

Edwardian Theatre and the Lost Shape of Asia: Some Remarks on Behalf of a Cinderella Subject

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As the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius found out, those who have come a long way to speak are presumed to have something worthwhile to say for themselves. I should therefore at the outset disclaim all intentions other than to take up your time as agreeably as circumstances allow. Even so, those circumstances do require that I say something in harmony with the established traditions of this distinguished series of lectures, and something ideally also in the spirit of the great intercultural communicator in whose honour the series was first instituted.

Coming as I do from London, my first thought was therefore to say something about the Tang dynasty, for the obvious reason that ever since the early days of Arthur Waley's first translations Great Britain has been known among sinologists as a bastion of Tang studies. Waley's first efforts appeared almost simultaneously with the formation of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, where I teach, since when London has seen not only A. C. Graham's work on Tang poetry but also the entire career of E. D. Edwards and the initial publications of J. K. Rideout, a former lecturer in this series who was one of the founders of Tang studies in this country. My own introduction to Chinese studies, however, took place at Cambridge, where for nearly half a century the Chair of Chinese has been occupied exclusively by scholars with strong interests in the Tang: first E. G. Pulleyblank, then D. C. Twitchett, followed by Glen Dudbridge and, since Professor Dudbridge's return to Oxford, D. L. McMullen. Denis Twitchett and David McMullen were both teaching there when I was an undergraduate, and I am much indebted to both of them not simply for my initial education in Chinese but for their continued guidance, just as I am to my doctoral supervisor at Yale, Professor Stanley Weinstein, author of *Buddhism Under the T'ang*. I have found much to admire, too, in the scholarship of Professor Pulleyblank and his one time student Professor Dudbridge, as would readily become apparent were I to address you today on some topic related to Tang culture.

This, however, I do not propose to do, even though in terms of my own abilities I can claim little more than a certain familiarity with the history of the Tang alone, and only the history of religion and thought, at that. The reason is that despite all the eminent scholars I have named, it would be wrong for me to pretend that Tang studies have any general prestige within Britain itself. Indeed, as the only occupant of a chair of East Asian History in the British Isles, a chair formerly occupied by experts on the expansion of Europe in East Asia and on the modern history of Japan, I am obliged to report that whenever I confess to fellow historians my preoccupation with the religious thought of China more than a millennium ago, I perceive if not an immediate glazing over of the eyes in utter boredom then a certain politely suppressed disappointment that a unique and hitherto valuable post should be thrown away on such fripperies. What, after all, to echo the Mencian experience once again, does it profit the world to know anything about the Tang, who for all their long rule from the early seventh to the start of the tenth century are as remote from us as are the Anglo-Saxons of King Alfred's times? The age that we live in must surely owe very little to a time and place so remote.

We should expect, of course, one or two technological innovations, such as the printing of books and the discovery of gunpowder, but since Joseph Needham (another Cambridge figure) has now convinced all of us that the world owes much of its premodern technical and scientific knowledge to China, this hardly calls for comment. What, in any case, does the history of religion have to do with printing and gunpowder, apart from the fact that the earliest references to such things are all in

religious documents?¹ If we turn instead to matters of culture, then we can hardly see much in our contemporary way of life that can be traced back to Tang times, other than perhaps tea drinking, or what has from a slightly different angle been wryly termed the ‘discovery of boiling water’, something which is such a common feature of our daily lives that again it surely does not merit discussion.² And even if we look at the most novel and exotic admixtures now to be found in the culture of English-speaking countries, such as an interest in Buddhism, there is hardly anything even there which provides a link with the Tang, unless perhaps one includes the Tang connections of Tibetan and Zen Buddhism—and the latter, though no doubt first patented in China, has always been much more successfully marketed from Japan.³

But the best measure of the irrelevance of the Tang is surely to be found in its lack of any contribution to world literature. True, some of its poetry has, as I have suggested above, been rendered into English, but that enterprise really only began in the twentieth century, so presumably it is far too soon to tell whether these translations will prove to be anything other than as exotic and peripheral as the forms of Buddhism just mentioned would now appear to be, despite the fact that T. S. Eliot once remarked “in our own time, the poetical translations from the Chinese made by Ezra Pound, and those made by Arthur Waley, have probably been read by every poet writing in English”.⁴ Times have probably changed already, making Pound as remote as Beowulf, so the real question is this: is there any piece of Tang literature at all that has gained the unshakeable status of a world classic? To ask the question is surely to answer it: the terms ‘Tang literature’ and ‘world classic’ just do not occupy the same sentence comfortably at all, so very isolated from the rest of us has Chinese culture been.

So self-contained, so unitary and self-sufficient does Chinese culture of more than a thousand years ago now look to us that there is no wonder that we should tend to describe China as a ‘Walled Kingdom’, even if during Tang times there was apparently no Great Wall of China, nor indeed during much of Chinese history before the fifteenth century.⁵ Nor does it matter that these fortifications, such as they were, concern only the northern frontier, since China was effectively a world apart, completely isolated by deserts, mountains and seas, except for the so-called Silk Road, which even recent discoveries would only take back to about one thousand years BC.⁶ As for maritime trade, this verifiably only extended to Europe as late as Roman times, as some of your own scholars have lately reaffirmed.⁷ Thus before the ‘Invasion of the West’, waking China from its millennia of introspection, hardly any outside influence impinged on China’s traditional culture at all, except for Buddhism. Experts on society, however, have concluded that Buddhism was fairly soon, (that is, after about a millennium), reduced to a merely ‘interstitial’ position as a sort of ‘safety valve’.⁸ Indeed, compared with the eight million characters which the Chinese preserved from the early days of their own tradition, one scarcely finds a trace of any awareness of any other ancient society, apart from the forty million characters of Buddhist materials translated from Indian

¹ The former technology and its relationship with religion I am beginning to explore myself, for example in “Images of Printing in Seventh Century Chinese Religious Literature”, *Chinese Science* 15 (1998), pp. 81-93; I hope to consider religion and gunpowder at some future point.

