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Isabella Bird

Excerpt

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THE YANGTZE VALLEY

CHAPTER I.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND INTRODUCTORY

THE events which have rendered the Yangtze Valley literally a "sphere of interest" throughout the British Empire lie outside the purview of these volumes. Few people, unless they have been compelled to the task by circumstances or interests, are fully acquainted with the magnitude and resources of the great basin which in the spring of 1898 was claimed as the British "sphere of influence," and I honestly confess that it was only at the end of eight months (out of journeys of fifteen months in China) spent on the Yangtze, its tributaries, and the regions watered by them that I even began to learn their magnificent capabilities, and the energy, resourcefulness, capacities, and "back-bone" of their enormous population.

Geographically the Yangtze Valley, or drainage area, may be taken as extending from the 90th to the 122nd meridian of east longitude, and as including all or most of the important provinces of SZE CHUAN, HUPEH, HUNAN, KIANGSI, NGANHUI, KIANGSU, and HONAN, with considerable portions of CHE KIANG, KUEI-CHOW, and YUNNAN, and even includes the south-eastern drainage areas of KANSUH, SHENSI, and SHANTUNG. Geographically there can be no possible mistake about the limits of this basin.* Its area is estimated at about 650,000 square miles, and its population, one of the most peaceable and industrious on earth, at from 170,000,000 to 180,000,000.

* Politically, as H.M.'s Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs defined it in the House of Commons on May 9th, 1899, it is "the provinces adjoining the Yangtze River and Honan and Che Kiang."

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The actual length of the Yangtze is unknown, but is believed not to exceed 3000 miles. Rising, according to the best geographical information, almost due north of Calcutta, its upper waters have been partially explored by Colonel Prjevalsky and Mr. Rockhill up to an altitude in the Tang-la mountains of 16,400 feet, and as far as lat. $34^{\circ} 43'$ N. and long. $90^{\circ} 48'$ E.*

It has thus been ascertained that the Great River, though not tracked actually to its source, rises on the south-east edge of the Central Asian steppes, and, after draining an extensive and little-known basin, pursues a tempestuous course under the name of the Chin Sha, hemmed in by parallel ranges, and raging through gigantic rifts in YUNNAN and South-western SZE CHUAN, which culminate in grandeur at the Sun Bridge, a mountain about 20,000 feet in altitude, "which abuts on the river in a precipice or precipices which must be 8000 feet above its waters" (Baber).

It is not till these savage gorges are passed and the Chin Sha reaches Ping Shan, forty miles above Sui Fu, that it becomes serviceable to man. In long. $94^{\circ} 48'$ Colonel Prjevalsky describes it as a rapid torrent, with a depth of from five to seven feet, a bed, upwards of a mile wide, covered in summer, and a width in autumn of 750 feet at about 2800 miles from its mouth. In travelling from its supposed source to Ping Shan, a distance roughly estimated at 1500 miles, its fall must be fully 15,000 feet (assuming that the altitude of its source is 16,400 feet),† while for the same distance (again roughly estimated) from Ping Shan to Shanghai the fall is only 1025 feet, and from Hankow to the sea, a distance of 600 miles, only an inch per mile.

The Min or Fu appears to have its source in the Baian Kara range, called in Tibetan Maniak-tso,‡ and joins the Chin Sha at Sui Fu. While the Chin Sha is only navigable for about forty miles above this junction, the Min is navigable to Chengtu, about 266 miles from Sui Fu, and by another branch to Kuan Hsien, forty miles higher. I descended the Min from Chengtu to Sui Fu in a fair-sized boat at the very lowest of low water. As being navi-

* The lowest latitude which it is believed to reach is 26° N., east of its junction with the Yalung at its great southerly bend, and its junction with the ocean is in lat. 31° N.

† *The Geographical Journal*, September, 1898, p. 227: "The Yangtze Chiang," W. R. CARLES, H. B. M.'s Consul at Swatow.

‡ *Land of the Lamas*, p. 218.

