Twentieth-Century Literary Encounters in China

From the travel writing of the eccentric plant collector Reginald Farrer, to Emily Hahn’s insider depictions of bohemian life in semi-colonial Shanghai, to Ezra Pound’s mediated ‘journeys’ to Southwest China via the explorer Joseph Rock, Anglo-American representations of China during the first half of the twentieth century were often unconventional in terms of style, form, and content. By examining a range of texts that were written in the flux of travel – including poems, novels, and autobiographies – this study argues that the tumultuous social and political context of China’s Republican Period (1912–49) was a key setting for conceptualizing cultural modernity in global and transnational terms. In contrast with accounts that examine China’s influence on Western modernism through language, translation, and discourse, the book recovers a materialist engagement with landscapes, objects, and things as transcribed through travel, ethnographic encounter, and embodied experience. The book is organized by three themes that suggest formal strategies through which notions of cultural modernity were explored or contested: borderlands, cosmopolitan performances, and mobile poet- ics. As it draws from archival sources in order to develop these themes, this study offers a place-based historical perspective on China’s changing status in Western literary cultures.

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In the context of twenty-first-century globalization, fewer stories have dominated the headlines more than China’s economic expansion and emergence as a global superpower. The issues that have emerged are multifaceted as they are politically and ethically complex, ranging from discussions to do with censorship to human rights, from the expansion of China’s interest in Africa to an increasingly imperialistic stance in the South China seas, and from China’s role as a rising technological innovator to its increasingly alarming environmental situation. At the time of writing, close to my own home, China’s influence in Hong Kong politics has provoked large-scale demonstrations and civil unrest, some of it violent, as local residents have taken to the streets again to protest against China, in this case, regarding the impending extradition laws (laws that many believe will allow for China to arrest and deport political dissidents, or other individuals deemed criminal by the state). For those of us watching these events closely, or who are personally affected by them, China’s presence is felt on both intellectual and emotional levels: as an academic and a long-term foreign resident of Hong Kong, I am implicated within the political turmoil, sympathizing with the views of my students, many of whom have taken to the streets, worrying for academic and press freedoms, but also concerned about the violence and blind anger that has recently erupted and will, no doubt, continue to emerge.

While there are indeed real issues at stake which continue to demand political and social action, it might also be said that China has been defined or characterized in ways that reveal historically enduring social anxieties. As China, as well as the Chinese economy, has become increasingly linked with many other countries of the world, it has also been repeatedly and consistently characterized as an entity other to the West: the closer it approaches, and the more undisguisable it becomes, the more it is defined as something else. Various accused of manipulating currencies, distorting markets, stealing jobs, or appropriating intellectual property, China is not only criticized for its actions, it is often painted as the villain, a bad actor, bending or breaking the rules of proper international conduct. Here in Hong Kong, within a space that

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is neither within nor completely outside of that entity which we fear, the issues are not just political but also, at times, deeply cultural, and even existential in significance (not uncommon in protest art, placards, or slogans we see the epic battle narrativized, with China figured as an evil, even Satanic, dark force). The polarization of us and them and intensity of these feelings is arguably indicative of other problems closer to home and needs to be viewed in relation to ideas of selfhood that are vulnerable and under threat for reasons that extend beyond the seemingly black and white present-day issues that we confront.

I begin this book by raising the question of ‘China’ in contemporary affairs not in order to weigh in on the politics of the present day, but to argue that China’s status as a political and cultural entity – as it has been variously imagined from ‘the outside’ – is both symbolic and historically unfolding. As China creates so much content for the world’s newsfeeds, it performs powerful symbolic work as an ideological, political, and cultural touchstone. This book argues that much of this symbolic work has been inherited from the previous century, and that in order to better understand the present day, we are behooved to read the past, to delve into the history of writing in order to better understand the constant push and pull between the real and the fictive, the political and imaginary, the self and the other. This notion that the West might rely on China – or the Orient more generally – in order to fashion its own image is, of course, not a new idea. One needs to begin this discussion with Edward Said’s Orientalism (1979), a seminal text of postcolonial studies which argued for an approach to understanding East/West relations through discourse and in relation to a history of imperialism. In this influential study, Said argued that European colonial representation functioned systematically as part of a discourse that itself was imaginary, but which nevertheless sustained Western material civilization:

... the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. (1–2)

For Said, such divisions were articulated through a range of cultural texts, and despite a diversity in form and genre, a remarkably consistent ‘Orient’ remained:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident.” Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom
are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, “mind,” destiny, and so on. (2–3)

Although Said focused primarily on the Arab world and the Middle East, one might extend such an analysis to Western imaginings of East Asia. Indeed, China has long served as a foil to ideas of Western modernity, and throughout history one finds a number of binaries that reinforce key temporal and spatial distinctions. Notions of being open or closed, dynamic or static, real or fake, democratic or despotic: these distinctions were often evoked to bolster and justify Western expansion at various points in history. For example, in the context of the eighteenth century, David Porter has illustrated how Europe built up a ‘discourse of commerce’ in regard to China and the West, elucidating the extent to which notions of free trade and images of circulation and restraint were key conceptual frameworks for European imaginings of self and other. In the case of Adam Smith, Defoe, Addison, and Lillo, free trade was understood as a “guarantor of social order and stability” and achieved a kind of “axiomatic status with respect to civilized society” (185). Porter states: “the economic metaphors of circulation and blockage are systematically adapted from the commercial context to intellectual, linguistic, and social spheres” (188). In a context where circulation is equated with pleasure and health, China was continually aligned with “imagery of obstruction, languor, and tedious monotony” (188).

