

# Sympathetic or Sinister? Representations of China in George Ernest Morrison's *An Australian in China*

Tom Gardner  
The Australian National University

---

**Abstract:** *George Ernest Morrison (1862–1920) was an Australian traveller, journalist and political adviser to the president of the Republic of China. Before he became the Peking (Beijing) correspondent of the Times of London, he established a reputation as an expert on the Far East through an account of a trip across China, An Australian in China (1895). Most analyses of Morrison's writings or the part he played in early twentieth-century China focus on the latter half of his life when he lived in Peking. This article analyses An Australian in China within the wider context of Morrison's life. It highlights the traditions of new journalism and special correspondents who shaped his approach to writing about China. Despite leaving China with a clear sympathy for the Chinese, this article argues that this sympathy had definite limits.*

In February 1894, the Australian doctor George Ernest Morrison left the treaty port of Shanghai on a journey to Rangoon in British Burma. His route took him up the Yangtze River by boat, across the western Chinese provinces of Szechwan and Yunnan by a combination of foot, horse and sedan chair, and down the Irrawaddy River by boat once more.<sup>1</sup> Reaching the Burmese frontier exactly 100 days after leaving Shanghai (he waited outside the border on the 99th day to ensure that he would arrive on the 100th), he collated the diaries he kept while travelling into a book, *An Australian in China: Being the Narrative of a Quiet Journey across China to Burma* (1895). The success of this book established Morrison's reputation as an expert on the Far East and enabled him to

---

1 For the sake of consistency, postal romanisation has been used throughout this article. All other place names are spelt as they appear in *An Australian in China*.

secure a job as the Peking correspondent of the London *Times*. The book was notable for the length of the journey described (although Morrison noted that he was not exploring anywhere new, even among Europeans) and for counteracting stereotypes of China.<sup>2</sup>

In 'China in the Eyes of Western Travelers, 1860–1900', Xiaolun Wang criticised typical nineteenth-century travellers in China for moving with massive armed expeditions that rarely stayed at Chinese inns or interacted much with the locals.<sup>3</sup> Such travellers sought romantic vistas and picturesque scenes in a quest to claim a sort of ownership over the Chinese landscape, but they only ever viewed China from a distance. They also lacked interest in discovery and sought only to confirm what they already thought they knew about China.<sup>4</sup> This lack of curiosity in the Chinese was a common attitude for late Victorians in general, and even Europeans living in Chinese treaty ports interacted as little as possible.<sup>5</sup> Like many European visitors to China, Morrison did not learn a Chinese language, but he did make a point of dressing in Chinese clothing, staying at Chinese inns and following Chinese customs and manners as far as he could. He also travelled without non-Chinese companions and translators and without weapons, instead 'trust[ing] implicitly in the good faith of the Chinese'.<sup>6</sup>

In Morrison's native land of Australia, intense Sinophobia was the norm. Federation had yet to bring about a national White Australia policy, but many Australian colonies restricted the entry of Chinese people.<sup>7</sup> This became an issue of imperial significance as Australian immigration restriction threatened Anglo–Chinese relations.<sup>8</sup> At first glance it seems that Morrison rejected the Sinophobia of his home colony in *An Australian in China*. He wrote that he:

---

2 George Ernest Morrison, *An Australian in China: Being the Narrative of a Quiet Journey across China to Burma* (London: Horace Cox, 1895), 149–51.

3 Xiaolun Wang, 'China in the Eyes of Western Travelers, 1860–1900', in *Tourism in China*, ed. Alan A. Lew, Lawrence Yu, John Ap and Zhang Guangrui (New York: Haworth Hospitality Press, 2003), 39–40.

4 Wang, 'China in the Eyes of Western Travelers', 40.

5 Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 116.

6 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 1.

7 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20, doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511805363.

8 Benjamin Mountford, *Britain, China, and Colonial Australia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 202, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198790549.001.0001.

Went to China possessed with the strong racial antipathy to the Chinese common to my countrymen, but that feeling has long since given way to one of lively sympathy and gratitude.<sup>9</sup>

While he never challenged the overriding assumption that the British presence in China was beneficial and ought to be extended, Morrison refuted many of the basic British assumptions held about China. As well as presenting a sympathetic picture of the Chinese, he argued against the effectiveness of the missionary presence in China.<sup>10</sup> However, Morrison's sympathy had clear limits; it never overrode imperial loyalty or the imperative to keep Chinese immigrants out of Australia.

