

Guy Boothby and the “Yellow Peril”: Representations of Chinese Immigrants in British Imperial Spaces in the Late-Nineteenth Century

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By the end of the nineteenth century the pernicious racial term “yellow peril” had entered the common parlance of Victorians across the British Empire.¹ Broadly speaking, it referred to a complex of fears surrounding the idea that the rhetorical sleeping Chinese “dragon” was on the cusp of awakening and running roughshod over the western world; or, in other words, that the declining Qing Empire would revive and, via the numerical strength of its population combined with military or economic advances, invert the current order of east-west relations to gain predominance over the European imperial nations. While the term seems to have been coined in the German press in response to perceived Far Eastern militarism during the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5 and been popularised by Kaiser Wilhelm II, the concept certainly predated this (Glover 49-50). Ironically, the insidious yellow peril myth of China rampant owed its genesis to the impact of European, and particularly British imperial activity, on China in the later part of the nineteenth century, rather than to any expansionary Chinese aims or activity. This western impact was bi-faceted, involving both the physical incursion of westerners into China, and the related movement of Chinese people overseas to work in western nations and colonies. On the one hand, the continual encroachment of western merchants and missionaries into China, coupled with the European scramble for Chinese territorial concessions, had led to a documented sense of grievance and anti-foreign sentiment in China which was exaggerated via the lens of the yellow peril myth into a perceived Chinese desire for vengeance in kind. On the other hand, Britain’s defeat of China in the two mid-century “Opium” wars (1839-42 and 1857-60), coupled with the increasing requirement for labour in its growing colonial holdings, had helped to spark off the international coerced labour phenomenon known as the “coolie trade,” in which Chinese people were transported like cargo across the Empire to fill labour gaps.² Chinese people were brought, mostly as indentured labourers, or “coolies,” or in other coercive labour arrangements, to Britain’s Far Eastern colonial holdings, to the settler colonies of South Africa and Australia, and even to the far-away plantations of the British West Indies, and they were everywhere received with suspicion and hostility. Despite the relative powerlessness of their position as indentured or indebted immigrants, they were inevitably perceived as threatening racial others inherently at odds with “white” society, linked to a set of stereotyped vices and deemed a threat to existing labour interests. Even an article written on humanitarian grounds to condemn the appalling conditions of the coolie trade and call for its immediate cessation managed to couch its appeal in the terms of the yellow peril, warning that European toleration of the coolie trade was “laying deep in the hearts of the whole Chinese nation – counting its millions by hundreds – a hatred so intense that sooner or later it will sweep out of the country both foreigners and their trade” (“Coolie Traffic” 10).³

While the idea of the yellow peril only began to gain wide currency at the centre of the British Empire in the late 1890s, particularly after the violent Boxer Rebellion against foreign interference in China in 1900-01, it had become conventional wisdom in the settler colonies of Australia long before this. Since the gold rush years of the 1850s, which had seen widespread Chinese immigration into the Australian colonies, the Chinese had been perceived as a grave threat to the development of so-called “white” civilisation in Australia,

and colony after colony had passed immigration restriction legislation aimed at excluding the Chinese.⁴ By the 1880s, as white Australian nationalism gained momentum, hostility to the Chinese presence in Australia intensified, fuelled by paranoid notions that the Qing government had invasive designs on Australian territory – that the coolie immigrants were just its vanguard (Richards 167). As elder statesman Henry Parkes warned in 1891, the anticipated Chinese offensive would succeed “not ... by the bombardment of one of our rich cities” but by “stealthily effecting a lodgement in some thinly-peopled portion of the country, where it would take immense loss of life and immense loss of wealth to dislodge the invader” (qtd in Ward 267). A series of Australian Intercolonial Conferences were held to address the “Chinese question;” the 1888 conference producing a draft bill aimed at entirely prohibiting Chinese immigration (Yu 18). So negatively was Chinese and other “non-white” immigration into Australia viewed that the very first act of the newly federated state of Australia in 1901 was the so-called “White Australia,” or Immigration Restriction Act that facilitated the exclusion of “undesirable” foreigners on a state-wide level (“Documenting” *n.pag*). Even for the liberal politician Alfred Deakin, who was instrumental in the federation process, the strongest motive for the federation of the disparate Australian colonies was “the desire that we should be one people, and remain one people, without the admixture of other races” (qtd in Macintyre 142). Ouyang Yu goes so far as to suggest that “anti-Chinese, anti-Asian feelings ... helped to unite the six [Australian] colonies into a federation” (19-20), that this stance was crucial to the economic, political and cultural development of the nascent nation, and that the Chinese were the key racial other against which “White Australia” defined itself.