During the nineteenth century, the development of Western institutionalized expertise on China began to coincide directly with a more aggressive form of military and economic presence in East Asia. According to the OED, the word ‘sinologist’ first appeared in 1816, followed by ‘sinologue’ in 1853 (that is, “one versed in the Chinese language, or in the customs and history of China”), and finally ‘sinology’ in 1882 (defined as “the study of things Chinese”). It is not entirely coincidental, then, that these terms emerged at a historical moment when there was unprecedented missionary activity and imperial aggression (manifest in the two Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1856–60). Similar to the ways in which fields such as Egyptology and Indology offered ways of knowing and simultaneously controlling imperial territories, China became increasingly conceived within a discourse of ‘the Orient’.

Yet the closer we examine the history and the textual record, the more we find that these imaginings were both inconsistent and often ambiguous in terms of political or social implications. Indeed, historians of imperialism in China have often emphasized the difficulty of categorically applying a theoretical model such as orientalism, and have offered more nuanced descriptions of Western imperial interests. For example, in his study of British colonial cultures in China, Robert Bickers has
described how British interests were often contingent upon local circumstances and were often generated through private and localized business interests rather than through state-apparatuses:

In the years after the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, which delivered that depot — Hong Kong — and first opened China to British residence and trade, a British presence developed in China which was neither formally colonial nor merely definable as ‘informal influence’. Hong Kong nominally became an orthodox colony. Administrative forms and practices were recognisable within the context of the wider British empire and the policies and practices of the Colonial Office, which administered the territory. What evolved in the parts of the rest of China in the interstices of the system of treaties fashioned between the Qing state and the foreign powers was quite singular, and owed no direct loyalties, or dues of obedience, to the British state. This was largely private enterprise imperialism: as such it was also international in character, even when it was nominally British. (5–6)

Similarly, James Hevia describes the ‘pedagogical’ campaign of conversion and discipline in historical discourse, emphasizing the ‘disorderly’ and ‘inconsistent’ nature of colonialist representation in China. Citing a number of Said’s critics, Hevia argues that “the East was not a passive recipient of an external coercive regime of power: colonialisms were transformed in multiple encounters, along class, race, and gender lines, between colonizers and colonized” (19). He goes on to make a number of points that further nuance interpretations of imperialism in China as a closed theory of West over East:

The situation in China through much of the second half of the nineteenth century was as complex as that to be found in settings where European political control appeared to be more formalized. Moreover, as in other instances of Euroamerican and indigenous contact, the China scene presents us with a number of seemingly contradictory developments that defy easy historical interpretation and raise troublesome moral issues. How, for example, do we reconcile the obviously venal opium trade with the well-intentioned missionary activities in nineteenth-century China, particularly when we recognize that both sought to penetrate and reconfigure the same bodies and polity? What are we to make of a use of force that justifies its self-interested violence on the grounds of abstract principles generated from a moral, humanist tradition and that, after World War II, provided the intellectual foundations for a concept of universal human rights? How are we to deal with and interpret direct aggression that claims to stand for the rule of law and presents itself as doing the good work of universalizing that rule? How are
we to understand the willingness of some Chinese in this century to reject long-standing cultural beliefs and forms of indigenous knowledge and embrace Western science and political forms at the same time as they claim to be staunch anti-imperialists? How does one distinguish, within reference to whose interests, between the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ impact of the West in China? (20)

Such complications and questions about the nature of Western imperialism in China have been examined in various studies of China’s representation through literature and travel writing. Works by historians and literary critics such as Nicholas Clifford, Susan Thurin, Colin Mackerras, Julia Kuehn, and Ross Forman have offered perspectives on the ways in which China was imagined and described through different types of texts including travel writing, literature, and photography. This work has revealed that Western representations of China are diverse in terms of their ideological leanings, ranging from the sympathetic, to the problematically sympathetic, to the outwardly imperialistic. The texts that scholars have brought to our attention are similarly varied in genres and modes as they draw from different categories of experience and speak to a range of audiences or interlocutors.

The result of much of this work has led to a historically engaged discussion about China’s status in the Western imagination, a useful problematizing of imperialism itself as a discourse, and to some extent, a questioning of East and West distinctions themselves and the extent to which they hold up under scrutiny. Some critics have approached the representation of China in terms of a debate over the extent to which texts are able to represent historical experience accurately. For example, in *A Truthful Impression of the Country: British and American Travel Writing in China, 1880–1949* (2001), Nicholas Clifford argues for the historical efficacy of travel writing, taking issue with postcolonial critiques that tend to align Western travel with discourses of power, expansion, and conquest. While accepting the usefulness of certain critical concepts in colonial discourse analysis, Clifford remains skeptical of studies that he claims deny the existence of historical realities. By evoking Isabella Bird’s travel narrative of the same title, Clifford’s ‘Truthful Impression’ argues against the trend in contemporary criticism to rely upon words like ‘imaginings’ or ‘inventions’ in their titles; such approaches, Clifford argues, end up “seeing translations of the travel writers as no more than ‘inventions’ or ‘imaginings’, as if the object, once translated, existed only in the mind of the person representing it, no more real, say, than in Roland Barthes’s fictive Japan” (14). But in most other cases, critics have recognized that ‘travel writing’ on China is inevitably tied to discourses of power to varying degrees. Indeed, most scholarship in this area has revealed how representations of travel and contact in China often present unstable and self-reflective knowledge.
For example, work in nineteenth-century studies has revealed the ways in which British interests in China were often self-effacing, mobile, and difficult to disentangle from larger global systems of exchange. Emphasizing the notion of the contact zone as opposed to one-sided ideas of imperialist domination, Ross Forman has described how Britons often imagined China in terms of shared or “entwining” imperial interests and within a shifting and heterogeneous project of overlapping informal and formal strategies (5). Or in a more comparative context, Klaudia Lee has revealed that works by Charles Dickens were not only formative in terms of British conceptualization of the cultural otherness but had a particularly important and influential reception in China itself, as these works were translated in ways that problematize our understanding to the ‘original’ text (xi). Others have recognized that the ways in which Western travelers describe China’s ‘return gaze’ present a challenge to imposed imperial hierarchies. Tamara Wagner describes such reversals as eliciting various reactions, ranging from “discomfort or unease to appreciative self-irony” (24), while Susan Thurin suggests that such reversals create a more dynamic interplay between Chinese occidentalism and Western orientalism:

