

Passport to Peking: A Very British Mission to Mao's China

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‘When did the West first seek reconciliation with Communist China?’, asks the blurb on the dust jacket of Patrick Wright’s latest book, *Passport to Peking*. ‘Not through President Nixon’s well-known visit of 1972, but far earlier – just five years after the People’s Republic was founded...’ And so tantalizingly the stage is set for ‘part travelogue, part political history, part social comedy’, as Wright tells the story of the eclectic cross-section of British political, artistic, and intellectual life who made their way to China in 1954 to take a peek for themselves behind the ‘Bamboo Curtain’.

As the author admits in the preface, ‘the book is far more about post-war Britain and its inherited perspectives than it is about the reality of China, either now or then’ (xi). The book is an attempt to ‘explore the historical relations between Britain and China, and, in particular, to review some of the ways in which China has figured as a land of contrast and otherness within the British imagination’. This reviewer is not entirely convinced he has succeeded in this task.

The book makes excellent use of diaries, journals, reminiscences, and oral interviews with those very few members of the three separate delegations (or close acquaintances, such as former Labour leader Michael Foot) still alive when Wright was conducting the research for the book. The comedy derives from the juxtaposition of what may be as unlikely a group of travelling companions as one could possibly imagine; spread among three separate delegations they included the self-absorbed painter Stanley Spencer; communist 'artist-journalist' Paul Hogarth; Eurasian biologist and tree-lover Cedric Dover; Sinologue Edwin Pulleyblank; philosopher A. J. Ayer; architect Sir Hugh Casson; Labour MP Barbara Castle; former Prime Minister Clement Attlee and his Labour Party nemesis Anuerin Bevan; along with other figures of varying importance within the British Labour movement.

The book begins with a very brief sketch of the story of the rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party, set against the background of Britain's complex relationship with a China divided between a brutal Japanese occupation in the east; the determined but ineffective Nationalist administration in the south-west; and the CCP-held 'Yanan' base area in the north-west. Against this background Wright describes the origins of some of his *nouveaux Marco Polos'* interest in and support for China's struggles for national independence, before delving into an introduction to the ex-pat and diplomatic circuit that was to be found straggling behind in Beijing in the early 1950s after the Communist triumph in China's Civil War. Via the 'anonymous and humiliating limbo' (p. 34) of life as a foreigner in Beijing just after the foundation of 'New China' and a series of cameos and pastiches we are introduced to the history of Britain's relations with China: the British consular mission 'in the Legation Quarter. Extending westward from the wall of the Tartar City...', Lord Macartney, the Opium Wars, Lord Elgin and the sacking of the Summer Palace, the Boxers (or more specifically the relief of the siege of the Legation Quarter which is given relatively extensive treatment), and the Warlord Era of the 1920s, which is introduced with a particular focus on the proliferation of Chinese antiques and antiquities, and the ease with which they were purloined or purchased before being whisked out of China. It is an oddly skewed depiction of Britain in China that would have benefitted from reference to Robert Bickers' book of the same title.[\(1\)](#)

As previously noted, it is not a book about China at all. We are more than half-way through the work before the first voyager (Attlee) arrives in China, having had to share the painful discomfiture of the travelling delegations' multiple-leg flights via Prague, Moscow, Siberia, and Mongolia, during which time we are treated to repetitive observations about the food, the hotels, the architecture, and in the case of alcoholic poet Rex Warner, the availability (or more precisely lack thereof) of 'drink'. We are also at times given an amusing insight into the growing tensions and dissent within the various delegations, and of a growing frustration and dissatisfaction with the sterile and choreographed itineraries that were laid on for the visitors.

The book is certainly not without humour – chiefly provided by the eccentric chief propagandist for the Berkshire village of Cookham, Stanley Spencer, and the dipsomaniac Warner, though Sinologist and Mandarin-speaker John Chinnery's encounter with a Chinese peasant, who was pleased to note 'how similar were the English and Chinese languages' (p. 466) will certainly have a resonance with all students of the Chinese language. That said, there is much within the book that those with more than a passing interest in China will find either disappointing or frustrating. There are a number of errors that should have been picked up at the editorial stage, such as the not infrequent misspelling of Chinese names.

