by those embarrassed little quotation marks in our writing, signs of the close conspiracy which we share with our knowing audiences; these signs serve as a figurative nudge of the elbow or a raised eyebrow: Reader, you and I both know that these accounts are not what they purport to be. Under these circumstances, we are apt to read Isabella Bird Bishop and her fellows today not so much to find out about China way back when, but to engage in what might be seen as a retrospective conversion of her from traveler into whichever one of a number of other roles interests us: feminist, imperialist, Orientalist, etc. In Bird's case, nowadays she also sells clothes; if you don't believe me, visit www.isabellabird.com, "Clothes for the Adventurous Woman."

For the historian, at any rate, the question is not whether such texts tell the truth or not. All human artifacts—literary texts included—are truthful in some way. The task is to decide what they are truthful about, and what questions to ask them if we expect truthful answers. There's a sense in which a speech by Adolf Hitler or Mao Zedong, for instance, is altogether truthful. But what is it truthful about? The wrong kind of question to ask Hitler is why the Poles or the Jews should be seen as dangers to European peace in 1939, and the wrong kind of question to ask Mao is why the capitalist remnants should have been identified as a danger to China in 1966. But if you ask the right kinds of questions, you can discover much about, say, the perception of the world underlying Nazi or Communist propaganda, organization, planning for the future.
So, too, with travel accounts. We have to ask them the right questions. And that of course means, among other things, figuring out what language they're written in and how that language may reflect various conventions of the time in which they were written. This is the kind of thing that contemporary discourse analysts are inclined to do when they try to uncover the Orientalist aspects of such texts, the ways in which the writers are making implicit or even explicit arguments in favor of, let's say, the continuation of Western imperialism in a country like China. The Chinese are too backward, these texts may tell us, too much in the thrall of tradition and superstition, too immoral, to be able to help themselves. And thus it is our duty to guide them, to help them get over their shortcomings, by bringing them science, Christianity, modern business and commercial practices, modern education. Behind all this lies the belief that History is as defined by the West: a progressive force, ever moving forward, making its logic evident in the experience of Europe and North America. In this view, while everyone agrees that the Chinese have a long past, they have no real History, and it is our duty to connect them with the forces of historical progress. This is what is called the civilizing mission, which has been used so often to justify imperialism. And as Said alleges, by defining History as something made by the West, the West stays in control even of the pasts of others. We do not yet appear to be done with this pattern—but significantly, it hardly seems to be an exclusively East-West matter: look at China doing the same thing in claiming to civilize and bring progress to its allegedly backward and superstitious dependency of Tibet.

Inevitably, then, the direct observation of travelers must come filtered through the use of a language they share with their readers, and that common language colors the choice of subject and determines the peculiar idiom. Thus, in the Western mind, according to Said, the Orient becomes "less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining." Though there are many difficulties in applying Said's particular notion of Orientalism to East Asia, undeniably what is seen to be the Orientalist cast of mind formed part of the intellectual genealogy of Westerners who dealt with China, and who in their representations of that land and its people might easily fall into ways of speaking that participated in the larger Orientalist binaries: Eastern passivity and Western activism, Eastern illogic and Western rationality, Eastern despotism and Western freedom.

Yet critical analyses of Orientalism or colonial discourse, like those carried on by Pratt or Spurr or Said himself, usually focus too narrowly on a selection of writings which argue, explicitly or implicitly, for the imposition or continuation of Western economic or political control. That's hardly surprising, since the use of such discursive frameworks has been closely associated with the grand project of Western imperialism in its many shapes, a project under whose influence there emerged a particular kind of representation of the East that asserted not simply the right but even the duty of Western overlordship. If we follow out the logic of such analyses, however, we see that they can also serve to illuminate the implications of some writings that present themselves as consciously anti-imperial. Thus, as it happens, even while calling attention

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to the construction of the East as the West’s Other, which must become “civilized” (as Westerners define the term), such writings may actually mirror the view of the East associated with the Western metropole. “Colonial discourse,” David Spurr reminds us, “is not a matter of a given ideological position, but rather a series of rhetorical principles that remain constant in their application to the colonial situation regardless of the particular ideology which the writer espouses.” Nineteenth-century bourgeois capitalism, after all, has hardly been the only way of thought to conceive of itself as furthering a universal moral and historical inevitability. Marx and his disciples have seen to that.