Beyond being an atypical Western traveller in China, Morrison complicates standard narratives around Australia and China in many ways. He was a British subject from a settler colony who moved across the borders of empire in a way that only empire made possible. Movement from one colony to another in this way complicates the metropole–colony model of empire, and assumes a particular dynamic between a white settler colony and a semi-colonised country where multiple imperial interests overlapped.<sup>11</sup> Morrison thought of himself as British and, later in his life, would claim to act in the best interests of Britain, but he still brought an Australian viewpoint to events in East Asia.<sup>12</sup> *An Australian in China* is a demonstration of these multiple identities. Publishing the book was a turning point in Morrison's life: it brought him the career he had been working towards for years and began an association with China that would continue for the rest of his life.

This article investigates the approach that Morrison took in his travel writing through an analysis of his life, his influences and the writing itself. In analysing *An Australian in China*, I compare the text to the notes and journals that Morrison wrote while in China. The differences between the two, whether as a result of an editor's influence or Morrison's own circumspection, show the limitations of his determination to present his

9 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 2.

10 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 5.

11 Peter Monteath, 'Peripheries of Empire: G. E. Morrison's *An Australian in China*', in *Colonialism, China and the Chinese*, ed. Peter Monteath and Matthew P. Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2019), 185. For more on this dynamic see Sophie Loy-Wilson, *Australians in Shanghai: Race, Rights and Nation in Treaty Port China* (London: Routledge, 2017).

12 Eiko Woodhouse, *The Chinese Hsinhai Revolution: G. E. Morrison and Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1897–1920* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 2, doi.org/10.4324/9780203493885.

own views on China. Conversely, the similarities give us an idea of what he felt he could freely say. This highlights the ways in which Morrison presented a sympathetic picture of the Chinese that still argued for imperialism and maintenance of racial boundaries.

I first sketch a biography of Morrison, noting particularly the circumstances in which he wrote *An Australian in China* and the Chinese career that resulted from publishing the book. I then examine the models of new journalism and the special correspondent that Morrison followed in his writing to establish how these influenced him. My examination of *An Australian in China* itself focuses on three main themes: first, Morrison's criticism of the missionaries in China; second, his dismissal of the Chinese Army; and, finally, his thinking on race. There are other themes in *An Australian in China* worthy of analysis, such as his approach to Chinese medicine, opium and women; however, as Morrison returned to the themes outlined at a number of points, they provide a cross-sectional perspective of the text. Comparing Morrison's public and private travel writings shows the extent to which he adapted *An Australian in China* to the expectations of a late Victorian imperial audience, and his own support for British imperialism in China. Morrison's sympathy and gratitude towards the Chinese by the end of his trip led him to many positive observations in his book, but this sympathy had clear limits.

## The Life and Times of Morrison

George Ernest Morrison was born in Geelong in 1862. He began keeping a diary at the age of 16—something that he would maintain with only occasional interruptions until his death in 1920.<sup>13</sup> At 18 he made the first of his many expeditions, hiking from Melbourne to Adelaide alone through what was then still regarded as wilderness.<sup>14</sup> At the suggestion of his mother, he sent the diaries that he kept on that trip to David Syme, who published them in the *Leader*.<sup>15</sup> At the end of 1881 he bought a canoe, christened it the *Stanley*, and paddled it down the Murray River. Once again Syme published his account of the trip. A medical student at

---

13 Cyril Pearl, *Morrison of Peking* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1967), 9.

14 Pearl, *Morrison of Peking*, 9.

15 Peter Thompson and Robert Macklin, *The Man Who Died Twice: The Life and Adventures of Morrison of Peking* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2004), 15.

the University of Melbourne at the time, Morrison failed his second-year examinations and decided to leave, later quipping that ‘it was a severe blow to the university, but the university survived’.<sup>16</sup>

In the middle of June 1882, Morrison made a serious attempt at a career in journalism, signing on to a ship engaged in the blackbirding of Pacific Island people into Queensland and reporting on his experiences in the *Leader*.<sup>17</sup> While his initial reports were neutral on blackbirding, he sparked controversy later with a letter in the *Age* condemning it. This drew criticism from supporters of blackbirding, including the premier and governor of Queensland.<sup>18</sup> On arriving back in Queensland, Morrison resolved to cross Australia from north to south—the reverse route to the failed Burke and Wills expedition 20 years earlier. During his preparations for the trip in Normanton, he was routinely discouraged from making such a journey, but in his 1882 diary he wrote:

It was hearing on all hands of the long stages between stations and the impossibility of travelling without at least two horses that decided me to go alone. It was the reports told me by everyone of the danger to be incurred from the blacks especially unless the travellers showed a rifle and revolver that promoted me in the decision to go entirely alone.<sup>19</sup>