More grievously from a historian's perspective, there are a number of significant factual errors, among which I will draw attention to the more obvious. The Xian Incident is given as December 1937 (p. 67), though later correctly dated to 1936 (p. 218); side-by-side photographs of Georgian and Uzbek farmers are clearly mislabelled (pp. 152–3); although the author admits that the Long March was 'an alleged (and still disputed) 8,000 miles', (p. 214), four pages later the dispute has reduced it to 'a course of 6,000 miles to Shensi' (p. 218). Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh is introduced as the Communist League for the Independence of Vietnam (p. 8) (and indexed as such), when of course the word 'Communist' was not in its name, and there were a great many non-communists among its number. Such was the efficiency of the Geneva Conference, 'Convened on 26 April', that despite 'moments of deadlock ... then came concessions that made possible the declaration issued on 27 April' [one can only assume the author is referring to the 21 July 1954 Final

Declarations], despite it stating on the same page that ‘The second phase, concerned with the Indo-China War, opened a day after the catastrophic fall of the French garrison at the long-beleaguered fortress at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May’ (p. 106).

This speaks to a more fundamental problem with the book – the Cold War background against which it takes place, the significance of which is given in the introduction but which never fully emerges throughout the body of the text with the importance which this reviewer feels is necessary. Attention is given to the context of these visits in the aftermath of the 1954 Geneva Conference (which, according to the author ‘may not feature as much more than a footnote in the Cold War histories of our time’ (p. ix) – not a categorization I suspect many Cold War scholars of East Asia would agree with), but not the bigger Cold War picture. America and Britain had been brought into conflict with the newly-founded People’s Republic ‘when Kim Il Sung’s Soviet-backed North Korean army advanced across the 38th Parallel’ (p. 13). What of China’s much more crucial role? On the same page we are told ‘The Korean War was joined by America together with Britain and other Western allies, whose intervention on the side of South Korea was sanctioned by a resolution of the United Nations Security Council’. Surely the absence of the veto-wielding Soviet ambassador who was boycotting the UN in protest at the refusal to seat the People’s Republic in the Chinese seat is worthy of mention, if just to help explain the context that made the post-Geneva ‘charm offensive’ necessary? Similarly we are told that ‘The People’s Republic of China entered the conflict on Kim Il Sung’s side at the end of October’ (p. 13), without any reference to the American advance on the Chinese border, Beijing’s warnings about the consequences of such an a provocation, and the MacArthur imbroglio it precipitated. Likewise, the account given by Wright of Zhou Enlai’s role and performance in the Geneva Conference (the chapter title is ‘Chou En-lai’s Winning Smile’) is without reference to two pivotal works of the revisionist ‘New Cold War History’ that were published almost a decade ago – Chen Jian’s *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, and Qiang Zhai’s *China and the Vietnam Wars*.⁽²⁾ The trend over the past decade has most definitely been one away from viewing the Viet Minh as ‘highly reluctant to accept the division of Vietnam’ (p. 108), and a China that ‘sacrificed the Viet Minh’ (p.109).⁽³⁾

This may appear like nit-picking, but to this reader, given the Cold War backdrop that is central to the narrative of the book, the events that produced the image of the ‘Bamboo Curtain’ through which the delegates were trying to peek, and which gave rise to the 1954–5 people-to-people diplomacy and charm offensive that followed the death of Stalin the subsequent Soviet ‘peace offensive’ (both unmentioned) are vital if a lay reader is to truly get a sense of the political environment in which the British visitors were operating. Indeed, startling in its absence is any reference to the first Taiwan Straits Crisis – taking the world closer to nuclear war than it had ever been – which was ongoing while two of the delegations were in China.

