

## REPRESENTATIONS OF CHINA IN WESTERN TRAVEL ACCOUNTS DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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**Abstract:** *The 1800's brought a very pronounced change in the images of China produced by Westerners. What was left of the admiration and the reverence expressed regularly towards China in earlier times, was replaced by skepticism, suspicion and, finally, deep contempt. Fragmentary positive images were still being produced, as there is no such thing as a uniform attitude, but it was at this historical moment that China's image in Europe began to suffer the most. The paper discusses in detail the reasons for this shift and illustrates the aforementioned tendency with several travel accounts written by prominent authors such as John Barrow and Arthur Smith.*

**Keywords:** *China, Images, travel accounts, imagology, nineteenth century.*

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, the vogue of *chinoiserie* entered a period of terminal decline. Western interest in it had begun to wane as early as the second half of the century but during the nineteenth century the trend became much more pronounced. The admiration that many Europeans harbored towards Confucian moral and aesthetic values began to disappear even more quickly. The Chinese silks, wallpaper, porcelain, paintings and furniture were losing their appeal. The beginning of the Industrial Revolution accelerated this process as it was starting to fundamentally change the way people looked upon the world. One of the last symbols of *chinoiserie* in England was erected in 1836: an illuminated Chinese style bandstand, resembling a pagoda. Although it was “the star attraction of the Cremorne Pleasure Gardens” (Witchard 2004, 2), it marked the ending of a fashion which had begun more than two centuries earlier. Quite significantly, this particular attitude shift was one of the certain symptoms that Western attitudes towards China were also rapidly changing, and for the worse.

The main reason was the rise of British imperialism, which was directly linked with the Industrial Revolution. In this new environment, dominated by imperialism and the idea of industrial progress, what people knew about China and, more importantly, **how** they knew it, began to be seen in a very different light. In his book *The Chinese Chameleon* Raymond Dawson makes an observation about the relation between knowledge about a foreign country and the attitudes of the holders of this knowledge: “The glorious tapestry of Cathay was frayed and tattered as a consequence alike of satirical attacks, of the inevitable

shift of taste, and of accumulation of **genuine knowledge** of the country [my emphasis]” (Dawson 1967, 132). As the postcolonial critique has shown, the concept of ‘genuine knowledge’ is very problematic not only because there are different kinds of knowledge but also because ‘knowledge’ itself is hardly ever innocent. Ever since Foucault it has been strongly linked with ‘power’ and Edward Said has demonstrated in his *Orientalism* that knowledge is hardly ever impartial or purely academic. While genuine **factual** information is not unobtainable, the uses of this information can vary so greatly, especially in a colonialist context, that the knowledge itself can become distorted. As the images created by the nineteenth-century travel writers demonstrate, an increased store of factual information does not necessarily lead to a better understanding or acceptance of Chinese culture.

The combination of rapid industrialization at home and an energetic colonial expansion abroad made the British and other Western Europeans feel superior to the inhabitants of other lands, especially oriental ones. The lack of comparable industrial progress came to be viewed as a sure sign of backwardness. Much of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European intellectual thought had been marked by a pronounced tendency to view Chinese Confucian moral code and especially Chinese law as something to look up to and try to emulate. This attitude had changed almost completely by the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1823 Andrew Cherry published his play *The travellers, or, Music’s fascination: an operatic drama*. In it, the Chinese Prince Zaphimri travels to Europe to learn from the British juridical system.

Koyan: ... [T]he prince should travel... through Constantinople, Naples, England...

Mindora: England – said’st thou?

Koyan: Yes, my mother, there to scan those laws which wandering nations silently admire, and envy what they cannot emulate (Cherry 1823, 8).

Additional ideological justification for this new attitude and for the new images that were being produced was provided by the protestant missionaries who began to arrive in China early in the nineteenth century. The Jesuits had withdrawn from China in the 1770s and their humanism and relative open-mindedness were replaced by the much more rigid, conservative and narrow-minded protestant viewpoint. The new missionaries were not in the least inclined to view the ancient Chinese beliefs with a tolerant eye. To them, even the most intelligent Chinese were inferior to the most unenlightened Europeans simply because they have not accepted the ‘true’ faith. In the words of Ian Welch, “The majority of 19th century Protestant evangelical missionaries hoped that

converted Chinese individuals would contribute to the reconstruction of China in which an 'enlightened', i.e., essentially European, Christian worldview would replace 'heathen' values" (Welch 2006, 6). Although the missionary efforts of the Protestants were largely unsuccessful, they influenced European ideas of China rather heavily. In addition, the missionary presence grew significantly after 1880 (Welch 2006, 10) and so did the image forming capacity of their intellectual influence.