² Marco Ceresa, *La Scoperta dell’Acqua Calda* (Milano: Leonardo, 1993), provides an excellent summary, with translated texts, of this momentous innovation.

³ See, for a volume uniting both forms of Buddhism mentioned, L. Lancaster and W. Lai, *Early Ch’an in China and Tibet*, Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 115.

⁵ As demonstrated by Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth*, Cambridge: CUP, 1990.

⁶ Adam T. Kessler, *Empires Beyond the Great Wall: The Heritage of Genghis Khan* (Los Angeles: Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 1993), p. 19, refers to Chinese silk in Egypt at this date.

⁷ D. D. Leslie and K. J. H. Gardiner, *The Roman Empire in Chinese Sources*, Roma: Bardi, 1996.

⁸ Talcott Parsons, *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 82, n. 38.

languages.⁹ Once those materials ceased to be translated, moreover, Buddhism showed no vitality, except for economic and religious revival in the Ming.¹⁰ Its later cultural influence outside the world of thought, apart from its impact on art, literature and politics (and possibly other fields such as music and medicine, of which I know less), was likewise entirely circumscribed.¹¹

Traditional China, then, had very little idea of the outside world, with a few exceptions, and, to quote the Qianlong Emperor, had ‘no need’ of its products, except (he forgot somehow to mention) for artillery, cartography, and a few other technologies.¹² Within, Chinese civilisation was remarkably homogeneous: apart from Buddhism and Taoism, Confucian ideology reigned supreme.¹³ The Chinese state, except for the period before the Ming, imposed this ideology uniformly through education for the examination system, so that one can scarcely find a trace of opposition to Confucian norms, save perhaps in the popular culture of the majority of the inhabitants of China, where subversive elements may be found in many forms, including religious ones.¹⁴ Such a degree of uniformity of culture was thus achieved across the great empire of China that one hardly notices the presence of minority cultures belonging to non-Han Chinese ethnic groups, except when they conquered China, as the Mongols or Manchus did, or in the case of less aggressive peoples, when their customs are occasionally described in passing, as for example in the four hundred or so traditional sources assembled by Eberhard for his study of Southern and Eastern cultural patterns.¹⁵

No, with the exceptions I have outlined, plus a number of others that I may have overlooked, there is simply no point in talking to you of traditional China, for you would doubtless be bored to distraction. The only historical topic one may, by long and almost invariant custom, lay before such a distinguished audience is one involving change, and the more dramatic the change the better. The only question is ‘when did China start to change?’ In answering this question we must, of course, take the standpoint of the outside observer, since Chinese historians were under the impression that China was changing all the time, as they saw it to some degree irreversibly, and suffered from a certain amount of anxiety on that score.¹⁶ So let us start from the point of view of change imposed from outside by Europeans as the only sort that counts, and ask at what stage that became visible. Obviously a great deal happened in the nineteenth century, at least from the Opium Wars onward, but in sum what this amounted to was that China was attacked, and defended itself. This, in the eyes of outsiders, showed inflexibility, even intransigence, but they tended not to describe that as change.

So in the conventional view, it would seem, resistance had to culminate in the ultimate atavism of the Boxer Rebellion before it could be finally crushed, and the massive weight of Chinese inertia

⁹ Cf. the figures given (in review of D. C. Lau’s concordance series) by Russell McLeod in *China Review International*, 1.1 (Spring, 1994), p. 50, and Paul Demiéville, on p. 399 of “Les sources chinoises”, originally in *L’Inde Classique II* (Paris-Hanoi, 1953), p. 158 as reprinted in *Choix d’Etudes Bouddhiques* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 157-222.

¹⁰ Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and The Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1993.

¹¹ See Marsha Weidner, *Latter days of the Law: Images of Chinese Buddhism, 850-1850*, Lawrence, Kansas: The Spencer Museum of Art, 1994; Victor Mair, “A Partial Bibliography for the study of Indian Influences on Chinese Popular Literature”, *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 3 (March, 1987) pp. 1-214; and James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), Chapter Two.

¹² Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Sextants of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 92, but cf. also p. 124.

¹³ Thus, for example, T. H. Barrett, *Li Ao: Buddhist, Taoist or Neo-Confucian?* Oxford: OUP, 1994.

¹⁴ See, for example, W. J. F. Jenner, “Tough Guys, Mateship and Honour: Another Chinese Tradition”, *East Asian History* 12 (December, 1996), pp. 1-34, and Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, eds, *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996.

¹⁵ W. Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), bibliography, pp. 475-502.

¹⁶ Of the great deal that might be said on this point, that which has been said most elegantly and within a small compass may be found in the 47th Morrison lecture of Pierre Ryckmans, *The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past*, 1986.

start to roll forward at last. The Boxer Movement has been penetratingly examined once in this lecture series already, and no doubt the occasion of its centenary next year will prompt even more historiographic reflection than has taken place of late, so now would not be an appropriate time at which to reconsider this pivotal event. But the following decade, up to the revolution of 1911, clearly embodies a major period of change, as all historians would seem to agree. This was, of course, the heyday of G. E. Morrison's spell of reporting for the *Times*, and if in his obituary in that newspaper, cited by another distinguished lecturer in this series, its writer chose to talk of the "momentous vicissitudes" which he recorded "with the prescience of a statesman and the objectivity of a historian", then surely it was not merely the events of 1911 and thereafter that writer had in mind, but those of the preceding decade also, especially since he resigned from his job of reporting for the *Times* in 1912.¹⁷ And in any case, historians of the late twentieth century, of whom I shall take John K. Fairbank of Harvard and Jonathan D. Spence of Yale as representative, have chosen to talk of the first decade of the century in China in very similar terms.