It is not surprising to find that this climate of anti-Chinese hostility and fear was abundantly reflected in, and intensified by, Australian popular culture in this period. Newspapers traded on it, notably *The Bulletin*, mouth-piece of nascent Australian nationalism from its inception in the 1880s. Shown in Figure 1, an insidious *Bulletin* front page cartoon entitled “The Yellow Trash Question” summed up yellow peril fears succinctly by representing Australia as a little boy on a life raft labelled “Australia for the Australians,” who is in danger of being overwhelmed by a caricatured sinister Chinaman. Contemporary works of popular fiction provided horrifying corroborating visions of future conflict between the “white” and “yellow” races and the invasion of Australia by oriental armies. These include, for example, William Lane’s vitriolic *White or Yellow? A Story of the Race-war of A.D. 1908* (1888), which depicts a heroic white uprising against a Chinese immigrant population on the brink of taking over Australia; and Edward Maitland’s *The Battle of Mordialloc; or, How We Lost Australia* (1888), which sees Australia invaded and conquered by a joint force of Chinese and Russian troops, with the Chinese being motivated by vengeance for the ill-treatment of their emigrant countrymen.⁵ It is to the popular fictional contribution to the yellow peril myth that we now turn – not to the imagined hordes of invaders to come, but to representations of the Chinese already present in imperial spaces in the works of Guy Boothby, a young Anglo-Australian who had emigrated from Adelaide in the British Colony of South Australia to London in 1893 and started to make a name for himself there as a popular author.



Figure 1: 'The Yellow Trash Question', *The Bulletin*, 24 August 1895.

Image reproduced with the permission of the *Making Australia Multicultural* website (<http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/library/media/Image/id/859.Fears-of-Chinese-migration-1895>).

Plunging enthusiastically into literary life in the imperial centre, Boothby capitalised on the relative novelty of his Australian colonial background to quickly gain a reputation for narrating the greater British imperial experience in Australia and the Far East.⁶ Boothby's most successful literary creation was Dr Nikola, a combination of master criminal, mad scientist and menace to British imperial rule, and a character whose debut appearance in the 1895 novel *A Bid for Fortune* brought overnight recognition to its author. Deriving from generalised Australian concerns about its vulnerable location on the far side of the world from the "mother" country, the threat of foreign invasion of imperial spaces is a major concern in Boothby's fiction and one that is embodied by the Nikola character in the series of five novels in which he featured between 1895 and 1901.⁷ However, if, in Boothby's fiction, Dr Nikola's criminal organisation provides one source of peril to the British Empire, the Chinese people as a race are depicted as another, yet more insidious, threat. Embedded in the colonial perspective that Boothby brought with him to England was the white Australian settler attitude to the Chinese, and this is abundantly reflected and developed in his fiction. In addition to the devilish doctor, the Chinese are depicted as an invasive presence in England throughout the Dr Nikola series – Boothby, in one sense, narrating an alarmist colonial perspective for an imperial centre as yet unaccustomed to Chinese immigration. The focus of this essay is not, however, upon the abundant fictionalisations of the implausible idea that Chinese people might pose a threat to the heart of the Empire, but rather on Boothby's depiction of the Chinese already present in the wider imperial world. Boothby's inclusion of Chinese villains menacing England in the Nikola series, which was ostensibly about an Italian master criminal, speaks to an active vilification of the Chinese that accords with the

extreme logic of the yellow peril premise. However, as this essay examines, this explicit vilification is supported across Boothby's writing by his seemingly unthinking, incidental inclusion of stock Chinese characters in British imperial locations who are described with a casual contempt that is staggering, and serves implicitly to reinforce the yellow peril premise. Similar stereotypes recurred in the colonial adventure tales of fellow globe-trotting colonial authors, such as William Carlton Dawe, Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling, and played an important role in the international articulation of the yellow peril myth.

Bigoted and detrimental as Boothby's collective portrait of the Chinese is, it also cannot help but attest to the important and largely overlooked presence of the Chinese in the spaces of the British Empire, demonstrating the impact of the coolie trade on imperial society and signalling the multifaceted nature of the British Empire's involvement with China. In pursuing this line of enquiry I am drawing on Ross Forman's approach in *China and the Victorian Imagination*, specifically on his metaphor of "empires entwined" which stresses the interdependence between the British and Chinese Empires in the nineteenth century, and the importance of the Chinese as "social actors across the British empire" (Forman 5). Forman emphasises the need to go beyond "the traditional paradigms of colonizer and colonized" and break "away from a top-down or centralized theory of imperialism and its literary production and instead emphasize ... the idea that imperial discourse is engaged in a dialogue with players both internal and external to itself" (5). He further stresses the need to extend "the center-periphery model" and examine the "common experience of being 'in empire';" a perspective which is applied in my examination of Boothby's representation of Chinese people across a range of imperial spaces (9).

