

The Tribulations of a Chinese in China: Verne and the Celestial Empire

William Butcher

Abstract: In *Around the World in Eighty Days*, Jules Verne presents chapters describing nineteenth-century Hong Kong. In the pioneering *Tribulations of a Chinese in China* he creates a complex Chinese hero and provides a relatively accurate description of contemporary conditions, based on first-hand sources. Verne's manuscript and correspondence with his publisher show, however, that this novel underwent considerable changes before publication.

Key words: Jules Verne; China; French literature; literary criticism; inception.

Introduction

Jules Verne (1828-1905) is undoubtedly one of the world's bestselling writers, and is the most translated. His works have been extensively published in China and in Chinese. One of his novels gives Hong Kong considerable attention; and another is set in Canton, Shanghai and Peking. Taking as title that of the author's Chinese novel, I will attempt here to survey the idea of the Middle Kingdom in the two works in question.

A word of caution is necessary, however: Verne's works rarely present consistent views on political and social matters. For every statement opposing colonialism in Verne, we could find one supporting it. The writer often merely synthesises, while rendering more readable, multiple passages from first-hand accounts of foreign countries. Quite often, he ascribes positions to his characters, or even to his narrators, that he himself is far from sharing. As a result, in his wide range of literary works and genres, coherent philosophies are rarely found, but rather an unusual complexity and variability in views on the world at large.

When Verne was writing, France was occupying the countries of Indo-China; but one major paradox of his works is that they generally remain silent about France and French activities in any part of the world. As if to compensate, his vision of China is rich and detailed. Unlike most European writers of the period, he is actively Sinocentric, with a Chinese hero (or anti-hero?) living a Chinese life in China, scores of fascinating illustrations — a remarkable contemporary record — and much cultural, historical, political, sociological and linguistic information and commentary — all integrated into a humorous novel of travel and adventure.

Clearly, Verne had access to up-to-date accounts of Chinese civilisation. One of the aims here will be to identify the novelist's main sources. More generally, by studying one of the most Chinese of nineteenth-century Western novels, and perhaps the earliest to have an entirely Chinese setting, it is hoped to reach greater understanding of how the Middle Kingdom and Europe have influenced each other.

Throughout his writing career, Verne showed great interest in China and the Chinese. However, this was not based on first-hand experience for, although he travelled widely across Europe and visited America and Africa, he never journeyed to Asia. All the same, as a boy growing up in the 1830s in a flat directly overlooking the international port of Nantes, he was surely marked by seeing many ships trading exotic goods with East Asia.

Verne's sources of information for his novels were generally varied, involving extensive reading of books in a range of disciplines, plus information from more transient publications. The geographical first third of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* is typical, in that three or four works on Iceland are borrowed from extensively, but thousands of other details are drawn from a huge variety of sources. As a result, the Vernian exegete requires an excellent memory, powerful search skills and considerable patience. It is perhaps only slightly surprising, then, that no one to date has systematically tried to investigate the sources of any of Verne's novels!

The difficulties are compounded in the present case by the variations in the transcription of Standard Chinese in the Latin alphabet. Even today, there are several transcription systems in English and French, but in the nineteenth century the situation was far worse, meaning that identifying Verne's places and historic personages is far from simple.

Nevertheless, Verne could not read any foreign language, which reduces the field; and in the period 1830 to 1880 there are less than a hundred book-length French accounts of China.

Also relevant to our theme is a novel Verne published in 1892, *The Special Correspondent, or the Adventures of Claudius Bombarnac*. The eponymous hero is a newspaper reporter describing a journey along the newly opened, but fictional, railway from Paris to Peking, and the final third of the book is set in China. *The School for Robinsons* (1882), *The Southern Star* (1884) and *Mistress Branican* (1891) also feature Chinese characters, respectively called Li (李), Seng-Vou (李盛欧) ("Who Does Not Live") and Gin-Ghi (晋奇) ("Indolent Man"). In *Robur the Conqueror* (1886) a flying machine hovers over Peking and gives a stunning presentation of the capital city from the air. In Verne's non-fictional *Famous Travels and Travellers* (1878), more than a hundred pages are devoted to early journeys of discovery to China, with another thirty in *The Great Navigators of the Eighteenth Century* (1879). The dates of publication are significant, since both volumes appeared while Verne was writing his Chinese novel, and may have led to the Chinese elements in the four novels cited above. Even in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas* (1870), there was almost a Chinese component. Verne's publisher, Hetzel, totally misunderstood the aims of the novel, repeatedly making absurd suggestions to "improve" it. Amongst the most unhinged was placing a Chinese boy on board the submarine so as "to cheer things up" — fortunately an idea the novelist categorically rejected!

Whatever the interest of these works, space is unfortunately lacking to study them here. Instead, I will concentrate on the Hong Kong chapters of *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872) and on *Tribulations of a Chinese in China* (1879, henceforth *The Tribulations*).

Around the World

Around the World was Verne's most successful novel, and Hong Kong is literally central to it. The book is structured by Phileas Fogg's circumnavigation. Because he heads east, Hong Kong comes nearly at the end of the Asian section. Inspector Fix, who is shadowing Fogg as a bank-robber, perceives space as having a dual structure. He can only arrest Fogg on British territory; before Hong Kong, he therefore does everything to slow Fogg down; after, to speed him up again. His space is equivalent to two linear segments, both having the colony as one pole and London as the pole of attraction. However, the paradox is that Hong Kong, the Ultima Thule of travel, this territory-from-which-you-can-go-no-further, is itself British and indeed resembles, according to Verne, the London suburbs! The message, in this blasé novel about the exhaustion of any areas of the globe that might be significantly different, seems to be that exoticism is no longer what it was; that Fogg may be right not to want to see the countries he visits; and that, in this perspective, Hong Kong is just the apex of the been-there-done-that which the self-sufficient gentleman carries within him.

Fortunately, we are not obliged to see the world through Fogg's spectacles.

One mystery is where Fogg stays in Hong Kong. The only information is that he sojourns at "l'Hôtel du Club", the hotel of the Club. Given his attachment to traditional British clubs — the journey *Around the World* is decided on in the Reform — this must be the Hong Kong Club, a well-known colonnaded building, demolished only in 1981.