Thus the former scholar points to the far-reaching consequences of educational reform and the abolition of the traditional examination system in 1905, since this meant that the "Neo-Confucian synthesis was no longer valid, yet nothing to replace it was as yet in sight". He continues: "The speed of change now became very unsettling", and summarises changes in dress and behaviour indicating the onset of widespread adoption of Western ways. And what of the Manchu dynasty, hitherto the backbone of reactionary resistance? "Facing this vortex of change, Beijing pursued systematic policies inspired partly by foreign examples".¹⁸ Jonathan Spence underlines the importance of this development: "The first dramatic gesture in the direction of constitutional reform was made by the empress dowager Cixi in 1905, when she ordered the formation of a small study group of five princes and officials—three Manchus and two Chinese—who would travel to Japan, the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and Italy to study their governments".¹⁹

It is this mission, then, firmly part of the modern history of China, which I have selected as the topic of my remarks today. I do so with a considerable degree of diffidence, for though it allows me to address the Morrison era, I am well aware that I know far less about this period than many whom I now presume to address. Even so, the publication in 1982 of a cheap paperback edition of the diary of one of the five officials, Dai Hongci (1853-1910), has allowed me the opportunity of expanding somewhat on existing accounts of the activities of the project in which he was involved.²⁰ Fortunately also, historians of an earlier generation have already given us a good overview of what is termed the 'Chinese Constitutional Mission of 1905-1906', or 'The Five Great Ministers' Mission Abroad', a venture that in fact involved two linked groups, of which the one including Dai had the better known Manchu official Tuan-fang (1861-1911) as co-leader.²¹ Thus although the purpose of the entire exercise was to investigate the possibilities of constitutional government on behalf of the dynasty, it has already been noted that in fact cultural activities such as trips to the theatre were also incorporated into Dai's programme, and it is one such visit upon which I would like to focus, in an effort perhaps to penetrate the 'film of events' and discover something of contemporary Chinese views of European culture.²² For when Chinese eyes were at length by all accounts open to inspect closely the world of which China formed a part, what was it that they saw?

¹⁷ Cited on p. 110 of Lo Hui-min, "The Tradition and Prototypes of the China-watcher", as reprinted in *East Asian History* 11 (June, 1996), pp. 91-110.

¹⁸ John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1992), p. 243.

¹⁹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (second ed., New York: Norton, 1999), p. 244.

²⁰ Dai Hongci, ed. Chen Siyi, *Chu shi jiuguo riji* (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1982), originally a government publication of 1906.

²¹ E-tu Sun Zen, "The Chinese Constitutional Mission of 1905-1906", *Journal of Modern History* 24.3 (Sept. 1952), pp. 251-68.

²² Sun Zen, "Chinese Constitutional Mission", p. 256.

But rather than try to present a synopsis of the entirety of Dai's travelogue as published, which would have involved the study of a number of foreign countries concerning which I know very little, I have decided to concentrate on his first impressions of London, a city with which I am now relatively familiar. This he reached, after landing from New York the previous day, on Saturday 24th February 1906 at nine o'clock in the morning. After a visit to the Chinese embassy, and, to Dai's great relief, a decent meal of Chinese food for the first time in a while, the afternoon from 3 p.m. was taken up by a visit to the zoo, where the giraffe and zebra, animals unknown to Asia, particularly made an impression. Sunday 25th saw a trip to a museum, and a stroll in the park, after which the party were entertained by the Chinese students then resident in London.

Not until Monday 26 February 1906 did the visiting officials engage in a full working day of constitutional investigations. After starting with a commemorative photograph at ten in the morning, they went first to the House of Commons, where the system of governing and opposition parties was noted, and then to the House of Lords. Unfortunately, Sir Edward Grey, Foreign Minister of the day, was unable to see them, but they did meet a junior minister. It was not until after a visit to a waxworks museum, presumably Madame Tussaud's, and some more Chinese food, courtesy of the Chinese students of Jiangsu, that everyone ended up at the theatre, at eight o'clock in the evening. Fortunately, though, Dai's record of this outing, however tired he may have been, is unusually full, since he explicitly states that he gives an account of the show in order that his readers may know the customs of European countries.²³ What follows, therefore, is a full translation of his remarks.

“A certain Frenchman had a wife who died young, leaving him a teenage daughter of great beauty. Later he married a second wife, a widow, who had two daughters. One day their friends and family held a feast, and the girls all wanted to enjoy the fun of seeing this, for such is their custom. But the mother only accompanied the daughters she had given birth to herself, while the other daughter was the only one not to take part. In her heart she was listless and depressed and could not be satisfied. Her father knew and took pity on her, so he provided her with some cakes and told her to mind the house. There was nothing the girl could do about it, so she laid her head on her pillow and went to sleep, dreaming that an immortal came down and took her to the feast. First they went on a trip to Heaven, where the cave-courts of the holy immortals and ‘Rainbow Skirts and Feathered Jackets’ that she saw all provided a more splendid spectacle than any seen in our mortal world. At this point her stepmother was going to the feast in a confused clamour of horses and carriages, and was scolded by the patrolling watch at such a volume as to deafen the listener. Once the feast had started, there was singing and dancing to the heart's content, and then they went home. At this time the crown prince of a neighbouring kingdom was in the process of selecting a bride, but had after much time found no one suitable. It happened that at the royal palace of France there was [this] great feast, attracting veritable clouds of aristocrats—and then in the ranks of the dancers he seemed to see this young lady whirling about, her appearance that of an immortal. The prince, as soon as he caught sight of her, was completely besotted. For a while they danced together, but then the lady vanished in a trice, leaving a single shoe, of a golden hue and finely worked, at which he could not withhold a sigh of admiration. In fact the immortal had come to the feast with her soul; it was not really the young lady. The prince then took the shoe, and offered a reward seeking to purchase [sc. the pair]. When he had sought it out, he found that the person who had taken his fancy was in this mortal world. Thus Heaven bestowed a chance meeting, and so she was enabled to marry.”