As an author who had spent his young manhood in Adelaide in the 1880s and early 1890s, Boothby had the then-circulating generalised Australian anti-Chinese sentiment to draw on in his writing, but he also had some direct experience of the rural and mining areas where many of the immigrants ended up and where the line of tension between the white and non-white workforce was more evident. During an initial attempt to emigrate to Britain in 1891, lack of funds had forced Boothby to disembark in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and begin making his way homewards through Southeast Asia and overland across the Australian continent from Cairns to Adelaide, taking in Melanesian islands and mining settlements in the far north and the arid and sparsely populated interiors of Queensland and South Australia along his way. This difficult journey had for a period of time taken him outside the less volatile urban space of Adelaide and placed him directly in the frontier contact zone with its reviled Aboriginal and immigrant labourer populations.⁸ Boothby used this experience not only to provide the substance of the travelogue, *On the Wallaby; or, Through the East and across Australia* (1894), which launched his literary career in London, but also as a source of settings for many of his fictional scenarios. The outback and the northern frontiers form the backdrop to a significant proportion of his Australian short stories and crop up recurrently in his longer works, including two of the Nikola novels, while China, Southeast Asia and Australia's Melanesian island territories also feature frequently as settings. This essay explores the representations of Chinese people proffered in Boothby's travelogue, in his fiction set in British Australian and Southeast Asian colonies, and also in fiction set in the informal imperial spaces of contact in "foreign" China, in the cities and coastal locations where the British Empire was making its presence and influence felt. It seeks to uncover how these superficially disinterested representations of the far-flung Chinese may have contributed to the developing myth of the yellow peril.

“The Chinese question” in British colonial territories

Boothby’s first major piece of writing, the travelogue *On the Wallaby*, certainly attests to its author’s awareness of the controversial Chinese presence in Australia. While he refers explicitly to “the Chinese Question” only once in the travelogue and in a jocular and glancing manner, the theme of white versus “coloured labour” (Chinese and Melanesian) permeates the Australian-set portions of the text. Boothby even interpolates into the text of the travelogue a lengthy article which debates the merits of introducing “cheap alien labour” (177) into Australia’s northern plantations and concludes “that the small beginning may result in complications of such magnitude as those with which the United States are now called upon to deal” (171), referring to the United States’ perceived problem with large-scale Chinese immigration.⁹ The travelogue is interspersed with portraits of Chinese immigrants in marginal Australian spaces – in mining settlements and bush townships as itinerant workers, cooks and petty thieves – and though the narration aims at a savvy, humorous tone, the subtext of Chinese inferiority is clear in all cases (see 195, 228, 370).

Boothby’s only known fictional work to extensively feature the Chinese in Australia is the “Story of Lee Ping” (1895), a short story about a corrupt Chinese merchant who runs “an illicit ‘Fan-tan’ [gambling] shop ... for the benefit of the coolies” from his general store in a railway camp in the remote “northern territory of South Australia” (426-28). Into this simplistic, two-page story Boothby manages to cram a wide range of negative anti-Chinese stereotypes: there is mention of illegal gambling, police corruption, subversive secret society activity and opium dealing, all of which serve to reinforce the idea that the Chinese presence in Australia was anything but positive. In fact the story evokes the famous Phillip May “Mongolian Octopus” *Bulletin* cartoon from 1886, which shows white Australians in the grips of octopus tentacles representing most of these imputed Chinese vices. Two of the Nikola series of novels reinforce this negative view: *A Bid for Fortune* associates Sydney’s Chinatown, “the lowest quarter of Sydney” (*Fortune* 285), with Nikola’s criminal activities, and *The Lust of Hate* (1898) refers to “many queer specimens of the Chinese race” (*Lust* 56) being encountered in Australia. Reading between the lines of Boothby’s pejorative short story, however, the roles assigned to the Chinese characters – a general store owner and a railway construction worker – attest to the vital, under-acknowledged part played by the Chinese in the work of British imperial development in Australia, revealing an interdependence that white Australia may not have liked to avow.

Moving beyond the Australian colonies, the journey from Colombo to Cairns described in *On the Wallaby* took Boothby through the British Straits settlement of Singapore, British North Borneo, Batavia in the Dutch East Indies and Thursday Island, a Melanesian island in the Torres Strait group recently annexed by the Queensland colony, and in each location he comments, often extensively, on the numerous presence of the immigrant Chinese. “As in so many other places we had visited,” he observes of Thursday Island, “the Chinese element is well represented” (112).



Figure 2: Untitled, *On the Wallaby* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1894), 97.

Image from the author's collection.