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NAVIGABLE AFFLUENTS

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gable for a far greater distance, the Chinese geographers regard the Min as the true "Great River," the superior length of the Chin Sha not being taken into account. It should be noted that the Chinese only give their great river the name of Yangtze for the two hundred miles of its tidal waters.*

After the River of Golden Sand and the Min unite at Sui Fu, the Great River asserts its right to be regarded as the most important of Asiatic waterways by furnishing, by its main stream and the tributaries which thereafter enter it, routes easy of navigation through the rich and crowded centre of China, with Canton by the Fu-ling, with only two portages, and with Peking (Tientsin) itself by the Grand Canal, which it cuts in twain at Chin Kiang.

It is only of the navigable affluents of the Yangtze that mention need be made here. The raging and tremendous torrents foaming through rifts as colossal as its own, and at present unexplored, lie rather within the province of the geographer.

In estimating the importance of these affluents it must be remembered that the Yangtze, of which they are feeders, is not *an* outlet, but *the* outlet, for the commerce of SZE CHUAN, which, owing to its size, population, wealth, and resources, may be truly termed the empire-province of China.

On the north or left bank the Min, before uniting with the Chin Sha at Sui Fu, receives near the beautiful trading city of Chia-ling Fu the Tung or Tatu, a river with a volume of water so much larger than its own as to warrant the view taken by Mr. Baber and Mr. von Rosthorn that it ought to be considered the main stream, and the Ya, which is navigable for bamboo rafts up to Ya-chow, the centre of the brick tea trade with Tibet. After this the Yangtze at Lu-chow receives the To, which gives access to one of the richest regions of the province, and at Chungking, the trading capital, the Chia-ling.

This is in itself a river of great importance, being navigable for over 500 miles, actually into the province of Kansuh. It receives

* It is the Mur-usu ("Tortuous River") in Tibet, the Chin or Kin Sha where it is the boundary between Tibet and China, and from the junction of the Valung to Sui Fu the Chin Ho. Between Sui Fu and Wan Hsien it is called the Ta Ho ("Great River") and the Min Chiang. At and below Sha-shih it is the Ching Chiang, and below Hankow for 400 miles it is called the Chiang, Ch'ang Chiang ("Long River"), or Ta-Kuan Chiang ("Great Official River").

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several noble navigable feeders, among the most important of which are the Ku, entering it a little above Ho-chow, the Honton or Fu, and the Pai Shui. It passes for much of its course through a rich and fertile region, and through a country which produces large quantities of salt, and it bisects the vast coalfields which underlie Central SZE CHUAN. On the right or south bank above the gorges, at the picturesque city of Fu-chow, the Fu-ling, which has three aliases, enters the Yangtze. This is an affluent of much commercial importance, as being the first of a network of rivers by which, with only two portages, goods from the Far West can reach Canton, and as affording, with its connections the Yuan Ho and the Tungting lake, an alternative route to Hankow, by which the risks of the rapids are avoided.

After the Yangtze enters the gorges, which at one point, at least, narrow it to a width of 150 yards, there are no affluents worthy of special notice until Ichang is passed, when the Han, navigable for cargo-boats for 1200 miles of north-westerly windings from its mouth at Hankow, takes the first place, followed by the Yuan, Hsiang, Kan, Shu, and others, which join the Yangtze through the Tungting and Poyang lakes. These rivers, specially the Han, are themselves swelled by a great number of navigable feeders, which east of Sha-shih, in the Great Plain, are connected by a vast network of navigable canals, the differences in level being overcome by the ingenious contrivance called the *pah*. These natural and artificial waterways are among the chief elements of the prosperity of the Yangtze Valley, affording cheap transit for merchandise, land carriage in China, mile for mile, costing twenty times as much as water carriage.

The time of the annual rise and fall of the Great River can be counted on with tolerable certainty. With regard to the rise, from what I saw and heard I am inclined to attach more importance to the swelling of its Yunnan affluents during the south-west monsoon than to the melting of those snows which, as seen from the stupendous precipice of Omi-shan, are one of the grandest sights on earth—the long and glittering barrier which secludes the last of the hermit nations.

