

“Chinese Boxes: ‘Typhoon’ and Conrad’s History of the Chinese”

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Much recent criticism of Joseph Conrad’s “Typhoon” has been particularly interested in reading it as an enquiry into kinds and theories of language and representation.¹ In particular, attention has been paid to metaphoricity, to Captain MacWhirr’s professed allegiance to facts, and his hostility to fiction and figuration, within a narrative which is itself both fictional and figural.² This essay proposes rather to examine “Typhoon” as Conrad himself described it, as a story about “a lot of Chinamen coolies and a few seamen on board a steamer in a gale of wind”.³ Each Chinese coolie has a box, and at the height of the storm there is a fight over the boxes’ contents. The ship itself is a Chinese box, a Chinese-named cargo vessel transporting Chinese labourers. And I will argue here that the tale itself can be approached as a nest of Chinese boxes containing, among much else, several versions of a history of the Chinese.⁴

First compartment: anarchy in the hold

Conrad, who knew more about most things than most people, is not famous for his knowledge of China, though there are Chinese people in a number of his stories, usually in the background.⁵ On board the *Nan-Shan*, in “Typhoon”, the Chinese are actually in the majority. “The *Nan-Shan* was on her way from the southward to the treaty port of Fu-chau, with some cargo in her lower holds, and two hundred Chinese coolies

¹ The author is grateful for support from the Hong Kong Research Grants Council in the preparation of this essay.

² See for example the following – Joseph Kolupke, “Elephants, Empires, and Blind Men: A Reading of the Figurative Language in Conrad’s ‘Typhoon’”, *Conradiana* 20:1 (Spring 1988), 71-85; Eberhard Griem, “Rhetoric and Reality in Conrad’s ‘Typhoon’”, *Conradiana* 24:1 (Spring 1992), 21-32; Amar Acheraiou, “Floating Words: Sea as Metaphor of Style in ‘Typhoon’”, *Conradian* 29:1 (Spring 2004), 27-38. Ian Watt persuasively reads the tale as a comedy centred on the contrast between the literal-minded and under-imaginative MacWhirr and the inexperienced and over-imaginative Jukes. Ian Watt, “Comedy and Humour in ‘Typhoon’”, *Essays on Conrad* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97-111. I have also learned from the following essays: Sooyoung Chon, “‘Typhoon’: Silver Dollars and Stars”, *Conradiana* 22:1 (1990), 25-43; Byron Caminero-Santangelo, “Testing for Truth: Joseph Conrad and the Ideology of the Examination”, *Clio* 23:3 (1994), 271-284; James Hansford, “Money, Language and the Body in ‘Typhoon’”, *Conradiana* 26:2/3 (1994), 135-55.

³ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: volume 2 1898-1902*, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 295. (Letter of 8th October 1900 to J. B. Pinker.)

⁴ “Chinese boxes” are understood to be nested, and the English phrase is often a figure for layers of secrecy and gradual disclosure. In traditional Chinese design, small compartments to house objects are known as *duo bao ge*, “spaces for many treasures”. These are something like cabinet curios and some designs contain boxes within boxes. Such objects date back at least to the Ming dynasty, but were very popular in the Qing, especially at court. The Qianlong emperor had a famous collection. (I am very grateful to Dr Koon Yeewan for information about Chinese boxes.)

⁵ See Heliéna M. Krenn, “China and the Chinese in the Works of Joseph Conrad,” *Conradiana* 27:2 (Summer 1995), 83-96.

returning to their village homes in the province of Fo-kien, after a few years of work in various tropical colonies” (6).⁶ Their first mention – “some cargo... and two hundred Chinese coolies” – tells us that they are not the same thing as cargo, but it is not clear just what they are and how they should be named and represented.⁷ The mate Jukes refers to them as passengers, but this earns a rebuke from his captain, since passengers are people who have paid for their passage – “Never heard a lot of coolies spoken of as passengers before. Passengers indeed!” (31) – and Jukes later calls them “a cargo of Chinamen” (99). But evidently they occupy some intermediate category in the great chain of being between inanimate cargo and human passengers (and they are certainly not sailors).⁸

Once the typhoon has seized on the ship, the fore ’tween-deck containing the Chinese re-presents the human-inhuman enigma in aural form, for the storm seems to have got inside it. “Its howls and shrieks seemed [to the boatswain] to take on, in the emptiness of the bunker, something of the human character, of human rage and pain – being not vast but infinitely poignant. And there were, with every roll, thumps too – profound, ponderous thumps, as if a bulky object of five-ton weight or so had got play in the hold. But there was no such thing in the cargo” (56). This unearthly noise is the sound of the Chinese. When finally we are given a sight of the ’tween-deck – when, so to say, the first Chinese box is opened – what we see is one of the most arresting images in all Conrad’s fiction.

It was stayed like the gallery of a mine, with a row of stanchions in the middle, and cross-beams overhead, penetrating the gloom ahead – indefinitely. And to port there loomed, like the caving in of one of the sides, a bulky mass with a slanting outline. The whole place, with the shadows and the shapes, moved all the time. The boatswain glared: the ship lurched to starboard, and a great howl came from that mass that had the slant of fallen earth.... With a precipitated sound of trampling and shuffling of bare feet, and with guttural cries, the mound of writhing bodies piled up to port detached itself from the ship’s side and shifted to starboard, sliding, inert and struggling, to a dull, brutal thump. The cries ceased. The boatswain heard a long moan through the roar and whistling of the wind; he saw an inextricable confusion of heads and shoulders, naked soles kicking upwards, fists raised, tumbling backs, legs, pigtails, faces (57-58).

The boatswain struggles back on deck to report this sight to the captain, and to explain it. “Dollars! Dollars, sir. All their rotten chests got burst open. Blamed money skipping all over the place, and they are tumbling after it head over heels – tearing and biting like anything. A regular little hell in there” (62). The boatswain here seems to

⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Typhoon and Other Stories*, Dent’s *Collected Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad*, 22 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1946-55), 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically with a page number.

⁷ The challenge that Chinese things present to Western taxonomies is discussed in Zhang Longxi, “The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West”, *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Autumn 1988), 108-131. Zhang’s starting point is Foucault’s discussion of Borges’s imaginary Chinese encyclopaedia. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. A. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Vintage, 1973), xv-xix.