The caricature in Figure 2 of what from the surrounding text may be imputed to be a Chinese merchant in Batavia, with its exaggerated expression of stupidity and cunning, serves visually to underpin all the stereotypes of Chinese inferiority that *On the Wallaby* has been dishing up. But the coverage of the Singaporean Chinese community is most telling: “A thing which is calculated to strike the newcomer with surprise is the tremendous preponderance of the Chinese element in this city. Numbering I believe something like half a million, these heathens fairly swarm over everything, and their own particular quarter ... is a place to see once and never to venture near again” (54). Willing to brave its horrors for the sake of vicarious experience, Boothby relates at length his visit to the Chinese quarter with its “cook-shops” selling “roast dog, rat, cat,” “fan-tan hells,” and “licensed opium dens,” about all of which he concludes, “for unadulterated misery and vice, unaccompanied by any redeeming feature whatsoever” (57-65), it would be difficult to match. The sojourn in British North Borneo elicits direct mention of the coolie trade – “the Chinese element predominates” there, he writes, owing to “the importation of coolies into Sandahkan” (73). In his characteristic detached, lightly ironic narratorial tone, Boothby reveals that “[t]he death rate among the Chinese coolies is ... something appalling” (74) and that the poor planters who have gone to the expense of importing them are to be pitied. As Mandy Treagus observes, ironic narration is a device often used to create a sense of distance from the subject so described, and of shared viewpoint between narrator and implied reader, serving to disempower the subject while at the same time confirming “the value systems [of] the narrator and those who share in the ironic view” (159). Reprehensible and exaggerated as Boothby’s sketches of the Chinese immigrant communities are, they clearly imply upon whose labour these Southeast Asian British colonies were built, while the recurrent accounts of swarming, preponderant Chinese enclaves appear to substantiate yellow peril claims that the scales of racial balance were tipping away from the white races.

Boothby makes repeated use of Southeast Asian locations in his colonial adventure fiction, and *My Strangest Case* (1901), a tale of murder, mutilation and stolen colonial treasure, is highly representative. It opens in a cosmopolitan, polyglot Singapore, “Gateway of the Further East,” of which the savvy detective narrator casually remarks, “There, if you are so disposed, you may consider the subject of British Rule on the one hand, and the various aspects of the Chinese question on the other” (*Strangest* 11-12), thus implying the intimate relationship between the two. In case the reader were in any doubt as to how the Chinese question should be settled, the text proceeds to paint the direst account of the Chinese character (as discussed subsequently). Also representative of Boothby’s tendency to use the Far East as an exotic backdrop for his plots is his 1896 nautical adventure yarn *The Beautiful White Devil*. It features an altruistic white female pirate, Alie, who marauds the South China Sea from Shanghai to Singapore and who is the scourge of both the Far Eastern British colonial authorities and the Chinese, who have coined her eponymous romantic cognomen. An anti-imperial figure, she operates from an idyllic multiracial island community somewhere off the coast of Borneo which she maintains with the proceeds of piracy. However, despite the inclusion of Chinese people on the list of the races that make up the population of this utopian counter-colony, the Chinese are still singled out by Boothby as the sustained target of racist invective. Towards the beginning of the narrative, Boothby includes a protracted incident which depicts the violent treachery of a Chinese junk crew hired to escort the English male protagonist from Hong Kong to Alie’s high-tech yacht. The initial description of this crew sets the tone for the entire scene: “a more evil-looking lot no one could possibly wish to set eyes on,” their “pock-marked” faces evoking preconceptions of the Far East as a locus of disease (20). These evil characteristics are abundantly reinforced in the novel’s illustrations by Stanley L. Wood, as shown in Figure 3.

That Wood does not depict what might be considered typical Chinese features but rather generic, malignant oriental features verging on the monstrous, only serves to highlight how divorced from reality this western portrayal of Chinese people was. As Figure 3 graphically illustrates, the Chinese crew attempt to murder the protagonist and his companion, and with no apparent motive. The initial attack takes the form of garrotting, a method also used against his English adversaries by Sax Rohmer’s later, better-known Chinese villain Fu Manchu, who kept the yellow peril flag flying in popular culture well into the twentieth century. Though they are far more numerous, the Chinese assailants in *The Beautiful White Devil* are eventually overwhelmed by the valiant efforts of the two white men, this outcome bolstering assumptions of Chinese racial inferiority as well as treachery. The descriptions of the Chinese crew’s demise are detailed, gruesome and devoid of empathy, presumably as is commensurate with their perfidy: “On the deck were four dead bodies . . . one at my feet, his skull dashed in and his brains protruding, a horrible sight – another under the bulwarks, his limbs twitching in his death agony, and his mouth vomiting blood with automatic regularity” (28). There is no plot-dependant reason for hiring this Chinese crew; their treachery merely serves to validate Boothby’s hostility to the Chinese race. He even uses the notably tolerant Alie as a mouthpiece for this sentiment: “I do not like the Chinese!” (48) is her vehement response to reports of the attack.



