

“Deep China: a travelling metaphor”

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When Archibald Little, Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, wrote a book about his latest travels in China, he joked in the Preface that he might have entitled it *A Walking Tour of the Tibetan Border*. This would have placed the book generically, and on the shelves of English bookstores, alongside homely and reassuring volumes with titles like *A Walking Tour in the Scottish Highlands* or *A Gentleman’s Walking Tour of Dartmoor*.¹ Instead, however, he called his book *Mount Omi and Beyond*. The “beyond” of the title indicates his itinerary, which took him and his companions on a journey first to Emei (Omi) mountain in Sichuan, and then westwards towards Tibet. The word interests me here as the name for a quality which I will call ulteriority – beyondness – which is never far away in the accounts of Western travel writers about China, and which is also, I will argue, a powerful metaphor in the way that Western people in general thought about China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and still do.²

Little’s allusion to “a walking tour” was a joke: his own journey was no holiday excursion, but often exhausting and sometimes dangerous. Here is a fairly typical passage from his travel journal. The date is 23rd August 1897.

Shortly afterwards we entered a wild uninhabited glen, up which we ascended steadily, following the course of a stream which meandered down it. Near the head of the glen we turned off to the left and commenced to ascend the side by a steep zigzag path which brought us to a cottage called Shan Chiao (mountain foot), where we halted for a few moments to collect our train in the fog. The country and the weather reminded us not a little of the mountains of Killarney. From here on we continued the ascent up an interminable and abominably steep zigzag path that seemed to go on and on forever in the clouds, until at last we halted in a cottage 50 feet below the top of the pass, a resting-place for porters, who use this road to carry goods – mainly salt – from Kiating to Fulin. Here we boiled our thermometer and found ourselves to be 9400 feet above the sea....³

¹ Simon Butler, *A Gentleman’s Walking Tour of Dartmoor*, 1864; W. H. Menmuir, *A Walking Tour in the Scottish Highlands*, 1912.

² The ulteriority of Archibald Little’s title had a precedent in another China travel narrative recently published – Isabella Bird Bishop’s *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, 1899.

³ Archibald John Little, *Mount Omi and Beyond* (London: Heinemann, 1901) 135.

Students of travel writing will recognize a number of familiar tropes here, including the way the foreign landscape is drawn back and managed by triangulation with familiar reference points, linguistic and topographical – the idiom of “glen” and “cottage”, the normative European geography (Killarney in Ireland in this case); the positivist disciplining of a potentially alarming Oriental prospect by measurement – and incidentally also the interesting detail that height above sea level was determined by boiling the thermometer. In these ways the writing goes about its business of processing and ordering a foreign experience. But still at the centre of the experience is something that resists these tactics of mastery, and the resort to measurement literally follows an admission of the immeasurable. The “ascent up an interminable and abominably steep zigzag path that seemed to go on and on forever in the clouds” is something like a nightmare of ulteriority, not dissipated by the light of positivist day radiated from Little’s robust modality. Interminable, abominable, it resists closure. Halting at a reassuring cottage will not bring an end to it, any more than his earlier ascent of Mount Omi vouchsafed him any discovery other than the sight of “the illimitable western mountains beyond”, the journey that faced him.⁴ The path leads to another path, beyond the mountain there is always another mountain. Little’s walking tour has taken him to deep China, recessive, incommensurable, and sublime.

The idea of Asian enormity has a genealogy going back to classical times. The Western imagination of the Orient has always been characterized, and tested, by hyperbolic uncountability – the fabled treasures of the East, its huge distances, its epical disasters, above all its enormous populations.⁵ Many of the most vivid or mythic moments of modern Asian history conjure images of great numbers of people – Hiroshima, the partition of India, the Cultural Revolution: these are above all episodes of a mass history. But this embodiment of Asia in daunting numbers is at least as old as the Persian expeditionary force under Xerxes which crossed the Hellespont into Europe in 480 BC, and was estimated by Herodotus to number two million six hundred and forty-one thousand six hundred and ten, a numeral so hopeless in its exactitude as to resemble nothing more than a prayer. For Europeans, Persia was the first embodiment of a terrifying Eastern depth, not only a depth in numbers of people but also in the apparently limitless expanse of territory over which the Persian monarchs ruled, a hardly conceivable excess of empire which in a later generation Alexander dreamed of mastering (and in doing so ceased to be a European ruler and became an Asiatic one).

⁴ Ibid, 103.

⁵ For an extended discussion of this point, see the chapter on “Crowds” in Douglas Kerr, *Eastern Figures: Orient and Empire in British Writing* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, forthcoming 2008).

