

An Indian Subaltern's Passage to China in 1900

By Anand A. Yang

On June 29, 1900, I, together with the ‘headquarter’ [commanding officers] of the 7th Rajputs, a Bengal regiment, boarded the ship *Palamcotta* at Calcutta.” This opening line sets the stage for *Chin meh Terah Mas (Thirteen Months in China)*, an account of a “*yudh yatra*” or war travel (*yatra* also means a journey, tour, trip, or pilgrimage) penned by an Indian subaltern named Thakur Gadhadhar Singh. He was a subaltern both in the military sense (i.e., a subordinate Indian noncommissioned officer) and in the postcolonial sense (i.e., a marginalized and colonized person).¹

As many travel narratives do, Singh’s China story signals its itinerary right from the first step. The title itself is revealing. Parenthetically subtitled *Chin Sangram (The China War)*, it identifies itself on the cover as offering “a full eyewitness account of the great war in China in 1900–1901 A.D., and a brief history of China and Japan, customs and practices, Chinese religious beliefs, [their] well being, relations with other countries, information regarding military forces and states, and a complete description of famous temples, buildings etc., Boxer uprising, foreign occupation—so on and so forth, generally characteristic descriptions of all knowable and suitable subjects.”²

Singh’s trip occurred under unusual circumstances. He recalls their Calcutta send-off by a “General Leach” of Fort William whose parting words were: “Rajputs! The Indian government places great faith in sending you to China. In China, the ministers of world powers [foreign legations] are in great danger because of the rise of a new religious community known as the Boxers. You have been mobilized to free them. Carry out this mission enthusiastically on behalf of the government. And do it triumphantly. Your force was previously dispatched to China in 1858–59. So this is not a new undertaking for you. Our expectation is that you will be successful” (1).

Singh journeyed to China, in other words, as part of the British force that formed the eight-nation strong International Expedition organized to raise the siege of the foreign legations in Beijing in the summer of 1900. A military man of the Rajput warrior caste, he seems out of place among travel writers who, in Asia and Africa, have historically come from the ranks of “Compilers and Editors; Pilgrims, particularly Buddhist and Muslim; Warrior Princes; Conquerors; Captives and Slaves; Ambassadors and other Government Functionaries; Royal Visitors; Pirates and Sailors; and Scholars.” Nor does his book perfectly match their typical products: “pilgrimages, travel-based studies, autobiographies, literary essays and travel accounts.”³

Not that all travel writings can be lumped into a single category, even though they may feature—to use one characterization of this genre—“a discourse designed to describe and interpret for its readers a geographical area together with its natural attributes and its human

society and culture.”⁴ And they share in common a propensity to provide reflections “about movement, memory, place, and perspective.”⁵ Their modes of presentation, however, vary considerably because “narration is intermingled with description, exposition and even prescription . . . in very different proportions.”⁶

Another characteristic aspect of travel narratives—in recent centuries—is their autobiographical element. That is, they center on highlighting eyewitness observations that emphasize individual experiences and perspectives. In an earlier period, as studies of European travel literature (about which the most extensive research has been done) reveal, the focus was on the “word, not the image, the ear and the tongue, not the eye . . .” Furthermore, the traveler in earlier accounts was often a male aristocrat who was enjoined to view his journey as a way of “discoursing with the living and the dead—learning foreign languages, obtaining access to foreign courts, conversing gracefully with eminent men, assimilating classical texts appropriate to particular sites, and, not least, speaking eloquently upon his return.”⁷ Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, travel writing began privileging the eye, which was “believed to yield direct, unmediated, and personally verified experience.”⁸

Singh’s narrative follows this convention of travel writing: it stakes its claim to authenticity through its “full eyewitness account,” that is, it keys on telling it like it was in China during the Boxer Uprising and its aftermath, from his line of vision. While this perspective commits him to relating personal stories of his lived experiences on and off the battlefield, it also results in interpretations and reflections, the kind of first-hand observations that often make travel accounts compelling reading and well calibrated to induce vicarious pleasure. As a recent volume on travel writing put it, “it is travellers’ eccentricities and extravagances—in the literal [and, I would add metaphorical] wanderings off—which have attracted many readers to the genre of travel writing.”⁹

Singh’s book is additionally fascinating and significant because of its subaltern perspective. It represents one of the very few first-hand public records left by Indian soldiers who comprised the overwhelming majority of the British force in the International Expedition—and in so many other imperial ventures undertaken in other venues before and after 1900—or by any of the other colonized peoples who fought for their colonial masters.

