

“Go and Teach All Nations”: A British Missionary’s Narrative on China in the 1840s

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Abstract

Texts in the genre of travel writing provide description and analysis of the author’s journeys and destinations. A variety of foci exists among texts in the genre, including accounts of explorations, personal narratives, or military memoirs. This article discusses Rev. George Smith’s *A Narrative of an Exploratory Visit to Each of the Consular Cities of China, and to the Islands of Hong Kong and Chusan, Church Missionary Society, In the Years 1844, 1845, 1846* as an example of a missionary narrative, a sub-genre of travel writing, embodying features of British imperial ideology.

Smith’s *Narrative* contributed to the discursive formation of China in the minds of people at the imperial center of London and probably other centers. His account and commentary of his travels to China in the early years of Hong Kong’s colonial history helped to foster the imperial meaning-making process. Written in a time of stable classifications of knowledge gleaned from the British imperial project, Smith’s travel writing affirms, consolidates, and incrementally expands features of the British imperialist ideology. Building on existing structures and employing the rhetorical and discursive strategy of binary oppositions, Smith’s *Narrative* depicted China as an inferior culture and Britain as superior to others and with a divine mission. Whereas China was dark and pagan, British civilization was enlightened and Christian. A hierarchy emerges where Britain is positioned above all others in terms of culture, religion, medicine, military technology, and law.

Keywords: travel writing, missionary narratives, China, British imperialism, ideology

Travel writing depicts and explains the journeys and destinations of an author. Texts in this literary genre include accounts of explorations, personal narratives, self-reflection, historical accounts of the places visited, missionary or military accounts, and comparisons with epic quests. Youngs (2013, p. 57) asserts that missionary writing in particular “may be seen as another subgenre of travel writing” and that the nineteenth century was “the age of the missionary narrative.” The production of these missionaries’ “profoundly hybrid genres” (Johnston, 2003, p. 32) presented a unique contribution to what Richards calls “the imperial archive” (1993, p. 7), a kind of complete “epistemological complex for representing a comprehensive knowledge within the domain of Empire” (ibid, p. 14). The “evangelical Protestant revival in Britain in the late eighteenth century” (ibid, p. 14) was articulated in the establishment of missionary societies like the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the London Missionary Society (LMS), founded in 1799 and 1795 respectively (Youngs, 2013, p. 57), making possible this missionary activity and literary production and coinciding with the beginning of what Bayly (1998, p. 54) recounts as “the second British Empire of the period 1783–1869”. When Rev. George Smith travelled to China in the 1840s, it was a period of ascendancy for the second British Empire. In 36 chapters and more than 500 pages, Smith’s *A Narrative of an Exploratory Visit to Each of the Consular Cities of China, and to the Islands of Hong Kong and Chusan, Church Missionary Society, In the Years 1844, 1845, 1846* (1847; hereafter *Narrative*; unattributed page numbers refer to this work) synthesized imperialist travel writing and missionary narrative with discourse found in military memoirs. The high degree of integration of imperialist and missionary purposes expressed in his writing is evident, for example, when he states that

empire is closely connected with the diffusion of evangelical truth, a British Missionary feels jealous for the faithfulness of his country to her high vocation, and ‘rejoices with trembling’¹ at the extension of the colonial empire. (P. 506)

In addition, throughout his *Narrative* Smith repeats “Go and teach all nations,”² a New Testament verse which in his writing fuses the religious and imperialist impulses. The military capability which underpinned the British imperial project is also found in Smith, such as in his boast of British military prowess throughout his *Narrative* and in his explicitly military metaphor for missionary work: “The warfare must be carried into the enemy’s country. The battle of Christianity must be fought on the soil of China itself” (p. 521).

¹ Smith borrows this phrase from the Old Testament; see Psalms, 2:11.