Another important reason for the deteriorating image of China in nineteenth-century Europe was the rapid decline of the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911) – the last imperial dynasty in China.

The images of China produced in the West took a sharp turn for the worse with the beginning of the so-called Century of humiliation. Chinese military weakness had been periodically witnessed since the sixteenth century but it was towards the middle of the nineteenth that it became apparent how bad the Chinese military machine really was, especially compared to the Western achievements in this sphere. In 1838 the Chinese government decided to crack down on the opium import that had been in progress since the late eighteenth century. Large amounts of opium, shipped by The East India Company, were seized and destroyed. This action led to the two Opium wars (1839 – 1842) and 1856 – 1860) which resulted in the sound defeat of the Chinese troops at the hands of the British Empire. It was at this point that China was turned into something like a semi-colonial region in which several Western countries (mainly England, France and the USA) could trade and do business as they saw fit. The humiliation was compiled by the Sino-French war (1884 – 1885) and the first Sino-Japanese war (1894 – 1895), both with negative outcomes for China.

In 1860 occurred the infamous burning and looting of the Old Summer Palace by Anglo-French troops in Peking, done in retaliation for Chinese mistreatment of British and French prisoners. The writings of some of the participants in this act exposed to the attitude held by many of the Western soldiers. Captain Charles George Gordon, for instance, wrote:

[We] burned the whole place, destroying in a vandal-like manner most valuable property which would not be replaced for four millions. We got upward of £48 apiece prize money... I have done well... You can scarcely imagine the beauty and magnificence of the places we burnt... [T]hese places were so large, and we were so pressed for time, that **we could not plunder them carefully** [my emphasis]. (Hake 1896, 18)

The military humiliation of the Chinese at the hands of the West and their apparent refusal to adopt the values and principles of Christianity (which was

viewed by many as the only way out of heathenism) were perceived as signs of imperial and moral decline. In various Western writings the Chinese began to be constructed in an even more derogatory and contemptuous way. As Clarke writes, “China, though never colonised in the full sense, became in the period of Western imperial expansion a standard object of ethnocentric bias, ridiculed for its backwardness and moral vileness. Scholars often gave their support to such attitudes” (Clarke 1997, 17).

The American Protestant missionary Samuel Wells Williams, for instance, spent forty-three years in China, trying “to obtain the **correct knowledge** [my emphasis]” (Isaacs 1980, 133) of the people living there. The knowledge he obtained might indeed be considered “correct”, but not in the sense in which Williams is using the word. He apparently means ‘objective’ and ‘truthful’ but, judging by the contemptuous and condemning tone he employs, his “knowledge” is correct only in the sense discussed by Said and other postcolonial critics: his intellectual claims are all too supportive of the imperial policies adopted by large parts of the West. In this sense, ‘correct’ would mean “supporting the practices of the powerful Occident”. In 1848 he published his comprehensive work *The Middle Kingdom*, which became extremely popular and had great image-formulating capacity. In it he claims that one of his main purposes is “to divest the Chinese people and civilization of that peculiar and almost undefinable impression of ridicule which is so generally given them; as if they were the apes of Europeans” (Williams 1848, 1: xv). What he does, however, is almost the complete opposite. Occasionally, he manages to find things worth praising, such as the orderliness of the country) but he denies the existence of a stable moral foundation in Chinese society, dismisses Chinese science as far inferior to its western counterpart and draws a devastating picture of the Chinese character. “The Chinese are... left without excuse for their wickedness... With a general regard for outward decency, they are vile and polluted in a shocked degree; ... a kind and degree of moral degradation of which an excessive statement can scarcely be made or an adequate conception hardly be formed” (Isaacs 1980, 136).