One fruitful way of studying Verne's Hong Kong is to examine the close parallels between *Around the World* and *The Tribulations*. Most obvious is the geographical setting, with the two-and-a-half Hong Kong chapters in *Around the World* connecting with the opening on the Pearl River of *The Tribulations*. Both works feature a main protagonist in the 1870s who is a dehumanised, rich eccentric who has life too easy. Both are circular journeys against the clock with a lone servant and with detectives following the heroes for an extraneous reason, and both lead to a marriage with a beautiful young Asian widow. Indeed, when Verne first mentions the novel to his publisher (14 March 1878), he describes it "as a counterpart to *Around the World*".¹

Both are comedies, though with macabre and even tragic elements, and both were unique in being first published in the adult review *Le Temps*, and thus able to retain a more adult tone and themes. Usually, before being published in book form by Jules Hetzel's publishing house, Verne's works were serialised in Hetzel's *Magasin d'Education et de Récréation*, mainly designed for young people; and we know that, as such, they were heavily censored and considerably altered.

In both works theatricality runs riot.² For the first twenty years Verne considered himself a playwright, and indeed his theatrical career was more successful than his novelistic one. The theatrical basis is not surprising since both novels were also plays: *Around the World* even before it became a book, with the play a smash hit, running for about sixty years and making the writer's fortune.³

One sign of the theatricality in both is the repeated disappearance and re-entrance of the main characters, and more generally a multitude of masks and disguises, mixed with considerable melodrama, for many people die and dead people come back to life.

In both *Around the World* and *The Tribulations*, Verne presents detailed descriptions of Chinese "flower boats". Although such boats served as restaurants and places of entertainment, they were also sometimes floating brothels; and the author seems to have taken pleasure in smuggling the reference past his publisher.

A possibly connected feature is the description of a "Tankadère". In *Around the World*, the phrase "the Tankadère" occurs twenty-five times, as the name of the boat Phileas Fogg charts in Victoria Harbour, but without explanation. In *The Tribulations* (Ch. 7), a sampan is guided across the waters of the "Wang-Pow" (黃浦) in Shanghai by a "young Tankadère" singing a love song — implying that the word can here be translated as "a Tanka boat girl".⁴ "Tanka" in turn of course signifies "a people in coastal China, traditionally living in floating villages", but also "a kind of small boat, often rowed by women".

1 Translations from French are my own. Quotations from Verne's correspondence are from *Correspondance inédite de Jules Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel (1863-1886)*, vols 1, 2 and 3 (1999, 2001 and 2002).

2 François Raymond, *Un Cache-cache littéraire: Les Tribulations d'un Chinois en Chine*, in François Raymond (ed.), *Jules Verne 7: Voir du feu, contribution à l'étude du regard* (1994), pp. 19-50, convincingly demonstrates the theatricality of the twin novels, *Around the World* and *The Tribulations*.

3 Fifteen years later Verne tried to repeat the success by turning *The Tribulations* into a play with the dramatist d'Ennery, who had co-written *Around the World*. It proved a difficult undertaking, as the two did not get on well, and eventually broke off relations. The play opened in October 1891, but was not successful.

4 What remains a mystery, though, is the origin of the word "Tankadère", as it is not otherwise attested in French or English.

In fact, Verne's use of the word, and hence interest in China, predates his career as a novelist. In "Rhymes and Melodies" (*Rimes et Mélodies*), a volume of songs published in 1863, he composes a "Chinese Song" ("Chanson chinoise"), which turns out to be the same as in *The Tribulations*. The idea may possibly derive from a woodcut entitled "Tanka Boat Girl" in *Narrative of the Expedition ... to the China Seas and Japan ... under ... M C Perry* (Vol. 1 — 1856) or from a watercolour by the Hong Kong artist George Chinnery "Portrait of Macau Sampan Girl 1825-1852".

Verne's description of Hong Kong is, it must be admitted, a little thin, and despite touching on such local aspects as Chinese barbers, opium dens, palanquins, the good shopping — already! — boats that leave ahead of schedule, and cosmopolitanism, it is perhaps best to consider it as an *hors d'oeuvre* to his treatment of China proper.

The Tribulations

The Tribulations, set entirely in China, is one of Verne's happiest mixtures of comedy and philosophical adventure. The most eminent French Verne specialist called it a "very much underestimated" allegory of literary communication.⁵ At 28,000 hardback copies in France alone, its sales marked a peak that Verne would never reach again.

The novel centres on Kin-Fo, rich, young and westernised, bored with life in spite of the wise advice of his faithful friend and teacher, the elderly philosopher Wang (王 or 黃), a former Taiping. Kin-Fo has announced his marriage with the charming widow Lé-Ou (娜娥), but when he learns of his ruin following a stock exchange crash, he breaks off the engagement, insures himself heavily and decides to end his life. However, even the thought of poisoning himself causes him no emotion. Writing a suicide contract instead, he entrusts it to Wang, who courteously promises to kill him before the insurance policy runs out. Kin-Fo finally experiences some excitement at the expectation of death. But this turns to dismay when Wang disappears, he discovers that his fortune is not lost after all, and he has to advertise madly for Wang to return. Now the laughing stock of Shanghai, Kin-Fo flees with Soun, his lazy servant, and two bodyguards from the insurance company, but has the feeling of being followed. Eventually, he gets a letter from Wang explaining that he has confided the suicide note to a ruthless Taiping called Lao-Shen (老沈). Kin-Fo immediately sets out to buy off Lao-Shen. After travelling as far as Peking, he is becalmed on a ship in the China Sea with a cargo of coffins. Strange whisperings are heard from the hold, causing Kin-Fo and his companions to put on Boyton rubber suits and slip into the ocean. Picked up by a fishing vessel, they continue on to the Great Wall. Kin-Fo is finally captured by bandits and dragged before Lao-Shen, who refuses mercy. Packed in a box for a seemingly endless voyage, Kin-Fo experiences every torment of a man condemned to death. Blindfold, he is brought out and bravely asks to be put out of his misery — but discovers instead that he is in his own house in Shanghai, surrounded by smiling, celebrating friends. The whole plot has been engineered by Wang to provide Kin-Fo with the emotion he yearns for. Healed from his lethargy, and with his attractive bride at his side, he faces a new life.