The Chinese racializing of the foreign visitor demonstrates the reverse of Pratt’s findings on the ‘gaze’ … The ‘foreign devil’ meeting the ‘celestial’ and the ‘barbarian’ meeting the ‘barbarous’ represents a unique combat between counter-stereotypes, a simultaneous Orientalizing and Occidentalizing. (20)

Arguably, these moments of Westerners watching themselves being watched present disruptive moments of self-awareness, and even a productive sense of humor. Recently, Wendy Gan has developed this line of thought more fully in her book Comic China (2018) where she argues that such reversals, incongruities, and juxtapositions elicited a cosmopolitan humor and a negotiation of power relations in the context of ‘colonial’ interactions with China. Laughter, Gan suggests,

sometimes reveal alternatives to the suspicions and misunderstandings that vex histories of cross-cultural encounters, alternatives that also hint at what humor and comedy are good at, namely, playful subversions that resolve harmoniously, providing new ways to imagine interacting with the alien other – alternatives that, at a specific point in time (given the right conditions), may actually take flight. (6)

While this existing research has revealed that China’s status in Western literature and writing has always been complex and self-effacing, in the context of the early twentieth century it becomes even more difficult to conceptualize China and the West as distinguishing or mutually opposed
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concepts. For one thing, China became increasingly global in terms of its own cultural transformations during this period. In 1905, China’s thousand-year-old examination system was replaced, and soon after missionary stations and Christian colleges began appearing throughout the country. Bickers notes that in 1919 only about 106 (about 6%) of China’s 1,704 counties were without some form of missionary presence. Almost 2,000 Britons worked for British missionary societies in China in 1919, running 384 mission stations (69). In 1900, there were 164 American Christian colleges in China, but by the end of the First World War, there were more than 2,000 (Chang 90). These foreign incursions had a profound influence on China’s historical development, and although small relative to China’s numbers, missionary and educational initiatives would have long-term effects. For example, the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program was established in 1909 as a compensation in place of a cash payout after the Boxer Rebellion (a form of ‘goodwill’ that China had, in fact, no choice but to pay for). Under the terms of this program, gifted Chinese students who had studied at American colleges in China were sent to prestigious universities in America every year. Notable recipients of the scholarship include Hu Shi (one of China’s most important reformist intellectuals), the celebrated poet and writer Bing Xin, the accomplished linguist Zhou Ziqi, and the political leader Yuen Renchao (who eventually became acting president of the Republic of China for a brief period).

As Julia Kuehn (2015) has described in her examination of late Victorian travelers to Hong Kong, it became possible during this transitional period to imagine a paradoxical ‘cosmopolitan colonialism’ as the travel impressions of writers such as Kipling mark a shift from an ethical mindset to a more economic outlook. The very notion of empire, therefore, however overlapping, relationally defined, or informal in nature, became eclipsed by new ways of conceptualizing culture and the status of the individual within economic systems of global circulation. As I have mentioned above, China has long been imagined in relation to its potential market and its seeming intransigence to Western ideas of commercial traffic, but with changes in transportation, industrialization, and tourism during the twentieth century, trade became increasingly recognized as reciprocal and mutually dependent. In many Western countries, there was desire for ‘Chinese things’, and they – silk, porcelain, and tea – were always in demand, but with widespread industrialization during the early twentieth century, China also began exporting commodities like glue, ink, tobacco, corn, and cotton. In the meantime, China also began trading in unprecedented ways. In Exotic Commodities, Frank Dikötter (2006) has shown that the import of items into China during the early decades of the twentieth century – objects like bicycles, kerosene, wine, and electric fans – irreversibly altered society and created opportunities for rethinking national and cultural identities in complex ways. Adding
complexity to any discussion of ‘western perceptions’ is the fact China was no longer the mere object of Western fascination: it increasingly became an active consumer of images and ideas of its own exoticism or difference. For example, by 1929, there were 233 movie theaters in seven Chinese cities, and although China’s domestic film industry developed rapidly during the 1920s, an estimated 90% of films shown in China from the 1910s to the 1940s were American (Cui 4). Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919) was one of the first Hollywood films to feature live footage of Shanghai, offering American viewers glimpses of life across the Pacific. Yet as they watched a yellow-faced Richard Barthelmess performing as a forlorn overseas Chinese falling in love with Lillian Gish, audiences in Shanghai watched themselves being watched.