⁸ For the uncertainty as to whether the coolies are passengers or cargo, see Ross G. Forman, “Coolie Cargoes: Emigrant Ships and the Burden of Representation in Joseph Conrad’s *Typhoon* and James Dalziel’s ‘Dead Reckoning’”, *English Literature in Transition* 47:4 (2004), 398-427; 411.

claim kin with Dante, reporting on his own underworld; but let us not be distracted by this.⁹ The hell in which the coolies find themselves is not a vision of the afterlife, but an actual place with social and political co-ordinates.

Certainly the boatswain's vision contains several parameters of the familiar hostile stereotype – the Chinese as a beastly, yet comical, money-grubbing mob. But it is possible to open up the teleological warrant that the stereotype contains. The Chinese coolies are literally lumped together to present a picture of a human aggregate of the most basic kind. Each individual is locked in struggle with all of the others, trying to secure his share of the resources in the form of the loose dollar coins clattering about the pitching floor of the 'tween-deck. Since all the chests, containing their belongings and savings, have burst open, no one can have any idea whether the dollars he is scrabbling for are rightfully his or someone else's, so the situation is one of a very pure anarchy. The absence of authority and law – of what Enlightenment discourse calls the “civil state” – is similar to war, as Thomas Hobbes explained in *Leviathan*. “Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal.”¹⁰ This is the state of nature, and Hobbes goes on famously to describe human life in this natural state as “solitary, nasty, brutish, and short”. “To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no injustice.”¹¹

This is where we start from; and human history as Hobbes understood it involves moving beyond – but without forgetting – this “natural condition of mankind”, through the development of institutions whereby people contract to give up some of their natural rights in exchange for peace or a modicum of security. Hobbes's idea of a primitive natural brutishness was influenced in its turn by the classical discourse of barbarism, as codified by Aristotle, which held that non-Greeks, notably Asians, were less than human entities. This is a long story indeed, but for the purpose of this argument the important point is that in this Enlightenment discourse the state of nature is prehistoric. Hobbes actually gives a list of all the things that cannot exist in the state of war of everyone against everyone that is the state of nature: there can be no industry (in the sense of systematic and productive labour), no agriculture, navigation, architecture, engineering; no geographical knowledge, no account of time, no arts or letters, no society. This gives full force to the word “brutish” in Hobbes's formula (“solitary, nasty, brutish, and short”): the state of nature is shared, of course, with the animals, creatures with no account of time, and no history. Every element of Conrad's description of the coolies thrashing around in the gloom – the gloom itself, the naked flesh, the howling and

⁹ It seems most likely Conrad has the wrathful, in Canto VII of *Inferno*, in mind. “Questi si percotean non pur con mano, / ma con la testa e col petto e coi piedi, / troncandosi co' denti a brano a brano.” (“They were smiting each other not only with the hand but with head and breast and feet and tearing each other piecemeal with their teeth.”) *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, Italian text with translation and summary by John D. Sinclair (London: Oxford University Press), 104, 105.

¹⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

guttural cries, the helplessness before the forces of nature, the mixture of inertia and struggling, dullness and brutality – reinforces the impression that these people are, or are like, animals. As such, they represent a different and in every sense lower order of nature from the men who man the ship.

And here we may feel we are on familiar ground, with the projection of asymmetrical alterity inscribed right through Western discourse about the Orient and Africa in the age of empire, and exhaustively documented. The conception of the savage, brutal and prehistoric, discloses – or perhaps precipitates, since it is not really possible to say which comes first, and each depends on the other – the self-conception of the civilized, humane and advanced, just as the concept of the barbarian helped Aristotle to define the self-conception of the Greeks. And just so, here in “Typhoon” we have the European crew, at least the officers, unremarkable men in themselves, but the representatives of a civilization with ideas and institutions, a law and order, which enable them to maintain a civil state throughout the crisis of the storm, and to impose it on the lawless and brutal creatures beneath them. The coolies are pacified, and under the authority of the captain the dollars are distributed in a way acceptable to all. So this is one way of solving the category problem of the Chinese coolies. They cannot be described as passengers because passengers are human beings, but they are not cargo either because cargo is non-human. They can best be described as pre-human – prehistoric human animals, in the state of nature, but a long way from developing the institutions, covenants and amenities that characterize civilization or, as Hobbes calls it, the civil state. These things will have to be supplied for them and imposed on them.

If we are looking, then, for the history of Chinese people in Conrad’s “Typhoon”, it looks as if we must be obliged to say that the Chinese have no history, other than the history entered into at the very end of the story, when the coolies voluntarily (not under coercion) accept the captain’s redistribution of their assets, thus contracting to relinquish some of their rights for the sake of peace, and entering the civil state according to the proper Hobbesian model.¹² A contrast between Western people who live in history, and Asian and African people who live in nature, is one of the master tropes of Orientalist discourse. Although Conrad for his part had little enough belief in the *mission civilisatrice*, he was not above representing Africans, for example, as living a simple and barely self-conscious life outside the stream of history that bore Europeans on, for good or ill. Such people – often appearing in Western representation as childish or infantile – could be thought of as not yet emerged, and perhaps never to emerge, into the light of historical day.¹³ And yet of course it would take an invincible ignorance to see the Chinese people in this way. The antiquity of Chinese civilization was undeniable. The boatswain’s vision of anarchy in the hold could not be the whole story.

Second compartment: an epitome of the history of the Chinese

¹² In the state of nature, Hobbes had argued, “every man has a right to every thing”. Ibid., 87.

¹³ The genealogy of this idea includes Hegel’s observations about the Dark Continent in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*.

If we turn the clock back to the time before the typhoon strikes, and watch them as they take their leisure on deck in calm weather, we do indeed see a rather different picture of the Chinese as human aggregate.

The fore-deck, packed with Chinamen, was full of sombre clothing, yellow faces, and pigtails, sprinkled over with a good many naked shoulders, for there was no wind, and the heat was close. The coolies lounged, talked, smoked, or stared over the rail; some, drawing water over the side, sluiced each other; a few slept on hatches, while several small parties of six sat on their heels surrounding iron trays with plates of rice and tiny teacups; and every single Celestial of them was carrying with him all he had in the world – a wooden chest with a ringing lock and brass on the corners, containing the savings of his labours: some clothes of ceremony, sticks of incense, a little opium maybe, bits of nameless rubbish of conventional value, and a small hoard of silver dollars, toiled for in coal lighters, won in gambling-houses or in petty trading, grubbed out of earth, sweated out in mines, on railway lines, in deadly jungle, under heavy burdens – amassed patiently, guarded with care, cherished fiercely (6-7).