Inception

The inception of the novel remained largely unknown until 2001, when the correspondence between Verne and his publisher was first published. Although none of the letters have appeared in English or Chinese, they provide vital information about the inception of the story, in particular which ideas were not Verne's.

⁵ François Raymond (*ibid.*).

On 12 April 1878, Verne says he wants to discuss with Hetzel a planned volume, set in the United States, which he will call "The Voluntary Assassinee" (23 May). Hetzel baldly tells Verne, now the most successful French writer, that "suicided, assassinated, are only labels, titles not to be kept"; and warns that the book is on dangerous ground from the Catholic authorities because of the theme of suicide (11 September). Verne replies that he "has thought it important to straight-away" change the setting from America to China (13 October). The way he says it seems to imply that the setting has already been a bone of contention between the two, but that Verne is here ignoring his publisher's objections. The change may have been because China was not Christian, and therefore the danger of opposition would be reduced. In the same letter the novelist emphasises his wide reading on China: he says he has prepared a large number of notes and is writing the book "with twenty volumes arranged around him". He adds, obscenely: "I've plunged into the Celestial Empire to the very tip of my tail. It has grown nine spots/buttons like a mandarin of the first class."

On 28 January 1879 Verne writes "half the volume ... is done ... it's amusing to do"; and then, "in about 10 days I'll have finished the Chinese novel ... I had great fun will people feel the same reading it?" (4 March). Titles suggested at this stage included "The Chinese", "Shen-Fou" (师父), "The Misfortunes of a too Fortunate Chinese", "A Customer of the Centenary", "Story of a True Chinese", "Novel of a Chinese", "From One Dinner to Another", "Between Two Meals", and "Kin-Fo's Idea".

Following the regular pattern, although perhaps less here than usual, as Hetzel read the final manuscript and successive proofs, he suggested changes, and even wrote in significant features. Thus the idea of Wang as a Taiping is Hetzel's; and the publisher may have objected to one of the songs, for Verne replies "As for the second song I've left it in prose because then it seems more Chinese ..." (19 April). Hetzel suggests "getting a book of Chinese proverbs and using them in the ending and even in places throughout the book" (21 April) — advice Verne seems to have followed, probably *Tchong Kou Sio Yù: Proverbes chinois, recueillis et mis en ordre par Paul Perny* (1869 — 中國成語). On 29 April Hetzel writes that he has done a great deal of work on the last chapter, working on every detail, adding and removing information. The publisher was thus responsible for the ideas of bringing Kin-Fo back home without him knowing and returning to a life of marriage and hard work and for instigating many name changes.

What Hetzel omits to tell Verne is that his ideas came from his young son, also called Jules Hetzel. At this stage (8 Apr 1879) the publisher also writes to his son that Verne does not accept all his suggestions and that there is little point in insisting, but that they can try again at proof stage — an interesting insight into publisher-author relations and a sign of Hetzel's control over the works. As late as 27 and 28 Jun 1879, changes were still being made to the book, although it was published in serial form from 2 July to 7 August 1879, and then in book form in November.

Three separate English translations were produced in 1879 and 1880,⁶ but, amazingly, the novel has not been translated since, although in subsequent reprints the title was changed to *The Tribulations of a Chinese Gentleman*.⁷

⁶ *The Tribulations of a Chinaman in China* (1879, Lee and Shepard, translated by Virginia Champlin); *The Tribulations of a Chinaman in China* (1879, Munro, translator unknown), *The Tribulations of a Chinaman* (1880, Dutton, translated by Ellen E Frewer).

⁷ Used for the 1963 edition (Arco/Associated, Fitzroy Edition, mendaciously indicated as "translated by IO Evans" — in fact an edited version of the Frewer translation); the same title was used for the OUP (Hong Kong) 1991 reprint of Frewer.

The Manuscript

The correspondence, then, reveals significant but incomplete information about the novel before Hetzel's suggestions. Although the manuscript is extant, surprisingly no-one has examined it to date. Information is therefore provided here for the first time.

The manuscript⁸ is neatly written in upright characters, indicating that it was intended for the printers; the changes must have been made on the proofs. In many of Verne's manuscripts sections were extensively reorganised, but here there is no page renumbering. However, even a quick scan reveals variants in the text. Thus the title of the novel is here "Tchien-Fou"; the hero's betrothed, Lé-Ou, is called Chou-chou (22) and her servant Nan is ... Léou – an interesting switch, implicitly equating women to servants.⁹ The Tankadère poem is also significantly different, although reasons of space preclude a full analysis.¹⁰

Chapter 22, especially, differs substantially. In both versions the initial setting is the Great Wall, with several paragraphs describing its history and the nationalities allowed to pass through the gates, although only in the manuscript are "Mongolians" included.

In this closing chapter, Kin-Fo is still desperate to retrieve his imprudent suicide letter, now in the possession of the Taipings. A guide claims to be able to take him and his servant to them, but a band of men captures the two, while the treacherous guide slips away. Kin-Fo and Soun are led over wild mountain paths to an isolated monastery. From this point the manuscript reads:¹¹

They found themselves in a sort of vestibule, overrun by weeds and with walls oozing with moisture.

The vestibule led to a vast hall, rather dark as the windows were more or less closed. However, there came enough light for Tchien-Fou to see a group of three men, stretched out on crude rugs in the corner.

When he went in, none of the men got up or made the slightest movement.

"Taiping Sun-Fo," said the leader, indicating the central man amongst the three.¹²

In the book in contrast, Kin-Fo and Soun are led into an underground crypt, with a full description of its decoration and architecture; it contains the whole band of Taipings, assembled for some ceremony, with the chief now called Lao-Shen.

In both versions Kin-Fo goes up to the Taiping chief, offers successively higher sums for the return of his letter and gets more and more annoyed by the lack of response. In the book he is then condemned to death, put in a cage, and transported for three days. Throughout the journey

8 Permission to cite the manuscript was kindly granted by the Municipal Library of Nantes, where it is kept (reference B 119).