Now there are many elements in this story which, parenthetically, I must say seem very familiar, at least to me. Far be it from me to say so, but to my mind a good knowledge of Tang writings turns out to be quite useful in understanding this modern diplomatic source. The romantic adventures of a disembodied soul recall, for example, the many ‘dream lovers’ of what is somewhat misleadingly

²³ Dai, *Chu shi jiuguo riji*, 5, p. 112.

termed Tang fiction, discussed most recently by Glen Dudbridge.²⁴ In this literature also we find the explicit statement “Shoes symbolize union”.²⁵ The journey to Heaven, too, and what I have literally rendered as its ‘cave-courts’ summon up again Tang images of the ‘Grotto-heavens’ or *dongtian* of Taoism, underground paradises in the holy mountains of China’s sacred geography concealed from ordinary mortals, but occasionally penetrated by the fortunate few.²⁶ As for Dai’s ‘Rainbow Skirts and Feather Jackets’, this is a quite specific reference to a very famous term describing the costumes of the world of the immortals, as clothed by the Tang imagination, which, since it became the title of a ballet much beloved by Bai Juyi, has already been explained at length by Arthur Waley in his classic study of that poet.²⁷ But as much as the specific references, it is the very structure of the story as a whole which finds analogues preserved among materials of Tang date. The most famous case of Heaven’s exaltation of the humble and meek to be found there probably concerns Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, and certainly the rapid growth in the popularity of his story has been attributed to its conformity to a pattern of the discovery of a hero in circumstances of humble obscurity which was already familiar to Chinese readers.²⁸ That pattern may even be found in the Confucian Classics, according to this argument.²⁹

Curiously enough, however, as that world-famous Zen story unfolded we find that it gained an increased impact from the assertion that the humble temple servant who is secretly recognised by the enlightened Fifth Patriarch as the only person spiritually qualified to be entrusted with the ‘Transmission of the Dharma’, the ultimate truth of Zen Buddhism, was not even Chinese at all. As early as the late eighth century, in a text written less than one hundred years after the lifetime of the historical Huineng, we find him described outright as a Gelao, a member of a non-Han group in South China so despised as to be considered not quite human. This first recorded version of their conversation is reported to have started with the Fifth Patriarch asking: “What place are you from? For what reason are you visiting me? What thing is it that you seek?” Huineng responds, “I have arrived from New Mountain in Lingnan, and so I have come to pay my respects. I only seek to become a Buddha, I seek for nothing else”. It is to this that the master replies, “You are a Gelao of Lingnan, so how can you be capable of becoming a Buddha?”, and Huineng retorts, “What difference is there between the Buddha potential (*xing*, nature) of a Gelao and your own Buddha potential?”³⁰

This detail, whether an authentic recollection of the origins of Huineng himself or imposed on the patriarch by later followers to illustrate the omnipresence of Buddha nature, proved to be so striking that it has been retained virtually verbatim in the version of the Platform Sutra of Huineng current today, a text which if not in the original then at least in translation is probably familiar to

²⁴ Glen Dudbridge, *Religious Experience and Lay Society in T’ang China* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), Chapter Seven.

²⁵ Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, trans., *Tang Dynasty Stories* (Beijing: Panda Books, 1986), p. 53, translating the story of Huo Xiaoyu.

²⁶ F. Verellen, “The Beyond Within: Grotto-heavens (*dongtian*) in Taoist Ritual and Cosmology”, *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 8 (1994-95), pp. 101-126.

²⁷ Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po Chü-i* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949), pp. 154-55; for Chinese references see Chen Yinke, *Yuan, Bai shi jianzheng gao* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1978), pp. 25-31.

²⁸ John R. McRae, “The Legend of Hui-neng and the Mandate of Heaven”, in *Fo-kuang Shan Report of International Conference on Ch’an Buddhism* (Kaohsiung: Fo Kuang Publishers, 1990), pp. 69-82.

²⁹ McRae, pp. 78-9, cites Sarah Allan, *The Heir and The Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981) in this regard.

³⁰ The document in question, a report of Hui-neng’s interview with the Fifth patriarch in one text of the sayings of Hui-neng’s self-proclaimed disciple Shen-hui is dated 792, and if not attributable to Shen-hui himself must at least go back to an original earlier in the eighth century, since it was copied in a garrison town already isolated from the rest of China by the Tibetans. See Yang Zengwen, *Shenhui heshang chan yulu* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1996), p. 109, reprinting the so-called Ishii text of the sayings.

almost every student of Zen.³¹ But who were these people? Research into the language of the Gelao has revealed that it may be classified as somewhat loosely belonging to the family of which modern Thai is the best-known representative.³² As to the culture of such groups, E. G. Pulleyblank has pointed to the significance for them of the key term *dong*, which though often represented by the Chinese character for grotto already referred to above, in this part of the world actually means something slightly different, in his words “mountain valley”, or “level ground between cliffs and beside a stream”.³³ His information in this regard would seem to be of a piece with the findings of the late Gordon Downer, as quoted by E. H. Schafer, who finds that the word occurs in several languages of South China to mean an upland rice-growing plateau.³⁴

Now if within this parenthesis I might parenthetically insert some further remarks on an area of study concerning which I am entirely unqualified to speak, I would venture to suggest that this looks like a rather significant cultural marker. That part of the world which embraces both South China and mainland South-East Asia, and which seems to form in some respects a continuum quite distinct from territories further north can only be understood, if I am not mistaken, on a three dimensional model rather than a two-dimensional map, taking due account of the relative height of the local topography.³⁵ On the open plains live those peoples who give their names to nation-states, whether they be Chinese, Vietnamese or, since late medieval times, Thai. Their history, at least once these peoples became established in their current locations, is well enough known. Interspersed with them, but in the highlands, live smaller groups who have never achieved nationhood—who perhaps never aspired to it until our own troubled times—like the Miao or the Yao, whose histories, dispersed as these groups are, we find much more obscure.³⁶

But there is a third category in between these two, namely the peoples of the ‘intermontane’ valleys, to quote the terminology of a colleague summarizing the basic ecological pattern of Thai life.³⁷ For in the case of these particular successful state-formers, who at an earlier phase were apparently virtually invisible as the subjects of another ethnically distinct kingdom, their earlier world-conception has, we are told, survived their relatively recent appearance in history as masters of the plain.³⁸ To my inexpert eye this switch of environments has even so affected their language to the extent that the word which I take to be originally cognate with *dong* has, it seems, switched meanings from ‘valley’ (in which sense it was earlier borrowed by neighbours) to mean ‘a plain’, in response to their historical southern migration.³⁹ At any rate the less politically if not spiritually successful relatives of the Thai remaining in China, such as the Gelao, are still said by experts to

³¹ See Wong Mou-lam, *The Sutra of Hui Neng* (Berkeley: Shambala, 1969), p. 12, where ‘barbarian’ represents ‘Gelao’.

