

POETRY

Unmindful

BIPASHA HAQUE



I forbade the clouds to sprawl around this flood plain—the clouds unendingly somersault around my windowpane at the beckoning of drooping hillocks though. I am unmindful of cropping in terrace. This monsoon, I'm rather looking for my golden *Bajubondh* that washed away the previous monsoon.

I no longer have any interest in Kanchan Jangha, wonder if the Shonalu sunrays sparkle any longer in black partridges' spotty tails! These — the nights and days of the forest floor: in it is the canopy of silky bosomed clouds and alert roaming of red-necked partridges ...o would that they were mindful of my warnings!

*Bipasha Haque is a diaspora writer with particular interest in life-the way it is. By profession she is a university teacher.*

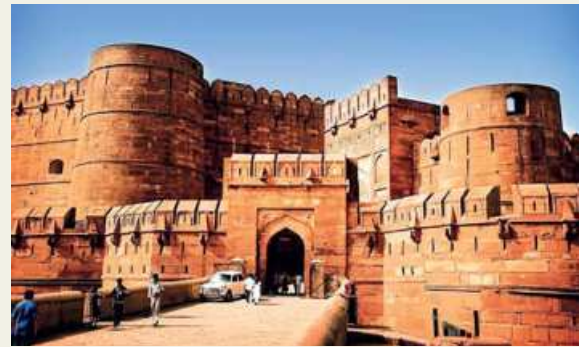
There is No Pause

ARYAN SHAFAT

Away from Agra, with its fortress of mahals, brimming with Earth's treasure, gardens and illusions from the eye of the vulture's flight, past the roadside dhabas, past the colossal statues and solitary temples, dotting the horizon resting comfortably atop Bygone mosques,

Defiantly stands, cradled in History's arms, The city of rallies. Unfazed by time, while holding a universe in its palm. A tapestry of stories is continuously woven from all corners of its body. Growing, thriving, collecting, souvenirs from eras gone by, the city dons the crown of long perished Kings.

There, in the heart of hearts, resides a market, blanketed from time's current, where memories are bought and sold,



a market of dark alleyways submerged in the past.

Hovering in the distance, dominating the skyline, watching over the tents and carts, The Jama Mosque made from red and white, basking in its grandeur, bedecked with the din from makeshift stalls and bargains. Fragrances of uncertainty and vibrantly glowing kebabs, traverse through the narrow, pot-holed roads, concocting a cacophony of tunes and stories.

In the landscape looms a bastion guarding icons, cities and bazaars: A fortress of royal fields, courts, thrones and stories.

In the younger parts, skyscrapers sprout and smog encroaches on the land. The gate of heroes is only partially visible. Straight along, at the end of the Rajpath, magnificence emanates from the palace of power, sand coloured and a copper-dome top from the coronation.

Groves of trees with husky, jaded canopies, painted red by the advent of winter are abodes to gods and goddesses. They lead to the astronomy stairs where ruby-red stairs wind up to the constellations.

Here, in this Dynamic city, Inside the overlooked Chuasath Khamba, hidden behind arcades containing stores of rose-petals, books and sandals; behind the tombs of saints and their boundless followers, isolated, inside the small courtyard, underneath the marble art, underneath the holy writings and garlands of roses and flaming marigolds, rests a soul, only defeated by his being.

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When?

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

The scents and colours of the morning arouse the wetness of the night. The dewdrop splendour awakens the dawning sunrise drenched in colours

of gold, grey and orange, asking much of the skies -- to unite — unite across the border line, to make sure each soldier returns home to their waiting wives, mothers and children. The battle stops raging. The anger calms — no longer flows deep through

the veins of the Earth filling the arteries of battling men. Winning or losing makes no sense if at the end the Earth closes its doors to armies drenched in nuclear waste

or melting ice floes. Angry with the rapacity of the species, Nature waterlogged weeps in desperation. When will they understand?