² Smith borrows this phrase from the New Testament; see the Gospel of Matthew, 28:19

Smith's book is of particular interest for a couple of reasons. As his voyage covered the years immediately after the establishment of Hong Kong as a British Colony and the period when the so-called treaty ports on the China coast were first opened to European Powers, it is one of the earliest examples of this kind of travel writing in the colonial period of Hong Kong. It is also of interest as it was available as a template for subsequent travel writing. The enduring influence of some of its discourse may even prove to be discernable in the production of some of the travel guides for the 57 million persons UNWTO (2014) estimates visited China last year. And with its provision of empirical detail to a reading audience in want of such detail for this phase of the unfolding British imperial project, Smith's *Narrative* can be seen as serving a function which Smethurst (2009, p. 7) describes as existing "between the world of experience and accumulated knowledge—between the empirical and imperial." In turn, this 'accumulated knowledge' found in Smith's work and others constituted what Richards calls the 'imperial archive', a sort of "paper empire" (1993, p. 4), exhibiting Victorian confidence "that knowledge could be controlled and controlling" (ibid, p. 7). The frequent and straightforward classifications of that newly created knowledge as binary opposites in Smith's writing from this second wave of British Empire were consonant with what Richards (1993) says were attempts in the first half of the nineteenth century to neatly order information in taxonomies. By the second half of the nineteenth century, ordering new knowledge gleaned from the far reaches of the empire into taxonomies became recognized as unfeasible, and "by century's end 'classified' had come to mean knowledge placed under the special jurisdiction of the state" (ibid, p. 6). Straightforward comparisons by a writer such as Smith in the first decades of the nineteenth century became less tenable a few decades later; as Johnston notes, "[u]nfortunately for the missionaries, attitudes towards evangelising colonized people also changed during the nineteenth century", pointing to how the 1857 Indian Mutiny and 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion complicated earlier assumptions about the feasibility of conversion (2003, p. 18).

As Smith embarked on his travels, the first Opium War³ had just concluded and parts of China lay open to exploitation in a new chapter of British empire. Osterhammel (1998) notes the gradual extension of that empire through unequal treaties with China, while Porter points out that the "establishment of 'treaty ports' allowed missions for the first time to operate in China" (1998, p. 235). Smith appears to be one of the first British missionaries to have traveled to China after the first of the Opium Wars, visiting several treaty ports as well as the new British colony of Hong Kong, where he eventually would become the first Anglican bishop (Headland,

³ The first of the Opium Wars took place from 1839 to 1842 (Hanes & Sanello, 2002, p. xi).

1894). As missionary discourse it did not just reflect what lay before the eyes of the writer; as Hevia (1997, p. 114) explains, “missionary discursive practices” in particular “did shape reality”, providing readers with order and meaning. Smethurst (2009, p. 2), in summarizing Clark, Saïd and Pratt, similarly asserts that “[t]ravel writing was systematically involved in the imperial meaning-making process”; Smith’s travel writing can be viewed in this way and as contributing to the ‘imperial archive’. These discursive practices were rooted in British imperial ideology, which Armitage shows was characterized by a system of contrasts, in particular a “common Protestantism” depending upon a “common anti-Catholicism” (2000, p. 66).

