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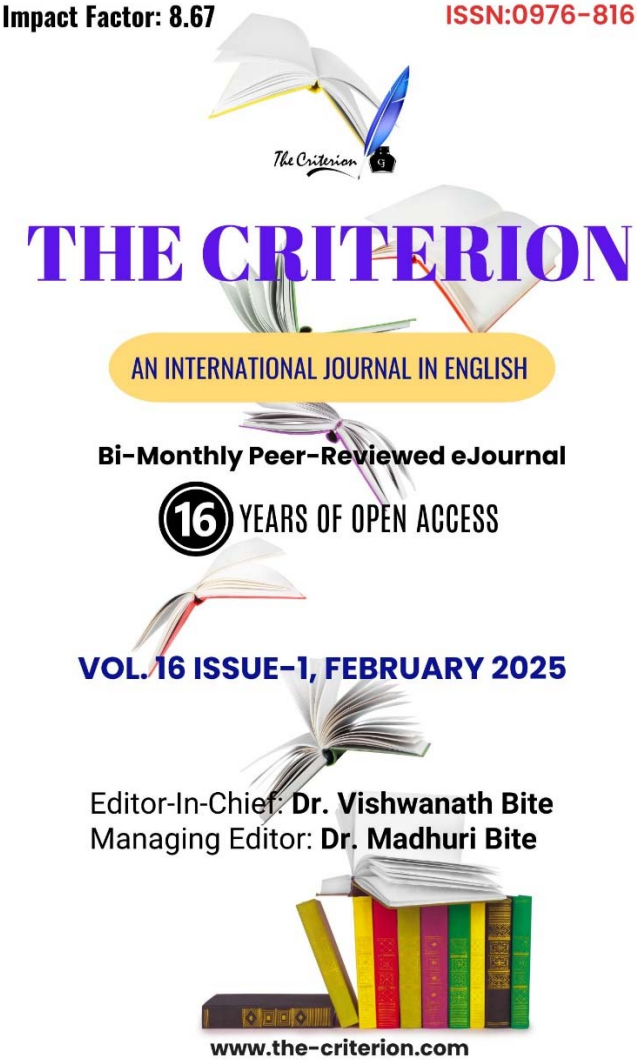

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The Paradoxical Tourist Gaze: Ambivalence and the Empire in Constance Gordon Cumming's *Wanderings in China*

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Abstract:

The study aims to address the contradictions inherent in the business of conveying China, a semi-colony by the privileged tourist Constance Gordon Cummings, as recorded in her 1886 travelogue *Wanderings in China*. Whilst partaking in the benefits of Western imperialist crusade, Cumming's discourse demonstrates an engagement, both intellectual and social with the country. Viewing China through the lens of Western luxury, her social position as an aristocrat offers her a certain detachment from the workings of the Empire. Nevertheless, an unmistakable tone of imperialist haughtiness and an unawareness of the historical context ultimately translates into an aggrandization of the role of Britain in propping up a regressive China. Her status as a privileged tourist allows her to go in and out of the discourse she engenders, while an adherence to her imperialist persona manifests as a misrepresentation of the opium question and a latent fear of a possible "Yellow Peril."

Keywords: China studies, British imperialism, treaty ports, travel writing, colonialism.

Introduction

The forced opening of China to European and Western incursions following the First and Second Opium Wars (1839-42, 1856-60) engendered large-scale changes, where China transformed into a fertile ground for a multitude of imperialist endeavors and contestations among a variety of stakeholders, including merchants, missionaries, adventurers, officials, writers and travelers. This influx triggered significant socio-economic, cultural and political changes, reflecting the multi-faceted dynamics of imperialism and its heterogeneous impact on China. The century-long trajectory of imperialist encroachment on the country, punctuated by multiple military encounters (including the Taiping and Boxer crises) and ultimately culminating in the economic and cultural colonization by the various Western powers, therefore fomented, not just the formation of a stringently dogmatic and insular foreign community which over time exercised an almost hegemonic sway over foreign occupied areas, but also transformed China into a conducive locale for travelers and globetrotters, especially in the era following the signing of the punitive Boxer Protocol of 1901. Furthermore, the nature of imperialism in China, generally termed as "informal imperialism" due to the absence of a formal colonial government, entailed that the China coast community as it developed in the treaty ports harbored a certain proclivity towards cultivating local loyalties (Bickers 14).