When will harmony be restored to the mind of man? When will War end? And life unfold in a new mould?

*Mitali Chakravarty is a writer and the founding editor of Borderless Journal. She likes to ride on light beams and waft among clouds in quest of a world drenched in love, tolerance, kindness and harmony.*



Neither Tranquil Mandarins nor Yellow Devils

JOHN DREW

Many centuries ago, Chinese pilgrims came up the Bay of Bengal on their way to Buddhist sites in the Subcontinent. We have no record of their conversations with the people of Bengal but it was the accurate accounts of early Chinese travellers that enabled archaeologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to rediscover the lost Buddhist sites like that inside a hill at Paharpur.

A more modern Chinese settlement in Bengal that has left us the word *chini* for sugar was largely curtailed sixty years ago by the dispute over the Himalayan border, the McMahon Line above Bengal a remnant of aggressive British imperialism earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, Bangladesh, like other Sub Continental countries, has its Chinese neighbours within the gates, driving the building of the prodigious rail bridge across the Padma, developing a port hub

freeing Asia from European rule. The British rulers of India pictured them as cunning and cruel. Both images were stereotypes that served the purposes of those producing the propaganda for or against.

What images does Bangladesh have of the Chinese? No doubt, given the colonial legacy, some of these have, willy-nilly, been bequeathed to us by the West. It is instructive to see how the stereotypes change with the times.

MANDARINS

For Europe unlike India, China remained off the map until the 13<sup>th</sup> century when Marco Polo, among others, made his epic journey to Cathay and reported on a China full of marvels. This report chimed nicely with a superstitious, religious European culture already given to believing in the miraculous and fantastic.

He mocked the way that even the uses of fashionable trinkets, including the pots for infusing a popular new herb, tea, were generally misunderstood.

The idealized view of Chinese civilization was never uncontested. Moreover, the older images often resurfaced. Coleridge, famously, in his poem "Kubla Khan" returned to the medieval travellers' image of China as a marvellous place: "It was a miracle of rare device/ A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice."

Likewise in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lowes Dickinson, following Goldsmith's epistolary method with his *Letters of John Chinaman* (1901) adopted the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment outlook on China. So did Vikram Seth in his mannered sonnet sequence, *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985).

PEASANTS

Less happily, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as European capitalism and imperialism destroyed the old feudal order at home, feudal China was increasingly dismissed as decadent and backward, its largely symbolic fleet destroyed by the British. Bangladeshis need no reminding of the wretched history of the cross-border trade in tea and opium.

Thereafter the dominant image of China that emerged was of the cunning peasant, especially following the "Boxer" uprising against the foreign imperialists and missionaries. Chinese labourers came to be used as cheap labour across the world, building the American railroads, for instance, and, after being conveyed secretly in sealed trains across Canada, providing labour battalions for the Allies in World War I.

Masters have a way of blaming slaves for their own condition and so was born the ugly racial concept of the Chinese as a Yellow Peril, perhaps a subconscious fear that the roles of masters and slaves might one day be reversed. In one frequently reproduced lithograph, even the meditating Buddha was enrolled as the Peril's presiding genius!

The peasant figure that displaced the mandarin still belonged to the same feudal order. Ah Sin, a comic stereotype created on page (1870) and stage (1877) by America's most celebrated writers, Bret Harte and Mark Twain, was shown as debased and thievish. Whatever the

intention of the writers, the effect, at a time of anti-Chinese rioting on the West Coast, was pernicious.

Jack London's portrait of the peasant Ah Cho in *The Chinago* (1909) was something of an exception to the general run. The French colonial authorities in Tahiti are exposed for the racism that hangs a man even when they find he is the wrong one, so cheap is the life of a Chinese coolie.

That the image of a sly Chinese peasant is not necessarily untrue can be determined from the way it was also used by Lu Xun, China's foremost short story writer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Ah Q* (1921) tells the story of a bully and coward who prevaricates in the face of, among other things, revolutionary change. For Lu Xun, a peasant uprising in China would not be successful until the peasantry was properly educated and genuinely spirited.

