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978-1-108-01385-7 - Mount Omi and Beyond: A Record of Travel on the Thibetan Border

Archibald John Little

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

CHUNGKING,* under present conditions of foreign residence there, is at no time a desirable place to pass the summer in. In 1892, to the perennial drawback of confinement in a low-roofed Chinese house, situated in what is stated to be the most closely packed hive of Chinese humanity in the Empire, was added that of a severe epidemic of cholera. Every morning the streets were blocked with funerals, and coffins seemed to form the staple article of trade, all other business stagnating for the time. Attempts to gain a breath of fresh air by a promenade outside the walls were frustrated by the pervading odour of freshly made graves, which were being daily squeezed in between the crowd of old graves, covering every foot of the surrounding hills for a radius of some miles, the dead far outnumbering the living. As the ground is sandstone rock, bare in many places, in others lightly clothed with thin soil supporting a poor weedy grass on which browse numerous half-starved cattle, the new graves are little more than coffins hidden by a scanty covering of graveyard mould filched from the surrounding tombs. Of the old graves many are empty, while in others gaping skeletons are exposed to the light of day. In the steamy windless atmosphere peculiar to Szechuan such conditions do not favour the dissemination of ozone, and amply suffice to account for the lassitude and general ill-health of the foreign residents at this season. We ourselves found

* Chungking, the chief trading town in the province of Szechuan, on the Yangtze river, 1500 miles from the sea, is the furthest point as yet reached by steamers.

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country walks yield us little more than a change of unpleasant odours, and came to the conclusion, none too soon, that if we were not to succumb to the "seediness" which was steadily lowering our vitality, we must make an effort and place ourselves outside the encircling ring of grave mounds and, if possible, attain an altitude where the air is not in that state of stagnation which is its constant condition at Chungking.

It is true that on the opposite bank of the Yangtze we have a range of limestone mountains rising to a height of 1700 feet above the river level—itsself some 600 feet above the ocean; and that cool nights and a day temperature 8° to 10° lower than that of the city are to be had on the summit. But to reside there, one has only the choice between a poor farmhouse with mud floor, shared with the pigs and poultry, or a damp close room in a temple, generally crowded with visitors in the summer season. Even these amenities are only grudgingly accorded to the foreigner, and those of our residents who have tried them do not seem inclined to repeat their experience. Of course, a bungalow in a clearing amidst the pines, dwarf oak, and azalea bushes, with which the higher ridges are covered, would form a charming retreat from the filth and discomfort of the city; but the amiable Chinese officials conscientiously oppose any such anomalies as are not provided for in the treaty, and so were not then to be thought of. Hence, to obtain fresh air the only plan is to take up one's staff, and—in the words of the passport furnished by a compassionate Government to "*You-lih*"—"roam and pass on," availing oneself of such shelter as the numerous native inns scattered along the great highways afford. In the by-ways one is often dependent on a chance farm-house or village temple, which, though generally poor and rough and ill-furnished with food at the best of times, yet affords an agreeable respite from the all-pervading dirt of the inns and the insatiable curiosity of their inmates—both two-legged and many-legged.

The nearest highlands, meaning by that term anything over 5000 feet, easily accessible, are the sacred mountains of Omi,

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situated in the Kiating prefecture, about one hundred and fifty miles west of Chungking as the crow flies. These form the outermost western buttresses of the Thibetan plateau, at the foot of which extends the great red basin of Szechuan, whose red sandstone waves are bounded by and break, as it were, against the towering cliffs of Omi. One thus passes suddenly from the steaming plain (if one may so call its rugged sandstone hills by comparison) of Szechuan to the breezy heights of the mountains, which extend unbroken to the Himalayas, and far beyond—mounting this great natural wall by an artificial staircase of some 20,000 slippery limestone steps. Once there one is in a paradise of Nature, seasoned by the romance of history, the traditions of Buddhism at the time when it was a living, growing faith, and the æsthetic results of this vitality, which have survived in the innumerable ruins of a glorious past, which still decorate the mountain. But to get there entails a land journey of fourteen days, or a boat journey, towing against the July current of the swollen Yangtze, of at least a month. Neither route is attractive in the dog-days, even apart from the risk of sun-stroke; but failing a railroad to take us there in three or four hours, or a carriage-road by which one might drive there in three or four days, we fall back on the time-honoured sedan-chair, and prepare ourselves for a fortnight's discomfort in anticipation of a month or more of healthful enjoyment afterwards. How our anticipations were fulfilled is shown in the following daily record of our progress.