To the transient visitors in China, this intricate power dynamics governing the expatriate/settler community along the China coast remained an enigma. Often come to China in search of local colors, to seek, as it were, the "real" China in the fringes of the 19th century chinoiserie motif that so dominated Victorian imagination, the treaty ports often became an aberration and a source of embarrassment, as reinforced in the accounts of writers such as William Somerset Maugham (in his *On a Chinese Screen*) and Arthur Ransome who coined the phrase "the Shanghai Mind" to

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delineate the severely anti-Chinese attitude in the foreign community of China's largest treaty port, which via dogmatic institutions like the Shanghai Municipal Counter, the Mixed Courts or the International Settlements enforced an almost domineering sway over the massive native populace living there. Conversely, however, the traveler's naivety regarding the underlying power structures that sustained this community within the framework of an informal imperialist setup, made them an object of ridicule and scorn to the settler society that was well-versed in the local lore and policies that upheld their privileges and status quos in China.

Narrative Paradox and Ambiguity in the Transient Traveler Constance Gordon Cumming

It is in this intersection of the dynamics between the traveler/tourist and the settler/expatriate groups that one gets a glimpse into the narrative paradoxes and the ambivalence of imperialism in the writings of the long-time traveler and painter Constance Gordon Cumming vis-à-vis her sojourns in China from the winter of 1878 to 1879 as recorded in her *Wanderings in China* (1886), an account which occupies a significant position in the discourse that shaped the Western vision of the country during the 19th century. With an extensive travel history spanning Scotland, India, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Australia, California, and Japan, Cumming's visit to China at the end of a four year long journey evinces a certain equivocation with regards to her impassive delineation of the evolution of the Empire as she saw it. The dichotomy inherent in the business of conveying China, a semi-colony through the lens of Western cultural colonization by the transient tourist, privileged by the spoils of imperialism, while simultaneously participating in a critique of the colonial project is thus marked by a curious paradox—the contradiction implicit in the very fact of her presence in the country which whilst reinforcing the colonial power structures also fortified the image of China as an open field to be exploited by multiple concerned parties; and her genuine engagement, both

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intellectual and social with it, a fact which inevitably underscores the complexities of inter-cultural exchange.

Ethnography vs. Autobiography: An Imperialist's Perspective

Daughter to the Scottish baronet, William Gordon Cumming, her social stature and aristocratic privileges, which even in China translates into a particularly sheltered visit filtered, as it were, through the lens of Western luxury, doubtlessly granted her an objective impartiality and a certain autonomy from the workings of the Empire. Positioning herself therefore, as "an unbiased stranger … continually receiving kindness from all ranks and conditions of my fellow country-men", Cumming's sojourns in China whilst revealing a sustained friction between the often incompatible claims of ethnography (facts) and autobiography (experiences), also betrays a shallow understanding of the immediate historical and cultural backdrop that gave rise to the foreign presence in China, together with a superficial engagement with the country which she views solely via the rose-tinted glasses of European privilege in the treaty ports (Cumming 243). Indeed, an uninhibited acceptance of the spoils of imperialism and an implicit endorsement of the colonial crusade transforms Cumming's China into a site of imperialist escapades to be cashed for its entertainment value. Even the perceived squalor and unpleasantness in the "real life" of China does not escape the scrutiny of her tourist gaze so much so that as an overwhelmed response to the "foulest dirt" of the Shanghai streets, she is coerced into expressing sympathy for the Europeans living there (Cumming 2-3).

Consequently, the most significant episode in Cumming's visit to China, namely the fire that destroyed large areas of the slum along Queen's Road during the Christmas of 1878, offers a glimpse into the nature of her discourse on the country. Having witnessed the conflagration from the privileged vantage point of an Englishman's hillside veranda, Cumming's almost god-like

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complacency in treating the entire episode as a spectacle is understated only by her inability to understand that in critiquing the Chinese for their perceived reluctance to be grateful for English help, she inadvertently underscores her own community's sustained objectification of the plight of the masses (Cumming 15-6). Furthermore, as Susan S. Thurin notes, the Queen's Road fire episode assumed additional significance as a sort of literary device in the sustained rivalry between Cumming and Isabella Bird Bishop, two prominent figures in the realm of Victorian travel literature. Their competition for narrative authenticity and the need to establish themselves as well-informed, empirical observers of China transformed the tragic event into a pawn, with each author attempting interpretive control over the Chinese landscape, which is cashed for its sensational value—"A published account of a journey exploits distant people, customs, and places to enhance the fame and fortune of the author. In the quest of these two travelers to establish representational authority, China becomes a pawn" (Thurin 91).

