

INTRODUCTION

Jules Verne (1828-1905) is one of the world's bestselling writers, and perhaps the most translated of all. 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.

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 of views on the world at large.

When Verne was writing, France was occupying the countries of Indochina; 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 reached Asia. All the same, as a boy growing up in the 1830s in a flat 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 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 extensively borrowed, but with thousands of other details 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 only a few score 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 Seng-Vou ("Who Does Not Live"), Li and Gin-Ghi ("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 Western 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. Even in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas* (1869-70), 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 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 [*Around the World in Eighty Days*] was Verne's most commercially 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 near 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 pole of rejection and London as the pole of attraction. However, the paradox is that Hong Kong, the Ultima Thule of European 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 the Briton 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 clubs—the journey of *Around the World* is decided 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 the published *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 whose life is too easy. Both are circular journeys against the clock with a lone domestic 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 less juvenile tone and themes. Usually, before being published in book form by Jules Hetzel’s publishing house, Verne’s works were serialised in his *Magasin d’Éducation et de Récréation*, mainly designed for young people; we know that, as such, they were heavily censored and radically altered.

In both works theatricality runs riot.² For the first twenty years Verne was a playwright, before becoming a novelist at the unprecocious age of 34. The theatrical basis is not surprising since both novels were also plays: *Around the World* even before it became a book, with the play later to become 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 die and the dead come back to life.

In both *Around the World* and *The Tribulations*, Verne presents detailed descriptions of Chinese “flower boats.” Although such boats also served as restaurants and places of entertainment, they were often floating brothels; the author seems to take pleasure in smuggling the concept 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”⁴ in Shanghai by a “young Tankadère” singing a love song—implying that the word can here be translated as “a Tanka boat girl.” “Tanka” in turn signified “a people in coastal China, traditionally living in floating villages,” but sometimes also “a kind of small boat, often rowed by women.”

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 derives from an engraving by the famous

Gustave Doré, entitled “A Tankadère (Chinese boat woman),” published in *Le Tour du monde* (1860, vol. 1, p. 133), and perhaps ultimately 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).

Verne’s published description of Hong Kong is, it must be admitted, a little thin, and despite touching on such 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’œuvre* 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. An eminent Verne specialist called it a “very much underestimated” allegory of literary communication.⁵ At 28,000 softback 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, a former Taiping. Kin-Fo has announced his marriage with the charming widow Lé-Ou, but when he learns of his ruin following a stock-exchange crash, he breaks off the engagement, insures himself heavily and resolves to end his life. However, the thought of poisoning himself causes him no emotion. Writing a suicide contract instead, he entrusts it to Wang, who 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. 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” together with a cargo of coffins. Strange whisperings are heard from the hold, causing Kin-Fo and his companions to put on Boyton floating rubber suits and slip into the ocean. Picked up by a fishing vessel, they continue 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 beautiful 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 published. Although none of the letters have appeared in English or Chinese, they provide important information about the inception of the story, in particular which ideas were not Verne's own.

On 12 April 1878, Verne says he wants to discuss with Hetzel a planned volume, set in the United States, which he later calls "**The Voluntary Assassinee**" (23 May). Hetzel baldly tells Verne, now the most popular French novelist, 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 straightaway" change the action 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. 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**,"⁶ "**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 added significant features. Thus the idea of Wang as a Taiping is his; and he may have disliked 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). The publisher 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 consulting *Tchong Kou Sio Yü: Proverbes chinois, recueillis et mis en ordre par Paul Perny* (1869).⁷ 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 is in fact 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 April 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 June 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 1880,⁸ but, amazingly, the novel has not been translated since, although in subsequent reprints the title was changed to *The Tribulations of a Chinese Gentleman*.⁹

THE MANUSCRIPT

The correspondence, then, reveals significant but incomplete information about the novel before Hetzel's reading. Although the manuscript is extant, surprisingly no-one has examined it to date.