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CHAPTER I

CHUNGKING TO THE BRINE WELLS RIVER

DEPARTURE from Chungking—Rock Fortress of Fu Tou Kuan—High Road to the Capital—Cross Ranges—Market Town of Pai She Yi—Palace of Heaven—Paddy-fields—The Weald of Kent—Dragon Supported Bridge—Robbers' Heads Exposed—City of Eternal Streams—Pi Pa Wo'ehr, Guitar Nest—A Muddy Bath—Banyans—Peaceful Hamlet—Grave-grounds—City of Lung Chang—Fellow Travellers—Lion Bridge—Coal-mine—Fossil Bridge—Millet—Samshu—Grass-cloth—Triumphal Arches—Monolith Transported on Men's Shoulders, Gun-barrel Tree—Assisi Scenery—On Lake Ferry—The Brine Wells River—Filthy Quarters.

ON July 7, 1897, after a last good home-breakfast, we set off in the usual smoky mist of Chungking at 7.15 A.M., each in a sedan-chair with four bearers, the blue cotton canopy over each extending for a distance of six yards from back to front; our Kwansé or major-domo in a chair with three bearers; seven coolies carrying each eighty cattles (107 lbs.) of our clothing, bedding, money, and "stores" for three months' consumption; one coolie headman, sent by the hong contracting for the labour and engaging to land us in the city of Omi Hien in thirteen days; and our house coolie, "Old Four"—these two latter carrying nothing. It is well to remember that the only coin current in the Chinese Empire is the copper "cash," of which a thousand strung by their centre hole on a straw rope makes a "string" or *tiao*. Such a string weighs 8 lbs. Ten strings equal in value just a sovereign, and form a load of 80 lbs. Thus the happy possessor of one pound sterling, if he takes it with him in coin of the realm, requires a special

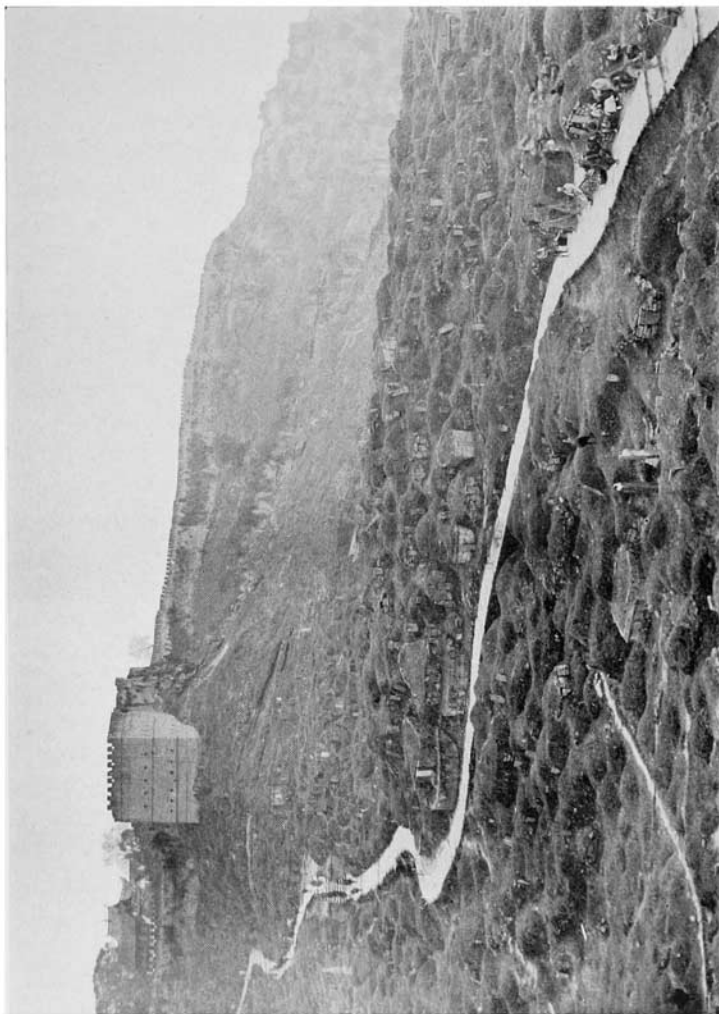
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High Road to the Capital of Szechuan (Cheng Tu), showing Grave-mounds on each side,
Bungalow and Crenelated Fort (Tchait) on Hill-top.

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porter to carry it. Silver coin, of course, can be exchanged for "cash" in the large towns, but the traveller's payments are all in copper cash.

