1 Introduction

It is a great honour for me to be invited to give the Smuts Commonwealth Lectures. I grew up in Ipoh in the state of Perak, a British protected state, and studied Empire and Commonwealth history for my Cambridge School Certificate in a government-funded school named after Governor Sir John Anderson (1858–1918). Jan Christiaan Smuts (1870–1950) was still alive when I went to university in Singapore, in the newly established University of Malaya. I was interested in the extraordinary story of how this Cambridge-educated colonial became first a bitter foe of the British Empire and then a loyal supporter of the Commonwealth. This interest was fuelled by my meeting Keith Hancock (1898–1988) at the Australian National University in 1968 when he had just completed the second volume of his biography of Smuts.[1] I enjoyed reading about the young Boer's youth and his exploits in the War of 1899–1902. The last stage of his career after 1933 intrigued me even more. Why did he become so loyal to the Commonwealth? Among the reasons that might be offered for this loyalty, two stood out for me as a Chinese sojourner. One was that he was of European descent, a Christian, someone who could identify with British culture and history, and who also trained to be a common

law lawyer in one of the great universities in the world. The other was that he was a settler colonist with a deep love of the land of his ancestors in South Africa and he wanted his people to build their own civilised country in a multiracial continent. Thus, he worked to perpetuate the Commonwealth as an institution that would enable his country to become free and humane and a part of a global enterprise.

Neither explanation applied to my life, however, and this was the reason why I did not embark on research in Commonwealth history when I had the chance to do so. I was born to parents from literati families who had served the Chinese imperial system. But the 1911 revolution in China changed the lives of such families. My father switched from studying the traditional Confucian classics to prepare to enter a modern university. After he graduated, he found that he had to leave China to find the kind of work he wanted and started his teaching life as a sojourner in British Malaya.[2] He then went home to marry my mother and they both went to the Netherlands East Indies. I was born in Surabaya where my father was a Chinese high school principal. He left Java to go to the Malay State of Perak when I was a small child, and took a job with the Education Department under British administration as an inspector of Chinese schools. Although my father had studied English at university in China and was a great admirer of English literature, he never brought me up to identify with the British Empire. However, his work introduced him to certain imperial ways of dealing with a plural society. He thus saw his task as ensuring that Chinese children had a good modern education and that the Chinese community did their bit to transmit Chinese culture to those

who wanted it. My mother knew Chinese well but did not speak or understand any English, so we spoke only Chinese at home. For them both, Malaya was not really their home and they had no deeper wish than to return to their homeland in China. They also imparted to their only child a love for China and things Chinese.[3]

So why do I think I have something to say about the Commonwealth? One of my qualifications comes from the fact that I have lived all but three years of my life in countries that were once part of the Empire or are still members of the Commonwealth. Those years were spent in various towns and cities of Malaya and Malaysia, in the United Kingdom, in Australia, in Hong Kong, and finally in independent Singapore. The other qualification is more mixed. I learnt my history at university from British teachers and colleagues[4] even though I have spent most of my professional life writing about the history of China and the Chinese overseas. I did my research, teaching and writing in Commonwealth-type universities and environments[5] and this has given me ample opportunities to reflect on the Anglo-Chinese connection, both within and outside the Commonwealth. Thus, I have often wondered about how various kinds of Chinese have fared in their dealings with the British and what China has made of the encounters with various British and their activities in Asia.

These lectures therefore have been written from that perspective. They do not attempt to be comprehensive about all aspects of British relations with China and the Chinese, but come at the subject from both the Chinese and British periphery and seek to juxtapose issues that were central to the two peoples with those that might seem to be tangential. My use of the word "encounter"

does not have the qualities described by Gillian Beer of being "forceful, dangerous, alluring, essential", but I hope, as she suggests, "it brings into active play unexamined assumptions and so may allow interpreters, if not always the principals, to tap into unexpressed incentives".[6] The angle of vision I have chosen is sometimes awkward, and the picture presented is elusive and hardly ever the whole story. The key to the story, however, is that, on the most serious matters pertaining to their deeply felt values, both the British and the Chinese people remained far apart.

