

Across China On Foot

Life in the Interior
and the
Reform Movement

by
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First Journey

From Shanghai up the lower Yangtze to Ichang

Chapter I

To Ichang, an everyday trip - Start from Shanghai, and the city's appearance - At Hankow - Meaning of the name - Trio of strategic and military points of the empire - Hankyang and Wu-ch'ang - Commercial and industrial future of Hankow - Getting our passports - Britishers in the city - The commercial Chinaman - The native city: some impressions - Clothing of the people - Cotton and wool - Indifference to comfort - Surprise at our daring project - At Ichang - British gunboat and early morning routine - Our vain quest for aid - Laying in stores and commissioning our boat - Ceremonies at starting gorges trip - Raising anchor, and our departure.

Let no one who has been so far as Ichang, a thousand miles from the sea, imagine that he has been into the interior of China.

It is quite an everyday trip. Modern steamers, with every modern convenience and luxury, probably as comfortable as any river steamers in the world, ply regularly in their two services between Shanghai and this port, at the foot of the Gorges.

The Whang-poo looked like the Thames, and the Shanghai Bund like the Embankment, when I embarked on board a Jap boat *en route* for Hankow, and thence to Ichang by a smaller steamer, on a dark, bitterly cold Saturday night, March 6th, 1909. I was to travel fifteen hundred miles up that greatest artery of China. The Yangtze surpasses in importance to the Celestial Empire what the Mississippi is to America, and yet even in China there are thousands of resident foreigners who know no more about this great river than the average Smithfield butcher. Ask ten men in Fleet Street or in Wall Street where Ichang is, and nine

will be unable to tell you. Yet it is a port of great importance, when one considers that the handling of China's vast river-borne trade has been opened to foreign trade and residence since the Chefoo Convention was signed in 1876, that Ichang is a city of forty thousand souls, and has a gross total of imports of nearly forty millions of taels.

Of Hankow, however, more is known. Here we landed after a four days' run, and, owing to the low water, had to wait five days before the shallower-bottomed steamer for the higher journey had come in. The city is made up of foreign concessions, as in other treaty ports, but away in the native quarter there is the real China, with her selfish rush, her squalidness and filth among the teeming thousands. There dwell together, literally side by side, but yet eternally apart, all the conflicting elements of the East and West which go to make up a city in the Far East, and particularly the China coast.

Hankow means literally Han Mouth, being situated at the juncture of the Han River and the Yangtze. Across the way, as I write, I can see Han-yang, with its iron works belching out black curls of smoke, where the arsenal turns out one hundred Mauser rifles daily. (This is but a fraction of the total work done.) It is, I believe, the only steel-rolling mill in China. Long before the foreigner set foot so far up the Yangtze, Hankow was a city of great importance — the Chinese used to call it the centre of the world. Ten years ago I should have been thirty days' hard travel from Peking; at the present moment I might pack my bag and be in Peking within thirty-six hours. Hankow, with Tientsin and Nanking, makes up the trio of principal strategic points of the Empire, the trio of centers also of greatest military activity. On the opposite bank of the river I can see Wu-ch'ang, the provincial capital, the seat of the Viceroyalty of two of the most turbulent and important provinces of the whole eighteen.

Hankow, Han-yang, and Wu-ch'ang have a population of something like two million people, and it is safe to prophesy that no other centre in the whole world has a greater commercial and

industrial future than Hankow.*

Here we registered as British subjects, and secured our Chinese passports, resembling naval ensigns more than anything else, for the four provinces of Hu-peh, Kwei-chow, Szech'wan, and Yün-nan. The Consul-General and his assistants helped us in many ways, disillusioning us of the many distorted reports which have got into print regarding the indifference shown to British travelers by their own consuls at these ports. We found the brethren at the Hankow Club a happy band, with every luxury around them for which hand and heart could wish; so that it were perhaps ludicrous to look upon them as exiles, men out in the outposts of Britain beyond the seas, building up the trade of the Empire. Yet such they undoubtedly were, most of them having a much better time than they would at home. There is not the roughing required in Hankow which is necessary in other parts of the empire, as in British East Africa and in the jungles of the Federated Malay States, for instance. Building the Empire where there is an abundance of the straw wherewith to make the bricks, is a matter of no difficulty.

And then the Chinaman is a good man to manage in trade, and in business dealings his word is his bond, generally speaking, although we do not forget that not long ago a branch in North China of the Hong-kong and Shanghai Bank was swindled seriously by a shroff who had done honest duty for a great number of years. It cannot, however, be said that such behavior is a common thing among the commercial class. My personal experience has been that John does what he says he will do, and for years he will go on doing that one thing; but it should not surprise you if one fine morning, with the infinite sagacity of his race, he ceases to do this when you are least expecting it — and he “does” you. Keep an eye on him, and the Chinese to be found in Hankow having dealings with Europeans in business is as good as the best of men.

* See Appendix D.