There are not many images in Conrad of a proper human community that is not actually engaged on a common task of work: this is one, for here for once we see the labourers released from labour. The description assembles some of the usual images of Chinese life (rice, tea, smoking, pigtails) but the associations of the language here speak of sociality, co-operation, nourishment, simplicity and peace, while the stillness of the weather and the monotony of the voyage lend it an idyllic timelessness. There is a culture here, a group life, and the coolies only become singular (“every single Celestial”) as holders of private property; but the dollars are not only their living but also their life, containing their history and their labour. These men’s proven capacity for hard work earns Conrad’s approbation, and their amenability to the arrangements will recommend them to Mr Jukes, who has charge of accommodating them – so much so, that when the ship begins to roll in heavy swell as the storm approaches, Jukes will draw the captain’s attention to their discomfort. So far, so civil. The coolies show no natural propensity for savagery, and their anarchic violence is not aboriginal, but still in the future. However, in the second group portrait of them on deck, as the heat rises and the barometer falls, we may detect some small ominous signs of change.

The sun, pale and without rays, poured down leaden heat in a strangely indecisive light, and the Chinamen were lying prostrate about the decks. Captain MacWhirr noticed two of them especially, stretched out on their backs below the bridge. As soon as they had closed their eyes they seemed dead. Three others, however, were quarrelling barbarously away forward; and one big fellow, half naked, with herculean shoulders, was hanging limply on a winch; another, sitting on the deck, his knees up and his head drooping sideways in a girlish attitude, was plaiting his pigtail with infinite languor depicted in his whole person and in the very movement of his fingers (20-21).

Not every reader would be reminded by this passage of Napoleon’s legendary remark about China being a sleeping giant, but it was certainly a commonplace among nineteenth-century stereotypes. It does seem that a strong enchantment, perhaps associated with that “strangely indecisive light”, has enthralled the coolies on the deck of

the *Nan-Shan*. They are significantly less active than when we first saw them, even those who have not dropped into a death-counterfeiting sleep.¹⁴ Inanition grips them, and it seems they are only aroused to quarrel among themselves. There is, in fact, a giant in sight, and although not asleep he is drained of virility, and hangs limply on the winch, an emasculated Hercules or shorn Samson. The other individual selected for attention has entirely relinquished his hold on manhood, his girlish attitude belonging more properly to the boudoir than to the deck of a steamship.

The concepts, icons and symbols of non-Western masculinities have probably always presented something of a challenge to European paradigms of gender.¹⁵ Here we can quite readily place these images of compromised manhood within a familiar binary typology in which Western masculinity, or potency, triumphs over Eastern femininity, or impotence.¹⁶ Often this perceived failure of the Orient to measure up has to be historicized if it is to look plausible, as it is in the case of the common British narrative of Indian (particularly Bengali) effeminacy as the consequence of the decay of Hindu culture. Once again, the undeniable magnificence of China's past makes a similar historicization necessary in its case. Consequently the feminization of China is perceived as something that has *happened* to the nation – it is not the opposite of masculinity, but its loss. It is not particularly surprising that the trouble afflicting the Chinese as disaster looms over them should be envisaged, in this Western modality, as a crisis in sexuality and gender.¹⁷

We now have three tableaux or epitomes of the Chinese aggregate: three tableaux in chronological order can make a narrative. First, the image of a peaceful and even utopian culture, with individuals going about their business in co-operation and tolerance. Second, the image of that culture with the beginnings of internal conflict, evidence of enervation and narcissism, and a crisis of manliness. And finally, the human aggregate reduced to its natural or animal state, a single seething mass in which individuals are not to be distinguished, but everyone fights everyone else for resources. We might characterize this third image as one of incoherent homogeneity.

The phrase is taken from Herbert Spencer, who defined evolution as “a change from an incoherent homogeneity to a coherent heterogeneity”.¹⁸ It is Spencer who can supply the key to this layer of the Chinese box. With his application of the idea of evolution to the human sciences, Spencer elaborated one of the nineteenth century's two

¹⁴ In *Lord Jim*, the deathly sleep of passengers on deck had presaged a disaster to come.

¹⁵ See Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, ed. Kam Louie and Morris Low (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

¹⁶ Of relevance here is the fact that the coolies appear to have no leader. The extremely diffident agent of the Bun Hin company has merged into the aggregate and become indistinguishable.

¹⁷ The construction of gender in “Typhoon”, especially in relation to the coolies, is interestingly discussed in the following studies: Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *One of Us: The Mastery of Joseph Conrad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 133-35; Andrew Michael Roberts, *Conrad and Masculinity* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 74-82; Ross G. Forman, op. cit.

¹⁸ “Evolution Defined”, *Herbert Spencer on Social Evolution: Selected Writings*, ed. J. D. Y. Peel (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972), 71.

most influential models of history.¹⁹ Spencer's notion of social evolution is sometimes unfairly associated with a triumphalist optimism about the inevitability of progress. Certainly it was enlisted by his late nineteenth-century contemporaries as what was believed to be a scientific justification for the high-handed actions of those who thought of themselves as evolution's darlings. Later in his life (he died a year after the publication of "Typhoon"), Spencer was, as we shall see, by no means complacent about the directions his own society and nation seemed to be taking.²⁰ Indeed his teleology had never been as crude as some of his more bouncing statements might have suggested. "Like other kinds of progress, social progress is not linear but divergent and re-divergent."²¹ In certain conditions, indeed, the current of progress could be reversed, in an evolutionary apostasy in which a group could revert to the qualities and behaviour of their predatory past. A wholesale regression of this kind was what Spencer called re-barbarization. "The cruelty of primitives was an essential to evolution," after all, and everyone had seen instances in which predatory habits could resurface in civilized people; moreover, "to make the evidence more complete, we have the fact that men, partially adapted to the social state, retrograde upon being placed in circumstances which call forth the old propensities."²²

What I am reading as the epitome of the history of the Chinese in "Typhoon" conforms quite exactly to the Spencerian model of retrogression – in other words, the model which was used as an explanation and sometimes justification for European global success at the end of the nineteenth century could also explain and perhaps justify the dire straits in which Chinese people found themselves. The greatness of the Chinese past – in particular the apparently timeless tranquility and continuity of classical Chinese civilization – need not be questioned; this was given. But in modern times the view from the West was that this equilibrium had been lost, unsettled by the helpless decadence of the Manchu, and a new era of something like savagery ushered in by the wholesale self-destruction of the Taiping rebellion (1850-1864), and confirmed, it seemed, by the lunacy of the recent Boxer uprising (1899-1900).²³

Third compartment: re-barbarization

¹⁹ The other great narrative, Marxist history, is equally indebted to evolutionary ideas and assumptions.