FU MANCHU

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while China underwent almost permanent revolution in an attempt to free itself from feudalism and foreign domination, the single most influential and lasting image Western culture threw up in response was that of Dr Fu Manchu who, with the manners of a mandarin and the craftiness of a peasant, was a perfect fusion of the two previous stock figures.

For almost the entire century Dr Fu Manchu filled the minds of first book and comic-reading and then film-going and television-watching public. Urbane and fiendish, he was involved in gambling and drugs as part of a plan to bring Europe and America under Chinese control. Historically, of course, the opposite had been true.

As Sax Rohmer admitted, he made his name as the creator of Fu Manchu because he "knew nothing about the Chinese" (depicted in his books as "the most mysterious and most cunning people in the world"). He got no closer to China than the East End of London but his fevered imagination has proved as contagious as any virus.

It is indicative, and also ironical given the British treatment of China in the Opium Wars, that such virulent dreams of a racist, imperialist China seem to have originated in the drug-fuelled nightmares of Thomas De Quincey, the English Opium-Eater.

PRETTY MUCH ALIKE

When the incumbent President of the USA described the racially-indiscriminate Covid-19 as the Chinese virus he was evidently trading on the 19<sup>th</sup> century image of the Yellow Peril, updated as that became in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Red Peril. It is an old trick to deflect attention from your own shortcomings by blaming somebody else.

The images of China they elaborate tell us as much about Western culture as about China. As we saw with the stock image of the peasant, the image is not necessarily untrue: it is that it is inadequate, incomplete. The real problem is that a stereotype essentializes a vast and various place. People and places are diverse.

Timothy Mo, in his novel *Sour Sweet* (1982), parodies the silly prejudice that "all Chinese look alike" by having his Chinese protagonist Lily complain that all the "bland, roseate occidental faces" look the same to her compared with "the infinite variety of interesting Cantonese physiognomies: rascally, venerable, pretty, raffish, bumpkin, scholarly."

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we could do worse than let an 18<sup>th</sup> century English mandarin have the last word. Lord Macartney, Britain's first Envoy to China (1793-4), wrote: "The Chinese, it is true, are a singular people, but they are men formed of the same material and governed by the same passions as ourselves."

Goldsmith, in the introduction to his *Letters*, had written: "The truth is, the Chinese and we are pretty much alike. Different degrees of refinement, and not of distance, mark the distinctions among mankind."

But Macartney went further. He suggested that before we looked at others we had better take a good look at ourselves. If the English found the Chinese proud of themselves and contemptuous of others, it was because these were the characteristics the English themselves displayed when travelling the globe.

The world we see mirrors us. The first place to look for the Yellow Peril — and the Red and the Black — is in Whitehall and in the White House.

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at Chattogram and proposing a rail link across Myanmar, the Celestial Empire once again a superpower but this time expanding as never before to the Indian, and perhaps every other, Ocean.

The people of the Bengal delta have suffered greatly from empires, whether Persian, Portuguese, British or Pakistani: empires are not a win-win situation and never will be. But while is as well to be wary of empire-building, it is also important to be wary of the stereotypes that invariably accompany it.

When the Japanese were at the gates of Imphal in 1944, they presented themselves as liberators, a clever, ingenious people who were successfully

The European Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century ridiculed this farrago, offering a very different view. Leibniz, Voltaire and Quesnay, most notably, canvassed the idea of China as an ideal Confucian state where civil harmony and stability prevailed. Ironically relying on the researches of their opponents, the Jesuit missionaries, rationalist European thinkers used this image to show that a society did not need any religious sanction to be ethical.

Oliver Goldsmith wrote his *Letters of a Citizen of the World* (1760-1) in the guise of a Chinese visitor, satirizing Europeans for preferring to acquire Chinese frippery rather than to try and understand China.