The production of similar images was not restricted to texts produced by people who had spent time in China. The popular nineteenth-century British conception of the heathen and degenerate Chinese was similarly reinforced by the local media. In his insightful book *Drawing the Dragon: Western European Reinvention of China* Zhijian Tao points out that “[p]opular culture, such as magazine essays, cartoons, literary and semi-literary works... also played a part in the reinvention of China” (Tao 2009, 179). In April 1858 *Punch* published the following verse:

## A Chanson for Canton

John Chinaman a rogue is born,  
 The laws of truth he holds in scorn;  
 About as great a brute as can  
 Encumber the Earth is John Chinaman.  
 Sing Yeh, my cruel John Chinaman,  
 Sing Yeo, my stubborn John Chinaman;  
 Not Cobden himself can take off the ban  
 By humanity laid on John Chinaman.

With their little pig-eyes and their large pig-tails,  
 And their diet of rats, dogs, slugs and snails,  
 All seems to be game in the frying pan  
 Of that nasty feeder John Chinaman.  
 Sing lie-tea, my sly John Chinaman,  
 No fightee, my coward John Chinaman,  
 John Bull has a chance – let him, if he can,  
 Somewhat open the eyes of John Chinaman.

Charles Darwin's revolutionary theory of evolution through natural selection was yet another factor that influenced the construction of images of China in the nineteenth century. It is noteworthy that the generally frivolous application of this theory worked both ways: on the one hand, religion suffered a heavy blow and it became apparent to many that the Christian idea of salvation in the afterlife was largely ephemeral in comparison to what could be done in **this** life to alleviate the suffering of the less fortunate. This led to the appearance of a more philanthropic attitude which, in turn, resulted in an increased number of less denigrating images of the Chinese, produced by authors like James Legge and George Morrison. On the other hand, Darwin's theory was, in some cases, misunderstood and badly misused in order to present the Chinese population as a subhuman race. In 1897 the influential English-language newspaper *North China Herald* published an article by an unknown writer who mentioned the work done by the Dutch paleoanthropologist Eugene Dubois, the discoverer of *Homo erectus* (the "Java Man"). He claimed that, judging by their anthropological features, the Chinese occupied a place between *Homo erectus* and contemporary humans and were certainly not as highly evolved as modern Europeans.

The Oriental is plainly less highly evolved than the European. Many Chinese have retained vestigial control of feet which Europeans have lost... Man is never nearer the beasts than when he is angry... [When a Chinese person is enraged] his simian ancestry have returned... and transformed him into a raging beast whose eyes glare, whose mouth foams with almost as poisonous a secretion as that of a mad dog... Watch him half bend himself downwards and then spring up with a jerk, his gesticulating arm and twitching fingers hardly under control: he is the very picture of an enraged anthropoid ape. (Giles 1970, 9)

As Giles comments, there was “a widespread belief among [the foreigners who read such articles] at the end of the nineteenth century that the Chinese were markedly different from themselves, and that there was plenty of scope for Chinese to change for the better” (9). Darwin’s ideas about complexity, diversity and interdependence were conveniently ignored. “Darwinist terminology conquered most academic disciplines, expressing itself as eugenics in biology, environmental determinism in geography, cultural evolutionism in anthropology and so forth” (Hung 2003, 269).

The anti-Western Boxer rebellion at the very end of the century did nothing to alleviate such attitudes. The images that were sent back to Europe and the USA constructed the whole situation in a very specific way: the Westerners were represented as noble and courageous and the Chinese rebels – as an uncontrollable mass of semi-wild, primitive peasants.

Another image that added to the common nineteenth-century perception of the Chinese as a nation of subhuman individuals, was constructed in 1866 when the English physician John Langdon Down used the term “Mongoloid” to describe people with the inherited genetic condition that was later called Down Syndrome. It was also referred to as “Mongoloid idiocy”. “Implicit in this was the feeling that the genetic defect... was related to the hereditary reasons why the people of eastern Asia differ in general appearance from the people of Western Europe” (Brace 2009, 291). The glaring racism of this notion was not recognized until the twentieth century. Thus, medical science also appeared to confirm the inferiority of the Chinese people. This is a good example of the relationship between scientific “knowledge” (or what was perceived as knowledge) and political power.

Only a century and a half earlier many Europeans had been inclined to view China as an enlightened empire at the height of its power and glory, which could teach the rest of the world valuable lessons. Now this view was all but extinct and replaced by the strong conviction that from this point on it would be China that would learn from the West, not the other way around. This conviction was largely shaped by Western belief in progress and change, rather typical of nineteenth-century Europe. China was perceived to be stagnant and motion-

less which condemned it in the eyes of many Europeans. As early as 1794 Lord Macartney, in his *An Embassy to China*, had written: “A nation that does not advance must retrograde and finally fall back to barbarism and misery” (Tuck 2000, 50).