³² The exact relationship is problematic: see Jerold B. Edmonson and David B. Solnit, *Comparative Tai: The Kadai Branch* (Arlington, Texas: The Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1997), pp. 2-3, for the most recent schema.

³³ See pp. 430-435 of E. G. Pulleyblank, “The Chinese and their Neighbors in Prehistoric and Early Historic Times”, in David Keightley, *The Origins of Chinese Civilisation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 411-466.

³⁴ E. H. Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird: T’ang Images of the South* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 277, n.21, evidently based on a personal communication.

³⁵ On the genetic substrate underlying this north-south divide within China itself, see Glen Dudbridge, *China’s Vernacular Cultures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 13-15: note that ‘Chinese’ becomes on this understanding a cultural term referring to adherence to the Northern cultural model.

³⁶ For the recent thwarted political ambitions of some of these ‘montagnards’, see Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: decolonisation, nationalism and separatism*, London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996.

³⁷ Philip Stott, on pp. 145-46 of “Mua’ang and pa: Elite views of nature in a changing Thailand”, in Andrew Turton and Manas Chitakseem, *Thai Constructions of Knowledge* (London: SOAS, 1991), pp. 142-154.

³⁸ On the origins of the Thais I follow the new consensus outlined e.g. in Charles Backus, *The Nan-chao Kingdom and T’ang China’s Southwestern Frontier* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), pp. 46-52.

³⁹ See p. 7 of James Matisoff, “Universal Semantics and Allofamic Identification”, in Paul K. Eguchi, et al., eds., *Languages and History in East Asia: Festschrift for Tatsuo Nishida* (Kyoto: Shokado, 1988), citing Li Fang-kuei, *A Handbook of Comparative Tai* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1977), p. 105, no. 29, and n. on p. 107.

“live in mountainous areas but prefer to settle on river banks”.⁴⁰ This third intermediate, intermontane group, then, seems to have had an occasional but not invariably realised capacity for moving into the first category. One such abortive move may be seen perhaps in the history of the nineteenth century Taiping Rebellion which, while usually considered as a movement inspired by members the Chinese Hakka dialect group, also involved some non-Han (or not entirely Han) inhabitants of Guangxi province, such as the half-Zhuang, half-Hakka general Shi Dakai, in their considerable if ultimately ephemeral success.⁴¹ Would that we had the sources, however, to move back earlier to examine how the first steps of such peoples towards statehood did or did not take place without resorting to hypothetical ethnohistory! What, one wonders, did those early tribes know of states, in their narrow valley worlds, that they should have aspired to emulate them?

But if the reference to dwelling in a *dong* can be used as a marker not of troglodytes (though there are admittedly such peoples in South China, in places where the landscape affords this form of easy shelter) but of valley dwellers speaking languages related to Thai, then this word, it seems to me, potentially gives added significance to another Tang tale also studied in depth by Arthur Waley. Waley was certainly not the first person to notice this interesting source, as he himself makes clear, and in fact the Japanese folklorist Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941) claims that he first realised its significance while studying in America in the late 1880s.⁴² But Waley’s study is the only one I have been able to find which pays any attention whatsoever to the tale’s original non-Chinese background. For the narrator named for the story, as collected in a compilation of the second half of the ninth century, is a man from the far South, as Waley would have it “a man from the caves”. However, since the story concerns (as he himself admits) a house-dweller, there would seem to be a good case in this instance for translating it as “a man of the valleys”.⁴³ Since Waley provides a complete translation of the story, it is with considerable diffidence that I provide a rendering of my own, even if this does allow me to bring out one or two points which he does not choose to comment on himself.⁴⁴ The edition used in his translation is not specified, whereas I have used a modern, well-edited typeset text published in 1981.

“The people of the South tell a tale that before the Qin and Han dynasties [in other words, the Tang equivalent of once upon a time] there was a lord of a valley (*dong*) who was named Wu, and so local people called his the Wu valley. He married two wives. One wife died, who had a daughter called Jiapshian [or Shiapshian].⁴⁵ As a child she was clever and good at panning for gold [an activity for which southern non-Chinese women were well known].⁴⁶ Her father loved her. But having grown old he died, and she was persecuted by her stepmother, who constantly made her collect firewood and draw water from difficult places. Then she found a fish, a couple of inches or so long, with red whiskers and golden eyes, so she kept it hidden in a bowl of water, but every day it grew bigger, so that after she had changed containers several times it was too big to put it in anything. So she threw it into the pond at the back. What leftover food she managed to obtain she would put in the water to feed it. Whenever the girl arrived, the fish would stick out its head and rest it on the bank, but if anyone else came it would not come out

⁴⁰ Jerold A. Edmonson and David B. Solnit, *Comparative Kadai: Linguistic Studies Beyond Tai* (Arlington, Texas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, Inc., 1988), p. 11.

⁴¹ For Shi (and in Chapters Two and Three the background to the movement in general), see Robert P. Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 80.

⁴² See p. 129 of Minakata Kumagusu, *Minakata Kumagusu Zenshû II* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1971), pp. 121-135, reprinting an article first published itself in 1911.

⁴³ Arthur Waley, *The Secret History of the Mongols and Other Pieces* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963), pp. 151, 152.

⁴⁴ Waley, *Secret History*, pp. 149-151.

⁴⁵ Unfortunately the first character (to the sound of which my orthography only approximates somewhat impressionistically) has two pronunciations: cf. E. G. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1991), pp. 279, 364.