A thunderstorm the previous evening had happily lowered the temperature from 92° to 80°, and our cavalcade trotted off gaily in the fresh morning air, through the everlasting wet rock-floored streets, half an hour's journey from our house to the West Gate which leads to the only land road out of the river-circled city—a gateway filthy with the droppings of the endless trains of coolies carrying water and soft coal in, and the town refuse out, past the long straggling suburb, on to the picturesque terrace with its carved stone balustrade overhanging the cliff that here bounds the Great River eddying and swirling below; at this season a cataract of liquid purple-coloured mud. Out in the country and once past the graves clean pavement and fresh air tempt us to leave our chairs and allow our willing bearers to climb the long staircase that leads up and through Fu Tou Kuan without our load. We persevere, and are rewarded by arriving at the top of the hill drenched with perspiration, such as is invariably the result of motion in the hot-house air of this province. Fu Tou Kuan, the walled town or fortress built on the "neck" of the Chungking peninsula—the point where an elbow of the Yangtze nearly reaches to a corresponding elbow of its affluent the Kia-ling, separated by this precipitous hill rising 500 feet above the water—forms the sole approach to Chungking from the land side. There are a few straggling houses on its main street, but it is architecturally remarkable for its *paifang* (stone-archways) and huge monumental tablets of carved sandstone.

We traversed a richly cultivated but comparatively uninteresting country of terraced paddy-fields, interspersed with thick groves of bamboo, winged walnut, and cypress surrounding the many villages and walled-in country streets. We left Fu Tou Kuan at 9.30 (15 *li*), and after another 15 *li* across this lower country where we found the air, even in our awning-protected chairs, very oppressive, arrived at the village of

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Tsan Pu at 11 A.M. Here, in a very decent Chinese inn, we tiffined, finding the inn all the better because of the delightful surprise of a courier from Chungking catching us up with letters and papers. Any one who has travelled in distant regions will know the intense delight this last greeting to be received from our friends for many a long day naturally gave us, and how thoroughly we read those newspapers. At one we started again and traversed the nearest to Chungking of the remarkable "cross ranges" that intersect the sandstone plateau of Szechuan in a N.E. and S.W. direction. Steep flights of steps led us up to the pass—just 1000 feet from the foot by my aneroid, through a group of steep fir-clad hills rising 300 to 400 feet higher. Here the paddy-fields ascend in serried terraces nearly as high as the pass, and above their bright emerald green the shining white-striped leaves of millet and miniature fields of spring wheat, bare rugged mountain limestone crowning the summits. The difference in temperature was most marked, the air on the top being delightfully fresh and cool. Reaching the other side we looked over another low but most picturesquely broken sandstone basin, dotted with farms and villages, among which was pointed out to us the market-town of Paisheyi—our destination for the night—the horizon bounded by another similar "cross range" looking deep blue in the distance, and over which our to-morrow's path lay, our W.S.W. course being at right angles to its axis. It is characteristic that the Chinese do not lower their passes by cuttings and tunnels as the Japanese do.

Descending rapidly by another long winding staircase we re-entered the hot-house, and shortly before sunset reached our not uncomfortable inn, before which we found our gaudy hong-flag hoisted by our *avant courier*, covered with the decorated Chinese characters informing all the world and his wife that a great British merchant is about to take up his abode there. A heavy and delightfully cooling thunderstorm wound up a day which we found far less disagreeable than we had any right to anticipate at this season.

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July 8, 1892.—Up at four by candle-light ; took an hour to pack our beds and baggage, and started in our chairs through the one busy long street of the market-town. Passed many spacious temples, some with colossal carved monsters before the door, one named *Tien Shang kung* ("Palace of Heaven"), and at last emerged on the narrow stone footpath between paddy-fields, which goes by the proud title of *Chêng-Tu-tu-lu*, great or high road to *Chêng Tu*. Here we got out of our chairs and walked from five to six, but the walk was not refreshing, as, although the temperature was only 80°, there was no wind, and heavy mist hung round the low sandstone hills, rising 50 to 150 feet, through which the path winds, following up a small turbid chocolate-coloured stream, crossed in places by substantial stone bridges of many arches, flat slabs on heavy square uprights. The dank heavy odour of the paddy, now in ear, made us glad to resume our chairs as soon as the sun began to pierce through the mist. We met many strings of struggling coolies, by whom, and by pack animals, all the cargo traffic is carried on, some with sore shoulders, most with bent spines, through beginning their work as beasts of burden at a too early age. Large numbers were carrying coal, mines of which exist in all the "cross ranges," which appear to have tilted up the level *strata* of this Szechuan basin and rendered the mineral accessible to the primitive methods of Chinese miners. One string of mules and ponies carrying heavy packs of rice and produce met us in a place where we could not pass them. A wordy fight ensued with our cavalcade, emphasised by flourishes of bamboo poles, until ultimately the packmen, who were in the minority, had to give way and retreat to a point where they could shunt their ponies in an adjoining field of maize. We stopped at 8 A.M. for a hurried breakfast, the materials for which we carried with us, paying 18 cents for the use of the inn's best room in which to lay our table. After this we ascended to the pass over the "cross range" (N.N.E. and S.S.W.). Looking back from half-way up the view was not unlike that over the Weald of Kent. The pass was just 1000 feet above