Late nineteenth-century observers of China—and here travelers were little different from others—share a view that real history is that shaped by Western experience and an Enlightenment teleology. Accordingly, they join those who, in Said’s terms, arrogate to themselves the right to represent the history (or non-history) of the Other. Heirs of Herder, Hegel, Marx, and Ranke, they perceive China as a land with a long past (though perhaps not quite the seventy thousand millennia claimed by Ping, the courtier of Puccini’s Turandot). But the mere past must not be confused with History, for real History is understood to proceed along a path designated by the signposts devised in the West, marking off classical and medieval times, renaissance and modern times. By the late nineteenth century, Marx’s view that imperialism has its regenerative as well as destructive aspects has become a commonplace: it is widely assumed that not until the West arrives with its commerce, its Christianity, science, and education, has there at last been an attempt to “awaken” the East, and drag it, for its own good, into the contemporary world. Japan seizes the opportunities; but China, that grand old empire, drowns on, her dreams shaped by the deceptive security of the Great Wall that will protect her not only from external enemies, but from also from the ravages of chronology and change, though she little knows that her iron house, to borrow Lu Xun’s famous metaphor, is already on fire. In the minds of Western observers, her problem is not one of race, at least not in the post-Darwin, post-Mendel scientific sense; culture, not biology, is seen as obstructing the natural inevitability of progress. Though they are not usually accused of “priestcraft,” with all the overtones Snow’s word carries for the nativist American mind, Confucius and his followers are routinely blamed for shackling the Chinese intellect and insisting on a numbing conformity to the ways of the past, thus preventing any advance. Buddhism and Taoism, alleged to be guilty of preying on ignorance and superstition, fare no better.

For a while, though, after the first World War, such conventional judgments begin to fall out of favor. Thanks partly to the shock to Western self-confidence growing out of the slaughter of 1914–18; but thanks also to the travelers’ sense that in a world of homogenizing modernity, China’s traditions, her very persistent differences, should be valued rather than deplored. More than that is at work in this change of attitude; indeed, there is a growing suspicion that the civilizing mission may in fact run both ways, and that the West may have something to learn from the East. Ex oriente lux: “The Chinese are gentle, urbane, seeking only justice and freedom,” Bertrand Russell observes, after his travels in the early twenties. “They have a civilization superior to ours in all respects that makes for human happiness” (never mind that some pages earlier he has described the Taiping rebellion laying waste to central China, and costing
twenty million lives). Russell’s picture of a contented and pacific land is by no means uncommon; Graham Peck, on his first trip there in the mid-1930s, praises China’s people for accepting the environment as it is, rather than trying to turn it into the air-conditioned, sterilized, and soundproofed mechanical civilization of the West. Technological backwardness, once the sign of a regrettable primitivism to be overcome, is now, like Gandhi’s spinning wheel, seen as testimony to an admirably simple approach to life.

The Orientalism of travelers like Russell and Peck, of course, descends through a lineage rather different from that examined by Said and his followers. It is a lineage that comes down from Marco Polo’s awestruck wonder at Khubilai’s thirteenth-century empire, and passes through the admiring writings of the seventeenth-century Peking Jesuits and after them the philosophes—like Voltaire—who, never having been close to China, nonetheless improved on the reports given by the fathers. “China offers an enchanting picture of what the whole world might become,” wrote Pierre Poivre in 1769, “if the laws of that empire were to become the laws of all nations”—thus foreshadowing the panegyrics of some of Mao Zedong’s Western admirers two hundred years later. Yet such enchanted views must also be seen as thoroughly Orientalist, for China’s strangeness is still defined against the Western norm. Indeed, the discovery of this strangeness, with its implication that herein can be found the authentic heart of China, becomes one of the features by which self-designated real travelers may distinguish themselves from the mere tourists whose world cruises set them down for brief stays in such Westernized ports as Shanghai or Hong Kong. The qualities that make China “Chinese” thus no longer seem barbarous, repulsive, or a stultifying barrier to human progress; instead they are praised, even exoticized.