Written entirely in literate Hindi, except for a few lines here and there in English, *Thirteen Months* is clearly intended for a vernacular reading public and not a British colonial audience. Nor does it appear to target the urban-based, upper caste, and English-educated Indian middle classes who were just beginning to read and write

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travel accounts. It sets its sights on those interested in learning about warfare and in the wider world beyond India.

Far different in perspective is the huge corpus of writings in English generated by Western journalists, diplomats, military officers, missionaries, and expatriates in China who sought to share their experiences of the dramatic events associated with the Boxer Uprising with eager audiences at home, a reading public whose appetite for China news had been stoked by newspaper headlines fixated on Beijing in the summer and fall of 1900. There is even a text by Singh's commanding officer, H. B. Vaughan, who cobbled together his "Account of the Relief of the Peking Legations by an Officer of the British Contingent" into a book published as *St. George and the Chinese Dragon* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1902; reissued in 2000, presumably to commemorate the Boxer centennial).

Most of these works, as has rightly been said about Western travel writing on the colonized and semi-colonized world, are deeply complicit in colonial subject formation and imperialism. They are rooted in "Eurocentrism [which] in its many national and historical guises often conditioned Western writers to emphasize the strange 'otherness' of the places they visited." They can be read, to continue in this scholar's words, "as an unconscious projection of native values onto other cultures, an exporting of repressed anxieties, or as a fantasy of the exotic. In attempting to come to terms with the difference of foreign places, these often reveal themselves to be mirrors of the writer's own desires and illusions."¹⁰

By contrast, *Thirteen Months* chronicles a journey to and across China by an Indian soldier whose mission was to wage war against that country, but whose experiences prompted him not to exoticize its otherness but instead to underscore its shared humanity with his own world. In fact, his sympathetic portrayal of China and the Chinese reverses and echoes the fabled seventh-century Tang dynasty pilgrim Xuanzang's favorable outlook towards the India he encountered under very different circumstances and in a very different era. Separated by over twelve centuries, their journeys—not their actual circumstances but their textualized renditions—invite comparisons, even though Singh does not make that point. He is keenly aware, though, that the famous Chinese pilgrim had helped forge ties between the two countries and advance the spread of Buddhism in China, thus further consolidating their shared Buddhist heritage (202–3). Perhaps if Singh had explicitly conceived of travelers as cultural intermediaries, he might have made more of his own extraordinary journey, and even more of its value as a text. As far as I know, there are no other China travel accounts in the vernacular written prior to the publication of Singh's book.¹¹

Completed after his return to India, this travel account appears to be a reconstruction of his experiences rather than a narrative written in the heat of the battle. He does not divulge how he managed to preserve his experiences. Perhaps, as is the case with many Western travel writings, his work, too, was based on diaries, journals, and letters he had written while in transit.¹²

The author also capitalized on other sources of information—eyewitness testimonies alone can rarely ever carry the full weight of travel tales. "Travel knowledge," as one member of that guild has noted, "comes from a mixture of firsthand observation, reflection, and a little bit of research."¹³ It is that extra "bit" that enables Singh to expound upon "knowable and suitable subjects," to furnish a level of details about China's history, political and social systems, and religions that surpass anything he could have derived only from what he had seen, done, or heard in the line of duty.

The few lines of English that he periodically parades in his text provide leads to his research. At times, he identifies his sources; on other occasions, he does not, but they are traceable. Two authors that he obviously relied on because he cites them—and understandably so, given their currency in his heyday—are Sir Robert Hart, the Inspector General of the Imperial Maritime Customs in China, whose writings first appeared as articles and were later reissued as a book entitled "*These From the Land of Sinim*": *Essays on the Chinese Question* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1901), and Neville P. Edwards, who wrote *The Story of China, with Description of the Events Relating to the Present Struggle* (London: Hutchinson, 1900).¹⁴ For Japan, one of his main unidentified sources is the much republished book by Henry Norman, *The People and Politics of the Far East. Travels and Studies in the British, French, Spanish and Portuguese Colonies, Siberia, China, Japan, Korea, Siam and Malaya* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895; another edition, 1901). Rudyard Kipling—his widely known and recited verses—occasionally grace the text, but always without attribution.