The handwritten document¹⁰ is neatly written in upright characters, indicating that it was intended for the printers; the changes must have been made on the proofs. Many of Verne's earlier manuscripts 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**";¹¹ the hero's betrothed, Lé-Ou, is called Chou-Chou and her servant Nan is . . . Léou—an interesting switch, implicitly associating wives with servants.¹² The Tankadère poem is also significantly different, although reasons of space preclude a full analysis.¹³

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:

They found themselves in a sort of vestibule, over-run 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, enough light came 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 middle of the three men.¹⁴

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 leader now called Lao-Shen.

In both versions Kin-Fo goes up to the Taiping chief, offers higher and higher sums for the return of his letter and gets more and more agitated at 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 he is obsessed with his impending demise, leading him at long last to feel strong emotion.

In the manuscript, the final revelation 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!¹⁵

The explanation as to how Kin-Fo ends up amongst his friends is 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, my pupil: your master, your friend, your father!”¹⁶

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.

“At last,” exclaimed Soun, “at long last! So no more land journeys, 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*.¹⁷

Wang admits he has given the letter to Kin-Fo’s fiancée. She duly makes her entrance in both versions, although in the book merely hidden previously 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,¹⁸ and had then had to pretend to die in the waters of the Pohio [*sic* for the Bohai (sea)]. He related all that had happened, all that was going to happen, and he persuaded her to accompany Pang, Houal and him 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 . . .¹⁹

The book, in contrast, has three or four paragraphs announcing the burning of the letter and including 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 such a thing,” only in the manuscript is an additional closing sentence 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 friends in Shanghai, although not for some reason to Canton, does provide a pleasing symmetry to the novel’s opening scene. The closing words “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 as regards the career path 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 final text.

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 remain undecided on the wider question of whether manuscript or book closes more satisfactorily. However, in this case, Verne wrote to Hetzel that his suggestions were good, so we should perhaps agree that the book version is on balance better—an exception amongst 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 into his home, employing him as a language and culture teacher for his daughter Judith.²⁰ Verne was a friend of Gautier, who was the first person—and virtually the last during his lifetime—to substantially review his novels. 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 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 pottery. 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 jungle!”

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

Difficult to identify are the book titles Verne cites as *Linnun*, on domestic virtues, *Nei-tso-pien*, 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*.”²¹

But fortunately, Verne does name five identifiable authors in his text: “Thompson,” “Rousset,” “Choutzé,” “de Beauvoir,” and “Pan Hœi-Pan,” all of whom seem to be significant sources, but none of whom has been identified to date.

For the first, Verne himself indicates the source of a direct quotation about the extreme lifelikeness of certain Chinese paintings as “J Thompson (*Voyage en Chine*).” This is the Scot John Thomson (1837-1921) author of *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.²²

The second source is Léon Rousset (born in 1845), *À 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.²³

The third authority cited in *The Tribulations* is "Mr T Choutzé,²⁴ 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 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 further information. The book in question is Ludovic de Beauvoir (1846-1929), *Pékin, Yeddo, San Francisco* (1868), a work generally critical of China and things Chinese.²⁵

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 Thomson, Choutzé and de Beauvoir's books.

Verne also mentions "Pan Hœi-Pan," the female author of a book of maxims on marriage, and cites from it "If a wife has a husband who suits her heart, it is for her whole life!" and "The husband is the wife's heaven." Now generally called Ban Zhao (45-c. 116), she was a historian, philosopher, co-author of the *Book of Han* and author of *Lessons for Women*, the book Verne is referring to.²⁶

An additional, fascinating, citation is that of the "*Sse-Khou-Tsuane-Chou*": "this work, begun in 1773, 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 encyclopaedia, but died, possibly 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 entire earth" in his more than a hundred volumes. As a result, Verne scholars have sometimes discussed the encyclopaedia, but without trying to identify it; it is the *Siku Quanshu* (1772 onwards), which had 79,337 volumes and 800 million characters.