Yet this positive re-orientation proves to be shortlived, for a decade later we find our handful of American travelers apparently reverting to the pattern of Orientalism according to Said, dredging up all the old essentializing and unflattering stereotypes of the nineteenth century. Thus as she crosses over into China from what she judges to be the enlightened hopefulness of Stalin’s Soviet Union, Agnes Smedley finds herself suddenly thrust back into the “Middle Ages.” This term, of course, carries a heavy Western freight, and in her use of it (as in her use of “feudal” elsewhere) she participates wholeheartedly in the conventional planting of Western history’s signposts in a country with a quite different past (the European placing herself “in command, almost at will, of Oriental history, time, and geography,” as Said would have it). Centuries, if not millennia, behind the West, this China still embodies all the darkness, barbarity, cruelty, and obscurantism that the idea of “middle ages” still suggests to a certain kind of Anglo-Saxon mind. “Life in Mukden was medieval,” she writes. “Watchmen with brass gongs told the hours of the silent night.” Attending a wedding in the walled, fortress-like building of a landlord who had recently had forty peasants killed, she feels as though she’s “in the castle of some lord of the Middle Ages.” Even as a toast is being raised in honor of the bride, there comes the “clanking of chains from a dark corner of the great hall”; more peasants being brought in to their doom, she learns later. It’s as if the Castle of Otranto had been plucked up and reconstructed half a world away by a Sino-Gothic architect.

In a similar way, Smedley echoes earlier travelers in her discovery of the sharp contrast

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between China’s lovely, even awe-inspiring scenery, and the squalid dinginess of cities, towns, and villages. “In the afternoon,” she writes of a scene in Anhui, “we stood on the crest of a high mountain range and looked down on glory. Below us lay a natural basin of gold with a long azure lake reflecting the azure sky. Fields of ripe grain gleamed like liquid gold. A few small white villages, set in green foliage, sparkled like jewels, and above and about this vision towered black volcanic peaks.” Here we are witnessing the imperial gaze, the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” overview (Pratt’s words) by which travelers appropriate whole landscapes by aestheticizing them, the seers mastering the seen, from their transcendent positions organizing and classifying what they observe according to their own systems of values. Yet those jewel-like villages are best viewed from a distance, framed by nature, or from above, as in one of those nineteenth century bird’s-eye views of small New England towns. For closer inspection reveals them as squalid and filthy, filled with wretchedness, sickness, and suffering, their deficiencies demanding an external intervention to be put right, or, in Smedley’s words, “a gigantic transformation.”

On his way to the Communist headquarters in 1936, Edgar Snow spends a night “in a filthy hut . . . with pigs and donkeys quartered in the next room, and rats in my own.” At such places, Ilona Ralf Sues, another American traveler, discovers, “[t]here was practically nothing to be had but grayish water-noodle soup, stale steamed bread, and an occasional egg. No meat, no vegetables. Oh, yes, some dark-brown pickled turnip, which at least had a taste. Dire poverty, tumbledown huts, swarms of half-naked beggars in every village.”9 Filth remains everywhere, and as an English traveler had written three decades earlier, still seems inseparable from the life of the people (“I remember,” he remarked, “. . . that I am in China and must not be disgusted”).10

Dirt, smells, poverty, and squalor: all are standard signifiers of degeneration and the uncivilized. So is superstition. Traveling into the hill villages of Sichuan in the early forties, Graham Peck observes “the picturesque colored papers on the houses, the fresh incense and tapers for the approaching Chinese New Year . . . pathetic signs of superstition, an expensive and hopeless way of coping with uncomprehended troubles.”11 As much as any intolerant Christian missionary he takes the Buddhist priesthood to task for preying on Chinese credulousness, and for its alleged frequent breaches of the vow of chastity, while in castigating the habit of “convenient indirectness,” he echoes the exasperation, forty years earlier, of the missionary Arthur H. Smith who numbered a “disregard for accuracy” among the Chinese Characteristics which formed the subject of his book.12

Vast and incomprehensible, such a land threatens Western rationality and Western organization, just as the meaningless “boum” of E. M. Forster’s Marabar Caves threatens English interlopers in India. The language used by Graham Peck, as he approaches the country for the first time from the sea, breathes a sense of unseen and mysterious danger: “The scarred moon was beginning to show through the mist when the ice-breaker crawled up a muddy river and docked at a torchlit pier on the edge of a marsh, beside the neglected corpse of a railway station. Here the faint menace of the Asiatic night crystallized in a horde of giant porters in tattered coats and barbaric fur hats.”13 Beside such avowedly progressive neo-Orientalist representations of
China's ancient capital, a modernized city like Shanghai, with its bustling streets and new department stores and neon lights and busy docks and missionary universities and Westernized businessmen, is understood to be no more than peripheral to China, the real China. For behind the Potemkin village being constructed by Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalists, behind his young technocrats from Harvard and Cambridge and St. John's and Yenching, behind the optimistic predictions of Henry Luce's China Lobby and the Protestant missionaries, the old essential China lives on, wrapped in its cloak of endless night, its ancient barbarisms strong and palpable as ever. The travelers of the thirties, penetrating into the country's dark interior, thus find little to admire in its supposed immunity to innovation, or its apparent fidelity to those imagined traditions of harmony, pacifism, and happiness which had so entranced visitors like Bertrand Russell. Has anything really changed in this China since it was described by a visiting American observer some four decades earlier, as a land "sunk in dirt and disorder, decadent, degenerate . . . combating with most zeal anything that would alter conditions even for the better"?  