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the plateau. We got out to walk the last 300 feet and save our perspiring coolies, but regretted having done so, as we found the sun so hot that we were glad to resort to the application to our heads of towels dipped in the cool spring-water at the summit, where we rested an hour before descending the steep west slope to *Fêng Yi*, where we took tiffin.

We continued to descend until we reached the lively market-town of Wa Fong Chiao, 900 feet below the pass, the wooden bridge from which it is named being lined on both sides with roomy shops. We passed another bridge supported on backs of stone dragons resting on its piers. At the inn had a very close room, with the door into a drain-infected court-yard, its only opening. Thermometer 86°. Passed a bad night, kept awake by stench, heat, and insects.

July 9, 1892.—Set out at 5 A.M., walked awhile on the stone path between the dank-smelling paddy-fields, relieved occasionally on the higher ground by the graceful, tall millet, crowned with its feathery tufts of now rapidly ripening fruit. One-fourth of the land is devoted to this alcoholic grain. At 7.30 arrived at village of Ta Chang, where we breakfasted off native sponge cake and Puerh tea. It was amusing as we sat in the covered way, with crowds of coolies taking their morning rice and fixings, to watch the ceaseless traffic through what seemed to be the centre of the *cha shih*—*café restaurant*—many boys among them—one not over ten—carrying his load of two baskets of coal. Passed Siao Ma Fang, where were exposed on pikes the heads of two robbers who, last year, stole five donkeys laden with treasure; then ascended a platform of sandstone with scarped sides, 450 feet high, comparatively level on the top and covered with paddy-fields. A five-miles walk across this brought us to its western brink, where we enjoyed an extensive view over the valley below to the “cross range” beyond, and in the middle distance the walls of Yung Chuan Hsien could just be distinguished climbing a low hill, and with its many trees, and no buildings, visible from our point of view—the branch of a banyan tree—looking like a nobleman’s

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walled-in park at home. From this point, 650 feet above the plain, the path falls rapidly to 230 feet, and, traversing a narrow valley for four miles, we passed through the gates and entered the walls of Yung Chuan Hsien ("City of Eternal Streams"). The suburb was squalid and thinly populated, but in the heart of the city we found some good business streets thronged with people. Here at eleven we stopped to "noon," starting again at two. (Row in inn over thief caught stealing A's Japanese leather-cushion and her bath-towel from her chair.) Although very hot—90° in inn room—we preferred our chance outside, and after rising 350 feet (500 feet above Chungking) we "rested to cool" in the little village of Pi Pa Wo'ehr ("Guitar Nest") and stayed there over an hour, our coolies being almost dead beat. Resumed our chairs at 4 P.M., when it clouded over and a light breeze came up the valley. Seeing a nice pool of chocolate-coloured water below a really fine waterfall—160 feet wide and 20 feet deep, but of muddy water, I stopped and had an enjoyable swim, then on in chair, river flowing in a gorge it has cut out for itself almost 70 feet deep. Crossing the river on another shop-lined roofed-in bridge, we ascended to the cooler air (86°) of Hoang-Ko-Shu ("banyan tree") 430 feet, arriving at 6.45; dined at 7.30, off delicious black-boned spatchcock, with stewed plums and rice, washed down with *lao chiu* (the "vin du pays," a sort of sherry-flavoured beer fermented from the glutinous rice).

Uncomfortably hot to-day, and we felt somewhat discouraged at ten more such days in prospect; but the coolies tell me that henceforth our road lies on higher ground, and this cool place where I write seems an earnest of it.

July 10, 1892.—Up at four, after cool, refreshing sleep; heavy rain, and thermometer fallen to 76°; almost chilly. Curious that Chinese, in this country of easily worked sandstone do not use it in their buildings, except incidentally; probably its porosity renders it unsuitable in this humid climate; but here, at a halting-place consisting of a heavy-thatched roof thrown across the road, with wide open restaurant on either