⁴⁶ Note the poem cited in Schafer, *Vermilion Bird*, p. 56.

any more. The stepmother found this out, but every time she lay in wait, the fish would never appear. So she tricked the girl, saying “Have you nothing for your hard work? I will change your skirt for a new one”. So she changed her worn-out skirt, and then she later told her to draw water from a different spring, which she reckoned to be a good way off. Then she put on her daughter’s clothes, and carrying a sharp knife in her sleeve went to the pond and called the fish, whereupon the fish stuck its head out and she killed it by chopping it off. The fish was already more than ten feet long, so she made a meal of its flesh, and it tasted twice as good as an ordinary fish. She hid the bones under the midden. The next day, the girl went towards the pond, but the fish did not come out any more, so she cried out in the country. Suddenly there was a man with flowing hair and coarse clothes who descended from the sky to console her, saying “Don’t you cry, your mother has killed your fish! The bones are under the dung, so when you go home you may take the bones of the fish and hide them in your room. All you need to do is pray to them, and everything will be as you wish”. So the girl did as he said, and gold, jade, clothes and food were provided according to her desires.

When the time came for the festival of the valley, the stepmother went, but she made the girl guard the fruit in their yard. The girl waited until the stepmother was some way off, and then went herself, wearing a cloak of material woven from kingfisher feathers with shoes of gold on her feet. [We should note that, despite the Taoist connotations of feathered clothes that we have already had occasion to mention, Eberhard, in the typological study referred to above, while conceding the religious connection, cites materials suggesting that the basic use for clothes of feathers, and especially kingfisher feathers, marks out a cultural pattern which he terms ‘Thai’].⁴⁷ Her stepsister, however, recognised her and told her mother “That looks very like my sister”, which is rather what the stepmother thought too. So the girl had to leave in such a hurry that she lost one shoe, which was picked up by a man of the valley. When the stepmother got home, all she saw was the girl asleep with her arms around a tree in their yard, so she thought nothing of it.

This valley was near an island [or at any rate a place approached by sea], on which was a kingdom named Dakhan, with powerful armies, which ruled over several tens of islands, and had a sea coast hundreds of miles long. The man who found the shoe then sold it in Dakhan, where the king bought it, and ordered his courtiers to try it on, but it was an inch too small for the one with the smallest foot. So he ordered every woman in the kingdom to try it on, but in the end there was not a single one that fitted it.

It was light as a feather, and even walking on stone made not a sound. The king of Dakhan thought the man of the valley had come by it through some nefarious means, so he imprisoned him and interrogated him under torture, but in the end he did not find out where it came from, so he took the shoe and left it by the wayside.

[There is then some sort of lacuna in the story, which resumes] Then they went from house to house detaining people, and if they found a woman’s shoe, they would confiscate it and tell the king. [Another lacuna seems to occur, for the next sentence says] The king of Dakhan thought it strange, so he searched the house, and found Shiapshian. He ordered her to put on the shoe, and there was the proof. So Shiapshian, wearing the cloak woven from halcyon feathers and her shoes, came in, as beautiful as a heavenly being. Only then did she tell the king the whole story, and he, loading up both her and her fishbones, took them both back to his kingdom. The stepmother and stepsister were then killed after being hit by flying stones, and the men of the valleys, having pity on them, buried them in a stone pit, which they named ‘Tumulus of the Distressed Women’. The men of the valleys used it as a matchmaking shrine, sure to answer prayers with a wife for all that wanted one. When the king of Dakhan reached his kingdom, he made Shiapshian his main consort. After a year, the king became greedy, and prayed to the fishbones, gaining jewels and jade without limit. The next year, there was no further response. So the king buried the fish bones by the sea shore, and heaped them over with one hundred bushels of pearls, bordered with gold. When his levies mutinied, he was going to dig them up to

⁴⁷ Eberhard, *Local Cultures*, pp. 285-287.

provide for his army. But one night they were washed away by the tide. This was told to me, Chengshi, by our old family retainer Li Yuanshi. Yuanshi was originally a man of the valleys in Yongzhou, and he was able to recall many strange things of the South.”⁴⁸

This narrative could hardly be more different from that witnessed by Dai and his party. Here no-one lives happily ever after, least of all, one suspects, the narrator Li Shiyuan, whom Waley shows was probably a slave.⁴⁹ But it does give us a little insight into the lives of people of whose mental world we would otherwise know practically nothing, since unlike the case of the Sixth Patriarch, whose aspirations towards Buddhahood despite his Gelao origins we have suspected of being a Chinese construct, we can be fairly sure that here the ethnographic reporting of the narrator’s words is reasonably accurate. Indeed, Waley, attracted to this source because of the abundance of non-Han Chinese materials to be found in it, translates as a coda to his study two other tales of non-Chinese origin recorded by this Chinese collector, Duan Chengshi, and one of them, on the origin of the Turks, has proved authentic enough to be used together with other official Chinese reports on Turkish mythology and later Inner Asian materials to help sustain a comprehensive modern investigation of that question.⁵⁰

But it is not the sum of ethnographic data here which is of immediate interest so much as the political information, to which perhaps insufficient attention has been paid in the past. True, Waley did manage to identify the kingdom I have tentatively transcribed as Dakhan as one which is named in Tang sources as a polity subject to the much better known (but still poorly understood) realm of Dvaravati. This state, also known to the Tang, appears to have occupied the area on the open plains now controlled by the Thais, and is assumed to have been peopled by their unrelated predecessors, speakers of Mon.⁵¹ E. H. Schafer reconstructs the name of its dependency as Dagon, and shows that in the seventh century it was responsible for supplying a substance that he identifies as camphor to China, though one cannot be sure that the substance was produced there.⁵² If Dagon was a dependency of Dvaravati, then the relationship was probably a somewhat loose one, of the South Asian ‘galactic polity’ type, to judge by the consistent independent appearance of the two names in Chinese ‘tribute lists’ of diplomatic contacts.⁵³ As to its culture, the entry on Dagon in the dynastic history of the Tang and elsewhere records inter alia that its inhabitants lived in pile dwellings named ‘*ganlan*’.⁵⁴ This is not much to go on, but Pulleyblank at any rate sees it as linked to a proto-Tai term for a house, thus putting the king and his bride in the same general cultural and linguistic group.⁵⁵ Even so, Waley assumes that the story as such is a relic of Dvaravati culture.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Duan Chengshi, ed. Fang Nansheng, *Youyang zazu*, Supplement, 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1981), pp. 200-201.