These interactions can be found throughout the historical record and within literary cultures. As Shuang Shen writes in her examination of Anglophone print cultures in semi-colonial Shanghai, “nationalism in contemporary China is often international in terms of its origin, cause, and articulation” (17). So when the reformist intellectual Hu Shi (who had pursued his studies in America under the supervision of John Dewey) wrote his manifesto “A Preliminary Discussion of Literature Reform” in 1917, outlining the new Chinese literary aesthetic, one that entails such notions as eliminating ‘old clichés’ and ‘writing with substance’, he was clearly influenced by Ezra Pound’s “A few Don’ts” (1913), which similarly outlined ‘rules’ for modern poetic engagement including ‘direct treatment of the thing’ and ‘go in fear of abstraction’. Ironically, Pound’s notions of a modernist aesthetic were themselves inspired from Chinese poetry (conveyed through the American sinologist Ernest Fenellosa’s notes). Ideas, objects, and texts circulate suggestively and, in this case, shuttling back and forth across the Pacific. Quoting Shen, Anne Witchard writes, “The transnational character of Western modernist poetry meant that when literary modernism travelled from the West to China, ‘its point of origin was already ambiguous’” (55).

**Writing China: Place-Based Perspectives**

In discussing a historical context where the ‘Orient’ becomes less certain as an imagined location (and orientalism itself less useful, or consistently useful, as a critical tool), it becomes necessary to explore other methodologies and theoretical possibilities for understanding interactions between cultures and across geographical distances. While attentive to the historically defined nature of East/West interactions as perpetuated through discourse, this book situates China as a central ‘place’ of modernist encounter, one that emerges through the imperfect medium of writing. In contemporary literary criticism, the notion of a place-based, or spatial, interpretation of texts is not uncommon. For example, Andrew Thacker has argued for a spatially and geographically
inflected approach to understanding modernist literature, offering an alternative to a long tradition of viewing modernist literary texts primarily in terms of temporality (for example, in relation to the innovations of tradition or reorientation of history). In his discussion of key modernist texts, Thacker suggests that space and geography should play a more dominant role in conceptualizing the modernist imagination. Arguing that modernist texts play a role in formulating cultural ideas of space, Thacker uses the term ‘textual space’ to refer to the interaction between different forms of imagined spatial features as they are created within narratives:

Emphasis is thus given to the spatial features of literature, such as the typography and layout of the page; the space of metaphor and the shifting between different senses of space within a text, or the very shape of narrative forms, found in open-ended fictions or novels that utilise circular patterns for stories. (4)

This argument for a more sustained attention to space draws from work by Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, as well as cultural geographers, including the theorist E.W. Soja whose notion of ‘thirdspace’ revealed the ways in which contemporary landscapes are mélanges of past and present, local and the global, that often obscure their impacts and social origins. In the context of a discussion to do with the cultural conditions of modernity, which we now often conceptualize in geographical terms – the rise of the city, the emergence of mass transportation, we might even say, the bending of ‘space-time’ that emerged out of these conditions – this discussion of space and place in literature appears to be highly relevant and even resonant with our time.

I draw from this body of work in order to argue that China served as an important point of reference in the mapping of the modern condition, a space through which writers could inscribe their experiences across borders while in some ways challenging their representational efficacy altogether. The aim is to investigate how accounts of travel within China provoked novel ways of thinking and writing about the social construction of space, but in doing so my intention is also to ground this analysis in relation to a more historically informed understanding of these contexts. Space, in this sense, will not only be examined as textual practice, or in relation to formal strategies, but approached more broadly as a condition that facilitates historical and biographical analysis. In this book, I argue that the author’s actual journey matters, particularly in the context of Western historical representations of China, where there is a long history of not ‘being there’. Indeed, the fourteenth-century classic *The Travels of Marco Polo*, the first Western texts on China, is perhaps the quintessential journey that probably did not actually happen. Yet the trend of writing fantasy and dubious conjecture on China did not
stop there and continued well into the twentieth century. Due to any number of reasons people had not really stepped foot into China, but yet continued to write about it with authority. Reading through the archive, one finds, for example, that many nineteenth-century observers of China, lacking any solid historical points of reference, still referred to Du Halde’s *The General History of China* (1736) as an authority, a text of questionable historical accuracy that was translated from French that was based on early Spanish work that was itself composed from various seventeenth-century Jesuit sources. New major works of sinology that were being published, works such as Samuel Wells Williams’s *The Middle Kingdom* (1848) or Walter Medhurst’s *China and Its Prospects* (1838), were not written in China, but in Malacca or Macau. Even after the Anglo-Chinese War 1839–42, when travel restrictions began to loosen, the vast majority of Westerners did their business on the coast and stayed there. Frustrated by their continual marginalization in Chinese society, and limited in what they could see or do, many travelers in China during this period also lacked the conceptual framework through which to understand China’s historical cultural differences, and so their writings all too often fell into crude stereotypes.