Smith embodied elements of that British imperial ideology throughout his *Narrative*, and his writing can be seen against a backdrop of historical development of travel writing on China. Writing in highly descriptive prose, departing into commentary on the people he encountered, he was influenced by his own British upbringing, his Oxford education (Headlands, 1894), his role as an Anglican cleric, and his anticipation of the readership for his writing. While Osterhammel (1998) concludes that the missionaries failed as a whole in their venture in China in part due to cultural insensitivities, Ryan (2003) explains that some of the cultural arrogance was offset by a genuine interest in local people. Thomas goes a step further, implying that setting up contrasts was essential to the work of missionaries, quoting John Francis Goldie, who headed the Methodist mission in the Solomon Islands in the early twentieth century: “mission discourse must simultaneously emphasize savagery and signal the essential humanity and more positive features, of the islanders to be evangelized” (1994, p. 128). Such views can be seen existing in a complex if not contradictory manner in Smith’s travel writing. While Smith’s reliance on plain contrasts to classify his experiences is extensive, spaces of ambiguity do occur, as when discussing the opium trade or the industriousness of inhabitants of Fujian province. Complexity in travel writing on China grew to be so pronounced that by the time the quasi-botanist Fortune wrote of his travels a decade or two after Smith, China had become “an unstable category” (Mathers, 2010, p. 67); this was indicative of an emerging problem in categorizing knowledge, and an unhinging from previous successes at stabilizing aspects of the ‘paper empire’ through classification. This historical development from simple to complex has been charted by Sample (2008), who observes how the travel writer Anderson in the decades before Smith produced mainly descriptive writing. That style gave way to more complex writing, as seen in Barrow’s journal on his China travels, which often contained comparisons and critiques as well as “lengthy, scholarly digressions in the customs and manners of the Chinese” (Sample, 2008, p. 37). Campbell (2002) also notes discourse of an anthropological nature in much travel writing, with Ryan (2003) adding that travel writing was sometimes ethnographic in nature. While Johnston (2003, p. 32) also notes the incorporation of

“ethnography, linguistics, and geographical descriptions and surveys,” she urges a reading that goes beyond binary opposites and takes into account gender, class and mutual imbrication—i.e., the complex enactment of imperial philosophies and how that experience “profoundly altered imperial theories and policies” (ibid, p. 3).

As one of the first British clerics visiting China from Britain in the first decades of the nineteenth century, Smith in his writing presents us with discursive digressions of an anthropological or ethnographic nature, which helps to structure a hierarchic system of differentiations while expressing features of the British imperial ideology. His system suggests Orientalism, which Saïd defines as “a Western Style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1979, p. 3). The discourse which Orientalism produced, such as travel writing, “was garnered and returned often haphazardly, to imperial centres, where it was refined, systemized, and used to inform further exploration and discovery” (Smethurst, 2009, p. 1). The audience for Smith’s book back in the imperial center London, the place of its publication, would have been influenced by class, gender education and other factors (Tsao, 2008), just as Smith’s own perspective, like other travel writers, would have been “shaped by the cultural context” (Bassnett, 2003, p. xi) from the which he arose. But as Saïd (1979, p. 336) wryly observed: “None of the Orientalists I write about seems ever to have intended an Oriental as a reader. The discourse of Orientalism, its internal consistency, and its rigorous procedures were all designed for readers and consumers in the metropolitan West.”

The founding membership in 1799 of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), Johnston notes, was largely middle class, with “merchants, bankers and brokers” (2003, p. 16) comprising a third of its membership. CMS was Smith’s primary readership for his *Narrative*; these kinds of societies “relied heavily upon donations from British congregations” (Johnston, 2003, p. 15) and consequently competition for funds for their work was an additional challenge faced by missionaries. One might not only conclude that Smith was successful in obtaining funding for his journey prior to departure,⁴ but infer as well that the publication of the *Narrative* of that journey did no harm to his career since he was consecrated as Bishop in 1849 and took up his new post in 1850 in Hong Kong (Headland, 1894).

A system of contrasts is prevalent throughout Smith’s *Narrative*. The anti-Catholicism which Armitage (2002) says fostered a unifying British identity by the eighteenth century is also evident in Smith’s *Narrative* discourse. Smith used the existing framework of anti-Catholicism in reproducing and then expanding that discourse for a new audience and a new

⁴ His journey was financed through a £6,000 gift to CMS (Smith, 1847, p. ii).