Figure 3: 'Fighting like wild cats.' *The Beautiful White Devil* (London: Ward, Lock and Co, 1896), 27.

Image from the author's collection.

While the plot of *The Beautiful White Devil* is not in any way advanced by this incident, the scenario of a Chinese attack upon white people onboard ship has a certain resonance with an aspect of the coolie trade well-known to contemporary readers. Given the atrocious conditions of passage, many coolie revolts or mutinies took place onboard transport ships, and a corresponding degree of notoriety attached itself to the coolies. As Jessie G. Lutz puts it, "Misunderstandings must have festered frequently on ships lacking a Chinese interpreter, and there were reports of many instances of mutiny and of attacks on the ship's crew during the long journey of several months" (141). The most famous of these took place mid-century, onboard ships transporting Chinese indentured labourers to the Caribbean and South America,¹⁰ but such disturbances also occurred in the more local Southeast Asian coolie trade, as an 1875 article attests which describes a coolie mutiny, "bloody strife and carnage" (*Mutiny* 1) onboard a ship from Singapore to Dutch plantations in Sumatra. Though these

took place two decades before Boothby was writing, a contemporary short story by fellow Australian popular author Dawe supports the idea that the shipboard Chinese workforce was viewed as a likely source of danger. Dawe's "Coolies" (1895), for example, depicts a violent coolie mutiny to redirect a ship away from British justice at Singapore, carried out by a group of "hideous, grinning wretches, bared knives in their hands" (80). This theme of coolie mutiny was a recurring one in Dawe's work.¹¹

"The most despicable race under the sun" at home in China

In addition to colonial Far Eastern locations, Boothby also set portions of some of his texts in China itself. Though China was an independent sovereign state – an Empire in its own right – its losses to Britain in the two Opium wars had placed it in a disadvantaged position within the informal sphere of British economic imperialism (see Bickers 12). Britain controlled its lucrative customs service in Beijing, and held strategic treaty ports, concessions and territories all along its coast, most notably the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong. This quasi-colonial status made China a pertinent setting for a fictional colonial gaze such as Boothby's, and especially one that was so concerned with the scrutinising of Chinese people. Boothby's second Nikola novel, *Doctor Nikola* (1896), is set largely in China and relates a plot by the doctor to steal valuable occult knowledge from a Chinese secret society, and the society's subsequent vendetta against him. The first half of the novel takes place in a series of Chinese locations where westerners had gained some foothold – Shanghai with its large English concession, the British treaty port of Tientsin (Tianjin) and Peking (Beijing) with its British-dominated foreign legations and international missionary presence – and the action traverses these spaces of foreign enclave and so-called "native city," highlighting their imbrication (*Nikola* 7). Boothby's vilification of the Chinese is nowhere more blatant than in the descriptions of the native cities, including the following, seemingly incidental account of life in Beijing, which is exemplary of the worst of these and therefore worth quoting at length:

The narrow streets were crowded ... Beggars in all degrees of loathsomeness, carrying the scars of almost every known ailment upon their bodies, and in nine cases out of ten not only able but desirous of presenting us with a replica of the disease, swarmed round us, and pushed and jostled us as we walked. Add to this the fact that at least once in every few yards we were assailed with scornful cries and expressions that would bring a blush to the cheek of the most blasphemous coalheaver in existence, accompanied by gestures which made my hands itch to be upon the faces of those who practised them. Mix up with all this the sights and smells of the foulest Eastern city you can imagine, add to it the knowledge that you are despised and hated by *the most despicable race under the sun*, fill up whatever room is left with the dust that lies on a calm day six inches deep upon the streets, and in a storm ... covers one from head to foot with a coating of the vilest impurity, you will have derived but the smallest impression of what it means to take a walk in the streets of Peking. (133-34; my emphasis)

Boothby concludes this piece of execrable racism with the following justification, adverting to his own status as an experienced colonial: "To the Englishman who has never travelled in China this denunciation may appear a little extravagant. My regret, however, is that personally I do not consider it strong enough" (134). This is ironic given that Boothby's travels never brought him to China – certainly not to Beijing, of which his description is riddled with geographical inaccuracies – but its picture of the white subject under threat of contamination amidst a hostile Chinese throng accords with Boothby's alarmist colonial

Australian perspective. It also serves to highlight the circular logic of the yellow peril, whereby fictional accounts of Chinese vileness derived from circulating yellow peril fears in turn helped to substantiate and promulgate these fears – simply put, the Chinese are despicable because Boothby says they are.