9 In addition the lines about the widow having previously married a distinguished collaborator on the 170,000-volume encyclopaedia are added in the margin.

10 Whereas the published text says "my boat, with its fresh colours of a thousand flowers" – making it another flower boat! – the manuscript reads "and the water shares the tint of the bright colours". The original version emphasises the romantic, if not the sexual, aspect when it says "I wait for him who adores me".

11 In the transcription, roman is used for the parts of the manuscript which do not appear in the book, and italics for the published parts also in the manuscript.

12 [Ils se trouvaient dans] une sorte de vestibule, envahi par les mauvaises herbes, et dont les murs suintaient l'humidité.

Ce vestibule donnait accès dans une vaste salle assez sombre car les fenêtres en étaient fermées tant bien que mal.

Cependant, Tchien-Fou y vit suffisamment pour apercevoir un groupe de trois hommes, étendus sur des tapis grossiers dans un angle de la salle.

Aucun de ces hommes ne se leva, ni bougea moins, lorsqu'il entra.

« Le Taiping Sun-Fo » dit le chef, en indiquant celui de ces personnages qui occupaient la place du milieu.

he is obsessed with his impending demise, leading him at long last to feel strong emotions. In the end he is led blindfolded into a room, but finds himself ... in a banquet room surrounded by all his friends, including Wang.

In the manuscript, the surprise happens at the monastery, immediately after the Taiping's final refusal:

That voice! What was that voice he had just heard?

At that moment the window bay was cleared and bright light flooded into the room.

Wang stood before Tchien-Fou. Taiping Sun-Fo was Wang!¹³

The explanation as to how Kin-Fo ends up amongst his friends are of course different. In the book the philosopher explains that Lao-Shen has now submitted to the Empire. He then expounds how he has manipulated his pupil and intones moral lessons for more than a page. As if to cut him short, Kin-Fo finally asks for the letter back.

The corresponding passage in the manuscript concentrates instead on the philosopher's life, providing interesting information about Wang's background and political affiliations.

"But what about Sun-Fo?" said Tchien-Fou.

"Sun-Fo was captured two days ago and is going to pay for his crimes."

"And you, Wang, his former companion! Are you a Taiping?"

"Me a Taiping!" replied Wang. "My friend, when your father took me into his hospitable home he thought he was rescuing a rebel, but it was a misunderstanding. However I felt so comfortable in his house that I never had the courage to tell him the truth... Can you forgive me?"

"But who are you then?"

"A simple philosophy teacher who was looking for a pupil, a scholar who knew the 80,000 operations of Chinese writing, an erudite person of superior dialect who had come top in the doctoral exam and had the right to pass through the main gate of Peking reserved for the Emperor, a descendant of Confucius's privileged family, and, better than that, pupil: your master, your friend, your father!"¹⁴

Attention then switches to Kin-Fo's servant and friends:

Soun understood nothing of all this; but he was touched, he wept.

As for Tchien-Fou, he felt transformed! He understood this lesson of practical philosophy, and he thanked the man who had given it.

"But what about the companions?" he said, indicating the two men stretched out on the corner rugs.

"Your friends Pang and Houal, who were kind enough to come with me!"

And the scholar and businessman warmly seized Tchien-Fou's hands, who did not attempt to hide his emotion.

13 Cette voix! Quelle était cette voix qui venait de se faire entendre?

En ce moment, la baie des fenêtres se dégagea, et un jour clair emplit toute la salle.

Wang était devant Tchien-Fou. Le Taiping Sun-Fo, c'était Wang!

14 « Mais Sun-Fo?... dit Tchien-Fou.

-- Sun-Fo est pris depuis deux jours, et va payer ses crimes.

-- Et toi!... Wang? toi!... son ancien compagnon!... Toi, un Taiping?...

-- Moi! un Taiping!... répondit Wang. Ami, lorsque ton père m'a recueilli dans sa maison hospitalière, il a cru sauver un rebelle que je n'étais pas! Mais je me trouvais si bien chez lui... que je n'ai jamais eu le courage de le détromper... Me le pardonnes-tu?...

-- Mais qui est tu donc? demanda Tchien-Fou.

-- Un simple professeur de philosophie, qui cherchait alors un disciple, un savant qui connaît les quatre vingt [sic] milles opérations de l'écriture chinoise, un lettré du dialecte supérieur, premier lauréat de l'examen du doctorat, ayant le droit de passer par la grande porte de Péking réservée à l'empereur, descendant de la famille privilégiée de Confucius, et, mieux que cela, mon élève, ton maître, ton ami, ton père!... »

“At last,” exclaimed Soun, “at long last! So no more journeys across land, no more sea voyages for me...”

“Ah, and my letter?”

“Your letter?” repeated Wang.

“Yes, or do you prefer to keep it,” exclaimed Tchien-Fou with a laugh, “to keep me dependent on you?”

“No,” replied Wang, *seeming quite embarrassed*.¹⁵

Wang admits he has given the letter to Kin-Fo’s fiancée. She duly makes her entrance in both versions, although in the book previously merely hidden by a screen. The manuscript version then explains how the young woman happens to be present:

An hour after leaving Peking, Wang, who wanted to avoid new unhappiness for the young woman, went to see her, told her he had by chance bumped into his pupil on the platform of Tongzhou, and had then had to pretend to die in the waters of the Pohio [*sic*]. He related all that had happened, all that was going to happen, and he persuaded her to go with him, Pang and Houal to the supposed camp of Sun-Fo, who had in fact just been thrown into Peking prison.

And that was why and how the tender Chou-Chou was waiting for her fiancé on the far side of the Great Wall...¹⁶

The book, in contrast, has three or four paragraphs announcing the burning of the letter and showing a sentimental scene between the couple.

In both versions the marriage then takes place, in two short words, and the couple are described as destined to live happily ever after. While in both the emotion is cut with an ironic “You need to go to China to see that”, only in the manuscript are the closing words added: “It’s worth the journey.”

What, then, should we think of Hetzel’s suggestions and the resultant changes?