My story begins with the theme that the British and the Chinese had a turbulent relationship from the start. There was never enough that was right between them to enable either to develop a deeper understanding of the other. There were complex reasons for this. Some arose from immediate political and economic conflicts, but most of them stemmed from deep differences in history and culture. There should be nothing surprising in that. The Western civilisation that had nourished the British nation was very different from the unique civilisation that China had produced for itself. Also, the British had had to deal with other great civilisations before they first met the Chinese. In fact, the British had a great deal more to do with the two civilisations of the Muslims and the Hindus in West and South Asia than with the Chinese, and they did not get much right with them either. The British, in accumulating imperial territories, were always outnumbered. Sensing that their power would always be insecure, they erected protective barriers that were extended to cover social and cultural relationships. Not enough of them could afford to lower their defences when faced with the alien and the bewildering.

Nevertheless, the Anglo-Chinese relationship was a rich and productive one. Although so different, the English- and Chinese-speaking worlds came tantalisingly close on many occasions and indeed there were some encounters that have had profound effects on China. For example, the Chinese felt the sting of British naval power but admired more the fact that that power came from a modern sovereign nation-state. Their reassessments of the defence and security of their country have been continuous, but the transformation that the country needed to respond to that kind of power was late in coming. Also, the Chinese official classes were struck by the wealth that overseas commercial enterprises could produce. This eventually prepared them to review the status of Chinese merchants and seek to redefine the roles that these merchants could play in China's recovery. Furthermore, different groups of Chinese responded to a British missionary culture in very different ways but, in the end, it was British technological advances that won the most converts. As a result, the idea of science has become the measure of modern civilisation and now determines the meaning of modern education for all China's peoples. Finally, most Chinese were struck by British respect for the law, their civic discipline and efficiency, even though they did not always appreciate how that respect was cultivated. Nor has it been easy to understand the ramifications of a system of governance based on the rule of law. But there is no doubt that the cumulative impact of a wide range of encounters has been profound.

I shall explore some of these past encounters and reflect on their present and future significance. Chapters two and three will focus on Chinese attitudes towards war and the strategies of entrepreneurs overseas. These

will be followed by two other chapters on the rediscovery of China's scientific past and the Chinese response to modern statecraft, including their experiments with political parties. I shall then try to draw these thoughts together to offer a long view of the Anglo-Chinese phenomenon.

When thinking about the Anglo impact on China as compared with that on India, I was struck to read the following lines by the nineteenth-century Indian Muslim poet Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869)[7] when he advised Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), the founder of the Aligarh Muslim University in India, not to look so much to the Mughal past. The lines were:

> Open thine eyes, and examine the Englishmen,
> Their style, their manner, their trade and their art.[8]

This would not have been advice that the Chinese mandarins of the time would have heeded and there were important cultural reasons why that was so. It is also a measure of the different starting points in Indian (both Hindu and Muslim) and Chinese worldviews. Of the four qualities Ghalib wanted Sayyid Ahmad Khan to examine, only "their trade" might have attracted the Chinese merchants on the coast, but that was precisely what the mandarin rulers had set out to limit and control. In no way would they have encouraged Chinese merchants to learn from English trading ways. And that would have been even more true of "their manner" and "their style" which, on the whole, the mandarins found reason actively to dislike. Some Chinese might have found "their art" interesting, especially in its use in design and industrial arts, and also the inventiveness in the use of materials but, most of the time, the Chinese

would have been more impressed by what made the British powerful.

What, then, would have focused the Chinese mind? I have found that Arthur Waley (1889–1966) captured that best in a piece he wrote in 1942, in the middle of the Second World War, called "A Debt to China". It was reprinted two years later in Hsiao Ch'ien's (1910–1999) *A Harp with a Thousand Strings*.[9] Waley spoke of "a great turning-point in our relations with China" during the first two decades of the twentieth century when men of leisure, poets, professors, thinkers, began to visit China instead of the usual soldiers, sailors, missionaries, merchant and officials. It seems somewhat surprising that he should have drawn attention to this. As Ivan Morris put it,

> The strangest thing about Waley was his failure to visit China and Japan. I asked him about this, but never received a direct answer. Raymond Mortimer is surely right when he says that Waley 'felt so much at home in T'ang China and Heian Japan that he could not face the modern ugliness amid which one has to seek out the many intact remains of beauty'. He carried his own images of China and Japan within himself and had no wish to dilute them by tourism.[10]

Nevertheless, he was part of the "great turning point" in demystifying Chinese poetry for the English-speaking world and walked his own path towards a deep mental and aesthetic encounter with the Chinese. It was a pity, however, that so few Chinese were aware how that sensibility could work its verbal magic on Chinese ideas, language and art.