²⁰ He had already by 1851 abandoned the idea of a determined, unimpeded upward growth. "Spencer's political thought reflects the developmental antithesis which he perceived between the first and second halves of the nineteenth century, the first a golden age of peace, prosperity and individual freedom, the second a period of regression, war, chauvinism, state interference, and bureaucratic tyranny." David Wiltshire, *The Social and Political Thought of Herbert Spencer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 101. See also Brian W. Shaffer, *The Blinding Torch: Modern British Fiction and the Discourse of Civilization* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 1-44. Shaffer also has a chapter (45-61) on Conrad's African fiction and Spencerian sociology, which has been useful for my argument here.

²¹ "The Factors of Social Evolution", *Herbert Spencer on Social Evolution*, 133.

²² "Social Statics and Dynamics", *Herbert Spencer on Social Evolution*, 19, 20.

²³ For the Taiping, see Yu-wen Jen, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), and Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: Norton, 1996). For the Boxers, see Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Further sources are given in the Fourth Compartment below.

Before considering the specifics of these events in Chinese history, let me make the case for seeing what happens to the Chinese coolies on the *Nan-Shan* as a form of retrogression culminating in what Spencer called re-barbarization. To do this, it is necessary to tell Spencer's story of progress at first forwards, then backwards. Organic evolution moves from simple incoherence to complex organization, Spencer explains; from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, from uniformity to differentiation and specialization. Social evolution also follows this pattern. With the emergence of social structure, co-operation is enabled by hierarchy and the specialization of tasks, and there are associated developments of language, knowledge, morals, aesthetics. "Progress in intelligence, thus associated with progress in language, has also to be treated as an accompaniment of social progress; which, while furthering it, is furthered by it."²⁴ Conflict and competition are and remain the rule. The state of nature is one of perpetual and incoherent conflict between everyone and everyone. With social organization, according to the Spencerian paradigm, conflict is institutionalized, and this produces a militaristic society. But if progress is unimpeded, militarism is succeeded by industrial society, and the crude physical competition of war gives way to a more enlightened era of non-aggressive economic competition. The highest expression of this phase, for Spencer, was a completely free trade. "The stages through which the industrial part [of society] passes, from its original union with the governmental part to its ultimate separateness, have to be studied."²⁵

The coolies on the *Nan-Shan* pretty comprehensively reverse this process. Though we never see them at work, our first sight of them disclosed the history and fruits of their industry, in the shape of the earned private property of each, and the wages they are bringing home to share with their families. The simple contents of their wooden chests also gave evidence of a civilization and individuality, ritual objects indicating a spiritual life, medicine ("a little opium") to alleviate the pains of the body,²⁶ and the small personal possessions that speak of a private life. Their actions are co-operative – sluicing each other with water, sharing food – and outwardly directed. This seems to be changing in the second tableau, where there is no group life at all: the only sign of interaction is of three men "quarrelling barbarously" (21); the rest seem to have retreated into their own quasi-narcoleptic sphere, to sleep or brood or preen. They participate, if at all, in a highly belated phase of culture, in which "[a]ll the Chinamen on deck appeared at their last gasp" (25). But the really dramatic regression comes in the third tableau, with the struggle in the dark depths of the ship.

The nineteenth-century evolutionists concurred with Hobbes in thinking of the state of nature as chaotic and cruel, the naked form of what Thomas Henry Huxley called

²⁴ "The Factors in Social Evolution", *Herbert Spencer on Social Evolution*, 131.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁶ Recent research has suggested that most opium smokers in China used it in moderate quantities and with few harmful effects. Among the poor it was prized as a medical panacea as well as a refreshing tonic for hard-working men and women, a hunger-repressant and a painkiller. Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann and Zhou Xun, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 46-92.

“the struggle for existence, the competition of each with all”.²⁷ This is certainly what is witnessed first by the boatswain and then by Jukes in the fore ’tween-deck, where the struggling mass of coolies is not engaged in anything as organized as warfare, but in a violent and random free-for-all. The individuals who constitute this heap of bodies are indistinguishable. Not only are they not differentiated or named, they are so entangled as to be, to all appearance, disarticulated, a heaving pile of body-parts. The very inability of the Chinese to be distinguished one from another already suggests they are a low form of life in Spencerian terms, for Spencer had understood that development works and is measured by differentiation. History can only get going when one member of the aggregate is capable of differing from another in function, and so the lumpen coolies are strictly speaking a prehistoric formation.

The noises they make – howls and shrieks (56), a great howl, guttural cries, a long moan (58), a fierce mutter, gusts of screams dying away (77) – hardly amount to human language, a faculty whose instrumental part in progress Spencer had discussed. When later one of them does speak, apparently to complain, what Jukes hears is “incomprehensible guttural hooting sounds, that did not seem to belong to a human language”, and which fill him with a strange emotion, “as if a brute had tried to be eloquent” (80). No language, no hierarchy, no structure. “The hatchway ladder was loaded with coolies swarming on it like bees on a branch” (62), but the coolies have none of the functional organization of bees, taken as a model of a well-ordered society since the time of Virgil.²⁸ Although not individuated, the Chinese in the hold are completely (one might say biologically) selfish, and this too could be taken to be characteristically primitive. “Conversely,” said Spencer, “among ourselves a desire to diminish human misery is accompanied by a desire to ameliorate the condition of inferior creatures,”²⁹ and the tale will go on to show these worthy desires animating Captain MacWhirr, even at the height of his personal danger and that of his crew.

Aggression prompted by selfishness can only be restrained by a commensurate power of sympathy, Spencer believed. But “perpetual warlike activities repress sympathy”, and cultivate aggressiveness.³⁰ The coolies in the hold show no awareness of the pain they are inflicting on each other, and Spencer would probably maintain that the longer they fight, the more callous they will become, in a descending spiral of savagery. Meanwhile even the scramble for dollars, the original cause of the mayhem, is forgotten, as the drama in the dark loses even its economic character and becomes the state of nature itself, a simple struggle for survival.