The main difference is that the Taipings in the revised version are real ones (although it is not really explained why they cooperate in the charade with Wang), whereas in the manuscript all three are fake, being, implausibly, Wang and Kin-Fo’s friends. Taking the hero back to find his

15 Soun ne comprenait rien à tout cela ; mais il était attendri, il pleurait.

Tchien-Fou, lui, se sentait transformé! Cette façon de philosophie pratique, il la comprenait, et il remerciait celui qui la lui avait donnée.

« Mais les deux compagnons? dit-il, en montrant les deux hommes étendus sur le tapis, à l’angle de la salle.

-- Ton ami Pang et ton ami Houal! répondit Wang, « qui ont bien voulu m’accompagner jusqu’ici. »

Le lettré et le négociant serraient cordialement les mains de Tchien-Fou, qui ne cherchait point à cacher son émotion.

« Enfin! s’écria Soun, enfin! J’en ai donc fini avec les voyages sur terre, les voyages sur mer...

-- Ah! Et ma lettre?...

-- Ta lettre? répondit Wang.

-- Oui!... Est-ce que tu préfères la garder? s’écria Tchien-Fou en riant, afin de me tenir dans ta dépendance?...

-- Non... répondit Wang, qui paraissait être assez embarrassé.

16 Une heure après que Tchien-Fou avait quitté Péking, Wang, qui voulait épargner à la jeune femme de nouvelles angoisses, se présentait chez elle, lui racontait que le hasard xx l’avait mis en présence de son élève sur le quai de Tong-Tchiou [*sic* for Tong-Tchéou], et qu’alors il avait dû feindre de périr dans les eaux du Pohio. Il lui disait tout ce qui s’était passé, tout ce qui se passerait encore, et il la décidait à la suivre en compagnie de Pang et de Houal jusqu’au prétendu campement de Sun-Fo, qui venait d’être écroué dans la prison de Péking.

Et voilà pourquoi et comment la tendre Chou-Chou attendait son fiancé au-delà de la Grande Muraille...

friends in Shanghai, although not for some reason to Canton, does provide a pleasing symmetry to the novel's opening scene. The closing "It's worth the journey" is perhaps better omitted.

One feature we can regret in the manuscript is the information about Wang's past, especially about the career of Chinese scholars and his Confucian ancestry. Another is the use of the intimate form "tu" (thou) between Wang and his pupil throughout the novel. It provides an amusing hint of homosexuality, reinforced by the hero's idea that the philosopher may want to retain the letter to keep him "dependent", an idea which justifiably embarrasses Wang. To a certain extent we can also dislike the moral lesson and the love scene with Lé-Ou in the book version.

In many of Verne's novels, the manuscript endings were very brief, causing Hetzel to suggest more elaborate and detailed versions. In the general case we can regret the ideological and plot changes imposed by the publisher but be undecided about the wider question of whether manuscript or book closes more satisfactorily. But in this case, Verne wrote to Hetzel that his suggestions were good and we should perhaps agree that the book version is clearly better – an exception in Verne's works.

Main Sources

"But how happy I am I was born in China! I have a house to protect me, enough to eat, every convenience for living, I have clothing, hats and many other delightful things; but in truth, my greatest happiness is my legacy!" (Victor Hugo, *Les Châtiments*, ch. 7)

Interest in China was generated in 1860s France by the writer Théophile Gautier, who in 1863 welcomed a man called Tin Tun-Ling (丁堂林) into his home, employing him as a language and culture teacher for his daughter Judith.¹⁷ Verne was a friend of Gautier's, who was the first person – and virtually the last – to substantially review his novels; and his description of Wang, and especially the corresponding illustration, may easily be based on Tin Tun-Ling. But apart from this possibility, Verne is not known to have had any contact with Chinese persons.

By 1879, despite periodic fashions for Chinese objects, relatively few French travellers had visited China. The East that was often referred to was generally the Holy Land or even North Africa. Amongst Verne's predecessors and contemporaries, a handful were thought original, or even eccentric, when they acquired Chinese porcelain or smoked opium. Gautier wrote some poems containing Chinese colour; in Baudelaire's "Invitation to the Voyage" are a few lines dreaming of China; Victor Hugo's poetry has a few references to Chinese people and porcelain. Flaubert also indulged in exotic reveries, writing notably: "Think that never perhaps will I see China; that I will never fall asleep to the regular pace of camels; that never perhaps will I see the gleaming eyes of a tiger lying amongst bamboo in the jungles!"

Given the dearth and stereotypical nature of the Chinese references amongst Verne's colleagues in France, we must seek his sources in non-fictional literature.

Difficult to identify are the book titles Verne cites as *Li-nun* (理论), on domestic virtues, *Nei-tso-pien* (内操篇), on the duties of marriage, and the *Nushun*, the instruction manual which has to be read regularly by every honest wife – especially as it is later spelled "the *Nun-schum*".

But fortunately, Verne does name five identifiable authors directly in his text: "Thompson", "Rousset", "Choutzé" (楚辞), "de Beauvoir", and "Pan Hoi-Pan" (班惠班), all of whom seem to be major sources. I must stress again that little work has been done to date to identify these writers.

¹⁷ Lin Miao Chen, *L'Orient dans l'œuvre de Jules Verne*, DEA [MPhil] (Paris, Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle (Paris III), 1994).

For the first, Verne indicates the source of a direct quotation about the extreme lifelikeness of certain Chinese paintings as “J Thompson (*Voyage en Chine*)”. This author is the Scot John Thomson (1837-1921) and the book, *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China* (1874), with five chapters on Hong Kong, Canton, Amoy, Shanghai, Ningpo, Nanking, and Peking. Thomson also published *The Land and the People of China: A short account of the geography, history ... and government*. (1873) and the four-volume *Illustrations of China and its People* (1873), with 200 high-quality photographs, a work translated into French.¹⁸

The second source is Léon Rousset, *A travers la Chine* (“Across China”, 1878), cited on the subject of the foreign concessions in Shanghai, presented in a favourable light by both Rousset and Verne. The book is known to have been in Verne’s personal library, as was the French periodical Thomson’s book was first published in.¹⁹

The third authority cited in *The Tribulations* is “Mr T Choutzé, in his journey entitled *Péking et le nord de la Chine* [‘Peking and the North of China’]” (1873), the source of an anecdote about Prince Kong’s courtesy to the French and German diplomats, as well as an ultra-rare reference by Verne to “1870 [and] the bloody war which devastated France”.