How are we to understand the persistence of this general view? Are these men and women of the left simply repeating all the old familiar prejudices of several decades earlier?  

Yes and no. What has changed is that no longer is the blame for China's misfortunes seen to rest with the people themselves, dull, unimaginative, and resistant to improvement as they have earlier been portrayed. Rather these well-worn Orientalist stereotypes, with all their ethnocentric, not to say racist, baggage, are being dusted off and brought into play for a very specific purpose. They are now used in the service of a rhetorical campaign against the particular regime of Chiang Kai-shek and his generals: Chiang, who in the conventional view of the left had turned in 1927 against his Communist allies and the progress they saw themselves as representing, to impose a dictatorship now seemingly backed by alick Shanghai business men and power brokers like the Soongs and the Kungs, as well as the "feudal" landlords who retain their centuries-old iron grip on the countryside and its peasants. Western Christianity and Western capitalism, which earlier might have been the means to break China out of her stagnant past, are now judged to have been appropriated by the Nationalists to cement their own illicit power.  

Yet in the eyes of these later twentieth-century observers there is still hope, for China is at last awakening from "two millenniums of sleep," as Edgar Snow concludes. As he sees the situation, a new trail is being blazed that promises to lead the country out of the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom—though a freedom quite unlike the one envisaged by American businessmen or American missionaries.  

This new way is, of course, Communism. Or at least what is called "Communism" by its Chinese practitioners, for it is apparently taking a form rather different from that visible in the Soviet Union. Edgar Snow first encounters this development in 1936, when he makes his way in secret from Xi'an to Baoan, Mao Zedong's temporary northwestern headquarters, and for Snow and those who follow him, the line dividing White from Red China is no mere geographer's expression, but a rhetorical or discursive frontier as well. For if on one side of this border lies that backward and impoverished

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land whose age-old characteristics have so dismayed earlier observers, on the other side, reaching into the future, is a new country, its qualities reflecting much of the best in Western, and particularly American, progressivism. Two Chinas: and each, in being described, demands its own discourse, its own metaphors, its own idiom.16

“Foreigners who believe that Chinese are passive, unemotional creatures would have revised their beliefs if they had seen the Manchurian Army,” writes Agnes Smedley of troops who, while not Communists, had recently kidnapped the Generalissimo at Xi’an in December 1936, refusing to participate in his drive against the Red Army. Parading through the city, their cavalrymen look “much like pictures of Daniel Boone. Manchurian infantrymen, as tall and strong as Americans, followed.” The frontier image is no accident; the new China being forged before her eyes is perceived as admirable precisely because it breaks with all the old images drawn from the past, breaks with all those qualities that for so long have defined China as “Chinese,” and that continue to define Chiang Kai-shek’s China. “Journalists never returned from the Red Army,” she writes, “without feeling that they had been among modern men, men much like themselves” (my italics).

“Perhaps the worst that should be said of him,” Graham Peck observes of the Generalissimo, whom he despised, “was that he was not a modern man.” Unable to get to Mao’s headquarters at Yan’an, Peck never gets to see this other, un-“Chinese” China, so filled with promise for the future. Though he thus stays on only one side of the discursive frontier, while in that territory he draws on the full repertoire of negative images borne down through the generations: images of corruption, superstition, cruelty, and a mindless, stupid conservatism. Perhaps that is why Two Kinds of Time—half travel book, half analysis of Nationalist failures—has about it a kind of hopelessness at odds with the optimism that characterizes similar accounts.