The struggle, however it began, had turned into a scramble of blind panic. If the coolies had started up after their scattered dollars they were by that time fighting only for their footing. They took each other by the throat merely to save themselves from being hurled about. Whoever got a hold anywhere would kick at

²⁷ T. H. Huxley, “Evolution and Ethics: Prolegomena”, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* (New York: Appleton, 1911), 4.

²⁸ Virgil admired bees and claimed (*Georgics*, IV, 220ff) that their social organization proves that they possess a share of the Divine Intelligence.

²⁹ “Social Statics and Social Dynamics”, *Herbert Spencer on Social Evolution*, 19.

³⁰ “Struggle in Evolution”, *Herbert Spencer on Social Evolution*, 172.

the others who caught at his legs and hung on, till a roll sent them flying together across the deck (78).

Not surprisingly, Jukes and the other members of the crew fear that this desperate aggressiveness will be turned on them.

Fourth compartment: the narrative of Chinese decay – the Taiping and the Boxers

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the hapless Qing dynasty was increasingly beleaguered. The Chinese empire was economically weak, corrupt, locally lawless, and beset by aggressive foreign powers. Between 1850 and 1873, the population of China dropped drastically, in no small measure due to a reported loss of fifteen or twenty million lives as a result of the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864.³¹ It has been maintained that Chinese warfare was unusually lawless and devastating. “Because of a lack of established codes of conduct governing warfare,” Kang Chao explains, “Chinese wars and conflicts were extraordinarily destructive.”³² Very little attention was paid in Europe to this cataclysmic event on the other side of the globe. For the English public, China in the mid-nineteenth century and later was chiefly the site of satisfactorily short naval and military campaigns (the “Opium Wars” of 1839–42 and 1856–60) and of missionary activity. The Taiping was known of, if at all, because of the presence of foreign commanders, Frederick Townsend Ward and later Charles George Gordon (“Chinese Gordon”), in the government forces that eventually destroyed the “Heavenly Kingdom” of the Taiping.³³

China’s image in the West in the nineteenth century was generally more negative than it had been a century before.³⁴ It was seen, with some justice, as a nation in decline, especially as measured against the vigorous expansionist European powers, busily carving out their spheres of interest and extraterritorial possessions on Chinese soil. The glories of China’s culture were known, but as far as most Western observers were concerned they belonged to the past. Contemporary China was generally thought to be characterized by cultural stagnation, military ineptitude, “superstition” (a resistance to Christianity), economic collapse and social decay, with an inward-looking, secretive and

³¹ The Qing government carried out a census in 1850, but population historians caution that statistics are not adequate to document the subsequent reversal accurately. See Judith Banister, *China’s Changing Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 3. Spence gives a figure of twenty million or more deaths, in battle or from starvation, in the Taiping areas. Jonathan D. Spence, *God’s Chinese Son*, xxi.

³² Kang Chao, *Man and Land in Chinese History: An Economic Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 31. Chao adds: “In reality, many wars in China before the Taiping Rebellion were more pronounced in scope, duration, intensity, and degree of devastation.”

³³ The extraordinary story of the Taiping is stirringly told in Jonathan Spence, *God’s Chinese Son*. There were some exceptions to the imperviousness of Europeans to the Taiping rebellion. Some Protestants saw in it, at least in the early stages, a wholly unexpected opportunity for mass conversions of Chinese to Christianity. Karl Marx too was paying attention, and wrote a number of articles on the Taipings for the *New York Daily Tribune*. See *Marx on China 1853-1860: Articles from the New York Daily Tribune*, ed. Dona Torr (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968). I am very grateful to Paul A. Cohen for help on this and other historical points.

³⁴ See Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), 43-65.

extremely conservative government and court.³⁵ If the Taiping had been the most epical factor in this decline, the Boxer rebellion at the turn of the century was the event that brought it most directly to the attention of the Western press, and hence public.

The Boxer society, the “Righteous and Harmonious Fists”, was formed in 1898, and the first Boxer attacks on outposts and symbols of Western influence came at the very beginning of 1900. The rebellion grew, and was being extensively reported in the European and American press through 1900, the climax of the story being the raising of the siege of the foreign legations in Peking in August. Punitive expeditions continued at least until April 1901, and negotiations with the Qing government culminated in the signing of the Boxer protocol, in September. Conrad’s first reference to the story that became “Typhoon” is in a letter in February 1899. It is mentioned again, and delayed, in January 1900. A specimen was sent to William Blackwood in October, its author then anticipating a story of some twelve thousand words. Running eventually to twenty-eight thousand words, the tale was completed in January 1901.³⁶ The gestation and composition of “Typhoon” coincide with the Boxer rebellion and its aftermath.

Though no doubt almost the last straw in the burden that was to crush the Qing a decade later, the Boxer rebellion was a small-scale affair compared to the devastation of the Taiping half a century earlier. But it was much more extensively reported in the West, partly because more foreigners were the Boxers’ primary target, and partly too because by 1900 Europe was in direct telegraphic contact with China (though not with Peking during the siege of the legations). The first mention of the Boxers in the foreign press was in the English-language *North China Daily News* in October 1899. The first missionary was killed on the last day of the year. The Boxers’ anger was directed at foreigners and their Chinese associates and surrogates (mostly Chinese Christians), and though many more Chinese than non-Chinese were killed in the Boxer turmoil, it was largely presented to the Western public as a conflict in which Westerners were the principal victims. This reaction is incidentally reproduced in the anxiety of Jukes that the swarming Chinese in the *Nan-Shan*’s hold will soon turn their aggression on the crew. Such was the reputation for cruelty of the Boxers that in Arthur Conan Doyle’s story “The Pot of Caviare”, an experienced old professor judges it better to murder the entire European population of a besieged outpost, rather than allow them to fall into the hands of their unspeakable Boxer attackers.³⁷

A study by Jane E. Elliott argues that the most sensationalist coverage of the rebellion was not in mass-circulation newspapers like the *Daily Mail* or the *New York World*, but in the *London Times*.

³⁵ For John Stuart Mill, the Chinese were “a warning example” of the despotism of custom, which had killed all possibility of progress. “On the contrary, they have become stationary – have remained so for thousands of years....” John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (London: Penguin, 1982), 136, 137.

³⁶ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* vol. 2, 169, 237, 295.

³⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle. “The Pot of Caviare”, *Round the Fire Stories*, 1908 (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1991), 41-52. The story first appeared in the *Strand* magazine in March 1908. Conan Doyle adapted it as a one-act play which was performed in 1910.