Other possible sources for the local colour perhaps include the following. Verne may have borrowed architectural details from Ida Pfeiffer, *A Woman's Journey Round the World . . .* (1850).²⁷ 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 Chinese 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] F(o)u perhaps imply an influence. In *Claudius Bombarnac* (ch. 21), Verne quotes two lines from *Le Voyage en Chine* (1865), a comic opera by Eugène Labiche. Another distinct possibility is Catherine de Bourboulon's *Relation de voyage de Shanghai à Moskou, par Pékin* (1864), since Verne cites her twice in another novel. A final possibility is Henry Russell-Killough, *16,000 Leagues through Asia . . . 1858-61* (1864), whose title seems similar to that of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*. 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 there, he avoids specialised treatises, but relies instead on general works, especially travel writings. He selects a healthy cross-section of authors, one which has stood the test of time. If, by modern standards, their treatment can be perfunctory and Eurocentric, Verne often adapts their necessarily fragmentary information to his narrative requirements, and thus succeeds in providing a plausible and reasonably accurate 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 almost 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 says that 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 conceivably also come from "Chun-Kin-Fo"

(“the town of the highest rank obedient to heaven”—(Shuntian-fu)), another name for Peking (ch. 14). Interestingly, Verne writes “Chim-Kin-Fo” for the same town in *Bombarnac* [*Claudius Bombarnac*].²⁸

Proud and impatient, Kin-Fo sometimes beats his valet, but “more through habit than wickedness.”²⁹ 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 wiser—at least from a conventional point of view. As with all Hetzel’s rather 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 apply his own interpretation, but for once the novelist resisted: “Difficult to make Chou-Chou³⁰ 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 March 1879).

Soun, of unknown age and appearance, 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 (1850-64). Verne shows his supports for the Taiping by underlining the “Tartar” origin of the ruling Qing dynasty and by having Kin-Fo’s father also support the revolt: “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 in *The Tribulations* generally have a spirit superior to their condition and represent old-fashioned virtues of frugality, cheerfulness, courage, abnegation and laconicism. In sum, Verne gives a generally favourable view of China and shows considerable sympathy for its 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 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,³¹ 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 counter ideas, only too prevalent in both China and the West, that the Chinese are somehow so different as to be beyond understanding. “The Tribulations of a Chinese Gentleman” is therefore an inadequate translation because it omits 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 perhaps 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 his master Wang, 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 it then Vernianly qualifies it by concluding that this happens only in China (ch. 22).³² Verne’s language and symbolism in fact reveal considerable antipathy to the married state, frequently equating it with 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 explicitly inform his publisher that his interpretation of the moral of the novel is far too “simple and naïve” (25 March 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 subverts 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 into him”; he communicates with Lé-Ou by phonographic recordings sent through the post.³³ (Incidentally, this insertion

by Verne of a recent invention is exceptional, as previously his preference had been for low-tech 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 March 1879).

One of the themes of the book is the mathematisation of death. Kin-Fo’s father’s fortune came 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), the reason for Kin-Fo’s wish to commit suicide, with the number of days, minutes and seconds of the countdown to death being calculated with macabre glee. The 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 there is no real reason for him to leave land. Under the appropriately named Captain Yin, superstitious, instinctive, sailing blind, but in touch with his environment and own feelings, Kin-Fo feels free for the first time in his life.

The second time is when, having abandoned 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, 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” first mentioned in *Around the World* (ch. 19), then featured prominently in *The Tribulations*. Verne neglects conventional ideas like the Chinese invention of gunpowder for technology he considers more useful, even transferring it to America, for Fogg sails there a land-yacht derived from the wheelbarrows.

By 1878 the novelist had accumulated the reputation of being some sort of prophet or scientific forecaster. As if in reaction, Verne writes into *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 sum, the writer takes the twin prejudices, that China is ill-adapted to technology, and that technology is his theme of predilection, and turns them both on their heads, but again without enabling us to conclude where his heart really lies. If modernism is the subversion 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: the depth of a Joseph Needham, the breadth of the 78,000-volume encyclopaedia Verne cites, and the energy of an Admiral Zheng He.³⁴

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, which are not meant to be 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. Two junior critics have argued that, although Verne displays a good knowledge of contemporary China, his characters are perhaps too westernised.³⁵ However, a more senior scholar, Dr 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. 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.