A fourth author is “Mr de Beauvoir”, from whom Verne makes two direct quotations without providing more information. The book in question is Ludovic de Beauvoir, *Pékin, Yeddo, San Francisco* (1868), a work generally critical of China and things Chinese.²⁰

As a slight parenthesis, we are very fortunate in being able to research nineteenth-century texts, as the French National Library has made tens of millions of pages freely available online, including the full text of the books of Thomson, Choutzé, and de Beauvoir — a sign that Verne chose his sources amongst quality texts that are still of interest today.

Verne also mentions “Pan Hoei-Pan” (班惠班) (Her given name is 班昭 a blue stocking), a female author of a book of maxims on marriage, and cites its “If a wife has a husband who suits her heart, it is for her whole life!” and “The husband is the heaven of the wife”. Searching for “Pan Hoei-Pan” on the Web again leads directly to the French National Library, and to *Chine moderne* (1853) by Guillaume Pauthier, which contains these two maxims word for word. Pauthier also tells us that Pan Hoei-Pan was the sister of General Pan-Tchao (班超) under Emperor Ho-Ti (和帝); and that she was widowed “in the flower of age”, but did not wish to remarry. The information is vital, since the heroine Lé-Ou is a young widow, as indeed was Verne’s own wife.

An additional, fascinating, citation is that of the “*Sse-Khou-Tsuane-Chou*” (四库全书): “this work, begun in 1773 [*sic* for 1772], will comprise 170,000 volumes, but is now only on its 78,738th” (ch. 5). Lé-Ou’s first husband, twice her age, had been one of the first editors of this mammoth encyclopedia, but died, presumably from the twin marital and professional effort. The attempt to sum up all knowledge is remarkably similar to Verne’s own endeavour to “paint the whole earth” in his more than a hundred volumes. As a result, Verne scholars have often discussed the encyclopedia, but for some reason none has ever tried to identify it. I can reveal that it is clearly the *Great Encyclopedia of Yongle* (永樂大典 — *Yongle Dadian*). This work was in fact first compiled in 1403-7 in the Ming Dynasty, and at that stage contained 22,877 volumes or 370 million characters, in handwritten form; it is now considered to have 79,337 volumes.²¹

18 His work continues to attract interest, with his books recently republished in Edinburgh and Hong Kong.

19 The periodical *Le Tour du monde*, possibly Verne’s most important single source of information for his books, published *Voyage en Chine* in 1875.

20 Although de Beauvoir provides ten pages on Hong Kong, these do not seem to have been Verne’s source.

21 It was thus twelve times as big as the famous French encyclopedia compiled by Diderot in the eighteenth century. Unfortunately only about four hundred books remain today, dispersed across eight different coun-

Other possible sources for the local colour perhaps include the following. Verne may have used the writings of the French explorer Père David, famous for the deer named after him. He may have borrowed architectural details from Ida Pfeiffer, *Woman's Journey Round the World ...* (1850).²² This pioneer traveller is mentioned in Verne's *The Fur Country* (1873); amongst the ideas borrowed in *The Tribulations* seem to be the description of a two-storey house with its "crenelations, its multi-coloured tiles, its ornate bricks" and "its living rooms surrounded by cabinets with transparent screens covered in painted garlands or maxims and moral proverbs". The title and date alone of *Tales of a Fugitive Life* (1877 — *Récits d'une vie fugitive*) by Chen [or Shen] Fou imply an influence, although this book was available only in Chinese. In *Claudius Bombarnac* (ch. 21), Verne quotes two lines from *Voyage en Chine* (1865), a comic opera by Eugène Labiche. Another distinct possibility is de Bourboulon, *Relation de voyage de Shanghai à Moscou, par Pékin* (1864), since Verne cites her twice in another novel. A final possibility is Henry Russel-Killough, *16,000 Leagues across Asia ... 1858-61* ((vol. 1), 1864), whose title may have influenced that of Verne cites the volume in a letter of 1875 (26 November).

In sum, Verne's documentation about China is extensive, especially compared with the superficial treatment of other writers of the period. As his principal aim is to give some flavour of everyday life in contemporary China, he avoids specialised treatises, but relies instead on general works, especially travel writings. He selects a healthy mixture of European and Chinese authors, one which has stood the test of time. If, by modern standards, their treatment can be slightly perfunctory and Eurocentric, Verne often adapts their necessarily fragmentary information to his narrative requirements, and thus succeeds in providing a highly plausible account of the Middle Kingdom.

The Characters

In building his characters, Verne attempts to give them 'Chinese' characteristics, at the same time as making them comprehensible for his French audience. In the same way, he told Hetzel he would avoid "those diabolical Chinese names which I don't want to bore our readership with" (13 October 1878).

Kin-Fo is thirty-two years old, without profession: he is described as a fine example of the Northern Chinese, "well built, more white than yellow, his eyebrows in a straight line, eyes arranged horizontally and hardly rising towards the temples, a straight nose, face not flattened". His description makes him sound European, but before Verne is accused of racism, it should be emphasised that Wang is described as having a very Chinese appearance, and is in nearly every respect more attractive than his pupil.

Kin-Fo had previously been "Schien-Fou" (4 March 1879), but Verne realises children will perhaps pronounce "schi" "disgustingly" (that is to sound like "chie" (shits)), and so announces he will spell it "Tschien" or "Tchien", that is with a hard initial consonant (5 March). The name Kin-Fo may come from "Chun-Kin-Fo" ("the town of the highest rank obedient to heaven" — "... 京府"?), another name for Peking (ch. 14).

Proud and impatient, Kin-Fo sometimes beats his valet, but "more through habit than wickedness".²³ He is nonchalant, lazy, blasé, and fatalistic. His tribulations will perhaps form him and at the end of the novel a new man appears, more optimistic and wise — at least from a conven-

tries. Parts have been published in facsimile form in China, and the work is currently being digitised in a joint PRC-Taiwan venture.

²² *Voyage d'une femme autour du monde en 1846* (1856).