We wended our way one morning into the native city, and agreed that few inconveniences of the Celestial Empire make upon the western mind a more speedy impression than the entire absence of sanitation. In Hankow we were in mental suspense as to which was the filthier native city — Hankow or Shanghai. But we are probably like other travelers, who find each city visited worse than the last. Should there arise in their midst a man anxious to confer an everlasting blessing upon his fellow Chinese, no better work could he do than to institute a system approaching what to our Western mind is sanitation. We arrived, of course, in the winter, and, having seen it at a time when the sun could do but little in increasing the stench, we leave to the imagination what it would be in the summer, in a city which for heat is not excelled by Aden.* During the summer of 1908 no less than twenty-eight foreigners succumbed to cholera, and the native deaths were numberless.

The people were suffering very much from the cold, and it struck me as one of the unaccountable phenomena of their civilization that in their ingenuity in using the gifts of Nature they have never learned to weave wool, and to employ it in clothing — that is, in a general sense. There are a few exceptions in the empire. The nation is almost entirely dependent upon cotton for clothing, which in winter is padded with a cheap wadding to an abnormal thickness. The common people wear no underclothing whatever. When they sleep they strip to the skin, and wrap themselves in a single wadded blanket, sleeping the sleep of the tired people their excessive labor makes them. And, although their clothes might be the height of discomfort, they show their famous indifference to comfort by never complaining. These burdensome clothes hang around them like so many bags, with the wide gaps here and there where the wind whistles to the flesh. It

* This was written at the time I was in Hankow. When I revised my copy, after I had spent a year and a half rubbing along with the natives in the interior, I could not suppress a smile at my impressions of a great city like Hankow. Since then I have seen more native life, and — more native dirt!—E. J. D.

is a national characteristic that they are immune to personal inconveniences, a philosophy which I found to be universal, from the highest to the lowest.

Everybody we met, from the British Consul-General downward, was surprised to know that my companion and I had no knowledge of the Chinese language, and seemed to look lightly upon our chances of ever getting through.

It was true. Neither my companion nor myself knew three words of the language, but went forward simply believing in the good faith of the Chinese people, with our passports alone to protect us. That we should encounter difficulties innumerable, that we should be called upon to put up with the greatest hardships of life, when viewed from the standard to which one had been accustomed, and that we should be put to great physical endurance, we could not doubt. But we believed in the Chinese, and believed that should any evil befall us it would be the outcome of our own lack of forbearance, or of our own direct seeking. We knew that to the Chinese we should at once be "foreign devils" and "barbarians," that if not holding us actually in contempt, they would feel some condescension in dealing and mixing with us; but I was personally of the opinion that it was easier for us to walk through China than it would be for two Chinese, dressed as Chinese, to walk through Great Britain or America. What would the canny Highlander or the rural English rustic think of two pig-tailed men tramping through his countryside?

We anchored at Ichang at 7:30 a.m. on March 19th. I fell up against a boatman who offered to take us ashore. An uglier fellow I had never seen in the East. The morning sunshine soon dried the decks of the gunboat *Kinsha* (then stationed in the river for the defense of the port) which English jack-tars were swabbing in a half-hearted sort of way, and all looked rosy enough.* But for the author, who with his companion was a literal "babe in the wood," the day was most eventful and trying to one's per-

* The *Kinsha* was the first British gunboat on the Upper Yangtze.

sonal serenity. We had asked questions of all and sundry respecting our proposed tramp and the way we should get to work in making preparations. Each individual person seemed vigorously to do his best to induce us to turn back and follow callings of respectable members of society. From Shanghai upwards we might have believed ourselves watched by a secret society, which had for its motto, "Return, oh, wanderer, return!" Hardly a person knew aught of the actual conditions of the interior of the country in which he lived and labored, and everyone tried to dissuade us from our project.

Coming ashore in good spirits, we called at the Consulate, at the back of the city graveyard, and were smoking his cigars and giving his boy an examination in elementary English, when the Consul came down. It was not possible, however, for us to get much more information than we had read up, and the Consul suggested that the most likely person to be of use to us would be the missionary at the China Inland Mission. Thither we repaired, following a sturdy employé of Britain, but we found that the C.I.M. representative was not to be found — despite our repairing. So off we trotted to the chief business house of the town, at the entrance to which we were met by a Chinese, who bowed gravely, asked whether we had eaten our rice, and told us, quietly but pointedly, that our passing up the rough stone steps would be of no use, as the manager was out. A few minutes later I stood reading the inscription on the gravestone near the church, whilst my brave companion, The Other Man, endeavored fruitlessly to pacify a fierce dog in the doorway of the Scottish Society's missionary premises — but that missionary, too, was out!

What, then, was the little game? Were all the foreigners resident in this town dodging us, afraid of us — or what?

"The latter, the blithering idiots!" yelled The Other Man. He was infuriated. "Two Englishmen with English tongues in their heads, and unable to direct their own movements. Preposterous!" And then, making an observation which I will not print, he suggested mildly that we might fix up all matters ourselves.