In modern times, not Persia but India became for most in Europe the Asian paradigm, and India was the great geographical embodiment of that excessive depth that became associated with the idea of the sublime. A fascinating and well-explored example is that of Edmund Burke, the great English theorist of the sublime as well as a statesman who was closely involved in the national political debate about the East India Bill in 1783 and the long process of the impeachment of Warren Hastings which began in 1786.⁶ To the author of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), India itself, in its vastness and remoteness, was a prime example of sublimity. The sublime is the topography of the beyond. India's geographical scope was astonishing ('The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment');⁷ its cultures and histories too seemed so diverse and obscure as to make Indian people virtually beyond management, or comprehension, or even representation.

All this vast mass, composed of so many orders and classes of men, is again infinitely diversified by manners, by religion, by hereditary employment, through all their possible combinations. This renders the handling of India a matter in a high degree critical and delicate. But oh! It has been handled rudely indeed!⁸

'In place of the popular vision of an exotic India excessively available to traversal and description,' says Sara Suleri, 'Burke offers an alternative reading in which the subject of India breaks each attempt to put it to an inventory.'⁹ In Burke's discourse we can see a struggle between a desire to account for India, and a recognition that India's unfathomable depths make it unaccountable, infinite; and this has something in common with Archibald Little and his attempts to subject the Chinese landscape to the protocols of inventory and measurement (in other words to realism), while acknowledging that its proliferation of distance and strangeness, its endless depth, makes it beyond measure.

Asia was sublime for Thomas De Quincey too, at least by Burke's definition which had identified the experience of sublimity with the idea of pain, danger, and the fearful stimulation of the instinct of self-preservation in the subject, and consequently of powerful passions that 'fill the

⁶ See Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 25-48.

⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Womersley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998) 101.

⁸ Edmund Burke, 'Speech on Mr. Fox's East-India Bill', *The Works of Edmund Burke*, vol 2 (London: Dent, 1911) 182-3. See Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* 27.

⁹ Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* 26.

mind with strong emotions of horror'.¹⁰ It is clear from a famous passage in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822) that he was especially worried about China, with its notoriously swollen population – three hundred and thirty-three million inhabitants were claimed for the Chinese empire, though De Quincey gamely declared that he did not believe it could have more than a hundred million.¹¹ But really Asia's size was beyond imagining; the continent was a "great *officina gentium*", a people factory. "Man is a weed in those regions. The vast empires, also, into which the enormous population of Asia has always been cast, give a further sublimity to the feelings associated with all oriental names or images."¹² De Quincey recognizes China as sublime, but it simply remains a source of horror for him. He has not managed to accomplish the second step in Kant's narrative of the sublime, in which the potentially threatening experience can become a source of delight, when the mind detaches itself from the phenomenal world to contemplate itself, and "feels itself elevated in its own estimate of itself on finding all the might of the imagination still unequal to its ideas".¹³ This detachment however was not easily available to the excitable De Quincey, nor presumably to poor Archibald Little, toiling up his interminable Chinese path in the clouds. De Quincey's China is too big for him: there is too much of it; it literally makes him sick. As for Archibald Little, he is embarked on a journey to Mount Omi and Beyond, a journey in which there is no knowable destination, a *telos* which can never be completed. "Beyond" is not a reachable destination, nobody ever gets there, and the best he can do is to press on as far as he can until he has to turn back. His journey is a *mise-en-abîme*, and can culminate only in the abyss of deep China.

It is worth stressing these qualities of unknowability and excess – of ulteriority – if only because the way we have tended to think in modern times about Western perceptions of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth century has been too often coloured by a simple idea of knowledge/power. In a discourse of Orientalism, Western expertise about the East was the other side of the coin of Western control of the East: empire and information served and enabled each other to the point of identity. This has been such a powerful paradigm that it has sometimes

¹⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 86.

¹¹ Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 228. By the time De Quincey died in 1859, the Chinese population had risen to between 400 and 450 million. See Judith Banister, *China's Changing Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 3-4. For De Quincey's overwhelming fears about the East – and the East End – see John Barrell, *The Infections of Thomas De Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

¹² Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater, The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson, 14 vols (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889-90), vol 3, 442.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) 105.

obscured the opposite turn, equally manifest in the historical record, when representatives of the imperializing powers, both official and unofficial, own up to ignorance and incapacity, an inability or in certain cases an unwillingness to plumb the depths they have undertaken to sound. The deep orient may be the site of resistance, or it may just be the acknowledgement of an intractable ulteriority that cannot be penetrated and made accessible. This is why I suggest it would be useful to take account of the idea of deep China as a serviceable figure, corrective to the widespread metaphor that coloured Western thinking about China in the nineteenth century and later, that of a triumphant and cumulative *opening*. China was a closed society, market, and culture; to many in the West it seemed obvious that it needed to be opened, as Japan had so successfully been, to trade, travel, ideas and faiths. Military and missionary intervention were techniques of opening, and so were treaty ports. China's door was to be opened, or forced if necessary; and there were people on the other side of that door who were struggling to open it too. The language of opening, however, was in a sense a misleading metaphor. Once the door was open, what lay beyond?