²³ Ghislain de Diesbach, *Le Tour de Jules Verne en quatre-vingts livres* (1969), intelligently studies the main characters in *The Tribulations*.

tional point of view. As with all Hetzel's heavy-handed rewrites and happy endings, though, I have my doubts; and personally prefer the unreconstructedly cynical Kin-Fo. To add another twist to an already complicated situation, it is possible that the tension between the old and the new Kin-Fo reconstructs the Verne-Hetzel tension.

His fiancée Lé-Ou, without profession, is a pretty twenty-one-year-old widow, with gentle eyes, and small feet, although "not from that barbaric foot-binding custom" (ch. 5). She is intelligent, educated, anxious, devoted, tender, and an excellent housewife. Once again, Hetzel attempted to impose his interpretation, but for once the novelist resisted: "Difficult to make Chou-Chou²⁴ a young married virgin ... She is not in any case the vivacious *ingénue*, the laughing woman you suppose; to make Chou-Chou true, I used inspiration from everything I read" (25 Mar 1879).

Soun, age and appearance unknown, is Kin-Fo's first valet. He is absent-minded, incoherent, "clumsy with his hands and his tongue, fundamentally greedy, and slightly cowardly", his only quality being fidelity. Soun realises that he is not a model servant and spontaneously offers himself for his master's beating. What he fears infinitely more is when Kin-Fo progressively cuts his pigtail — an authentic contemporary punishment, symbolic of castration, which Verne works with crude pre-Freudian humour. At the end Soun reveals that he had long ago substituted a false tail — again an authentic usage exploited by Verne.

Kin-Fo's philosophy master, Wang, is fifty-five, "a true Chinese, with eyes raised towards the temples ... a traditional moustache" and a projecting stomach. He possesses great wisdom and optimism, philosophising with humour and intelligence at the drop of a hat. Devoted and disinterested, he places friendship above all other virtues. Stoical in the face of ill-fortune, he is content with his modest condition and unmarried life in Kin-Fo's home.

Wang had taken part in the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64). Verne shows his supports for the Taiping by underlining the "Tartar" origin of the ruling dynasty and by having Kin-Fo's father also support it: "An uprising against this foreign domination even after three hundred years in power would have found him ready to act. Useless to add that his son Kin-Fo shared his political opinions" (ch. 2).

Verne's other characters generally have a spirit superior to their condition and represent traditional virtues of frugality, cheerfulness, courage, abnegation, and laconicism. In sum, Verne generally gives a favourable view of China and shows considerable sympathy for its enigmatic inhabitants, whose calm philosophy he admires. Wang and Kin-Fo represent a modernised nation, true to eternal values while open enough to adopt European ideas and inventions.

The stereotype of the traditional Chinese is that of the philosopher, never having travelled outside or inside the country, not interested in politics or scientific development, loving material pleasures, but satisfied with a house and garden, a wife and friends. Political correctness demands that we reject such stereotypes. However, different cultures do exhibit different patterns, and even different weaknesses and strengths. Verne takes account of the traditional traits of the Chinese, but also of the French, undermines them both,²⁵ mixes in doses of prejudice and personal observation, and finally pulls out interesting and varied characters who easily pass for Chinese in a French novel. In other words, Kin-Fo, Lé-Ou, and Wang are not real people, but Verne creates a certain illusion of life, although we are not necessarily obliged to find them sympathetic. Similarly, the force of the novel's title is to undermine ideas, only too prevalent in both China and the West, that the Chinese are somehow so different as to be beyond understanding. "The Tribulations

²⁴ Lé-Ou's earlier name.

²⁵ The undermining of stereotypes is observed by Lin Miao-Chen, *L'Orient dans l'œuvre de Jules Verne*, DEA [MPhil] (Paris, Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle (Paris III), 1994).

of a Chinese Gentleman” is therefore an inadequate translation because it misses the irony that being Chinese in China is no better and no worse a route to happiness than being French in France.

Philosophy

The undermining of popular stereotypes can thus be seen to be a constant in Verne’s novel. In this perspective, the plot of *The Tribulations* may be less interesting than reading between the lines, following the author’s weaving of diagonal connections, whether within 1870s China, the characters, or from the book to the reader. This is undoubtedly the reason why the play of the book failed after the unparalleled triumph of *Around the World* by the same authors — it was simply too subtle for the stage.

One example is Kin-Fo’s initiation into the value of life by Wang the master, which plays essentially on east-west, modernity-tradition, Verne-Hetzel differences to produce its effect. Thus, at the beginning the pupil sees marriage as the introduction of a “new element” in the emptiness of his life, but Wang immediately objects: “to be bored as a couple is worse!” (ch. 1). The Hetzelised conclusion proclaims loud and clear that marriage equals happiness, but then Vernianly qualifies it by concluding: “you need to go to China to see such a thing!” (ch. 22).²⁶ Verne’s language and symbolism in fact reveal considerable antipathy to the married state, frequently equating it to death. The wedding of the son is described as the death of the father; the twin phoenixes that Verne mentions in one mock-learned footnote as a Chinese symbol of marriage are also a western symbol of death; Lé-Ou is “completely resigned to her new fate” of marriage to Kin-Fo (ch. 5); the date of the wedding is the same as his planned assassination; the ceremony is described as “perhaps gloomier than a funeral procession” (ch. 14), and then, in case the point has been missed, as less “magnificent” than “a burial ceremony” (ch. 15); it is indeed prepared for by the death of the Empress and followed by the news of Wang’s death. As if the conclusion were still unclear, we are told “marriage is sometimes suicide!” (ch. 15).

Two other Hetzel-style moral lessons-for-young-people are given similarly short Vernian shrift: that there is any short cut to happiness; or that one can be taught “the value of life” by being placed “in the presence of death” (ch. 22). Indeed, Verne has to inform explicitly his publisher and mentor that his interpretation of the moral of the novel is far too “simple and naïve” (25 Mar 1879). A few years later, he has to again hammer home the same point about another novel: “the lesson to be given to our hero is not in my view the main point, far from it” (1881).

We should be wary, then, of sticking labels on Verne, because he anticipates, often comments on, and in any case actively undermines our critical reactions. The opening passage of the novel had already emphasised that wisdom is not really transferable, that happiness has to be fought for, and that traditional Chinese values are not a guaranteed route to salvation. Verne’s only conclusion is a sort of Taoist systematic doubt.