The rise of the Yangtze is from forty feet or thereabouts at Hankow to ninety feet and upwards at Chungking. During three months of the year the rush of the vast volume of water is so

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tremendous that traffic is mainly suspended, and even in early June many hundreds of the large junks are laid up until the autumn in quiet reaches between Chungking and Wan Hsien. The annual rise of the river as well as the rapids have to be taken into consideration in the discussion of the question as to whether steam navigation on the Upper Yangtze can be made commercially profitable.

The actual rise, which is more reliable than that of the Nile, begins late in March, is at its height early in August, and then gradually falls until December or January. Late in June, when I descended the Great River, its enormous submerged area presented the same appearance on a large scale as the limited Nile valley—an expanse of muddy water, out of which low mounds, probably of great antiquity, rise, crested with trees and villages, with boats moored to the houses.

The country in the neighbourhood of Shanghai is a fairly good example of the characteristics of the Great Plain. In ordinary dry weather the surface of the soil is not more than five feet above the water-level, and as seen from any pagoda the whole country, with the exception of the two or three low Tsing-pu hills, which are seldom visible, presents the aspect, familiar to dwellers in the fens, of a cultivated dead level, intersected by numerous canals and creeks and by embankments for the preservation of the fields from inundation. Much the same sort of view in winter may be seen from any elevated point for hundreds of miles, modified by a few ranges of hills of somewhat higher elevation, wider creeks, and shallow marshy lakes.

It is not solely by deposits of rich alluvium brought down by the annual rise of the river that the soil of the Great Plain is gradually raised. The agency of dust-storms is an important one, and these occur extensively throughout Northern and Central China, moving much material from place to place. I saw a dust-storm at Kueichow which lasted for seven hours, burying some hovels and much agricultural country, and even producing a metamorphosis of the rocky bed of the Yangtze. Such storms have been observed as far east as Shanghai, but their occurrence at Kueichow shows that their area is not limited to the Great Plain or even to the region east of the mountain barrier between HUPEH and SZE CHUAN.

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It is not till the Yangtze reaches Sha-shih that its character completely changes. The first note of change is a great embankment, thirty feet high, which protects the region from inundation. Below Sha-shih the vast river becomes mixed up with a network of lakes and rivers, connected by canals, the area of the important Tungting lake being over 2000 square miles. The Han alone, with its many affluents and canals, disperses goods through the interior for 1200 miles north of its mouth at Hankow, but there are some difficult rapids to surmount. The Hsiang and the Yuan, uniting with the Yangtze at the Tungting lake, are navigable nearly as far to the south. The Kan, which unites with the Yangtze through the Poyang lake, which has an area of 1800 square miles, is navigable to the Mei-ling pass, near the Kwantung frontier.

The delta of the river is indicated below Wu-sueh by even a greater labyrinth of tributaries, lakes, and canals, the area of the Tai Hu and the other lakes in the southern delta being estimated at 1200 square miles, and the length of the channels used for navigation and irrigation at 36,000 miles. In summer, after the spring crops have been removed, the whole region is under water. The population migrates to mounds, and the temporary villages communicate by boats.

At Chinkiang the Grand Canal enters the Yangtze from Hangchow, and leaves it on the left bank, some miles away, for Tientsin. On that north bank engineering works, extending over a vast area of country, have been constructed, evidencing the former energy and skill of the Chinese.

These have diverted the river Huai, which with its seventy-two tributaries form important commercial routes to North An Hui and Honan, from its natural course to the sea, and have compelled the bulk of its waters to discharge themselves into the Yangtze through openings in a large canal which runs nearly parallel with it for 140 miles. By means of innumerable artificial waterways, the excavation of some lakes, and the enlargement of others, the Huai no longer has any existence as a river east of the Grand Canal, most of this work having been carried out to prevent undue pressure on the bank of that great waterway at any one point south of the old course of the Hoang Ho.