Singh's familiarity with Western travel writings is less unusual than it seems because that genre was widely read towards the end of the nineteenth century. Travel accounts also proliferated as authors stepped up to cater to the growing audience for such works. Nor is it surprising that he does not allude to indigenous travel literature whose products were few and far between.

The seeming neglect of this literature does not mean that Singh was not familiar with vernacular travel texts. As a literate man from the Indo-Islamic city of Lucknow, he must have known about Hindu and Muslim pilgrimage accounts that were in circulation in print or manuscript form, many of which predated the colonial era. He may also have encountered pilgrimage stories through conversations or in oral traditions communicated via family members who had undertaken such journeys, as was the practice among many Hindus.¹⁵ Not that any of these accounts—written or oral—would have served him well in writing up his own odyssey. As a preliminary study of Hindu pilgrimage texts suggests, these were "in essence a diary-like account in prose of a journey undertaken . . . to a number of [religious] places in northern India."¹⁶ Geography and faith dominate these remembrances; largely absent are conspicuous stirrings of individual perspectives.

Travel was, in other words, very much part of his religious imagination, as it was and is for many peoples and cultures. And

with religion such a constant presence in his text, it is not surprising that many of his reflections address, implicitly or explicitly, travel experiences. For instance, all his examples illustrating India's status as a great civilization highlight this linkage, from his remarks about the "Aryan" (Indo-European) settlers to his praise of their sacred texts, the Vedas, to his allusions to the great epic, the *Ramayana*. What they have in common is that they speak to the historical or remembered movements of the so-called Aryan peoples.

While travel was part of the literary and religious imagination of South Asia, it may not have loomed as large as it did in other traditions, specifically those of the West. According to one scholar, in Western literature "major genres from the epic to the novel have been constructed around odysseys, pilgrimages, crusades, exiles, explorations, picaresque adventures, Grand Tours, quests, and conquests."¹⁷ Although said to be of less importance in China than in the West, there, too, travel became a significant part of the literary imagination, so much so that travel writing, "rare for the first two-thirds of Chinese literary history," became by "the later dynasties . . . [a genre] that just about every writer of note tried his hand at travel accounts or travel diaries."¹⁸ A similar assertion cannot be made for South Asia, even though its travel literature has yet to be inventoried and studied systematically. Nevertheless, Singh's work stands out in a literary landscape that is largely bereft of vernacular accounts recounting travel experiences abroad in other parts of Asia in the precolonial or colonial periods.

More than half of Singh's book dwells on his thirteen months in China sequentially, starting with the voyage out from Calcutta to the mid-July landing on Chinese soil in Dagu, from where he and his regiment marched inland to Tianjin, a city retaken just a few days prior to their arrival, and then continuing on with their advance into Beijing in early August that culminated in its takeover by the International Expedition in mid-August. It also focuses on the foreign occupation of Beijing, which entailed its division into separate spheres controlled by different powers, and the clashes that ensued in and around the city with Boxer remnants and supporters.

Singh's "war travel" account paints a different picture of the "China war" than has been portrayed in most Western contemporary works. He depicts the Boxers in much more favorable colors, even as he highlights their religious and military shortcomings. And every step of the way in the campaign that resulted in the takeover of Beijing, he recounts incident after incident of cruelty and barbarism perpetrated by the soldiers of the "world powers" against the local population. He also has much to say about the looting of China by everyone, including his own comrades.¹⁹

The author's narration of day-by-day events and experiences are often punctuated by his "wanderings off" into "interpretations and reflections." One set of ruminations converge on Japan, about which the author has nothing but high praise. He raves about the bravery and professionalism of its soldiers, who he had personally observed in action and about whose earlier campaigns he had heard equally glowing evaluations.