context. In referring to Catholic laymen and Catholic clergy in his travel writing, for example, he is pejorative in his choice of words and phrases. Smith uses phrases such as “a Popish priesthood, intimately connected with a local government” (p. 69) when referring to Catholic priests in Macao. Catholic laymen, too, are not Christians but members of “Popish flocks” (p. 141). Catholic priests who in past centuries had liberty to preach the Gospel in China are referred to as “Romanists, [who] in former ages, not only had access to the country but also enjoyed a fair measure of toleration in their missionary work” (p. 144), though they had now become diminished: in his present day, he observes the “unpopularity of the Romanist Missionaries” (p. 158). These Papists engage in something like covert espionage: “The Romish bishop was now absent from Shanghai on a secret mission to Peking” (p. 156), and the “Popery is already sending its agents with redoubled activity” (p. 527).⁵ However, Rev. Smith sees through them and communicates that to his audience: “Romanish Missionaries in China belie the pretensions, and expose the theory, of a visible unity of the universal church centring in a sovereign Pontiff enthroned on the Seven Hills” (p. 465).

The formation of the British imperial identity as Protestant Christian and superior to inferior religions is also evident in Smith’s reference to a Muslim as “Mahamodean” (p. 176), a term which Saïd finds especially “insulting” (1979, p. 66). At one point in his travels, Smith and his companions come upon another Muslim. The condescension in tone is quite clear: “We discovered a Mahomedan.... His bold features, prominent nose, and restless eye, confirmed the fact of the distinct origin of this descendant of Ishmael. I always felt a sympathy with the poor dispersed disciples of Islam in this pagan wild” (pp. 213–4). Like the ‘Papists’, the warning must go out to Rev. Smith’s readers as well about ‘Mahomedans’ and the competitive inroads which have been made in the China religion market. While the Romanists are engaged in secret activities to expand their activities in China, Muslims have been expanding theirs for hundreds of years: “The imposter of Mecca also, for 600 years, has had his numerous followers scattered over the neighbouring islands, and on the forbidden soil of China itself” (pp. 527–8).

Besides constructing and then denigrating both Catholicism and Islam as alien others, Smith also sets his discursive sights on Buddhism. In referring to the prayers of Buddhist priests in Canton, he writes of the “mystical and unintelligible sounds addressed to Budh” (p. 32). The logic and clarity of the Occident is lacking in those prayers, and instead there exists a “confused

⁵ Whether or not Smith’s concern with espionage among missionaries was influenced by his own reading of travel writing would be interesting to speculate on: Mary Baine Campbell, for example, has remarked in *The Witness and the other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* that “many missionaries were military spies” (quoted in Youngs, 2013, p. 91).

din and uproar” and “pandemonium” (p. 2). Both Buddhist clergy and laity, the narrator makes clear, are inferior: the priests “lead an idle and sauntering life” (p. 36) in the south of China, while further north “[t]he generality of the priests were men of fierce and unprepossessing aspect” (p. 117). Buddhist nuns are not reported to be much better: “The nuns were generally women of coarse manners and unprepossessing appearance” (p. 215). Unlike the excellence of Christian doctrine espoused by Smith and company, in Buddhism “[t]he more devout are able to revel in the imaginary paradise of absorption, or, in the words of, annihilation. This is the grand hope of Buddhism [*sic*]” (p. 185).

Smith equates the inferior religion of Buddhism with that other inferior religion he has been describing throughout his travels in China, i.e., Catholicism. He writes: “An honest Romanist priest must often be stumbled at the similarity between the religious forms of Popery and those of Buddhism” (p. 205). Later, he urges his readers to consider “[t]he mutual affinities which exist between the various systems of error, and to exclaim ‘How faithful a counterpart this to Popery!’” (p. 313). But in the battle for souls in China, Rev. Smith warns these readers, “Such a remarkable similarity of details ... may facilitate a transition from Buddhism to Popery” (p. 206).

Finally, Smith extends his religious stereotyping to Parsees and Jews, managing to stereotype Parsees in China with typecasts of Jews in Europe. Alluding to the commercial success of Parsees, he writes that Parsees in China have the same reputation which Jewish people have in Western countries (p. 25).

Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism become surrogates against which Smith establishes the supremacy of British Protestantism in his book. In a passage in which he expounds on the superiority of Christianity to Buddhism, but which perhaps could be applied to any of the other religions discussed so far, he exclaims “How glorious, in the contrast with such meagre hopes, are the substantial realities which the Gospel reveals!” (p. 185). Like an angel appearing to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus in a nearby manger, Smith and his companions have come to China as “Heralds from the Church of England” (p. 2). He likens himself and his companions at one point to the Apostles: “Fewer than the original Apostles, and, like them in an upper room” (p. 38).

For Smith, the superiority of Christianity begins with Christ but extends to other areas, including “the medical skills of Christendom” (p. 23). China is set up as a surrogate against which Smith articulates the superiority of Christendom, headed by Britain. He does allude to a few positive phenomena in China, such as the “industrious population” (p. 13), the “hardy and enterprising race of Fokeen province” (p. 90), and an observation that in Canton, the “better

classes are intelligent, friendly and enquiring” (p. 102). Beyond such exceptions, the China he depicts and explains is subordinate to Britain.

Smith records his impressions of China as he journeys from the new British colony of Hong Kong to Canton and then north to Amoy, Shanghai, Ningpo, and other points. Beginning in Canton, he says that the Chinese are a “heathen people” (p. 2) under the “corrupt venality and cowardice of the Mandarins” (p. 5). The scenery is “monotonous” and filled with “strange scenes” (p. 3), “noisy discharges” and “noisy clamors” (p. 4). “Idle, reckless vagabonds ... infest” (p. 5) some areas like vermin, and in other places Europeans are likely to encounter an “infuriated mob” (p. 6). This is an area of “popular violence, so long encouraged against foreigners” (p. 19). The “idolatrous empire of China” (p. 38) is filled with “fraud and superstition” and is under the “baneful spell of paganism” (p. 49). In this place, “the uneducated are manifestly idolators”, and religious beliefs are “strange vagaries which falsehood, priestcraft, mysticism and fear have combined” (p. 63). Consequently, a “laxity of morals” (p. 58) persists, so “female infanticide” (p. 60) and “opium smoking” (p. 82) are rampant.

At times Smith appears to be complimentary towards aspects of Chinese culture, only to quickly criticize and denigrate them in relation to his own. For example, he refers to “the absurdities of Chinese principles of creation” (p. 112) then simultaneously compliments and degrades Chinese accomplishment: “the ingenuity of the Chinese, in turning to the best account their limited knowledge of the physical sciences” (p. 113). He laments that “amid the poverty of the physical sciences it is evident that a large amount of talent is wasted in the metaphysical system of the Chinese ... destitute of reality and truth” (p. 114). He judges that a scientific instrument he is examining “would be well worthy a nation more advanced in civilization” (p. 112). A similar occurrence of seeming to compliment while actually criticizing and undermining is evident when he refers to the “stern majesty of Chinese law” and its “severity of justice” (p. 115).

Smith does not confirm the infallibility of the British, however, merely their superiority. For example, while “[t]he temporary annexation of Chusan to the empire of Britain as a rare and precious opportunity for an exhibition of the arts and civilization of the west” (p. 271) is noted, he also notes that “[t]he English had always been overbearing towards [Chinese] countrymen, and until they showed a kind spirit towards them, Christianity would never be respected” (p. 53). While “the inhabitants of Foo-chow [are] more ignorant of the real power and superiority of foreigners than the inhabitants of the other consular cities of China” (p. 323), he also notes “British companions in arms, seemed to delight in the idea of their own superiority to the Chinese” (p. 203). In travelling north, Rev. Smith discovers that “[o]ur own vessel, though not engaged in the opium-traffic, carried 750 chests of opium as part of her freight” (p.

130); however, “our Government [must] show the example of sacrificing the gains of the opium revenue on the altar of Christianity” (p. 132). In reporting about an incident where the Empire’s troops behaved in a questionable way in China, Smith points out that they were Indian troops, not British (p. 380).