⁴⁹ Waley, *Secret History*, p. 152.

⁵⁰ See “The Legendary Origin of the Turks”, the second study in Denis Sinor, *Studies in Medieval Inner Asia* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1997), especially pp. 230-31 (original pagination: first published in *Indiana University Uralic and Altaic series*, 141, 1982, pp. 223-257).

⁵¹ See Charles Higham, *Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia from 10,000 BC to the Fall of Angkor* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), pp. 269-279, and R. Hagersteijn, *Circle of Kings: Political Dynamism in Early Continental Southeast Asia* (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1989), p. 19, for some recent summaries of the evidence.

⁵² E. H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 167, and n. 117, p. 317.

⁵³ Compare Wang Qinruo, *Cefu yuangui* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960 reprint of 1642 ed.) 970.8b, 10a and 970.11b and 13b—the Song print is identical for the passages, but less legible. For the overall value of this source (but not for the point raised here), see R. B. Smith, “Mainland Southeast Asia in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries”, in R. B. Smith and W. Watson, eds., *Early Southeast Asia*, Oxford: OUP, 1979), pp. 443-456; for the Southeast Asian state, see e.g. Hagersteijn, *Circle of Kings*.

⁵⁴ Liu Xu, comp., *Jiu Tang Shu* 197 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975), p. 5272, describes it as contiguous with Dvaravati, but closer to China, southwest of Linyi, or Champa, so perhaps in the Mekong delta.

⁵⁵ Pulleyblank, “The Chinese and their Neighbors”, p. 434. It would be somewhat surprising if a language of this type were spoken at this point so far south.

⁵⁶ Waley, *Secret History*, p. 154.

He may or may not be right in this assumption: why should one rule out *ab initio* the possibility that the humble folk who introduced this story to the Chinese were incapable of any originality? But even if he is right, one startling political fact has become apparent: the oppressed and frequently enslaved folk of the valleys were undeniably capable of sustaining, if not inventing, an image of self-improvement as aspirational as that of the Sixth Patriarch, and one which already betrays in the ninth century a world view embracing not only the environment in which they lived during this historical epoch, but also the distant southern polities of mainland Southeast Asia upon which some of their kin were eventually to have such an impact many centuries later.

I use the word “startling” advisedly, for the very earliest evidence we otherwise have for the worldview of the Thai peoples as they emerge as literate, articulate actors on the stage of history in the fourteenth century, in the form of early textual material preserved in a later, nineteenth century chronicle, has been carefully analysed to sum up their outlook as quite the reverse of what our story suggests, in short as “local, particularistic, and even parochial”.⁵⁷ How to account for this contradiction I simply do not know. It may be that those men of the valleys who lived close enough to the Chinese to be enslaved also lived close enough to international trade routes to form a picture of the wider world; it may even be that the pan-Asian world of trade and Buddhism that survived until the mid-ninth century was genuinely more cosmopolitan than anything else which was to appear until a long time later. But whatever the explanation, this valuable and challenging nugget of information from a people otherwise almost totally voiceless has been preserved solely in an ostensible work of fiction, what we might call a ‘fairytale’.

Yet surely if we are to achieve a truly three dimensional picture of the Asian past—that is, three dimensional not only in the sense in which I have just used it as accounting for all the denizens of the complex topography between the Yangtse and the Gulf of Siam, but also in the sense of recreating imaginatively the lives of genuine human beings, with their hopes and fears, to say nothing of their emotions—then it is to these very materials, whether preserved informally as supposed works of fiction or formally as works of the religious imagination, that we must turn.⁵⁸ One senses that this point is now accepted amongst historians. “To the extent that historians are concerned with questions of value and belief, they cannot afford to ignore the history of Chinese religion”, writes one recent introduction. “Unfortunately there is no guide to Buddhist historiography”, it adds, baldly.⁵⁹ To this one can only say that value and belief aside, there are plenty of other types of data that are only preserved in religious or folkloristic materials, and that if no historiographic guides exist, then that may be a good thing, in that the first task of the historian is always to read the surviving materials in the way in which they were intended, before putting them to other uses.

But I have been digressing for too long, and now I am merely parading opinions to no purpose; I must try to steer back towards my original topic. You may still vaguely remember that it was about Dai Hongci and his trip to the Edwardian theatre, and that I branched off to make some observations on the Tang overtones of some of his description of the evening’s entertainment. I have also dragged you to the ethnographic margins even of Tang civilisation and asked you to consider a narrative from a lost world of jungle valleys very different from that of the salons of Europe during the high noon of its cultural self-confidence. Yet to those salons we should now return, so let me make the link by observing that despite the great differences between Dai’s record

⁵⁷ David K. Wyatt, on p. 698 of “Southeast Asia ‘Inside Out’, 1300-1800: A Perspective from the Interior”, *Modern Asian Studies* 31.3 (July, 1997), pp. 689-709.

⁵⁸ Robert Ford Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: SUNY, 1996), pp. 156-9, argues eloquently against the imposition of the modern category ‘fiction’ on these sources, but the most eloquent demonstration of their historical value when carefully used is still Dudbridge, *Religious Experience and Lay Society*.

⁵⁹ Endymion P. Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard, 1998), pp. 584, 593.

of the Edwardian theatre and the folktale collected by Duan Chengshi, there are one or two notable overlaps, even if—as implied earlier—Dai deliberately wrote into his record Tang overtones to the story to suit his Chinese readers.