In his view, Japan's prowess grew out of a particular historical context, which had to be studied in order to comprehend its rising military might. Deploying a metaphor that he uses often to distinguish between and among Asian countries, he characterizes Japan as a country that had recently emerged from behind closed doors to become a world power. It did so as a result of the collective determi-

nation of its leaders, big and small, to unite under one ruler and to sacrifice their own positions for the greater good of the nation. He also commends its commitment to its own culture, even as it sought to gain knowledge from and about the rest of the world, including by sending emissaries overseas to gather new information, and its drive to become economically self-sufficient through the production and export of such commodities as silk, umbrellas, and lamps (27–37).

By contrast, he is critical of China, but always in a voice suffused with concern and regret. Its main shortcoming was that it was not Japan; it lacked precisely those advantages that the latter had gained for itself. Therefore, its future looked bleak, it seemed to be on the eve of destruction. Japan, moreover, had exposed its weaknesses—presumably he means that Japan, much to the surprise of the rest of the world, had crushed its giant neighbor in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95. He makes this judgment almost at the beginning of his narrative, when he is remembering his voyage out to China. Curiously, in the same breath, he mentions that while he was on the high seas en route to Tianjin, he dreamt that he was in Japan where the Emperor had opened up the country in the wake of its confrontation with the United States.

Japan was a country that Singh held in high regard. Among its many achievements that he lauded—and, by extension, that he found wanting in China and India—was its success in gaining national unity. In his understanding, this had been attained through selflessness, as rival kings willingly and selflessly subordinated their individual interests to the larger national ideal. He also praised its thirst for new knowledge, which led it to seek out what the rest of the world had to offer. And what he especially appreciated about this drive was the fact that it always insisted on translating foreign texts into Japanese so that its people would have access to the new information in their own language. Thus, Japan reaffirmed its commitment to its own language and traditions. Furthermore—and this was another quality that he prized—the country was self-reliant. It gained self-sufficiency; it not only freed itself from a dependency on foreign commodities, but also became an exporter of various products, including silk, umbrellas, lamps, tea, scissors, and earthenwares (36–7).

By contrast, China was on a different trajectory. Again and again, he speaks of the calamity that was about to befall it. Returned soldier though he was and from a war in which he had participated in devastating the country, he had no qualms about articulating the conflicted feelings that he felt about his experiences. These sentiments surface fully towards the close of the book where he examines "Chin aur Hind" (China and India), an assessment of the two countries in relation to, and in comparison with, one another. Part of the discussion in this section takes up the question of why China was on the brink of losing its independence whereas Japan was thriving. For answers, he recalls a conversation that he reportedly had with a "padri sahib" or missionary. Here, as elsewhere in the text, he invokes a 'third party' to speak about what he seemingly did not feel comfortable expressing overtly.

According to his missionary interlocutor, there were seven reasons why China, which had been independent for thousands of years, had not prospered. Its first impediment was its intellectual conceit—it sat frog-like at the bottom of a well and thought that its narrow slice of the world was all that was worth knowing. Note the contrast here to his glowing portrayal of Japan because of its remarkable receptivity to new and foreign ideas. Second, its bureaucracy was

corrupt and therefore unable to advance the country economically. Overpopulation was a third obstacle. A fourth barrier was its wasteful spending on weddings and other rituals. Female illiteracy was a fifth encumbrance. Sixth was opium addiction, which exhausted the country's resources. The seventh and final obstacle to its development was its belief in a false religion, by which he meant the faith propagated by the Boxers (313–14).

That Singh discusses China's shortcomings in conjunction with India is deliberate: China is a stand-in for India. By highlighting its missteps, he is not only able to register his concern about its impending doom but also to draw parallels to the mistakes that he believed his own country had made in an earlier era, and all this without having to openly condemn colonial rule. He is clearly concerned that China would meet the same fate that had befallen India, namely, end up as a colony of an alien power. Its weaknesses, too, arose from the same impediments that had closed off India to change. Change was necessary to overcome these obstacles, and his notion of change was one that seemed in keeping with the ideals of a 'purified' Hinduism associated with the Arya Samaj, the socio-religious reform movement that rejected many of the rituals and practices of contemporary Hinduism, including "polytheism, idolatry, the role of Brahman priests, pilgrimages . . . and the ban on widow remarriage."²⁰

Japan serves as his foil country. Its emergence as a major power stood in stark contrast to the historical trajectory that India had followed in an earlier time period, and that China now seemed on the verge of emulating. India had succumbed to British rule as a result of the path it had taken, and now China was about to follow suit. Thus, neither country had become what Japan had become—a world power.