Indeed, an instinctive loyalty to her overarching imperialist identity manifests in an unstated affirmation of Hong Kong's elevated status as a bastion of British dominance and an epitome of colonial power—"In short, everything is so pleasant that already I have begun to feel myself quite at home in this British isle of Hong Kong" (Cumming 9). This innate adherence to the precepts of a popular treaty port discourse which, via the creation of simulated foreign spaces (in imitation of home life), sought to assert Western cultural superiority, while at the same time functioning as bulwarks of security, thus also translates in Cumming's narrative as an expression of the deep sense of insecurity afflicting the China coast community vis-à-vis their liminal status in the country. Consequently, a mention of the long standing native-foreign dispute regarding the handing over of Jesuit land to Westerners in the post Opium war era, ultimately transforms into an inherent fear of a recurrence of the 1870 Tianjin Massacre.

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A Created Paradise: Foreign Enterprise and Missionary Endeavour

In a sense, Cumming does manage to integrate herself into the colonial discourse. Her repeated use of "our" to refer to the insignias of foreign presence in China undoubtedly hints at an unconscious indoctrination into the narrative of the Empire despite being a sojourner in it. Even her extensive discussions on the honest fervor of native Christian converts regardless of financial gains and subject to local violence and ostracism, or her entitled remonstrance against the uncooperative nature of Chinese officials biased in favor of natives, continues her sustained discourse on the regressive and recalcitrant nature of China that refuses change even when faced with beneficent Western aid. It is not surprising, then, that her narrative bent on Christianity ultimately culminates in a skewed optimism regarding the imminent Christianization of China—"It may be that in years to come, when China has taken her place as THE GREATEST CHRISTIAN NATION IN THR WORLD, such troubles as these will be remembered as we in Britain remember the persecution of the earliest Christian by our pagan ancestors" (Cumming 253).

As Thurin notes:

> Cummings support of missionaries stems from her conventionality, religion, and a sense of duty. Her strategy for bolstering mission work is to attack its critics and provide hagiographical accounts of missionaries and converts, often registering a surprising credulity in repeating stories such as those about a miraculous cure, an exorcism, and the heroic fortitude of Christian converts enduring 'one outrage after another' during anti-foreign riots (101).

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An incomplete knowledge of the realities of the Chinese mission field or the supposed infringement of treaty clauses eventually translates into an attack on whatever she perceives as impeding the noble business "to win these millions from their miserable idolatry" (Cumming 435). Indeed, the failure of Christianity to leave a significant mark on China's socio-cultural fabric despite the relative success of other areas of imperialist incursions has been the object of much scrutiny. The foreign religion's defects in gaining substantial traction in China has been attributed, in part, to the religion's rigidly monopolist stance, which precluded meaningful integration into the Chinese social fabric, unlike in the case of Buddhism in the 1st century C.E (Purcell 126-27). Furthermore, the presence of heretical and non-conformist sects and the perpetual threat of rebellions fueled by large-scale dissenting sect-based activities compelled China's rulers to vigilantly suppress any subversive movements, something which remained detrimental to Christianity due to missionary aggressions and interference in Chinese legal and judicial systems (Purcell 126-27). Indeed, the missionaries, often dubbed as the "scapegoats of imperialism," incurred widespread contempt among the native populace due to their belligerent land acquisitive tendencies, confrontational attitude towards local authorities, and general disregard for Chinese customs. Additionally, the influx of bandits seeking sanctuary within the churches further eroded their credibility. It is hardly surprising, then, that missionaries working in the isolated interior of the country, in close proximity to disgruntled natives and suspicious government officials, became the primary targets of anti-foreign violence with the church's practices, such as baptism and medical work, only exacerbating local skepticism and doubt.

Interestingly, Cumming also indoctrinates herself into the expatriate/settler discourse of the treaty ports by not just extolling Western self-sufficiency and insularity in China, but also in concurrently delineating Western presence as being quintessentially beneficent in fashioning a paradise,

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something which fundamentally reiterates the formation of the treaty ports' "created histories" which bolstered the local identities of the China coast community (Bickers 39-40)—

> It is hard to realise that, previous to the capture of Canton in 1857, a hideous mud-flat occupied the place where this green isle now lies. Having been selected as a suitable spot for a foreign settlement, piles were driven into the river and filled up with sand, and on this foundation was built an embankment of solid granite, which is now the daily recreation-ground of all the foreign population. But nothing that now meets the eye on this artificial island suggests the enormous labour by which this transformation was accomplished (Cumming 27).