Notes

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. An anglicised form of the modern “Huangpu,” a short tributary of the Yangtze.
5. François Raymond (*ibid.*).
6. The name of a writer, mentioned below as a possible source for Verne; but also similar to “(T)chien fou.”
7. Perny (1818-1907) was a missionary and a Sino-logue who lived in China from 1847 until 1869, author also of a French-Chinese dictionary.
8. *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).
9. Used for the 1963 edition (Arco/Associated, Fitzroy Edition, incorrectly indicated as “translated by IO Evans”—in fact an edited version of the Frewer translation); the same title was used for the Oxford University Press (Hong Kong) 1991 reprint of Frewer.
10. Permission to cite the manuscript was kindly granted by the Municipal Library of Nantes, where it is kept (reference B 119).
11. “Chien fou” in French means “mad dog.”
12. In addition the lines about the widow having previously married a distinguished collaborator on the massive encyclopaedia are added in the margin.
13. 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 aspect when it says “I wait for the one who adores me.”

14. In the French transcription, roman is used for the parts of the manuscript which do not appear in the book, and italics for the parts which survived in the publication:

[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.

15. 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 emplît toute la salle.

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

16. “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, de-

scendant de la famille privilégiée de Confucius, et, mieux que cela, mon élève, ton maître, ton ami, ton père! . . .”

17. 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.*

18. Tongzhou, a suburb of Peking.

19. 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 seul 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 . . .

20. Lin Miao Chen, “L’Orient dans l’œuvre de Jules Verne,” DEA [MPhil] (Paris, Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle (Paris III), 1994).

21. The source for *Nei-tso-pien* and for *Nushu is*: Jules Arène (1850-1903) (not to be confused with the “P Arène” mentioned in *The Tribulations*: Jules’s brother,

- Paul Arène (1843-96), author of *Une Séance littéraire à l'hôtel du Dragon-Bleu*, *La Chine familière et galante* (1876—in Verne's library), p. 30, which reads: "le nu shun . . . livre d'instruction pour les femmes" (book of instructions for women); the book was translated into French in about 1875. In *Bombarnac*, Verne quotes "the 'Shiang-Touo-Tching,' or 'Song of Daydreams,'" an idea taken from J. Arène's *Love, Chinese Style* (1876), an explicit presentation of marital and extramarital relationships.
22. His work continues to attract interest, with his books recently republished in Edinburgh and Hong Kong.
 23. The periodical *Le Tour du monde*, an important source of information for Verne's books, published *Voyage en Chine* in 1875.
 24. Pen name of Gabriel Devéria (1844-99).
 25. Although de Beauvoir provides ten pages on Hong Kong, these do not seem to have been Verne's source.
 26. Verne's source must be *Chine moderne* (1853) by Guillaume Pauthier (1801-73), which contains these two maxims word for word. Pauthier also tells us that she was widowed "in the flower of age," but did not wish to remarry; the heroine Lé-Ou is also a young widow, as indeed was Verne's own wife, Honorine.
 27. *Voyage d'une femme autour du monde en 1846* (1856).
 28. Perhaps due simply to a misreading of "Chun." The more accurate "Chun thian fou" was already visible in Egor Timkovski's *Voyage à Péking, à travers la Mongolie* (1827).
 29. Ghislain de Diesbach, *Le Tour de Jules Verne en quatre-vingts livres* (1969), intelligently studies the main characters in *The Tribulations*.
 30. Lé-Ou's earlier name.
 31. 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).
 32. Raymond (*ibid.*) astutely analyses Verne's implied comments on marriage.
 33. Verne's views on technology in this novel are studied 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).
 34. In this connection, I am grateful to have benefited greatly from the advice of Lou Fangyu, unparalleled connoisseur of the Anglo-Chinese linguistic interstices.
 35. 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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