However, given that the book is ostensibly about ‘post-war Britain and its inherited perspectives’ (p. xi), our attention must turn to this area. Wright gives over considerable space to the frequently improbable comparisons made by these visitors to China (and indeed previous ones, such as Joseph Needham on his first trip in 1943) who found so much in China ‘strangely familiar’. This seems to be one of the core themes in Wright’s book: the China of the imagination of these 1950s Britons was always being brought home to what also appears to be a fairly idealized vision of England. However, it strikes this reader that there is nothing particularly British or unique to that era or China in the human desire to find the familiar among the strange, however quixotic the vision of islets in a flooded Yangzi river being like raisins in caramel custard may be (p. 418).

The book offers nonetheless tantalizing glimpses onto a Britain undergoing dramatic change from the *Austerity Britain* ⁽⁴⁾ of the immediate post-war era and its transformative Labour government under Attlee, to the Conservative-dominated 1950s, during which time Britain wrestled with its decline on the world stage, epitomized by the 1956 Suez Crisis. However, as above, this reader feels more could have been done to explain and contextualize this era. We are given an interesting biography of ‘Chairman’ Ellis Smith, the radical working-class Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent South who acted as leader of the second political delegation, but who was looked down upon by more erudite members of the delegation, such as the Oxford-educated Barbara Castle and many of the left-wing ‘Bevanites’ who heard his speeches with such dismay’ and considered Smith a man of ‘stupendous simplicity’. Sadly we don’t have Ellis Smith’s account of this

journey, or that of the other trade unionists who are somewhat scornfully mocked in Prague for ‘searching for cups of tea while they waited for the plane’. Our vista is definitely that of the Oxford-educated Castle, UCL anatomist Derrick James, and art critic Denis Matthews. The tensions between these characters hints at the social and political change underway in Britain and in the British left, and indeed could have been a book in and of itself; this reader thinks it perhaps a shame that it was not.

It is when discussing art and artists that Wright’s book really comes alive, particularly the then-communist illustrator Paul Hogarth, and the ridiculously eccentric Stanley Spencer, whose rejoinder to Zhou Enlai that New China ought to better know Cookham was Wright’s introduction to this unlikely tale. When discussing Hogarth and Spencer, Wright’s knowledge of and passion for art come to the fore in a manner that is absent in the rest of the book, engaging the reader with the life stories of two very different 20th-century British artists: Hogarth, the card-carrying Communist ‘artist-journalist’, and Spencer, the avowedly apolitical and quintessentially English painter who only agreed to meet Zhou on the condition that politics was not to be discussed, and whose most famous works are depictions of Christ resurrected in Cookham and preaching at Cookham regatta. Here too exists what strikes this reader as the core of another very fine book on its own.

And this is the nub of the issue for this reader: while offering rich and at times amusing cameos of a range of early 1950s British figures on their arduous ‘journeys of peace’, the overly broad scope results in a dissatisfying scatter-gun approach that neither fully illuminates as brightly as it might 1950s Britain, the British left, the Cold War, nor China. Worse than that, however, by relying on the depictions of this group of visitors, caught up in the hope of post-Geneva ‘peaceful coexistence’, Wright runs the risk of, in fact, perpetuating their misconceptions and imaginings of China (though it should be noted that they cast a sceptical eye on what they saw and several – Nye Bevan in particular – were unafraid to challenge their Chinese hosts).

The result is a book that offers little to engage the specialist, but which has a subtlety, humour and sympathy that will appeal perhaps to a lay reader of a certain vintage from the Home Counties who has an interest in art. Someone not unlike Stanley Spencer perhaps.

Notes

1. Robert Bickers, *Britain in China, Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900-49*, (Manchester, 1999). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001); Qiang Zhai, (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See also Pierre Asselin, ‘The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: a revisionist critique’, *Cold War History*, 11, 2 (2010), 155–95. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, (London, 2007). [Back to \(4\)](#)

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