Examination of both *The Times* editorial column and the columns written by special correspondents reveals a highly-coloured and emotive attitude to the Boxers, Chinese statesmen, Chinese military leaders and the Empress Dowager herself. There was a persistent use of adjectives such as “cruel”, “ferocious”, “revolting”, “decayed”, “reactionary”, “murderous”, “rigidly conservative”, “malign”, “ignorant”, “reckless”, “criminally apathetic”, “corrupt”, “treacherous”, “arrogant”, “sinister”, “audacious”, and “notorious”.³⁸

The uprising was seen as an anti-foreign movement instigated and directed by the Empress Dowager; the complex relation between the rebellion and various individuals and factions within the government and imperial court was not something the *Times* leaders were up to disentangling. The predicament of the foreigners themselves seemed easy enough to understand – martyred missionaries, beleaguered diplomats, heroic garrison and relief column. But the Chinese side of things was so intractable a knot – just whose side, for example, was the Chinese Imperial Army on? – that for most readers of the *Times* the overall impression must have been one of simple chaos.

If the events in North China were presented as impenetrably obscure, it is possible that some of the confusion attributed to the Chinese situation was displaced from the helpless inability of the foreign observers and victims of the uprising to make any sense of its highly complex and shifting circumstances. Who were the Boxers and how were they different from any of the many secret societies of whose existence the foreigners had some inkling? Who were their leaders and what did they want? What was their relation to the Chinese state and the national army? Incidents and rumours, confusing in themselves, were often reported in emotive language and relayed in a fast but extremely imperfect modern communication system. The outlandishly irrational nature of the Boxers themselves, with their mass spirit possession and their belief in their invulnerability, can only have compounded the feeling that the Chinese were doing something beyond comprehension, that made no sense, an assault not only on Christianity but on civilization itself.

This indeed remains the tenor of the “Boxer myth”, as Paul A. Cohen concludes in his study of the event and its representations.

In the years immediately following the uprising, the Boxers were a prime focus of Yellow Peril demonology. Throughout the century they have been understood single-dimensionally as an emblem of barbarism, cruelty, irrational hatred of foreigners, and superstition. This pattern made its first appearance while the uprising was still in progress.³⁹

But Cohen also points out that the denigration of the Boxers as specifically barbaric and primitive was largely shared by the modernizing Chinese intellectuals of the late Qing. He mentions the famous 1903 pamphlet *The Revolutionary Army (Gemingjun)* by Zou Rong, which makes a distinction between civilized revolutions (*wenming zhi geming*) – desiderated for modern China – and barbaric revolutions (*yeman zhi geming*) such as the Boxer uprising. “The Boxers, for Zou, were a symbol of everything in Chinese society he

³⁸ Jane E. Elliott, *Some Did it for Civilisation, Some Did it for their Country: A Revised View of the Boxer War* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2002), 8.

³⁹ Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 235.

wanted destroyed.”⁴⁰ Specifically, they were a regressive formation, a throwback to a barbaric past. It is worth invoking the development, in the reformers’ narrative of Chinese modernity, of the ideas of English evolutionists, Darwin, Huxley, and Herbert Spencer.⁴¹ Spencer’s model of history was not simply “Western”.

The history of the nation was understood to have reached a critical point. Could China evolve as a modern nation, or was it condemned to backwardness and anarchy, nasty and brutish? For the reformists, the Boxers were an embarrassment, only highlighting the need for a real progressive revolution that would free China from the foreigners and put it on the path to modernity. For most foreigners – and we must number Captain MacWhirr of the *Nan-Shan* among them – the example of what seemed barbaric and chaotic behaviour on the part of the Chinese only further proved the need, even the duty, of foreigners to intervene and sort them out. MacWhirr first orders the ’tween-deck hold to be opened up for the violent pacification of the coolies, and after the storm he reforms the economic chaos of the broken Chinese boxes by a fiscal intervention, arranging for the dollars to be divided equally among all the coolies, the remaining fraction to go to those most seriously hurt in the storm. His action is of dubious legality (there is a question of jurisdiction), but he justifies it – and according to Jukes the coolies accept it – on the grounds that the institutions of the Chinese state are hopelessly dysfunctional. “As to giving up the money to any Chinese official he could scare up in Fu-chau, he said he might just as well put the lot in his own pocket at once for all the good it would be to them” (101-2).⁴²

In summary, then, within the story of the coolies on the *Nan-Shan* in “Typhoon” is another narrative which can be read as a history of the Chinese as a whole. In this history, the peaceful equilibrium of the nation’s earlier civilization has become a retrogression, characterized by a loss of the harmonious interaction of elements of the social organism, of energy and differentiation of function, until under environmental pressure this decline has turned catastrophic and become a wholesale re-barbarization, a seething state of anarchy akin to the pre-civilized state of nature. In the ensuing chaos, the now indistinguishable and virtually dehumanized participants present a threat to foreigners as well as to each other. This narrative about Chinese people, written in the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 225. Zou was to die in Shanghai early in 1905, aged nineteen. See Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1999), 234-35.

⁴¹ Several of Spencer’s works had been translated by Yen Yung-ching in the 1880s. Yen Fu translated T. H. Huxley’s *Essays on Evolution and Ethics* in 1896, and Spencer’s *Study of Sociology* in 1903. “These annotated renderings in exquisite style brought a generation of Chinese scholars under the sway of what may conveniently be called Social Darwinism.” Jerome Ch’en, *China and the West: Society and Culture 1815-1937* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), 180. See also 271-3. Lu Xun reputedly read *Evolution and Ethics* in Chinese, when he was eighteen, and was so impressed that he committed the entire text to memory. See Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 73.

⁴² P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins note that Britain’s profit from late Qing China came much more from “invisible” earnings, including the provision of finance, than from trade, and this gave the British an even greater commitment to maintaining political stability in the country. “The China market remained more of a myth than a reality Britain was unable to open a vast new market for her manufactures, but she did succeed in holding China together and in expanding opportunities for finance and commercial services there.” P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688-2000*, 2nd edn. (London: Longman, 2002), 380. MacWhirr’s fiscal intervention is quite in line with British economic policy.

aftermath of the Boxer rebellion, and apparently underwritten by it, seems to confirm or naturalize the authority of Europeans over Chinese, and the need of the latter for the former.