North of the canal, and parallel with the Yangtze, lies a parallelogram the extent of which is estimated by Père Gandar

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at 8876 square miles, and is one of the most productive rice-fields in China. This is below the water-level. It has immense dykes protecting it from the sea, pierced by eighteen drainage canals, but its chief drainage is into the Yangtze. Waterways under constant and careful supervision intersect this singular region. For the remaining distance the mighty flood of the Yangtze rolls majestically on through absolutely level country, in which in winter embankments and waterways are everywhere seen. The influence of the tide is felt for about 200 miles.

There is an ancient Chinese proverb regarding the mouth of the Great River: "Lo, this mighty current hastens to its imperial audience with the ocean." But opaque yellow water and mud flats, extending as far as the eye can reach, leave the imperial grandeur to the imagination.

Tennyson's description of the work of rivers as being "to sow the dust of continents to be," applies forcibly to the Yangtze, which, after creating the vast alluvial plains which stretch from Sha-shih for 800 miles to the ocean and endowing them in its annual overflow with sufficient fresh material to keep up an unsurpassed fertility, has yet enough to spare to discharge 770,000 feet of solid substance every second into the sea, according to scientific estimates. The Yangtze has done much to create, within comparatively recent years, at least the eastern portion of the province of Kiang Su and the island of Tsung-ming near Shanghai, capable of supporting a population of considerably over 1,000,000 souls. Another marked instance of its power to create is shown near the treaty port of Chinkiang. The British fleet ascended the Yangtze, so recently as in 1842, by a channel south of the beautiful Golden Island. Now, instead of the channel, there is an expanse of wooded and cultivated land sprinkled with villages.

Nearly a mile wide 600 miles from its mouth, nearly three-quarters of a mile at 1000, and 630 yards at 1500, with a volume of water which, at 1000 miles from the sea, is estimated at 244 times that of the Thames at London Bridge, with a summer depth of ninety feet at Chungking and of ten feet at its few shallow places at Hankow when at its lowest winter level, with a capacity for a rise of forty feet before it overflows its banks, with an annual rise and fall more reliable than those of the Nile, with navigable

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tributaries penetrating the richest and most populous regions of China, navigable in the summer as far as Hankow for the largest ships in the world, and during the whole year to Ichang, 400 miles farther, for fine river steamers carrying large cargoes, even the Upper Yangtze, that region of grandeur, perils, and surprises, is traversed annually by 7000 junks, employing a quarter of a million of men. During my own descent of the Min and Yangtze from Chengtu to Shanghai, a distance by the windings of the river of about 2000 miles, I was never out of sight of native traffic, and those who, like myself, have waited for two or three days at the foot of the great rapids for the turn to ascend, can form some idea of how vast that traffic is.

The navigable portion of the Yangtze, as regarded from the sea, naturally divides itself into three stretches, the first, of 1000 miles, rolling as a broad turbid flood, traversed by several lines of steamers, through the deep grey alluvium of some of the richest and most populous provinces of China, mainly its own creation; the second, the region between Ichang and Kueichow Fu, through which hitherto goods have been carried by junks alone, in which it cleaves the confused mass of the HUPEH ranges by a series of magnificent gorges and tremendous cataracts; and the third, the long stretch of rapids and races between Kueichow Fu and Sui Fu at its junction with the Min.

It is not possible to exaggerate the sublimity and risks of the navigation of the Upper Yangtze, especially at certain seasons. Of the vast fleet of junks which navigate its perilous waters, five hundred on an average are annually wrecked, and one-tenth of the enormous importation of cotton into Chungking arrives damaged by water. Yet so ample are the means of transport, and so low the freight considering the risks, that, according to Mr. von Rosthorn, of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs, foreign cottons are sold in SZE CHUAN at a barely appreciable advance on their price at Ichang, to which point they are brought by steam from the coast in eight days.