Imperial and commercial intervention begins at coasts or frontiers, and moves inward into the hinterland. The word has its origin in the language of Bismarckian diplomacy and entered English from German at the beginning of the decade that was to see Archibald Little's journey into the mountainous depths of western China, and Isabella Bird Bishop's to the Yangtze Valley and beyond: it is almost a history in itself of late nineteenth-century European exploration, encroachment and land-grab. Its first citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from the *Spectator*, 19th July 1890: "The delimitation of the Hinterland behind Tunis and Algiers". Its second citation, from the *Daily News* of 12th June 1891, reports Lord Salisbury's recognition of "the very modern doctrine of the hinterland, which he expounds as meaning that 'those who possess the coast also possess the plain which is watered by the rivers that run to the coast'". To describe a place as hinterland might already be to make a territorial claim on it. By 1902, J. A. Hobson, the great critic of imperialism, could denounce "a whole sliding scale of terms from 'hinterland' and 'sphere of interest' to 'effective occupation' and 'annexation'" as illustrations of a diplomatic phraseology "devised for purposes of concealment and encroachment".¹⁴ Hinterland is the "back country" or interior, that uncertain territory that recedes away from the known and possessed. Hinterland extends "our" sphere of property and knowledge and security, but extends beyond it, and is always to some extent disputed.

¹⁴ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London: James Nisbet, 1902) 219.

The writing of travellers played its part in reporting on the Chinese hinterland, and in this it might be expected to supply the geographical and ethnographic knowledge required as a foundation for commercial activity and political incursion. This is the model of travel and ethnographic writing influentially proposed by Mary Louise Pratt. There is plenty of evidence of travel writing serving, sometimes quite deliberately, the project of “opening” China. Isabella Bird Bishop, for example, in *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, declared herself “a believer in the justice and expediency of the ‘Open Door’ policy”, having frankly acknowledged her motive in “the extreme importance of increasing by every means the knowledge of, and interest in, China and its people”.¹⁵ She frequently matched the deed to the word of this policy of opening; for example, arriving at the last government post at Li-fan in Sichuan where officials tried to prevent her proceeding further on her journey, on the grounds of the dangers of the route, she foiled attempts to shut her in – literally – first at the door of the inn and then at the city gate, and swept on in her chair, headed for the great beyond.¹⁶ As traveller and travel writer, she was a missionary in the cause of opening China to inspection and use. But travel writing plays another role too. It was never just a question of imperialistic travellers ramping across China and climbing every mountain to subject all they saw to a monarchical survey and lay claim to it.¹⁷ Often the vaunted imperial gaze, usually taken as a trope of complacent possession, is contemplating something it will never know and cannot represent, something that always escapes into its own life beyond, into ulteriority; or else the traveller, like Archibald Little, is reporting back on some “interminable and abominably steep zigzag path that seemed to go on and on forever in the clouds”. The bulletins filed by Western travellers on deep China were by no means all triumphant gestures of mastery, and often, not surprisingly, it was the more knowledgeable reporters who were also the more modest – like Elizabeth Kemp, who scaled Emei mountain a few years after Little, but resorted to a metaphor of depth to set a limit on her own knowledge of the country.

People *may* describe with success the soul of a people, provided it is sufficiently near the surface, but the foreigner who has known and loved China for a lifetime would be the first to repudiate the possibility of doing this in the case of China.¹⁸

Here we can see the idea of deep China reappearing as a psychological trope: the soul of China is too far below the surface, beyond the reach – or actually beyond the powers of representation – of even the most knowledgeable.

¹⁵ Isabella Bird Bishop, *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, 1899 (London: Virago Press, 1985), 527, viii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 387-88.

¹⁷ See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) 201-8.

¹⁸ E. G. Kemp, *The Face of China* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1909) vii.