I use the term ‘literary encounters’ in the title of this book, therefore, in order to gesture towards a view of writing that is situational, transformative, and inventive, but also grounded in ‘being there’. This effort to situate literary expression within biographical and social histories can hopefully offer something new to a discussion which has in the past focused largely on the ways in which ideas of China’s linguistic or aesthetic ‘otherness’ disrupted or otherwise influenced Western cultural modernity. For example, the collection of essays *Sinographies* (2007) provides a useful exploration of China’s epistemological status in literary writing from a comparative perspective. Here the editors Eric Hayot, Huan Saussy, and Steven Yao present a loosely conceptualized notion of ‘China’ as a process rather than a fixed geographical and cultural object: “China is not something one thinks about but something one thinks through; it is a provocation, it realizes itself variously as subject, process, and end of articulate thinking” (xii). Hayot elaborates,

It is not … a question of differentiating between China the geopolitical nation and ‘China’ the Westernized trope, as though one of those ought to be studied as historical and political (sinology) and the other read in literary terms (sinography). The argument of *Sinographies* in general depends on refusing to make that distinction, to acknowledge the realness of both the referential and the discursive, to understand that both count as dimensions of the human experience and to focus on the manner of their interactions. (19–20)

This unwillingness to conform to a distinction between the historical and the fictive provides a productive way forward, but in practice much
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of the work that has emerged in the field has continued to develop along strictly theoretically lines. For example, Christopher Bush’s Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media (2010) offers a reading of Western philosophical and literary texts in relation to the ‘ideograph’, which he views as an imagined and mediated form of knowing and viewing the contemporary world. Through a discussion of works by authors such as Ezra Pound, Paul Claudel, Victor Segalen, Walter Benjamin, and Paul Valéry, Bush develops an argument about the status of China within Western modernist writing, arguing that ideas of the Chinese language informed the ‘mediatic character’ of Western modern aesthetics. Modernism, in Bush’s formulation, looked to China in order to better understand the consequences of “language’s reduction to a reified, almost technical medium” yet at the same time it offered a “revelation of its material being in an explosion of textures, tones, and shapes” (3). This approach, sophisticated and valuable in its own way, offers little understanding of China outside of the fictive, the philosophical, and through the lens of the avant-garde.

This study operates on a more pragmatic level, describing how authors traveled, while also, and just as crucially, examining how they used formal strategies as a way to negotiate cross-cultural interaction during the first half of the twentieth century. In the chapters that follow, there is some discussion of canonical figures of modernist literature – for example, Ezra Pound and Harriet Monroe – but most of the works that are discussed in this study, including those by Reginald Farrer, Frank Kingdon-Ward, Han Suyin, and Emily Hahn, are not usually included within a discussion of twentieth-century literature and will offer readers different perspectives on this period. In choosing these writers, I have intentionally aimed to bring forward texts that are heterogeneous in terms of genre, uncertain in terms of their truth status, and which also raise questions about the status of culture in a context modernist reevaluation and reorientation. In discussing these works – many of which are now rather obscure ‘misfits’ of literary history – I explore an eclectic range of issues and topics including imperialism, queer identities, feminism, interracial romance, Cold War orientalism, nature writing, fascism, and the value of literature as ethnography. While these topics vary greatly, they also demonstrate how ideas of China were deeply implicated in a range of social and cultural issues of the period.

There should be no need to summarize the contents of this book chapter by chapter (readers will find an abstract at the beginning of each chapter), but I will take a moment to outline the main trajectory. This book is organized into three main themes, each of which suggests an approach, method, or location. The first section of the book focuses on ‘borderlands’ and explores how China’s peripheral regions were particularly captivating for early twentieth-century readers and provided key spatial reckonings of emergent landscapes. In discussing the travel writings of two explorers and plant collectors – Reginald Farrer and Frank
Introduction

Kingdon-Ward – I argue that the colonial engagement with China’s botanically abundant and ethnically diverse regions served as a foil to notions of urban and industrialized Western modernity. As this section brings together discussions of colonial travel, plant aesthetics, and literary production, I map out a context where objects circulate globally, where selfhood is expressed in relation to competing notions of colonial and ecological space, and where representations of human corporeality are themselves formulated in relation to nonhuman entities. By offering close readings of these travel texts, these chapters explore how modernist sensibilities were formulated within the ‘borderlands’ – a concept that can symbolically designate more than one place while also suggesting ways of seeing and being that are not easily defined in strict binary terms. These chapters touch on discussions to do with the colonialist representation of China’s minorities, including Western impressions of Tibet, therefore complicating and blurring ideas of China as a coherent object of Western knowledge.

The second section deals with ‘cosmopolitan performances’ and examines the memoirs and autobiographical fiction of two writers: Emily Hahn and Han Suyin, both of whom lived and traveled throughout China during the 1930s and 1940s. In some ways, both of these writers produced texts that celebrates a cosmopolitan ideal, but a close reading of their work reveals the ways in which cross-cultural identities were often contested and conflicted, particularly within a wartime context where literary writing was undeniably influenced by divisive politics and propaganda. As both authors negotiate selfhood in different ways, their works suggest a provocative conflation between fiction and autobiographical realism while often testing social limits within China’s changing contexts of the 1930s and 1940s. While examining how these writers negotiate the social and political landscape of both ‘home’ and ‘abroad’, I will also discuss how ideas of modern female subjectivity, the literary marketplace, and authorship are implicated within this complex network of changing geopolitical alliances.

The final section explores the possibilities for mobile poetics as a category of intercultural inquiry. The section begins with a discussion of Harriet Monroe’s travels to China and her various interests in landscape, architecture, and antiquities. In this chapter, I discuss her role as editor, and influential formulator of Imagism and modernist poetry, but also her interests in alternative temporalities and spaces for imagining cultural origins. While discussing Monroe’s efforts to imagine China as a source for modern poetics, I also outline the geopolitical context of American and Chinese relations during this period of the Open Door Policy, arguing that Monroe’s editorial work and her writings also react to and reflect this larger political context. In the second part of the section, I turn to the explorer and ethnographer Joseph Rock and discuss his influence on Ezra Pound’s late poetry. Rather than interpret Rock...
as a mere source for Pound’s poetic project, as others have, I argue that Rock’s travel writings are themselves significant in terms of their stylistic and aesthetic foregrounding of problems and predicaments inherent in ethnography. Both of these chapters reveal how writers experimented with language, style, and form in order to suggest a ‘give and take’ with the places that they encounter, and that engagements with China both complicated and intensified the impulse towards experimentation within literary modernism.