John Barrow’s book *Travels in China* (1804) is an excellent illustration of those new tendencies in the Western perceptions of China. Barrow himself was a member of Lord George Macartney’s embassy to Peking which had started as early as 1793. After the exit of the Jesuits in the 1770’s this event heralded the commencement of a new period in Sino-British relations, characterized by an increased Western confidence as well as contempt for the Chinese empire.

In the “Advertisement” before Chapter 1 the author makes it clear that the opinions expressed in his book will be in sharp contrast with the largely benevolent public attitude towards China during the previous century but defends them as being “the unbiassed conclusions of his own mind, founded altogether on his own observations” (Barrow 1804, xii). After this warning he proceeds to level a searing attack on all aspects of Chinese society, creating images which must have resounded with considerable force in nineteenth-century Britain. A strong tendency that emerges from his writing is his readiness to make sweeping statements (especially negative) and to present the disagreeable features he observes in individual people as applicable to the whole Chinese society.

[Cleanliness] forms no part of their character. On the contrary they are what Swift would call frowzy people. The comfort of clean linen, or frequent change of under-garments, is equally unknown to the Sovereign and to the peasant... Their bodies are as seldom washed as their articles of dress. They never make use of the bath, neither warm nor cold. (Barrow 1804, 76–77)

The general character... of the nation is a strange compound of pride and meanness, of affected gravity and real frivolousness, of refined civility and gross indelicacy. (187)

It is very significant, however, that, while Barrow is extremely condescending and contemptuous, he does not ascribe what he perceives as contemptible and repulsive to some innate features of the Oriental character in the way that later travelers do. Instead, he blames these features on the inadequate government which, in his view, can be described in “terms of tyranny, oppression, and injustice” which result in “fear, deceit, and disobedience” (360) in the common people. The cruelty of the legal punishments “exclude[s] and obliterate[s] every notion of the dignity of human nature” (179). Before ascribing such an attitude to some traces of benevolence or ‘objectivity’ on the part of the author, one should take into account the political implications carried by such a concession

(as Debbie Lisle repeatedly argues in her book *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, a depoliticized approach is liable to lead to a biased and incomplete analysis). The suggestion that the ‘depravity’ of the Chinese character is caused by a corrupt and incompetent government, and not by some innate, unchangeable trait, provides a very convenient excuse for a future colonialist intervention. If the reason for the ‘uncivilized’ condition of the Chinese could be found in the corruption and depravity of the rulers, then a Western civilizing mission could be made to look like the ultimate cure.

A very influential and image-forming work – *Chinese Characteristics* – was produced in 1894 by the American missionary Arthur Smith, who had spent twenty-two years in China. He makes it clear that he accepts as completely valid the opposition truth-untruth and that “[m]any witnesses concerning the Chinese have told the truth” (Smith 1776, 9). With this attitude he sets about creating a long and comprehensive list of Chinese national traits that he evidently perceives to be nearly universal. He often provides specific examples intended to illustrate and ‘prove’ his points. In his introduction he gives a rather surprising (for this historical period) warning against generalizations, stating that “China is a vast whole, and one who has never even visited more than half its provinces, and who has lived in but two of them, is certainly not entitled to generalise for the whole Empire” (11). Such a pronouncement against essentialism at a time when Western (though not American) imperialism was at its height, is rather impressive. The text itself, however, does not even attempt to live up to this commendable standard: it is riddled with sweeping generalizations and extremely essentializing statements. Another innovative intention of the author is not to be denigrating. “There can be no valid excuse for withholding commendation from the Chinese for any one of the many good qualities which they possess and exhibit” (12). In this respect he does a little better but, again, his intention remains largely theoretical: the text itself betrays Smith’s impatience, his constant irritation and deep conviction that the Chinese can only be saved from their backwardness by the West. Some of the titles of his chapters, which he devotes to specific characteristics, give an excellent impression of the overall tone of the book:

Disregard of Time	Absence of Public Spirit
Disregard of Accuracy	Absence of Sympathy
Talent for Misunderstanding	Absence of Sincerity
Talent for Indirection	(Smith 1776, 5–6).
Intellectual Turbidity	
Absence of Nerves	
Contempt for Foreigners	