So while the metaphor of opening in writing about China is most often a sign of the writer's endorsement of European ambitions and policies of penetration and predation, the metaphor of ulteriority is more likely to signal a more cautious and modest kind of Orientalism (Orientalism none the less), in which an account of China's vast hinterland does not automatically entail a claim to possession or mastery – either the political mastery of “the Powers”, or the intellectual mastery Kant claimed as the reward for successful contemplation of the sublime – but instead a respectful or prudent recognition of the limits of European knowledge/power, the ability of China always to present the enquirer with an excess of itself, to baffle or delight or overawe.

In the writing of Agnes Smedley, who reported on China between 1928 and 1940, travelling extensively in the country, we can watch an interesting and lively interaction between these two master tropes, opening and ulteriority, the trope of “into” and the trope of “beyond”.¹⁹ Whether arriving overland, by sea or by air, travellers make first contact at a frontier, a space to be passed through before access is obtained to the hinterland and the country itself. It seems natural to think of these liminal spaces – stations, airports, customs posts – as doorways, beyond which stretches the interior. Agnes Smedley entered China when she crossed the Soviet-Manchurian border in December 1928, moving on first to Beijing and then Nanjing, before settling for several years in Shanghai. As China's economic powerhouse and most populous city, Shanghai had some title to be considered the heart of the country, and was a good choice of headquarters for a foreign correspondent who wanted to know what was going on – and wanted to report, as the contemporary cliché has it, “in depth”. But though she lived there for some five years, and relished the city's lively intellectual life and cosmopolitan connections (she became a friend of Soong Ching-ling and of Lu Xun among many others), she does not speak warmly of the place in her writings. The reason for this antipathy is clear. She did not find Shanghai deep enough.

There are two dimensions to this. First, she considered the Shanghai style superficial – the fashions, the jazz clubs, the conspicuous consumption, the foreign concessions, the gossip and intrigue which gave the city its notoriety, and which expressed its international character; such manifestations seemed to her puritan eye vacuous and irresponsible considering the exacting

¹⁹ For a fuller account of Smedley's writing, see Douglas Kerr, “Agnes Smedley: The Fellow-Traveler's Tales”, in *A Century of Travels in China: Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s*, ed. Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007) 163-76.

crisis through which the nation was passing. Related to this is a sense that Shanghai – at least since the suppression of the Communists in 1927 – was not authentically Chinese, and the real life of the country was taking place elsewhere. There is a discourse of authenticity here which is very familiar in travel writing (where writers often promise to reveal the “real” place, as opposed to the superficial perceptions of the tourist), but in Smedley depth is measured in political terms. Most of the time she lived in the city she was writing about what was going on in the interior, in deep China where the revolution was struggling to survive. The book *Chinese Destinies: Sketches of Present-Day China* (1933), begins in Shanghai but is soon roaming all over the country, from Mukden (Shenyang) to Macau. The next book, *China's Red Army Marches* (1934), was written in Shanghai,²⁰ but its subject is the Jiangxi Soviet, which she had not visited, relying instead on the reports brought out to her by communist informants.²¹

Real life in China was taking place not in the cosmopolitan glamour of Shanghai, as far as she was concerned, but in the struggles of workers and peasants for livelihood and justice, a world of experience to which the foreign reporters, diplomats and travellers doing the rounds of parties in the foreign concessions and treaty ports, had little or no access.²² And in turn, that authentic heartland turns out to have a hinterland of its own, in the revolution. In 1936, experiencing “a pervasive sense of isolation and near-paranoia about political persecution”,²³ she moved from Shanghai to Xian, a move inward, but one that still did not take her where she really wanted to go. At last the invitation to Yanan came, and she made the difficult winter journey to the Communist headquarters, where she would spend months talking to the revolutionary leadership and sending dispatches to explain and justify to the outside world what was being done and planned in Yanan. She seemed to have arrived at last in deep China. Yanan reminded her of the American West of her childhood, but, as she wrote to a friend: “Never in Shanghai or

²⁰ The book was finished during Smedley's stay in Moscow and Leningrad, 1933-34. See Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China* (London: Gollancz, 1944) 93.

²¹ The process is described romantically by Anna Louise Strong in an account whose source must be Smedley herself. “They were stories brought to her stealthily, often by night, by people on whose head a price was placed. Her own life was frequently in danger; her very closeness to the Chinese Red Armies prevented her for many years from visiting them, since she was constantly watched.” Anna Louise Strong, “Introduction”, Agnes Smedley, *China Fights Back: An American Woman with the Eighth Route Army*, Left Book Club edition (London: Gollancz, 1938) 11.

²² A colony, just as much as a treaty port, suffered, in Smedley's critical view, from inauthenticity and superficiality and encouraged the same qualities in its visitors. “The Americans who blew through Hong Kong were distinctive. Breezy, self-confident, virile, some were quite capable of making a three or four weeks' trip to China, then writing a couple of books.” Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China*, 361.