To Peck, Chiang’s China is no more than a monstrous “practical joke.” Moreover, he sees his own country making more than its share of mistakes. With one or two exceptions, Peck finds his fellow Americans, whether diplomats, military men, or missionaries, to be obtuse and patronizing at best, outright racists at worst. Similarly, Agnes Smedley takes pains to point out what separates her from her own countrymen in China (the sorts of Americans who “thought of the Chinese as ‘Chinamen’ who took in washing for a living”), and to remind her readers repeatedly that her sympathies lie with the downtrodden rather than with the fat Nationalist profiteers who in her characterization make up the Generalissimo’s entourage. For his part, Snow draws a line (as the Maoists would say) between himself and the kinds of expatriates who live within the “never-never land” of the Beijing Legation Quarter, where they spend their time gossiping while they knock back their whiskey-and-sodas, insulated from life beyond the city’s great gray walls.

In such summary dismissals, of course, such writers reflect the long-established convention whereby those who identify themselves as sensitive and thoughtful travelers insist on the differences distinguishing them from mere tourists, or from their less astute or broad-minded compatriots. Yet at the same time, in describing Nationalist China they participate fully in the earlier discourses of Orientalism and colonialism, unwilling to forego the rich store of images which have for so long been associated
with China, and which still arouse very particular resonances in the minds of their readers. Take, for instance, two portraits, one from Nationalist, one from Communist China, drawn by Ilona Ralf Sues in these years. The first is that of Du Yusheng, the notorious gangster chief, opium baron, labor racketeer, and Shanghai philanthropist whom she is determined to track down—despite warnings from her friends—in his lair in that city. Fascinated, yet repelled, she watches him:

... a gaunt, shoulderless figure, with long, aimlessly swinging arms, clad in a soiled, spotted blue cotton gown, flat feet shod in untidy old slippers; a long, egg-shaped head, short-cropped hair, receding forehead, no chin, huge, batlike ears, cold, cruel lips uncovering big, yellow decayed teeth, the sickly complexion of an addict. ... I had never seen such eyes before. Eyes so dark that they seemed to have no pupils, blurred and dull—dead, impenetrable eyes. ... He gave me his limp, cold hand. A huge, bony hand with two-inches-long, brown, opium-stained claws.

The classical Chinese villain, in short, made familiar even before Hollywood by Sax Rohmer’s insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu (who also possessed an “amazing skull,” and “clawish hand,” and whose “emotionless face [was] a mask of incredible evil”). Decades later, Ian Fleming’s equally wicked half-Chinese, half-German Dr. No would make his appearance, clearly a product of the same sinister gene pool.

A year or two later, however, fed up with the Nationalists (for whom she’d been working in Hankou), Sues joins the pilgrimage to Yan’an, and there, like others, meets Mao:

[T]he most wonderful face I had never seen. I had looked forward to seeing a man—a great revolutionary, but a man just the same. I had not expected to find myself face to face with the Chinese nation incarnate. ... There are moments when life unexpectedly gives us a fleeting glimpse of eternity. That is what I felt at the first sight of this imposing, timeless, erect figure. Peasant, poet, philosopher, revolutionary, and statesman in one—rooted in a legend, grown out of China’s history of sorrow and glory, matured in our days into a living part of China’s destiny, and leading his people out of bondage into freedom, into the future.

“The Chinese nation incarnate.” Like all travelers, Sues seeks the essential aspect of the land in which she is a visitor, and at last she has come to discover it reflected in a single man; this leads her to a conviction that she has succeeded in penetrating a new Chinese reality lying behind all surface appearances. The critic James Buzard’s analysis of the distinction between travelers and tourists is to the point here: while “tourists” are incapable of grasping the authentic, integrative concept of a place or a people, “travelers” reach for symbols that stand for and express the essence of the whole, and thus believe that they have made a meaningful contact with what those places are. Other travelers might search for China’s essence in the signs of an unchanging tradition, or in the gray walls and gates and temples and palaces that defined Beijing, or the sorts of mountains that might have come out of a Northern Song landscape once observed in a museum, or even in the “medieval” barbarities of some of the nation’s customs. But for Sues the most essential features shine forth not from a monument or a landscape, but from a man who looks “Chinese” in an almost visionary sense, a Leader who links the two Chinas, links the burdens of the

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country's long and sorrowful history with all the promises of the future. Whatever the political ideas that inform it, the vision's purpose always remains the same: the identification of the essence enables the traveler to tame the enormous size and enormous diversity of the land, gives him a way to say, There, I have found it, this is the real China.