A significant incident in the Tianjin-set portion of *Doctor Nikola* – a random mob attack carried out by “fellow[s] of the coolie class” (96) upon an English missionary’s house in the native city – draws the reader’s attention more explicitly to the reality of growing Chinese hostility to western encroachment into China. The illustration in Figure 4, again by Wood, is a graphic depiction of an enraged rioter in the act of shouting “Kueidzu!,” a contemporary Victorian rendering of the Chinese phrase “foreign devil,” and hurling a rock at the house. There were at the time of writing many documented instances of Chinese attacks on western missionaries, and the controversy surrounding their presence contributed to the outbreak of the anti-foreigner Boxer Rebellion in 1900.¹² Boothby uses these background accounts of Chinese hostility to put the threat represented by his fictional secret society in *Doctor Nikola* into the context of real Chinese violence toward westerners, while exaggerating it further via the lens of yellow peril paranoia. Encounters between Nikola, who stands in for the western imperial presence in China, and members of the secret society, who are the principle representatives of the Chinese population, are adversarial and negative throughout. From the outset the secret society is coded as political and subversive, as highlighted in Nikola’s claim: “I am inclined to believe that the all-powerful Triad Society, with its motto, ‘Hoan Cheng Hok Beng,’ which, as you know, exercised such an enormous influence in China until quite recently, was only an offshoot of the society which I am so eager to explore” (47). The motto cited here, translated as “Drive out the Cheng [Qing], restore the Beng [Ming],” was that of the “Hung League,” a major real-world Chinese secret society which was reported on internationally in the early 1890s, hence Boothby is making a significant association containing layers of meaning that would have been more apparent to his contemporary readership (“Secret Societies” 6).¹³ While the chief aim of the “Hung League” was to overthrow the ruling Qing dynasty (viewed as a foreign [Manchu] imposition on the Han Chinese), the society was also vehemently opposed to the presence of all foreigners in China, which means Boothby’s fictional secret society would in itself have evoked Chinese anti-European sentiment for the 1890s reader, compounding that demonstrated in the seemingly incidental descriptions of the Beijing streets and the Tianjin riot. Secret societies were often linked to attacks on foreigners, particularly missionaries, in China, as in the following sensational 1895 *Spectator* report. “The most horrible massacre of white people by Chinamen recorded in modern times was committed on English missionaries ... [at] Foochow” (1), it announced, before going on to describe the fatalities in gruesome detail. It attributed the attack to “a band that had long threatened mischief to the Christians ... and appear[s] to be a secret society” (1), and further implicated this band in the alleged “state of semi-revolt” in South China that threatened both Qing and British interests.



Figure 4: “Kueidzu!” he cried.’ *Doctor Nikola* (London: Ward, Lock and Co., 1896), 96.

Image from the author’s collection.

Another connotation of the Hung League was the supposed danger posed by secret societies to British colonies with large Chinese populations. In Singapore, the League was described as a “Reign of Terror.” Operating via “murder, torture ... pitiless beating” and being, according to the British Inspector-General of Police, “a standing danger to the peace” (Boyle 598), the unrest it caused eventually led to the suppression of secret societies in the British Straits colonies in 1888. And indeed, the scale and reach of the fictional secret society in *Doctor Nikola* are extensive and linked to colonial locations, as Nikola’s English accomplice is warned early on:

This society into whose secrets he is so anxious to penetrate ... is without doubt the most powerful in the whole world. If rumour is to be believed, its list of members exceeds twenty millions. It has representatives in almost every town and village in the length and breadth of this great land [China], to say nothing of Malaysia, Australia and America; its rules are most exacting. (93)

The reference to “Malaysia, Australia and America” once again demonstrates Boothby’s awareness of the global pattern of Chinese emigration, and reinforces the habitual links he makes between the immigrant Chinese populations and yellow peril stereotypes of numerousness and violence. Here the perceived Chinese threat is seen to be emanating beyond the boundaries of China to the colonial world, with the further implication, reinforced by the subsequent action of *Doctor Nikola* which sees Nikola and his accomplice chased back to England, that it may not stop there. Indeed, in 1891 there had been a significant secret society-led rebellion against the Qing in Hunan, with the British taking the Qing side against the rebels. In reporting on this outbreak, *The Spectator* newspaper, with its trademark

alarmism, indulged in speculation about the outcomes of an unlikely anti-Qing success which links secret society activity with a global yellow peril threat several years before the term was coined:

In all probability, the first idea of the destroyer of the Manchu [Qing] dynasty ... will be to look out for fresh worlds to conquer. Will he turn upon India, will he drive the French into the sea at Tonquin, or will he break Russia ... in two ... A victory on the Amour [Amur river] might lead to that invasion of civilisation by a horde of Chinamen which has long been the nightmare of imaginative Europeans. (“Chinese Disturbances” 8)

Boothby’s account of vile China in *Doctor Nikola* is backed up by the pervasive accounts of attack, mutilation, torture and murder carried out by Chinese people in *My Strangest Case*, which on one level reads like a rehash of the successful China-set Nikola novel. As one reviewer pointed out, “In this novel the author, with some success, hies back to his old Far East haunts” (*Strangest Case* 72). *My Strangest Case* describes an expedition by three colonial rogues into another British colonial location – Burmah (Myanmar), then largely administered as a province of British India – in order to steal buried treasure from a ruined city roughly located “at the back of Burmah; near the Chinese Border” (28). Here the three encounter “the Chinese, who ... were strong in the neighbourhood” (30), who torture and mutilate two of them seemingly as a matter of course: ““We were traders’ [the rogues lie], ‘and we fell into the hands of the Chinese ... With their usual amiability they set to work to torture us. My companion’s tongue they cut out at the roots, while, as I have said, they deprived me of my sight’” (69). This, then, is yet another instance of a dangerous Chinese presence infiltrating a British imperial space, this time as cross-border marauders from China rather than as immigrants. In a subsequent attempt to garner sympathy, the mutilated men also falsely claim to have been so treated because they were missionaries, trading on by-now widespread assumptions of Chinese depravity, further consolidated by sensational journalistic accounts of the Boxer Rebellion from 1899 onwards.¹⁴ Dawe, in fact, based a whole novel on this premise of anti-missionary sentiment, *The Mandarin* (1899), which sees an isolated British mission in the interior of China under sustained threat from the local population until it is ultimately attacked and burnt down. As in *The Beautiful White Devil*, no compelling plot-dependent reason is ever provided for the Chinese violence in *My Strangest Case*; it is rendered as if it was the natural inclination of Chinese people, that merely to fall into their hands is to incur torture and death. Although it may be that some motive is obliquely suggested in the revelation that the third rogue, who escapes physically unscathed though mentally terrorised, has been involved in the Southeast Asian coolie trade, in “what he called the ‘Pig-tail trade’ to Borneo” (256).

“The world’s low places”

In text after text, Boothby’s yellow peril racism relentlessly pursues Chinese people across the spaces of the British Empire and beyond to the wide range of locations they had found themselves transported to via the iniquities of the international imperial system of coerced labour. By way of an apposite concluding example, in *A Prince of Swindlers* (1900), a novel concerned largely with Britain’s Indian colonial territories and not with China or the Chinese, Boothby once again cannot help lapsing into this default position of anti-Chinese racism, this time in order to contextualise the perceived horrors of Calcutta. The “reeking” city of Calcutta is compared to others of “the world’s low places,” including “The Ratcliffe Highway in London, and the streets that lead off it ... the Chinese quarters of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco ... Little Bourke Street, Melbourne, a portion of Singapore” (*Prince* 35-36).

Ratcliffe in London's East End had been infamous in the 1870s for its opium dens, most notably the den visited by Dickens and immortalised in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870),¹⁵ it also bordered on Limehouse, then notorious as London's Chinatown; New York and San Francisco housed the United States' most famous Chinatowns; Little Bourke Street was well-known in Australia as home to Melbourne's significant Chinese population; and from the description in *On the Wallaby* cited previously, it is likely the portion of Singapore referred to here is its Chinese quarter. Once again it is abundantly clear that Boothby is designating the world's Chinatowns as its lowest, most vice-ridden places, containing teeming pockets of unwanted Chinese immigrants, possible vanguards of the ultimate Chinese inundation of the west predicted by the yellow peril.