²³ Janice R. Mackinnon and Stephen Mackinnon, *Agnes Smedley: The Life and Times of an American Radical* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988) 163.

America could I live so freely or so happily.”²⁴ Gaining admission to this sequestered sanctum (as only the fourth foreigner to be allowed into the communist base) was a triumph of opening, though the reformers and foreigners who advocated opening up China had seen the process as enabling a flow of knowledge inwards to the benighted country, whereas the cybernetic project of Smedley’s penetration of Yanan was to get knowledge out, so that the rest of the world might understand what was being done in the Chinese Revolution.

Yanan in turn, however, was not the terminus of deep China. Though living cheek by jowl with the revolutionaries, she was denied the authentication of membership of the Chinese Communist Party; in due course, she was informed she must leave Yanan: she would be more useful elsewhere. But in any case, there was a further recession in depth to be negotiated. Every penetration discloses another ulteriority. Beyond or beneath the superficial life of cities was the authentic life of the people. Beyond the life of the people was the revolution. And beyond the revolution was the revolutionary army, the essence of China and its inward life. “In them was a simple grandeur as fundamental and as undemonstrative as the earth. They belonged to China. They *were* China.”²⁵ Living among the soldiers, first for three months with the Eighth Route Army and later for some eighteen months with the Fourth Army in the Yangtse valley, Smedley felt she had finally and properly arrived in deep China. There is a tremendous exhilaration in her writing about them. “I wanted to follow, to go where they led, to be with these men of destiny.”²⁶

Yet even now, there was a further dimension, beyond her vision, which she could intuit but could never know. She felt she belonged with the peasant soldiers. “When I was with them,” she told Christopher Isherwood when they met in Hangkou in 1938, “for the first time I felt at one with the universe.”²⁷ Isherwood, though he admired her, found this sort of thing rather ridiculous, yet she could not have been more serious; for her, to be in deep China with these soldiers was also a kind of *nostos*, a homecoming. Yet the thought was also self-defeating, a reminder of her own distance and alterity, for if deep China was anyone’s home it was not hers. In the end she was neither a peasant nor a soldier, nor of course a Chinese; she was a foreigner, an onlooker, and a privileged one.

I, who had had food this day, realized that I can never know fully the meaning, the essence of the Chinese struggle for liberation which lies embedded in the hearts of these

²⁴ Quoted in Mackinnon and Mackinnon, 193.

²⁵ Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China*, 131.

²⁶ Agnes Smedley, *China Fights Back*, 141.

²⁷ W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War*, revised edition (London: Faber, 1973) 156.

workers and peasants. I am still an onlooker and my position is privileged. I will always have food though these men hunger. I will have clothing and a warm bed though they freeze. They will fight and many of them will lie on frozen battlefields. I will be an onlooker. I watched them blend with the darkness of the street; they still sang. And I hungered for the spark of vision that would enable me to see into their minds and hearts and picture their convictions about the great struggle for which they give more than their lives.²⁸

This passage is full of the language of ulteriority. Just as for Archibald Little labouring along his steep mountain path that seemed to go on and on forever, Agnes Smedley too had to acknowledge that for those who seek to know China there is always something beyond, and in this case it was the inner frontier which proved beyond her, the experiential gap that still separated her, and always would, from the people she sought to know. It was a version of the anthropological dilemma: her very status as an observer made invisible what she most wanted to see. “I remain a teller of tales, a writer of things through which I have not lived. The real story of China can be told only by the Chinese workers and peasants themselves. Today that is impossible.”²⁹

Agnes Smedley did more than just about any other modern traveller in her efforts to find deep China and inhabit it. The strange intermittent melancholy of her writing, a form of romantic irony that stares across the gulf between world and word, the lived experience and the written witness, testifies nonetheless to her acceptance that, in the end, deep China is not on the map and for mimetic purposes, does not exist. The trope of opening is always liable to be deconstructed by the trope of ulteriority – or to put it differently, as Alexander Pope had done, invoking a European geography, “The increasing prospect tires our wandering eyes, / Hills peep o’er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!”³⁰ Agnes Smedley would assent to the description of deep China as sublime, ultimately unopenable. The perception however does not fill her with Kantian horror, nor with an aggressive determination to unlock, inventory and master it, but with the sadness of ulteriority, an acceptance of limits in the face of what will always lie beyond.

²⁸ Agnes Smedley, *China Fights Back*, 123.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁰ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, 231-32.