In addition to such oppositions, Smith distinguishes the culture of southern China from the culture of coastal communities to the north. For example, he writes: “I could not fail to contrast the respect and immunity from annoyance here ceded to foreigners, with the arrogant pride still predominant among the Canton populace in the south” (p. 135). In referring to Shanghai, he records a similar sentiment: “The character of the population is peaceable and industrious. They are friendly and respectful to foreigners though a mercenary and avaricious spirit seems likely to infect them in their dealings with Europeans” (p. 137). In general, he articulates the “friendly and peaceable demeanour of the people in the more northerly cities and the arrogant turbulence of spirit which still forms the distinguishing characteristics of the Canton mob” (p. 495). His most potent criticism is reserved for the new colony Hong Kong, however, where “the lowest dregs of native society flock to the British Settlement in the hope of gain or plunder” (p. 508).

Conclusion

As Smith was one of the first travel writers after the treaty ports were opened and Hong Kong was established as a British colony, his audience would have been eager to read of his travels. Indeed, the Church Missionary Society financed his trip (Headland, 1894) and his book was published in London. His often urbane tone when reporting facts and empirical observations, and his digressions on customs and culture, would have burnished his credibility on matters relating to China for his voracious readers. Working within an ideology of religion and empire, Smith produced a travel text which reinforced and reproduced British imperial ideology in the context of a missionary-exploration journey to China. The anti-Catholic sentiment he authoritatively expressed was a fundamental part of British imperialist ideology as it had evolved by the second British Empire. The anti-Catholicism within his *Narrative* would serve to reinforce and help reproduce existing attitudes rather than break new ground. His reproduction of imperial ideology would have contributed to the reification of British identity for those readers back in the imperial center and have been probably, to use Armitage’s words, “vestigially reassuring” (2000, p. 198) for Smith and readers alike as they encountered persons with languages, religions, and customs differing to what they normally encountered in Britain at the time.

Furthermore, Smith’s incremental contribution to the imperial ideology and the epistemological complex of the imperial archive was in its application of that oppositional

formula to other religious groups. While Orientalism is associated with the area today referred to broadly as the Middle East, its rhetorical features were so influential that Smith adopted them for his surrogatization of peoples 'east of Suez': i.e., China. Through this surrogatization and assertion of binary oppositions a hierarchy emerges in his writing where Britain is positioned atop the world, superior in culture, religion, medicine, military technology, and law. The other Western cultures are also near the top, except for those elements of Western culture which are associated with 'Popism', which is accorded the same low rank as the erroneous Buddhism which Smith encountered in China. The culture of the Muslim Tartars is seen as having temporarily dominated Chinese culture, but as Islam is built on the words of the 'imposter', it was not able to sustain that position and now is as low as Chinese culture. Smith's reading audience at the imperial center must have gained a sense of their own culture as united in its modernity and its Protestantism, not by virtue of what they were, but by what they were not: neither Catholic, nor Buddhist, nor Muslim, not adherents to any of the other 'false' religions, and certainly not pagan Chinese.

Having asserted British superiority and having declared that China is a battlefield, the New Testament verse 'Go and teach all Nations' is deployed to justify the establishment of a kind of informal empire, i.e., a network of British Christian missions in China, whose work would be facilitated by the colonial infrastructure of the formal British Empire. While the missionary enterprise in China would ultimately fail, as noted earlier, the hope at the time would have been that these missions would provide the bases for the war against false religions on the periphery. Equally important, they could serve as frontline outposts of discourse formation, authoritative sources for constructing China in the imperial consciousness as the inferior and alien other, while synthesizing an imperial and religious discourse which would contribute to the reification, refinement, and dissemination of British identity as Protestant, civilized, and superior back at the imperial centers. Within a few decades, however, events in the colonies would complicate the missionaries' purpose and their relations with colonial administrators, requiring new ways of reading their literary output in order to see some of the emerging dynamics like gender, class, and especially mutual imbrication, but Smith's *Narrative* stands as an earlier work poised among the empirical, the imperial, the clerical, and the imaginative, effusing both zeal and clarity.

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