This is not to say that Smith was completely uncritical of his own side of the globe. In the face of the contemporary political tendencies, at a time when there were very few Westerners who were inclined to criticize their own countries, the American traveler wrote: “[During the long period of regular contacts with China] there was very little in the conduct of any Western nation in its dealings with the Chinese of which we have any reason to be proud” (98). He also suggests at several points that Westerners will be better off if they adopt some of the ‘positive’ Chinese characteristics. For example, he praises Chinese cheerfulness during times of hardship and contrasts it with “the nervous impatience which, under like circumstances, would be sure to characterise the Anglo-Saxon” (170). Such examples, however, are extremely rare and Smith’s general tone is dismissive, condescending and rather angry.

One of the most damning chapters in *Chinese Characteristics* is “The Absence of Sympathy”. Throughout the construction of this denigrating image the author is self-righteous and apparently oblivious of his own warnings against generalizing. To support his contention that the Chinese are unsympathetic, Smith quotes various examples – from the cruel treatment of the daughters-in-law to the indifference to the sufferings of smallpox victims. What is remarkable (though hardly surprising) is this complicated process of imagining and re-imagining the Chinese that the traveler has devised for himself, during which each striking example he quotes is given the validity of an all-inclusive truth. The specific becomes general and the general is given the status of ‘reality’:

One of the most striking of all the many exhibitions of the Chinese lack of sympathy is to be found in their cruelty... [T]here can be no doubt in the mind of any one who knows the Chinese that they display an indifference to the sufferings of others which is probably not to be matched in any other civilised country.” (213)

One of the most illuminating chapters in Smith’s work is “Contempt for Foreigners”. It is full of quite telling passages, whose formidable irony appears to go completely undetected by the writer: “Inability to conform to Chinese ideas and ideals in ceremony, as well as in what we consider more important matters, causes the Chinese to feel a thinly disguised contempt for a race whom they think will not and cannot be made to understand “propriety”” (102). This is a classic case of projection on the part of the Western observer. It is obvious to the postcolonial reader that the passage describes almost perfectly the exact opposite: the inability (or the unwillingness) of the Chinese to conform to the ideas of the ‘civilized’, colonial-minded westerners was exactly what triggered Western contempt, an illustration of which is this exact text. At the same time Smith is at pains to construct the image of the westerners in a way that would allow

him to portray them as more tolerant and open-minded than the Chinese. The language he uses even in such passages, however, betrays the author's contempt. "A Chinese gentleman clad in a short frock would not venture to show himself in public, but numbers of foreigners are continually seen in every foreign settlement in China, clad in what are **appropriately styled "monkey jackets"** [my emphasis]" (99).

Predictably for the end of the nineteenth century, in Smith's mind there is only one way for the Chinese to lose their contempt for the west: to force on them the values of Western religion: "The only way to secure the solid and permanent respect of the Chinese race for Western peoples as a whole is by convincing object lessons, showing that Christian civilization... accomplishes results which cannot be matched by the civilisation which China already possesses" (105–106). The American flatly denies the ability of the Chinese to transform their country and make it more 'progressive' (he does not even ask the question of whether the Chinese would **want** to do that) chiefly because of their Oriental apathy and "dumb stupidity" (323).

China must be civilised... To attempt to reform China without some force from without, is like trying to build a ship in the sea... China needs Western Culture, Western science... The manifold needs of China we find, then, to be a single imperative need. It will be met permanently, completely, only by Christian civilization." (324–330)

From a postcolonial perspective Smith's book is extremely orientalist but it shaped the conceptions of many Western readers and constructed a multitude of memorable Chinese images. It became extremely popular and remained so for many decades. In 1979 Jerome Ch'en wrote: "To date, I think the most comprehensive survey of Chinese characteristics is still AH Smith's [Chinese Characteristics]" (43).

The decades of Chinese humiliation at the hands of the Western powers resulted in growing frustration among the Chinese people and the desperate gesture of the Boxer Rebellion against the Westerners and the Chinese Christians (1898–1901). The suppression of the rebellion was brutal and put an end to any residual Chinese ambitions for effective independence. Paradoxically, this status quo led to a positive change in the way the victorious West viewed China. Since China had already been semi-colonized and was no longer a military challenge, writers ceased to feel the need – or the obligation – to represent it in a denigrating light and to compare it unfavorably to their own countries. As the twentieth century approached, so did the period of relative benevolence.

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