Notable absences include Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden’s *Journey to a War* (1939), a remarkable text of the twentieth-century literary travel writing that contains a fascinating convergence of journalistic writing, memoir, and poetry (readers will find a number of existing studies that deal with this text and its historical contexts). The book also excludes works by Pearl Buck, an author who, perhaps like no other, shaped Western understandings of China during this period. While I share the view of Buck’s biographer, Peter Conn, that Buck’s novels have been unfairly maligned, or ignored, by academia over the years, it becomes difficult to place Buck in the context of a discussion that focuses primarily on modernism and travel. The same goes for Lin Yutang, who also published important and influential works, including his novel *A Moment in Peking* (1939) which is also largely ignored in contemporary literary criticism but is nevertheless significant, at least insofar as it is one of the first works of Chinese literature in English. There are other exclusions, including the poems of William Empson, which he composed while teaching in China during the 1930s, or of Langston Hughes who traveled briefly to Shanghai and wrote a few short poems in response to his experience. I have also failed to bring in to the discussion Harold Acton’s novel *Ponies and Peonies* (1941), a work that documents and critiques expatriate life in Beijing during the 1930s, although I do discuss Acton’s importance and influence on China-West literary translation in the chapter on Monroe.

Despite these gaps, my hope is that this book can offer sightlines into divergent iterations of ‘modernism’ as it was translated, negotiated, and experienced. I have based the timeframe of this study in relation to China’s Republican Period (1912–49), and I have assembled the chapters, more or less, in chronological sequence, giving readers a sense of historical development. Implicit here is a hope that by exploring these historical perspectives one finds resonances and relevancies within our own time. In thinking of China today, it is sometimes useful to consider the potentialities of previous eras. In his study of the Republican Era, *An Age of Openness: China before Mao* (2008), Dikötter has observed that the early decades of the twentieth century have often been overlooked, particularly within official Chinese histories, which tend to describe modern progress beginning with the rise of class consciousness and communism. Rather than viewing the Republican Era exclusively in these
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terms, Dikötter shows that China made significant reforms in education, banking, and social programs during this time. It was indeed a period of violence, but it was also one of remarkable development and cultural openness: in some respects, China was more cosmopolitan then than it is now. As China continues to develop within diffuse global networks of travel, but as information is nevertheless mediated through large-scale media organizations, and managed and filtered through a massive and powerful censorship regime, it is hoped that these views from an earlier era, presented to us through the imperfect position of travel and ‘being there’, can tell us something still.

Works Cited


———. *Steps of the Sun*. The Dial Press, 1940.


——. “Peking Roofs.” Harriet Monroe Papers, [Box 11, Folder 2], Special Collections Research Center, U of Chicago Library.


Notes


2 At the same time, Western colonial interest in China was also present in the form of missionary activity. In the period following the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) – when hundreds of Western missionaries were killed in peasant revolts throughout the country – many Christian organizations in China turned their attention to China’s minorities. Relative to efforts in the rest of China, missionaries in the southwest were successful in converting minority populations. Explaining the relative success of missionary activities in Western China, John Shepard writes that “Marginal groups were known to convert en-masse when it appeared that an alliance with the local mission station would bring some benefit vis-à-vis the local government, such as ad

3 The modern Chinese spelling is Mosuo. Despite many differences, Mosuo people are often confused with the larger group, the Naxi (or Naki in older texts). Today, there are around 50,000 Mosuos living in Yunnan and Sichuan, mostly near Lugu Lake.

4 Lutzu is an outdated term, which was considered offensive by some. Here Kingdon-Ward is probably referring to the Nu, an officially recognized minority in China who inhabit the Nu River (Salween) in Yunnan province. Today there are about 27,000 Nus in China.

1 According to the British botanical explorer E.M. Cox, Kingdon-Ward and Farrer met at one point in a small village in Yunnan and the three decided to travel back to Rangoon together. The exact details of this trip are unknown, but in his biography of Farrer, Cox relates how there was a heated exchange about who had the privilege to collect plants in a remote corner of Southwest China. The ‘terrible Boxing-Day row’, as Cox later described it, brought out the worst of Farrer’s volatile personality. Cox wrote: “It is odd that a man of so many brains should think himself a combination of God, Demosthenes, and George Moore all rolled in one.” He then observed: “If I had been K-W I would have hit him.”

2 Following Said’s line of critical inquiry, *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* (2000) addresses similar problems of empire and class in Austen’s work. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan describes the ways in which Austen’s texts are ‘in the world’ as a consequence of British colonialism and the global hegemony of the United States, raising questions about the ways in which Austen represents cultural capital in different contexts and offering a view that much of Austen’s work is animated by “an impossible nostalgia for an imagined pre-colonial” (5).