It is, it seems, environmental pressure – the typhoon itself – that causes a collapse of the civil state among the Chinese on board, and their reversion to barbaric behaviour. But it has no such effect on the European crew of the *Nan-Shan*. Whatever may be thought of Captain MacWhirr’s bone-headed decision not to change course in the first place, the white crew perform creditably in the extreme test of the typhoon. Unlike the undifferentiated coolies, each crew member has a specialized function and most have a name. They are individuals, but they work together and – with the exception of the second mate, who loses his nerve, is struck by the captain, and will be dismissed – they obey orders, with a due measure of unheroic grumbling. The engines themselves symbolize the workings of Spencer’s industrial society and are endowed, however ironically, with moral qualities and a heroic work ethic. “There was the prudent sagacity of wisdom and the deliberation of enormous strength in their movements. This was their work – this patient coaxing of a distracted ship over the fury of the waves and into the very eye of the wind” (73). The chief engineer is professionally scornful of the “deck people”, who are dilettantish and get in the way – “You fellows are going wrong for want of something to do...” (75) – but the ship is a law-governed society that works on the joint principles of specialization and co-operation, enjoined by a contract of employment, as he reminds them: “Remember the articles: *Sailors and firemen to assist each other*” (76).⁴³ The crew seems a highly evolved and exemplary human aggregate, and its social qualities secure it evolution’s great and only prize, survival in the face of nature.

Fifth compartment: another story – the coolies and the flag

For it is not, in the end, simply the hostility of the elements that brutalizes the coolies. To understand what has brought them to that dehumanizing scramble in the hold, we need to consider the human environment, and the story gives us enough clues to elucidate it. I will now argue that the last and appropriately deconstructive compartment is not inside the others, but outside – indeed, all around. It is the economic environment of the voyage of the *Nan-Shan*, the coolie trade itself, and the part played by coolie traffic in generating wealth through Britain’s extracolonial engagement with the non-European world. I will discuss the trade here as it bears on Conrad’s treatment in “Typhoon” of this phase in the history of the Chinese.

The indentured labour trade sprang up in the 1830s to replace freed slaves on the sugar plantations in British colonies, but soon expanded into a truly globalized traffic. Worsening conditions in nineteenth-century China drove many to make use of China’s superior internal transport to reach coastal ports and seek work abroad, making available a supply of good-quality labour. “The comparison of other races with the Chinese when questions of labour arose was in fact very popular with the Victorians, who were agreed

⁴³ The engineer is invoking “The Articles”, a document of legal agreement between the master and crew of a merchant ship, containing statements on conditions of service, entitlements and wages, and the accepted disciplinary code for seamen. All parties signed this upon embarkation.

that the key characteristic of that race was diligence.”⁴⁴ From the 1840s, Chinese agents had begun to hire superior European vessels. Before long Chinese labourers were working in the Straits Settlements, Australia, Peru, British Guiana, Hawaii, the Caribbean and the Transvaal. Many had married just before leaving China, and hoped to return loaded with riches.⁴⁵

Under Qing law it was treason to leave China, and punishable by death, so the traffic was illicit and there were many scandals involving kidnapping and deception. As ever with economic migrancy, questions of agency are not straightforward. “The line between voluntary and involuntary,” says David Northrup, “is further blurred by the fact that the migrants’ desperation and ignorance made them easy to cheat and deceive.”⁴⁶ The Peking conventions with Britain and France in 1860 forced the Chinese government to recognize its subjects’ right to make contracts and to leave China. But though the traffic was now no longer illegal it was still subject to abuses, and the conditions of transportation (never mind the conditions of work) remained notorious, as Robert L. Irick notes.

Almost every work dealing with the coolie trade cites numerous instances of ships being scuttled, taken over, burned, or sunk by the terrified passengers. There were several cases in which the crew battened down the hatches and abandoned the ships, leaving the coolies to suffocate, burn to death, or drown. News of the successes of coolie mutinies was so widespread that organized attempts were subsequently made by Chinese pirates disguised as coolies to take over several of the ships engaged in the trade.⁴⁷

It is thus not hard to understand both the anxiety of Jukes and others of the European crew, who rush to arm themselves when the captain releases the two hundred Chinese from the hold (100), and the earlier terror of the Chinese themselves, who assume Jukes and the other white devils have entered the hold with the intention of slaughtering them (78-9). If the coolies are demonized in the eyes of the crew, they might justly reply, with Frankenstein’s creature, “Misery made me a fiend”.

Indentured labourers were not slaves, and indeed the traffic in them was instituted as a more humane alternative to the slave trade. But it is fair to say they were the closest thing to slaves in a non-slave economy, and their lives as coolies, even when entered into voluntarily, were not rich in human dignity. Some attempt was made to secure their interest and safety (they were, if nothing else, valuable only if delivered safely, at least on outward journeys). David Northrup says that overall, ships carrying indentured migrants

⁴⁴ Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 199.

⁴⁵ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), 210-2.

⁴⁶ David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism 1834-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 58.

⁴⁷ Robert L. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy toward the Coolie Trade 1847-1878* (Taipei: Chinese Materials Center, 1982) 211. A mutiny of outward-bound coolies is the subject of James Dalziel’s short story “Dead Reckoning” (1907), discussed by Forman alongside “Typhoon”.

had a good safety record.⁴⁸ Furthermore, on British vessels certain standards were mandated for the accommodation of passengers. “In 1840 ships from British possessions whose routes crossed the equator had to provide fifteen square feet of space per passenger with decks no lower than 5.5 feet and containing no more than two tiers of berths. These rules applied to vessels carrying indentured Indians and Africans as well as Chinese shipped from Hong Kong.”⁴⁹ But these regulations do not apply to the *Nan-Shan*.

For though the ship was built in Dumbarton and is crewed by British and Irish sailors, and comes out East on a British register, its European owners, Messrs. Sigg and Son, have “judged it expedient to transfer her to the Siamese flag” (9).⁵⁰ The reflagging of ships for commercial reasons can be traced back to the need of seventeenth-century English merchant ships to avoid Spanish monopoly restrictions on trade with the West Indies; however, the widespread use of flags of convenience is a twentieth-century phenomenon.⁵¹ Since the motive in this case cannot be anonymity of ownership, or lower crewing costs, it can only be the avoidance of regulatory control and of scrutiny of conditions on board to British merchant marine standards. In other words, the expediency that counts for Messrs. Sigg and Son bears directly on the treatment of the coolies who will be the *Nan-Shan*’s principal cargo. The change of flag ensures that the ship’s human trafficking will not be complicated by any over-fastidious liberal-humanitarian scruples. This is the convenience that the Siamese flag of convenience confers.