In his essay, Arthur Waley went on to mention a few men who went "not to convert, trade, rule or fight,

but simply to make friends and learn". He thought such visitors would have given the Chinese a completely new view of the British. Of the men he mentioned, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (1862–1932) and Robert Trevelyan (1872–1951) made no impact. Only Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) left an impression, but men like him were too few and most of them had gone to China too late to make many friends. In reality, his earlier four words, "to convert, trade, rule or fight", remained truer than he might have wished. He cannot, of course, be blamed for not foreseeing that Britain was to be succeeded by an even more powerful force to which the same four words could apply. I refer to the informal empire of the United States that, perhaps unwittingly, has replaced the British Empire not only in the eyes of the Chinese but also of other peoples living in the regions of East and Southeast Asia. Informally or not, the United States' accession to a second phase of Anglo-Chinese encounter has made the larger picture seem continuous and seamless to the present day. I therefore suggest that Waley's four words remain central to that extended story. The words, "convert, trade, rule or fight", describe the core issues in the history of Chinese relations with the English-speaking peoples.

I shall not, however, follow Waley's word order but begin with "to fight", the word that captured China's full attention as none of the other three did. China's first humiliating defeat by Britain in 1842 was an ill-fated start, and was probably why the two peoples never did quite get anything right between them thereafter. The next would be "to trade", something that had begun much earlier but whose full impact did not come until after all the fighting was done. Here the Chinese had

a much better measure of the British and their mutual assessments of each other, as they widened their common enterprises over time, were usually more right than wrong. As for "to convert", this was rather one-sided. The Chinese tradition paid little attention to converting others, but when the word was stretched to include both sacred and secular education, this was a fertile area for mutual exploration. It turned out in the end to be one where nothing was ever quite right, but the Chinese did manage to take much of only what they wanted from the contact. Finally, "to rule" was even more one-sided but this was necessarily a partial, if not peripheral, experience for most Chinese. After having to rule India before opening up the coast of China, the British did not relish the idea of ruling over China. But rule they did over bits of administration, whether in the Treaty Ports or in the maritime customs, and over Chinese communities outside China, notably in Hong Kong, Malaya and parts of north Borneo. Here the response of the Chinese was mixed indeed, but the potential for a deeper understanding of the essential features of modern governance was often there and deserves attention.

As I shall be talking a lot about China, I shall obviously be neglecting issues closer to the Commonwealth for which the Smuts Memorial Lectures have been named. I hope you will bear with me when I suggest that, the motives of the politicians who created it notwithstanding, the ideals underlying the Commonwealth go beyond those of a cozy club consisting of member countries that have shared a common past. They were drawn from ideals which represented a bold attempt to generalise some unique experiences of a multicultural and multiracial world, and to make enough order out of those

experiences for others to study if not emulate. China itself was not directly part of that world and will still insist on its own vision in order that it might yet play an important role in defining the future of that world. But there are now millions of Chinese outside China who are living with various social and economic systems, a major part of them in an extension of the English-speaking empire now informally led by the United States. They are now useful links between China and a globalised world.

Jan Christiaan Smuts would have understood the changes in perspective between the first half of the twentieth century and the second. He was the most internationalist Boer of his generation. He admired Winston Churchill's worldview, regretted American isolationism, feared the rise of Soviet Russia, and recognised the inevitability of Indian independence. He wrote on China, with foreboding, in September 1937, following the outbreak of war with Japan,

> What will the giant yet do when fully released? I fear Japan has done a thing which may not only undo her yet, but which may threaten the West far more in the coming generations than anything that has happened in the East in the past. The heroism of the Chinese may yet shake the world.[11]

His tragedy was, in his own words, the "fear of getting submerged in black Africa . . . What can one do about it, when the Lord himself made the mistake of creating colour!"[12] Thus he did not blame the British for not getting it right about South Africa. In retrospect, the British were wrong to have fought the Boers. Also, they fought badly even though they eventually won the war. In the end, they failed to stop the creation