Boothby, an immigrant himself – albeit one in the much more privileged position of white colonial – gives no credence whatsoever to the struggle faced by Chinese immigrants in the majority of situations they found themselves in, nor to their stalwart efforts to overcome adversity and carve out some kind of existence for themselves, whether in terms of enduring the period of indenture and returning home with some savings, or finding a means to survive and succeed in their new communities over the long term. This lack of empathy notably resonates with fellow immigrant Joseph Conrad's treatment of returning Chinese migrants in his 1902 novella *Typhoon*, which touches on the coolie trade: Conrad's dehumanisation of the immiserated "cargo of Chinamen" (72) is, in its understated way, comparable to the worst of Boothby's yellow peril excesses. Despite *Typhoon*'s acknowledgement of the terrible conditions of indenture the migrants have endured in order to amass their savings, when the storm hits and their possessions are scattered, the ensuing struggle for survival below decks is described in the most unsympathetic, crude and yellow-peril inflected terms. The Chinese are, in keeping with the mutinous coolie imagery, at times bestial, at times demonic: "swarming" on the hatchway ladder "in a crawling, stirring cluster, beating madly with their fists on the underside of the battened hatch," they are a grave danger to themselves, the crew and the ship (Conrad 45). A relatively isolated instance in Conrad's *oeuvre*, the same could not be said of Boothby: it is as if he cannot let the Chinese people be, but feels compelled to rehearse over and over instances of their loathsomeness and perfidy.¹⁶ In most of the Boothby texts examined in this essay, with the exception of *Doctor Nikola* (and its sequel *Dr Nikola's Experiment* [1899]), the recurrent inclusion of Chinese people seems incidental, and the racism directed at them casual and unthinking.¹⁷ However, in some senses, this functions to make the racism even more insidious than that encountered in overt yellow peril texts of oriental invasion, because the casualness combined with the repetition gives the racist utterance the semblance of naturalness; of being "not merely ... true, but ... axiomatic, self-evident, utterly indisputable" (Huxley 34), as Aldous Huxley writes of the simplistic repetitions that effect social conditioning in *Brave New World* (1932). Ultimately though, despite the harmful, naturalised stereotyping that Boothby's work perpetuates, what is yielded up by his recurrent depiction of Chinese people at work in British imperial spaces and of British experience in the contact zones of the China coast, is the increasing importance of the Chinese to the British Empire, something that colonial Britons could not help being aware of, even if many metropolitans were not.

Notes

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yellow peril developed throughout the western world, particularly in the U.S.A. and in many European imperial nations, nineteenth-century British imperial versions necessarily form the focus of this article.

² Again this exploitative labour practice was not confined to British shipping companies and colonies, but was carried on by their European and American counterparts also. See, for example, Meagher and Bright.

³ Official British engagement in the trade had largely ceased by the 1860s, but the practice continued from Portuguese Macao to Spanish and South American colonies, where the conditions of indenture were particularly brutal.

⁴ This legislation is glowingly detailed in chapter 11, “The Colonial Aspect,” in Wilson, *The Alien Invasion*, a polemical text arguing for the enactment of similar legislation in Britain.

⁵ *White or Yellow* was published in *Boomerang* from Feb to May of 1888; for details see Crouch. *The Battle of Mordialloc* was published anonymously by Maitland (Melbourne: Mullen, 1888). For more on Australian invasion fiction see Dixon, chap. 8 “Imagined Invasions: *The Lone Hand* and narratives of Asiatic invasion.”

⁶ For Boothby’s literary reception in London, see Bulfin.

⁷ For more on general Australian invasion anxiety see Ward. The sequels to *A Bid for Fortune* are *Doctor Nikola* (1896), *The Lust of Hate* (1898), *Dr Nikola’s Experiment* (1899), and “*Farewell, Nikola*” (1901).

⁸ For more on the settler attitude towards the indigenous Australian population see Curthoys.

⁹ Ironically, the article is written by the Queensland correspondent for the London *Times*, who, Boothby seems to feel, has a better understanding of Queensland politics than Boothby himself.

¹⁰ Meagher (174, 185, 190) estimates that mutinies occurred on at least 68 emigrant ships from Chinese ports between 1847 and 1874, with one in eight British coolie ships experiencing mutiny. Thirteen of these were successful, and often in the case of failure the mutineers resorted to the desperate tactic of setting the ship on fire.

¹¹ Coolie mutiny is referred to briefly in *The Mandarin* (1899), while *Captain Castle: A Tale of the China Seas* (1897) expands upon it at book length.

¹² For more on how the missionary presence contributed to the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion, see Xiang, especially chapter 5 “The Eruption in Shandong.”

¹³ The Sydney article was a reprint of “The Secret Societies of China” from the influential, London-published *Spectator* (29 Aug 1891): 6, which was in turn a summary of the New York-published article by Frederick Boyle, “Chinese Secret Societies,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 83:489 (Sept 1891): 595-602. The recycling of the American article in British and Australian publications provides an interesting insight into the mechanisms by which fears of China were disseminated across the Anglophone world.

¹⁴ For an account of newspaper coverage of the Boxer Rebellion see Diamond.

¹⁵ For an account of Ratcliffe opium dens in popular culture see Frayling, 87-104, 132.

¹⁶ For more on Conrad's representations of China and the Chinese see Krenn and Kerr.

¹⁷ It is virtually impossible to speak of the inclusion of Chinese characters in Boothby's writing because the Chinese encountered are little more than an amorphous mass undistinguished by individual attribute, fitting neatly with the stereotype of "sinister Chinaman."

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