1 During her years in Shanghai, Hahn also became involved in the Chinese literary scene. In the *China Heritage Quarterly*, Daniel Sanderson describes Hahn’s notable but limited influence on the development of Chinese modern literature through her contribution to the Shanghai-based Anglophone literary journal *T’ien Hsia*, her collaboration on the bilingual magazine *Vox*, and the monthly bilingual magazine *Candid Comment* or *Ziyou Tan*. Sanderson states that:

> Though no doubt a minor figure on the Chinese cultural scene of the 1930s, Hahn’s contribution to *T’ien Hsia* was clearly in keeping with its stated goals of fostering international cultural understanding, and she added her own indelibly snarky tone to her frequent essays and reviews.

Therefore, while Hahn did not read or write Chinese, she nevertheless played a key role in developing and supporting the cosmopolitan literary culture that emerged during this period. See Daniel Sanderson, “Emily Hahn Does ‘All-Under-Heaven’.” *China Heritage Quarterly*. June, 2010. Web. 16 Aug. 2018.

2 See Ken Cutherbertson’s edited edition: *Congo Solo: Misadventures Two Degrees North* (2011). This version contains material that was originally censored due to a threat of litigation from the family of Patrick Putnam, one of the main characters in the book. This revised edition provides insights into the ways in which Putnam – a Harvard trained anthropologist – exploited the Africans he encountered and was ostensibly studying.

3 Both Snow and Smedley were known Leftists. Snow’s *Red Star Over China* (1938) included the first interview with Mao Zedong conducted by a Westerner. Smedley – most widely known for her autobiographical novel *The
Daughter of Earth (1929) – was also sympathetic to the communist movement and actively supported the socialist cause.

4 Hemingway and Geller's journey lasted between January and May 1941. For a detailed account, see Peter Moreira, Hemingway on the China Front (2007).

5 Looking back, we can also view Jill's transformation as partly autobiographical, or at least as resonating with the author's own experience. Long after returning to America, Hahn published a biographical piece in the New Yorker, “The Big Smoke” where she describes her own opium addiction. Here she comically describes her initial encounter with the drug as a disappointment:

I tried to remember if I'd had any drug-sodden dreams, but as far as I could recall there hadn't been dreams at all, which was disappointing. I didn't feel any craving, either. I simply wasn't an addict ... To make a surprisingly long story short, a year of earnest endeavor went by. (“The Big Smoke” 225–26)

6 The doubling of East and West femininity in Sternberg’s films is particularly interesting and has provoked various critical interpretations. Karen Kuo suggests that the inclusion of characters such as Hui Fei can be interpreted as providing an entry point into a universal womanhood, and a testing of a New Woman subjectivity. In this way, Kuo views the film The Shanghai Gesture as critical of race and nationalism as it posits the Asian female as resistant to patriarchy: “A close examination of The Shanghai Gesture shows that female melodrama's form allows for a veiled critique of the constraints of the domesticity that results from the East/West relationship” (104).

7 It is noteworthy that when Hahn was in China another literary figure traversed the same routes and wrote of similar conflicts and themes in her work. Like Hahn, the Chinese author Zhang Ailing (or Eileen Chang) moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong in order to avoid the violence and repression of the Japanese occupation, only to find that Hong Kong would eventually suffer a similar fate. In the preface to the 1944 novel Love in a Fallen City, Chang refers to the figure of the huadan from Chinese opera (a lower class character, generally a seductive coquette), as strategically viable during a wartime context. Chang writes, “In the wilderness that is coming, among the shards and rubble, only the painted-lady type from ‘Hop-Hop’ opera, this kind of woman, can carry on with simple ease. Her home is everywhere, in any era, any society” (3–4). Both writers, then, explore changing identities from ‘below’, situating falling women within falling cities.

8 Hemingway boasted about this sexual feat at various points during his life and also refers to the episode in his posthumously published novel Islands in the Stream (1970). It must be said that the anecdote could have been another of his tall tales that he sometimes regaled regarding his trip to the Far East (along with witnessing a spontaneous public execution and eating monkey brains out of the skull). However, as Peter Moreira writes in Hemingway on the China Front, “there are reasons to believe the story may have been true. First of all, Hemingway said it happened. Not only that, but he said repeatedly and consistently that it happened” (169).

1 Han’s portrayal of Mao and the Cultural Revolution has been criticized by many, including Bill Willmott who describes her two books on Mao as “almost hagiographic in their praise” (176).

2 In the early 1930s, Han studied pre-medicine within a highly competitive academic environment. The history of this institution is itself a subject of extended study. See Hao Ping’s John Leighton Stuart’s Missionary-Educator’s Career in China (2017). According to Han’s description in her 1966 work A Mortal Flower the dropout rate was high with only thirty out of seventy students eventually admitted to the prestigious Peking Union Medical College (288).
While Monroe had a clear affection for Chinese architecture and visual art, her appreciation apparently did not extend to music or theatre. In More Memoirs of an Aesthete Harold Acton describes Monroe’s inability to endure a Chinese opera, “pressing her fingers to her ears” and “tottering out in the middle of a stirring drama” (2).

Duanfeng was prominent collector and a high-level government official who was killed during an army mutiny in Sichuan. In 1924 his family sold most of his collection. The set of Shang dynasty bronze artifacts that Monroe describes is an alter set (dated eleventh century B.C.), which sold for about twenty million taels of silver to John Calvin Ferguson. The bronzes are now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City and can be viewed through their website: “Altar Set, Late 11th century B.C.” metmuseum.org, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/76974?sortB y=Relevance&amp;where=China&amp;what=Bronze&amp;ft=zhou&amp;offset=0&amp;rpp=20&amp;pos=4.