The *Chinese Gazetteer* notifies one thousand rapids and rocks between Ichang and Chungking, a distance of about 500 miles; and in winter this does not seem an outlandish estimate, but in early summer, with the water twenty-four and thirty feet higher, many of the vigorous rapids, alternating with smooth

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stretches of river only running three knots an hour, disappear, along with boulder-strewn shores, rocks, and islets, giving place to a broad and tremendous volume of water, swirling seawards at the rate of seven, eight, and ten knots an hour, forming many and dangerous whirlpools.

Of the magnitude of the native traffic on the Lower Yangtze, undiminished by the various steamboat lines which keep up daily communication with Hankow, it is scarcely needful to write. In ascending it is evident to the traveller by the time that Chinkiang, the port of junction with the Grand Canal, is reached, that, broad as the river is, there is none too much "sea room" for the thousands of junks of every build, from every maritime and riverine province, fishing and cargo boats of every size and rig, rafts, lorchas, and cormorant boats, which throng its waters.

The open ports of Wuhu and Kiu-kiang, each with its fleets of junks, and trade worth several millions sterling annually, and big cities such as Nanking, Yangchow, and Nganking, each with its highly organised mercantile and social life, and trade guilds and charities, are important and interesting; and it is seen in a rapid glance that large villages with numerous industries, rice, cotton, and silk culture predominating, abound, that everything is utilised, that every foot of ground capable of cultivation is bearing a crop, and that even the reed-beds of the irreclaimable swamps furnish materials for houses, roofs, fences, and fuel. It is seen that elaborate and successful engineering works have reclaimed large tracts of country and keep them drained, that a network of irrigating and navigable canals spreads over the whole level region, and that the traffic on these minor waterways is enormous.

So ceaseless are the industries by land and water, that it is hardly a surprise to find them culminating 600 miles from the ocean in the "million-peopled" city of Hankow (Han Mouth), the greatest distributing centre for goods in China, with miles of craft moored in triple rows along the Han, itself navigable for 1200 miles.

The empire province of SZE CHUAN, with the great navigable tributaries of the Yangtze, by which goods are conveyed at small cost to countless towns and villages, will be treated in some detail farther on. It is enough to remark here that it has about the area of France, that it has a population estimated by the Chinese

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census authorities at 70,000,000, and by none at less than 50,000,000 ; that it has a superb climate, ranging from the temperate to the sub-tropical ; a rich soil, much of which, under careful cultivation, yields three and even four crops annually of most things which can be grown ; forests of grand timber, the area of which has not even been estimated ; rich mineral resources, and some of the most valuable and extensive coal-fields in the world. It cannot be repeated too often that for its export trade, estimated at £3,300,000, and its import trade, estimated at £2,400,000, the Yangtze is the *sole* outlet and inlet.

Such an exhibition of Chinese energy, industry, resourcefulness, and power of battling with difficulties is not to be seen anywhere to the same extent as on the Upper Yangtze, where the enormous bulk of the vast import trade has to be dragged up 500 miles of hills of water by the sheer force of man-power, at two or three of the worst rapids a junk of over one hundred tons requiring the haulage of nearly four hundred men.

Waterways take the place of roads, which are usually infamous, throughout the Yangtze basin, but the bridges are marvels of solidity, and in many cases of beauty. The annual inundations on the Great Plain partly account for the badness of the roads, and constitute an expensive difficulty in the way of the forthcoming railroads.

To write of the Yangtze Valley, the British "sphere of influence" (a phrase against which I protest), without any allusion to such an important factor as its inhabitants, would be a mistake, for sooner or later, in various ways, we shall have to reckon with them.

The population throughout, from the ocean to the unexplored rifts of the Chin Sha, is homogeneous, that is Chinese, with the exception of certain tribes of the far west : the Sifan, Mantze, and Lolo. The Tartars or Manchu, who have supplied the throne with the present dynasty, whose fathers drove the Chinese before them like sheep, and who still garrison the great cities, have mainly degenerated into opium-smoking loafers, the agent in their downfall being hereditary pensions.

Throughout this vast population, perhaps not over-estimated at 180,000,000, with the exception of spasmodic and local rebellions now and then, law and order, prosperity (except in such disasters as floods or famines) and peace prevail, and that