Science and Technology

Similarly paradoxical is Verne’s painting of a hyper-modern China, technologically and economically undergoing the shock of the future. Kin-Fo’s family is in the vanguard of progress. “It was the electric cable which gave [Kin-Fo’s father] the price of silk in Lyon and opium in Calcutta.” The hero himself “belonged to that category of Sons of Heaven ... who are keen on the physical and chemical sciences ... material progress had even penetrated inside him”; he communicates

²⁶ Raymond (*ibid.*) astutely analyses Verne’s implied comments on marriage.

with Lé-Ou by phonographic recordings sent through the post.²⁷ (Incidentally, this insertion by Verne of a recent invention is the first time in any of his novels, as previously his preference had been for low technology like sledges or balloons or, just as often, no technology at all.)

In fact, such descriptions are partly ironic, and Kin-Fo and his father's technology is not necessarily a force for good, as shown by the mention of opium dealing aided by the telegraph. The suspicion is that the phonograph idea is also Hetzel's, for in the correspondence the publisher energetically promotes it as a way of showing Kin-Fo's love for Lé-Ou (25 Mar 1879).

One of the major themes of the book is the mathematisation of death. Kin-Fo's father's fortune had in fact come from shipping the bodies of Chinese workers back from California. The hero's insurance agent, William J. Bidulph, calculates the price of death with "mathematical exactitude" (ch. 6), and thus determines Kin-Fo's voluntary suicide, which is a countdown to death, with the number of days, minutes, and seconds being calculated with macabre glee. The inescapable conclusion is that statistics and technology kill trust, love, and friendship.

What Kin-Fo is seeking instead is the unmathematical, the unpredictable, the creative; and he finds it on the China Sea, a gratuitous episode for he has no real reason to leave the land. Under the appropriately named Captain Yin, superstitious, instinctive, sailing blind, but in touch with his own feelings, Kin-Fo feels free for the first time in his life.

The second time is when, after abandoning ship, he and his companions put on Boyton suits and take to the water. Paul Boyton was a real-life figure, who crossed the English Channel in 1875 in a body-length life-saving suit made of air-filled cushions. Kin-Fo's Boyton suit is presumably an improvement on real life, for it is equipped with paddles, a small mast and sail, and a tiny chemical stove. For once, little irony is attached to technology, just admiration for the freedom and autonomy this means of transport allows. A similar intermediate-technology philosophy underlies "the wind-driven wheelbarrows still in use in the Celestial Empire" in *Around the World* (ch. 19), also featured prominently in *The Tribulations*. Verne neglects conventional ideas like the Chinese invention of gunpowder for technology he considers much more useful, even transferring it to America, for Fogg sails there a land-yacht derived from Chinese wind-propelled wheelbarrows.

By 1878 the novelist had accumulated the reputation of being some sort of prophet or scientific forecaster. As if in reaction, Verne inserts in *The Tribulations* a "popular prophet" whose "profession is to forecast the future", using "a deck of sixty-four cards representing figures of God's men and animals" (ch. 3). The novelist seems to be commenting that his reputation is false, for his invariable preference is for the human scale, for the quirky improvisation, for human-animal-natural interaction for ecology in a word.

In sum, Verne takes the twin prejudices, that China was ill-adapted to technology, and that technology was his theme of predilection, turns them both on their heads, and subverts them both, but without, once again, enabling us to conclude where his heart really lies. If modernism is the undermining of any fixed scale of values, Verne must be considered eminently modern.

Conclusion

In coming to terms with Verne's ideas on China, one difficulty is the gap between the two civilisations; as Lord McCartney said, "nothing would be more mistaken than to judge China using our European criteria". To properly assess the novelist's representation of the Middle Kingdom would require an exhaustive knowledge of nineteenth-century Chinese and European culture:

²⁷ Verne's views on technology in this novel are analysed by Jean-Pierre Picot, *Le Conteur et le compteur, ou Jules Verne entre science et sentiment*, pp. 57-83 in François Raymond (ed.), *Jules Verne 5* (1992).

the depth of a Needham, the breadth of the 78,000-volume encyclopedia Verne cites, and the energy of an Admiral Zheng He.

Verne's descriptions of Chinese life are immensely detailed, and so carry a certain plausibility, which is after all the aim in works of fiction, rather than sociological or anthropological treatises. The author himself modestly called *The Tribulations of a Chinese in China* a "fantasy" (17 March 1879). Although both *The Tribulations* and *Around the World* contain a few misconceptions about Chinese customs, some may be merely exaggerations to make for a more interesting story; and some must be due to the publisher's interference and illiteracy. Two junior critics have argued that, although Verne displays a good knowledge of contemporary China, his characters are perhaps too westernised.²⁸ However, a more senior scholar, Wang Rencai, has recorded his respect for the depth and breadth of Verne's knowledge of China — on the basis of preparing the first ever translation of *The Tribulations* into Chinese.²⁹ In any case, it is clear that one subtext of the entertaining accounts of behaviour in China is to point up the eccentric behaviour of Frenchmen, just as it was for Voltaire's Chinese or Montesquieu's Persians.

In this too-short study, the complexity of China as depicted by Verne has hardly been broached, but is hoped that the ground has been cleared for more ambitious ventures. One especially urgent need is for a critical edition of *The Tribulations*, since only a detailed analysis of the meaning, and variants, of the text can enable us to understand it properly.

One of Verne's richest novels still contains many oriental mysteries, just waiting to be discovered.

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²⁸ Huang Wen-Ling, *Jules Verne et Les Tribulations d'un Chinois en Chine* (1988), and Lin Miao-Chen, *L'Orient dans l'œuvre de Jules Verne* (1994).

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Brief bio notes: Dr Butcher was Founding Director of the Language Centres at the Hong Kong Institute for Vocational Education and previously worked at the Ecole Nationale d'Administration and Oxford University.

His main research area is nineteenth-century French literature, where he has published more than half a million words. In 2005 he published a critical edition of Verne's *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (OUP) and in 2006 *Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography* (Thunder's Mouth).