In later letters, Freer suggested that Monroe visit a number of collections in America by 'presenting his card': “Don't fail to see the Tryon collection now being show at the Montross Gallery, #500 Fifth Avenue ... When you go, present the enclosed card to Mr. Montross ... Go, also, to the shop of Yamnaka & Company, #254 Fifth Avenue, and ask to be shown the Chinese objects bought from Prince Kung in Peking last Summer and which are to be sold ere long by auction ... and let my card introduce you ... Don't fail to visit Knoedler’s Art Gallery, at 556–558 Fifth Avenue, and if you will call for Mr. Knoedler and present to him this card enclosed, you will see the most beautiful, public art salesroom in the World, and, of course, many fine objects as well” etc. (“Letter, Jan. 26, 1913”).

The historian Warren Cohen concludes that Freer and Ferguson were responsible for the ‘golden age’ of East Asian art collecting, as Freer’s wealth and aesthetic judgement combined with Ferguson’s connections made it possible for the American public to view a wider and more representative body of art, and led directly to a shift in American taste away from ornate and decorative works. See Warren Cohen, East Asian Art and American Culture: A Study in International Relations. Columbia University Press, 1992. On the intuitive nature of art collection, Ferguson once wrote,

To those unable to read Chinese the task of collection must be guided largely by aesthetic taste, together with such information as has already been published; but as soon as the standard authorities are made available through further translations, it will be possible for any trained critic to know accurately the correct interpretation of Chinese paintings. It thus occurs that the Chinese collector places great importance upon the records of any painting of unusual merit. When he sees a picture for the first time, it is the aesthetic value which first appeals to him. If there is no such value, little further attention is paid to the picture. (Ferguson xiii–xiv)

The writers of this guide make use of the trope of disappearance, common in tourist discourse, which places the Western traveller in an ethically privileged position, in this case cast as preserving China’s historical antiquity against the forces of the local people themselves. They write

As [this book] is about ‘Old Peking,’ it describes not only buildings that are to be seen to-day, but also those that have disappeared completely ... Readers may be led to believe that the authors have sometimes mixed
up the two, when during their rambles round Peking they are unable to find monuments or buildings that are mentioned in the book as still existing. This, unfortunately, is not the fault of the authors – they would be only too glad if it was – but is due to the indifference of the Chinese themselves, more especially of their authorities, towards the historical monuments in which Peking is so rich. The loss by vandalism and utter neglect has been proceeding at such a rate that, on repeated occasions, buildings and historical monuments have actually disappeared while the authors were still writing about them. (1)

1 Neither the older spelling ‘Na-khi’ nor the Mandarin romanization ‘Naxi’ is particularly intuitive for non-Chinese speakers. An approximate pronunciation is ‘Na-she’. In order to remain consistent with current usage and scholarship, I will use the spelling ‘Naxi’. There are currently approximately 286,000 Naxi living in the southwest of China, mostly in Yunnan province. The city of Lijiang is the Naxi cultural capital.

2 There was, in fact, a correspondence between Pound and Rock. Rock wrote at least one letter to Pound from Hawaii on January 3, 1956, summarizing his work on the Naxi. This letter, it is presumed, was a response to a letter from Pound but which is now lost (see Wallace 2003, p. 252, note 52).

3 Ezra Pound, The Cantos of Ezra Pound. New Directions Books, 1996. Further references to this work will be abbreviated Cantos with page references and canto number (when not stated elsewhere) given parenthetically in the text.

4 The first printed photographs in National Geographic Magazine were of Tibet. While several members of the National Geographic Society were initially opposed to these photographs in the magazine, their views changed when in 1905 the photographs of Lhasa were published and the magazine’s membership dramatically increased. In their study of the cultural history of National Geographic Magazine, anthropologists Catherine Lutz and Jane Lou Collins write that “[w]hile a number of the board members were shocked and angry, public response was overwhelmingly favorable. Society membership, which stood at 3,400 at the time the photographs of the ‘forbidden city’ were published, soared to 11,000 by the end of the year” (27).

5 The pictographs mentioned here are known as Dongba script, a system of writing that was likely developed during the tenth century in Southwest China. Technically, Dongba script is not a language, and its use is limited to mostly religious purposes. Pound was likely interested in Dongba symbols because of their pictographic and ‘ideographic’ nature, but also because of their association with Bon religious practices. More on the Naxi and Dongba script can be found in Anthony Jackson’s Na-khi Religion: An Analytical Appraisal of the Na-khi Ritual Texts. Mouton Publishers, 1979.

6 Müaⁿ ¹bpö is a Naxi ceremony that can be translated as ‘Worshipping Heaven’ (Rock The Ancient Na-Khi Kingdom, v.1, 69).

7 Daniel Perlman describes the meaning of these plants and symbols in Naxi society:

Artermisia is a plant involved in the Na-Khi ceremony whose strong pungent odor is supposed to remove all impurities. Arundinaria is bamboo, also used in the ceremony, but here included for its music as well as its relation to the circular pictogram below it, the Na-khi sign for Fate that secondarily means a bamboo winnowing tray. ‘Neath luna’ recalls ‘under Fortuna’ [Canto 97], and Fortuna, or fate, is now the winnower – preserving the good, casting out the evil: fostering as well as destroying... the image of the luna is intriguing ... Whatever it symbolic intention ... it is certain that the source is an exactly similar pictogram – except for the tilted position – used in Na-Khi writing to represent the moon. (76)