As an extension of this discourse is Cumming's assertion that it is ultimately the foreign presence which imparts on its surroundings a civilizing impact, one in which the primary hallmark of civilization is a reduced anti-foreignism.

The bulk of Cumming's discourse on China however pivots around the tactic of pitting English rationality and progress against Chinese superstition and regressive backwardness, requiring as it were, the conducive effects of Western modernism to prop up its antiquated bulwark of heathenism and irrationality. A sensationalized portrayal of the strangeness of Chinese medicine, repeated reports of floods, pestilences, natural calamities and their horrible side-effects, an extended discourse on overpopulation, infanticide and inherent faults in Chinese national character is supplemented further by her "fear of contamination by the 'common herd'" (Cummings 25). As Susan S. Thurin observes:

> … to the colonial world, cleanliness and dirt take on racial significance as a paradigm for the power relation between colonizer and colonized. It is a pattern that comes easily to hand

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> as a method of defining and separating self and other, and consequently appears in various cross-cultural and interracial contexts … For Cumming, dirt and bad smells also become involved in a religious interpretation of culture. They are associated with a disorderly and sinful world that the missionary must root out: class gives way to religion as a discursive approach to China. Cumming dramatizes the vast field of work for missionaries by enumerating images of "heathen" China that incidentally indulge the Victorian penchant for the grotesque (96-7).

A Vacillating Stance: The Business of Narrating China, a Semi-colony

Nonetheless, a sustained note of critique with regards to the inequalities between the colonizer and the colonized, together with an acknowledgement of the anomalous nature of the insularity practiced by the China coast community does complicate the nature of her narrative. Thus, in an account of the disastrous 1852 flood caused by the Yellow River changing its course, Cumming does, in essence, manage to capture the smug complacency exhibited by the foreign world of Shanghai, which remained ignorant of the disaster just beyond their insulated perimeters for five long years—

> Strange to say, so little did foreigners even then know of anything that occurred beyond the limits of the treaty ports, that five years elapsed ere the Europeans living in Shanghai had any inkling of the tremendous catastrophe which had occurred scarcely so far from their homes as Edinburgh is from London! Two years later, though it was then known beyond a doubt that the great river had vanished from its accustomed bed, no foreigners knew what had become of it! (Cumming 5).

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In a similar vein, her first impression of the Canton foreign settlement is marked by a sense of astonishment at the detached isolation of the Europeans living there—

> … it was a most startling revelation to find myself in a very smart, purely foreign settlement, as entirely isolated from the native city as though they were miles apart, instead of being only divided by a canal, which constitutes this peaceful green spot an island. Here is transplanted an English social life so completely fulfilling all English requirements, that the majority of the inhabitants rarely enter the city! (Cumming 27).

Her humanitarian bent, although not as acute as other writers on China (such as Isabella Bird Bishop, for instance), is nevertheless substantiated by her discussion (albeit nominal) on the poor socio-cultural-economic conditions of Chinese women and children, and the pervasive social ill of foot-binding which she believes will only be ameliorated by the willingness of these women to embrace reform and change. Even then, her sympathies are hardly sustainable. As Thurin further observes:

> Cumming's feminist leanings are evident in her concern for women's health and education, but when class and race are of consequence, she is unable to sustain her sympathies for Chinese women. She finds the richly dressed, highly made up wives and daughters of the wealthy to be tedious, and … she unkindly refers to the bound foot as a "hoof."… From another point of view, however, the dehumanizing term for the bound foot expresses the travelers' rebellion against the limitations placed on Chinese women: the bound foot symbolizes their situation. When Cumming admits she prefers the company of men to that of these women, she is making a pitch for freedom (95).

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Such a vacillating and inconstant stance on Cumming's part is augmented further by the generally impassive and detached tenor of her narrative, one in which she perpetually avoids assigning positive or negative connotations to the things she delineates (be it the many facets of imperialist incursions or a light-hearted account of a dinner party), something which, in effect, allows her to go in and out of the discourse she is herself creating. It is then her tourist prerogative which permits her to exonerate herself of accountability of being a partisan in the business of the Empire, whilst at the same time being unable to fully extricate herself from an unmistakable tone of imperialist haughtier which continually haunts her narrative. Such ambivalence in the discourse on conveying China by the privileged tourist unable to arrive at a homogenous representation of the country thus underscores the complications lying at the heart of chronicling a semi-colony with an informal imperialist setup.