Singh's subaltern view of China and, by extension, India, on the one hand, and his favorable impression of Japan, on the other hand, are thus closely interrelated. The thirteen months in China had clearly awakened new sensations in him, sentiments that enabled him to view that country and its people more sympathetically than he would have had otherwise as a soldier engaged in a tour of duty, as well as to envision his own country in a different light. Like many travelers, he, too, was affected by "the disturbances of travel" and "the experience of geographic displacement," which can lead "writers [as it did Singh] to renegotiate the cultural verities of 'home'" and "destabilize the boundaries of national, racial, gender and class affiliation . . ."²²

Gadhadar Singh's book, a war-related travel story, is largely a tale of woe, especially when the subject is China, and, by extension, India. It concludes, though, by sounding at least one hopeful note. In lamenting what he thought was the imminent takeover of China, in his estimation by the British Empire, he finds one silver lining: it would lead to the creation of a unified "Hindu Chinese country," a "Chindia," to use today's parlance, a combination of two of the greatest civilizations on earth, great not only because of their individual accomplishments in the past but also because of their shared Buddhist religious heritage and their shared identity as Asians. And this new imagined community that he pins some hope in would be a giant among the nations of the world! ■

NOTES

1. For details of this argument, see my, "(A) Subaltern(s) Boxers: An Indian Soldier's Account of China and the World in 1900–1," in *The Boxers, China and the World*, eds. Robert Bickers and R. G. Tiedemann, forthcoming.
2. Thakur Gadhadar Singh, *Chin meh Terah Mas* (Lucknow: Thakur Gadhadar Singh, 1902). All page numbers in the body of the text are to this book.

3. Tabish Khair, "Introduction," in *Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing*, eds. Tabish Khair, Justin D. Edwards, Martin Leer, and Hanna Ziadeh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 21.
4. Roy Bridges, "Exploration and Travel Outside Europe (1720–1914)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 53.
5. Michele Morano in "Roundtable: Travel in Nonfiction," *Fourth Genre* 7, 2 (2005).
6. Barbara Korte, *English Travel Writing: From Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 9. Many of the elements present in travel accounts show up in other forms of writing as well. No wonder some scholars have underscored the links between travel writing and fiction, connections that have also been extended to various forms of non-fiction, ranging from guidebooks to other kinds of instructive texts.
7. Carol Traynor Williams, "Introduction," in *Travel Culture: Essays on What Makes Us Go*, ed. Williams (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000), 4–5.
8. *Ibid.*, 7.
9. Hulme and Youngs, "Introduction," *Cambridge Travel Writing*, 5.
10. Richard E. Strassberg, *Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writing from Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1. See also Mary L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).
11. For another Indian account of the Boxers and China in this period but from a different perspective, see S. H. and L. I. Rudolph with M. S. Kanota, *Reversing the Gaze: Amar Singh's Diary, A Colonial Subject's Narrative of Imperial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).
12. Joshua A. Fogel, *The Literature of Travel in the Japanese Rediscovery of China, 1862–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 8.
13. Morano.
14. Hart viewed the Boxers as ardent patriots who were angered by Western high handedness and insensitivity.
15. Some Hindus, such as those belonging to the emerging reform movement known as the Arya Samaj, did not encourage its followers to undertake pilgrimages. See below, note 20.
16. Kumkum Chatterjee, "Discovering India: Travel, History and Identity in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century India," in *Invoking the Past: the Uses of History in South Asia*, ed. Daud Ali (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 199–200. In the late nineteenth century, travel accounts began to reveal more of the authors' sensibilities. Such works emerged in part among middle class Western-educated Indians who conceived of "travels as journeys that had been explicitly or implicitly undertaken for the purpose of seeing and experiencing a historical-national entity called India."
17. Strassberg, 1.
18. *Ibid.*, xix.
19. For additional details on his China experiences and impressions, see my "Subaltern Boxers."
20. Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India, The New Cambridge History of India, III, 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 96.
21. Amanda Gilroy, "Introduction," in *Romantic Geographies: Discourses of Travel 1775–1844*, ed. Gilroy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 1.

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