Such items as the feathered cloaks and golden shoes, for example, presumably cannot all be due to his elaboration of an Edwardian original in the light of a reading of Duan Chengshi, assuming that he had indeed read this source.⁶⁰ To suggest any genetic connection between the two stories would be to undermine entirely Dai's preconceptions—if not our own—about the value of the materials he preserves as representative of the Western society of his day. But that is not the only way of discussing similarity. One might equally well talk of seemingly familiar elements in European works which happened to commend them to the attention of Chinese of the day. Glen Dudbridge, for example, suggests that the famous translator Lin Shu (1852-1924) would never have made a successful start to his career in 1899 had he not selected from Alexandre Dumas a story with very strong and presumably entirely fortuitous resonances in Tang fiction.⁶¹

This, of course, makes it a matter of some interest to try to identify the Edwardian dramatic performance which Dai and his friends witnessed. Here, alas, I am forced to acknowledge that the 'film of events' which remains to be traced in the public record turns out to be very thin indeed. *The Times*, in a manner befitting London's newspaper of record, chronicles the comings and goings of the 'Mission of the Five Ministers', but strictly after its fashion. "Their Excellencies Tuan Foy and Tai Whun Chu, the Chinese Commissioners who are studying constitutional government, arrived in London on Saturday evening, from New York. According to present arrangements, they will leave London on Wednesday for the Continent", it reports, on Monday 26th February, giving a time of arrival quite irreconcilable with the zoological investigations recorded in Dai's diary, and presumably wrong.⁶² On Thursday, the prediction concerning the time of departure at any rate is duly reported as fulfilled. "Tai Hung Chi and Tuan Fang, the Chinese Commissioners who are studying constitutional government, accompanied by a large party of Chinese officials, left Victoria (South-Eastern and Chatham railway) yesterday morning by the second portion of the 11 o'clock Continental boat train express for Paris, where they will stay a short time before proceeding to Berlin".⁶³ It is most reassuring to note that during such a short visit their reporter was almost able to learn the names of the visitors, and though Dai carefully notes that his party boarded the train at 10.30, in order to leave at 11 o'clock, he leaves out entirely the information about which line the train was on, or even the name of the station.⁶⁴ On the other hand the *Times* passes over in complete silence any details as to what the commissioners had been up to between their arrival and their so faithfully recorded departure.

Disappointed, then, in my first venture into English language sources for Edwardian Sino-Western contacts, I still entertained hopes that the perceived exoticism of the Commissioners might have excited the attention of the *Illustrated London News*, and my search was duly rewarded with a group photograph. But this was taken later, in Berlin, and contains information yet more unilluminating and inaccurate than that provided by the *Times*. Under the general caption "Chinese Commissioners in Berlin for the Study of European Institutions" two sentences appear, first, and misleadingly, "An Imperial Chinese Mission has been sent out to study social and commercial

⁶⁰ This assumes that he had read the story above, in Duan's *Youyang zazu*. Fan Xizeng, *Shumu dawen buzheng* 3 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1981), p. 156, a bibliography compiled in its current form in 1908, suggests that a number of editions of the work might have been available to him.

⁶¹ Glen Dudbridge, *The Tale of Li Wa* (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), p. 98. For more on this translation, see Hu Ying, "The Translator Transfigured: Lin Shu and the Cultural Logic of Writing in the Late Qing", *positions* 3.1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 69-96, though unfortunately this does not pick up Dudbridge's observation.

⁶² *The Times*, 26 February 1906, p. 6c.

⁶³ *The Times*, 1 March 1906, p. 9f.

⁶⁴ Dai, *Chu shi jiuguo riji*, 5, p. 114.

problems in Europe”, and next, with studied vagueness, “Some time ago Chinese envoys made an extended tour of the great centres of British industry”. Once again, the true course of Dai’s activities in London seem to have passed British journalism by completely.⁶⁵

Doubtless, experts on this period would be able to direct me to more profitable sources of information, for it is certainly the case that some of the later British activities of the Five Ministers have recently been spectacularly revealed from English sources, albeit once again in tandem with the Chinese record of another of the Five.⁶⁶ But I must confess that this encounter with the historiographic shortcomings of the modern British press left me more than a little discouraged. So what the performance was that Dai describes in his diary I have found no means of verifying as yet. Some of you may have already guessed what he saw, but in the absence of appropriate evidence it would be quite unprofessional of me to venture an opinion. For the failure of my research I can only apologise, as I should also undoubtedly apologise for only reaching in my narrative day three of the Constitutional Commission’s trip to London, omitting any account of day four, when their investigations turned to banking, and to the Royal Mint. But of their cultural experiences in London I believe I have selected the most interesting for more extended discussion.

By this stage, however, you may well have concluded that my entire account has been no more than an elaborate pantomime, from the outset never intended to illuminate any great vistas of knowledge, but rather simply to challenge some existing assumptions—that modern materials, especially in English, are self-evidently more interesting and informative than those in the Classical Chinese of bygone ages; that such distant and bygone ages yield no information of value in reading twentieth century Chinese texts, let alone any links with what is loosely termed ‘Western’ culture; that religious and folkloric materials should be left to specialists in those fields and not touched on by real historians; that the world views of illiterate peoples of more than a millennium ago are invariably lost and gone forever; and other issues of the same sort. But you may recall that at the start of this lecture I promised no more than to try to take up your time as agreeably as possible. If in my rambling remarks I have wandered into a number of topics, including perhaps even ethnology, the nominal topic of this entire lecture series, my main priority has been only to sustain your interest. Now, unfortunately, I have entirely run out of things to say, so rather than impose upon your patience any further, I shall stop. Thank you for your attention.

⁶⁵ *Illustrated London News*, 24 March 1906, p. 412.

⁶⁶ Charles Aylmer, ed., on pp. 47-48 of “The Memoirs of H. A. Giles” (and cf. his appendix on pp. 86-7), in *East Asian History* 13/14 (June/December 1997), pp. 1-90.