Imperial Guilt: Yellow Peril and the Question of Opium

This dichotomy manifests yet again in her discussion on the question of opium. Her intense aversion to opium, as the narrative evinces, is ironically buttressed by the drug's significance to British economic and political interests, which she otherwise endorses. It is ultimately in an effort to reconcile this paradox that Cumming employs a multi-faceted narrative tactic in which she—inflates the importance of European philanthropic activities benefiting China; offers a sensationalized account of increasing opium suicides among the Chinese; employs elaborate statistics to address the spread of the drug in the Americas; and ultimately positions the use of opium as being contrary to British respectability, whilst placing the moral onus of its usage on the Chinese themselves (greed leading to excessive opium cultivation causing famine and poverty). In her agenda to shift attention away from Britain's role in the spread of opium in the Far East, Cumming therefore, successfully manages to steer her discourse away from the fact of her nation's

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historic role in China's opium epidemic. As Ross G. Forman notes—"… the discourses associated with China during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries changed as a result of the shifting imperial situation: opium now rivaled porcelain as a symbol of "Chineseness" (10).

It is however in her response to spread of opium "*among* [the] *white population*" that her true agenda manifests (Cumming 488). An almost apocalyptic vision of a massive Yellow Peril sweeping across "our own colonies", poisoning at its wake the entirety of the Western world on account of an increased migratory trend among the Chinese, thus ultimately translates into an elucidation of a firmly entrenched anxiety of a possible yellow deluge (Cumming 487)—

> Already this long-secluded race is colonising Thibet, Mongolia, and Manchuria. Tens of thousands have settled in the beautiful Philippine Isles — in Borneo, Sumatra, Java, Cambodia, and Hawaii. We find them in Australia and New Zealand, and in every corner of the Pacific. And in how vast a stream they have poured into California we very well know. Everywhere they work their way by gentlest but most dogged force of will … That they will continue more and more to overrun the earth is certain. A vast portion of heathen Chinamen carry with them the spreading curse of opium-smoking — a vice from which the Christian convert must of necessity keep himself absolutely free. So from self-interest it behooves all nations of the earth to help in this mission-work (Cumming 436).

It is, therefore, not surprising that her discourse on the opium question ends on a note of deep-seated imperial guilt and an intrinsic fear of divine retribution—

> If, in addition to this evil, a taste for opium-smoking should once gain a footing in England, as it has already done in America, there may be reason to fear lest the poison which Britain has so assiduously cultivated for China, may eventually find its market amongst her own

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> children — a retribution too terrible to contemplate, though one against the possibility of which it were well to guard (Cumming 490).

At its core, Cumming's narrative thus disseminates and endorses the Victorian ethos of legitimizing the adverse consequences of the Opium Wars as a necessary evil in the grand and noble crusade to Christianize China and rescue it from the clutches of heathenism. Nevertheless, China's persistent resistance vis-à-vis Christianity and the possibility of conversion into a thriving mission field perpetually haunted British conscience, riddling it with a lingering moral conundrum. As Susan S. Thurin observes—"In being the purported good coming out of evil, missionaries faced a moral dilemma mirrored by their relative lack of success … The Chinese language, culture, and the deeply inbred Confucian ethic made it difficult for them to integrate themselves into the community, much less convert people" (101).

Conclusion

Cumming's objective to extol China's cultural legacy and faded imperial glory by subtly pitting it against the superiority of British modernism is thus understated only by a shallow understanding of the historical and cultural context of 19th century China. As a consequence, her account succumbs to a great deal of subjectivism, disseminating a conventional and well-established vision of a decaying and regressive China, something which quintessentially reinstates an innate loyalty to her imperialist persona that lies at the heart of her discourse. A sustained critique of the Confucian orthodoxy, the imperial examination system, the aristocracy, social institutions and perceived faults in the Chinese national character, together with the perpetual usage of exoticised aesthetics, thus only serves to align Cumming's discourse with the popular image of China in Western imagination, an image which fulfilled the dual purpose of assuring the West of the impending dissolution of China's stagnant civilization, while concurrently emphasizing their own

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role in ushering in the seeds of modernism. It is perhaps only fitting that as an ultimate testament to her vacillating stance is Cumming's final impression of China steeped in a deep-seated imperial guilt—a twofold vision of Peking, one enveloped by its bygone splendor, and one, a mere shadow of its former glory, an indubitable outcome of the progressive colonial crusade.

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