Yet if Mao Zedong represents the reality of one China, so does Du Yuesheng encapsulate the reality of another. For the Orient of Western imaginings persists in being a place of difference and danger, a region which, if it does not need to be subdued, remains an area of backwardness which must be helped to rise towards the light of civilization. And what is interesting about the writers of the latter half of the century just concluded is that, despite their presumed progressivism, they continue to draw from this old rhetoric that defines China—a China that is dark, backward, and barbaric—so that their travelers' tales appeal to all those old Occidental attitudes and memories.

Far from dismissing this negative vision of pre-modern China as a mere Western imagining, they describe it in great, almost loving detail, making use of all the discursive formations of their predecessors, reconstructing the old empire of tyranny, backwardness, corruption, and superstition that has fascinated and horrified observers for generations. Precisely because it is fascinating and horrifying—the addict's claw-like hands stained with opium, the unfathomable medieval barbarities of the country's rulers—this vision seems just too good to let go. Moreover, by linking images of this barbaric empire of the past, with all its shortcomings and cruelties, to the specific regime of Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalists in the present, these self-consciously modern travelers manage to discredit him, while holding out the old possibility of a brighter future glimpsed in the northwest.

In sum, they have not yet abandoned the civilizing mission, a mission which, as Pratt points out, is powerful and flexible. "It asserts its power over anyone or any place whose lifeways have been organized by principles other than the maximizing, rationalizing mechanisms of industrial production and the manipulations of commodity capitalism. It tolerates all manner of contradiction." Again, we need to remind ourselves that her formulation is unnecessarily restrictive. Precisely because of its power and flexibility, the civilizing mission is by no means the property only of commodity capitalism, and could well include, for example, the kind of "gigantic transformation" that Smedley had seen at work under Stalin. "China was bound by a thousand chains both internal and foreign," Smedley writes; in contrast "the people of the Soviet Union labored under heavy burdens, but no one owned them, their land, or their industries. They were a proud, awakened people." More recently, of course, the world has found itself witnessing China playing a similar role abroad in the modernization and "civilization" of its Tibetan dependency, and at home in the "gigantic transformations" associated with developments like the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Do these developments suggest that China has at last reached the point of freedom and self-determination? Not, in the end, in the minds of such writers as we have been considering. For the Western historical framework is part of the air they breathe, and they continue to impose it upon China, even if it is to take shape as the working
out of a modernist or Marxist design. Communism, for all its professions of belief in
the universality of Marx's laws of historical development, remains made in the West,
and the standards by which China's progress is to be measured are identified with
those very signposts first planted by the West—feudal, medieval, modern, and so
forth—and drawn from the Western experience. Ultimately, then, it is still the
Westerners who decide, on the basis of rules they have written for their 'home playing
fields, not only what is and what is not modern or progressive, but even what is and
what is not peculiarly "Chinese." In the end, whatever their latest political disposition,
Westerners remain, as Said has complained of certain travelers in earlier eras, as
much in control of Oriental time and history as ever.

NOTES

1. Agnes Smedley, Battle Hymn of China (New York: Knopf, 1943), 58; Edgar Snow, Red Star
Over China (New York: Random House, 1938), 15; Graham Peck, Two Kinds of Time (Boston:
Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 179.
2. Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London and New
York: Routledge, 1992), 152–53. See also David Spurr, The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse
in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) and Sara Mills, Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing
4. Though there are many discussions of the general problems raised by "Orientalism," one of
the most cogent, from the historian's point of view, is that by John MacKenzie, who is
particularly worried by Said's ahistoricism, in Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts (Man-
chester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 20–39. For the application of Orientalism to
East Asia, see Arif Dirlik, "Chinese history and the question of Orientalism." History and
Theory, xxxv no. 4 (December 1996), 96–119. The topic was also explored in a thread on
H-ASIA, 2–11 March 1996 (http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~asia/threads/thrdoriental-
ism.html).
5. Spurr, Rhetoric, 39.
8. Said, Orientalism, 86.
9. Ilona Ralf Sues, Shark's Fins and Millet (Boston: Little, Brown, 1944), 256.
(New York: Henry Holt, 1911), 90.
12. Peck, Time, 47–48, 189, 250; Arthur H. Smith, Chinese Characteristics (Boston and Chicago:
14. Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore, China: The Long-lived Empire (New York: Century Co., 1900),
5–6, 336.

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