Similar motives seem to have been in play in the choice of a none too imaginative captain. MacWhirr recommends himself to the owners’ agent when he is given a tour of inspection of the new ship “ready to take up the work of her life” (7), by asking no questions at all about it; his only query is about a faulty lock (thus perhaps signalling the carceral instincts that will lead him to lock in the coolies in the storm). Old Mr Sigg, the senior partner, warms to a captain who “you could be sure would not try to improve upon his instructions” (9). MacWhirr can be relied on only to obey orders, and his decision not to alter course confirms this sterling quality. He dismisses Jukes’s suggestion: “You want me to haul a full-powered steamship four points off her course to make the Chinamen comfortable!” (31). He is not to be distracted by humanitarian concerns, and cannot imagine the human consequences of his decision – or what it might be like to be imprisoned below deck for hours in darkness, fighting for your life with two hundred others in a typhoon, because the ship’s captain has not been willing to change course and run up an extra coal bill for his owners. Conrad’s tale recognizes, as Spencer did not, that re-barbarization may be transitive, and dehumanized behaviour the result of

⁴⁸ David Northrup, *Indentured Labor*, 87. Irick concurs: “It would seem that most captains were genuinely concerned with the well being of their passengers, if only to have them reach their destination alive.” Robert L. Irick, *Ch’ing Policy*, 209.

⁴⁹ David Northrup, *Indentured Labor*, 83.

⁵⁰ Albert Jucker was the first Swiss merchant to work and live in the Kingdom of Siam. He and his compatriot, Heinrich Sigg, purchased the Bangkok branch of Malherbe and Jullien and founded the firm Jucker, Sigg & Co in 1882. See also Norman Sherry, *Conrad’s Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 238.

⁵¹ *Ship Registration: Law and Practice*, eds. Richard M. Coles and Nigel P. Ready (London: Lloyds Shipping Law Library, 2002), 18. See also William Langewiesche, *The Outlaw Sea: A World of Freedom, Chaos, and Crime* (New York: North Point Press, 2004).

dehumanizing treatment. Marx had given a name, alienation, to the deformation of the human by the exploitation and greed of others, and this effect of the coolie trade is another part or compartment of the history of the Chinese in “Typhoon”.

There are poignant moments in the story when MacWhirr, and Jukes too, show signs of recognizing the full humanity of the Chinese – and moments too perhaps of a similar glimpse in the passengers’ view of the crew. But these are brief and bewildering flickers of light in the dark farce of the story, and no one has the time, or the imagination, or the dialogic facility, to sustain them.⁵² These people’s shared ordeal in the end does nothing to create any lasting bond across the cultural gulfs that divide them. Most of the time MacWhirr and the crew consider and treat the Chinese *in specie*, as inanimate economic units. “They had had a doing that would have shaken the soul out of a white man,” Jukes acknowledges. “But then they say a Chinaman has no soul” (101). The confirmation of this notion that the Chinese have nothing inside comes in the last image of the story, when Jukes in his letter has reported the “equitable division” with which MacWhirr redistributes the scattered dollars.⁵³

We turned-to afterwards, and shovelled out on deck heaps of wet rags, all sorts of fragments of things without shape, and that you couldn’t give a name to, and let them settle the ownership themselves (102).
Once the coolies’ dollars have been accounted for, Jukes cannot assign or name the other things that belong to them. He cannot even identify them as things in the first place. But the narrative has seen, named and inventoried these things before. They are the remaining contents of the Chinese boxes.

“Typhoon” was serialized in *Pall Mall Magazine* in the early months of 1902, the year before Herbert Spencer died. The great sociologist might well have seen in the turmoil of recent Chinese history a drift away from the civil state to more primitive forms of behaviour, but in his last years he was more exercised by ominous signs of what he called “the re-barbarization accompanying the movement towards Imperialism” at home, and the same year, 1902, saw the publication in *Facts and Comments* of his essay “Re-barbarization”.⁵⁴ A century on, his list of regressive formations makes interesting reading – he points to imperial ambition, electoral oligarchies, a bellicose press, the militarization of religion and educational institutions, increased professionalization and brutality in sport, a cult of violence and success in popular literature, journalism and art.⁵⁵ It is unlikely that the author of the recent “Heart of Darkness” would have dissented much from the view that history, even for Europe, might be taking the form of what Wilfred

⁵² Such communication as takes place between the crew and the Chinese is through the Bun Hin agent who acts as interpreter, and whom Jukes insists on addressing in his “mangled” pidgin English (10).

⁵³ “Equitable Division” was the first version, and “A Skittish Cargo” the second, of the title of the story that became “Typhoon”. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* vol. 2, 169, 237.

⁵⁴ Herbert Spencer, *Facts and Comments* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1902) 187; 122-33.

⁵⁵ “As indicating most clearly the state of national feeling, we have the immense popularity of Mr. Rudyard Kipling, in whose writings one-tenth of nominal Christianity is joined with nine-tenths of real paganism; who idealizes the soldier and glories in the triumphs of brute force; and who, in depicting school-life, brings to the front the barbarizing activities and feelings and shows little respect for a civilizing culture.” *Ibid.*, 131.

Owen in 1918 would call the “trek from progress”.⁵⁶ And behind barbarism, late Victorian evolutionists warned, lay the state of nature, never fully transcended, a spectre haunting modernity no less than the primitive. The human race, T. H. Huxley wrote, was ineluctably committed to “the struggle for existence with the state of nature outside it, and the tendency to the return to the struggle within”.⁵⁷ The *Nan-Shan* with its complement of travellers, human beings of different provenances, contending with the elemental violence of the storm, and the commensurate violence in the fore ’tween-deck, seems a fitting symbol of that struggle without and within.

⁵⁶ “Strange Meeting”, l.29. Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, vol. 1, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto and Windus, Hogarth Press and Oxford University Press, 1983), 148.

⁵⁷ T. H. Huxley, “Evolution and Ethics: Prolegomena”, 43. The similarity of Huxley’s views in “Evolution and Ethics” to “the ideological purport” of ‘Heart of Darkness’ is noted in Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), 162. A reading of *Nostramo* in the light of “the Huxleyan View of History” is given in Ludwig Schnauder, “Free Will and Determinism in *Nostramo*”, *Nostramo: Centenary Essays*, eds. Allan H. Simmons and J. H. Stape (*Conradian* 29:2), 59-74.