Morrison’s personality emerges from these early diary extracts. A wry sense of humour coloured his observations. He was also perfectly happy to be a contrarian and, to some degree, revelled in it to establish his reputation. This played into the model of the special correspondent that he was consciously emulating, with its emphasis on sensationalist, on-the-ground reporting and daring feats.<sup>20</sup>

Morrison’s most ambitious expedition in this mould, however, would end in failure. On an expedition into New Guinea funded by the *Age*, he was speared in the face and stomach in retaliation for shooting a Papuan.<sup>21</sup> A surgeon in Melbourne was only able to remove the spear point in his

16 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 36. Sarcastic comments such as this were typical of Morrison and permeate *An Australian in China*.

17 George Ernest Morrison and Rob Clifton-Steele, *The Cruise of the Lavinia: An Eyewitness Account of a Labour Recruiting Voyage in 1882* (Chatswood, New South Wales: Rob Clifton-Steele, 2017).

18 Morrison and Clifton-Steele, *The Cruise of the Lavinia*, 6.

19 Morrison, in Pearl, *Morrison of Peking*, 26–27.

20 Andrew Griffiths, *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism, and the Fiction of Empire, 1870–1900* (New York, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 26, doi.org/10.1057/9781137454386.

21 Pearl, *Morrison of Peking*, 48.

nose, unwilling to remove the other. This had to be done by Dr John Chiene, a professor at the University of Edinburgh, to whom Morrison dedicated *An Australian in China* as the man who ‘gave me back the power of locomotion’.<sup>22</sup> Morrison remained in Edinburgh to recuperate and finish his medical studies. He attempted to find work as a doctor in the United States, Spain, Morocco, Australia, the Philippines and Japan—with varying degrees of success—but did not hold any job for more than two years.<sup>23</sup> In 1894, he arrived in Shanghai after a trip through Japan that drained the last of his funds.<sup>24</sup> After borrowing £30 from his mother, he resolved to make the trip that is the focus of this article.

By the time Morrison left Shanghai he had already built a reputation within Australia as an adventurer and writer, although his precarious financial situation did not quite reflect his fame within Australia. No diaries immediately preceding Morrison’s trip through China have survived, so it is difficult to know exactly what he was thinking as he planned it, but an untitled and undated note from his papers lists the anticipated benefits of his journey:

1. Book to be a great success
2. To enable me to pay off my debts  $\frac{1}{4}$
8. Abundance of money forthcoming  $\frac{1}{4}$
12. Uninterrupted good fortune in London.
13. To become a great newspaper correspondent.<sup>25</sup>

Morrison hoped that *An Australian in China* would bring relief from the financial troubles he experienced after leaving Edinburgh. A successful book would also help to rebuild his confidence after the disaster in New Guinea. Indeed, he was so embarrassed by the outcome of his expedition to New Guinea that he destroyed all of his papers from that time.<sup>26</sup> An unarmed trip across China could have been his way of making up for this failure as an explorer. This trip was a resumption of the adventurous career that he had attempted to build in his early life. Perhaps most

---

22 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, n.p.

23 Pearl, *Morrison of Peking*, 66–68.

24 Pearl, *Morrison of Peking*, 68.

25 G. E. Morrison, *Books for Publication: An Australian in China*, State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW) Archives, Mitchell Library (ML), MSS 312/28, Item 1, n.p. I suspect this is a ‘thanksgiving’ note, which Morrison would occasionally write at the end of a year to take stock of his accomplishments or express his hopes for the coming year.

26 George Ernest Morrison, *Reminiscences*, SLNSW Archives, ML, MSS 312, CY Reel 16, 11.

importantly for his long-term goals, it was on the basis of his book that he attempted to get a job as a special correspondent for a newspaper in England.<sup>27</sup>

Eventually his efforts would be successful. In 1895 he was appointed the London *Times*'s Peking correspondent on the success of *An Australian in China*. From 1897 to 1912 Morrison would cover the Boxer Uprising (1899–1901), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) and the 1911 Chinese Revolution. During this time, he made further trips through Siam (Thailand), Northern China, Mongolia and Siberia. From 1912 to his death in 1920 he served as an adviser to Yuan Shikai, the first president of the Republic of China. The fame that he garnered as a journalist and adviser led him to be dubbed 'Chinese' Morrison, echoing another hero of empire, Charles 'Chinese' Gordon.<sup>28</sup> He also received a great deal of praise and recognition for his efforts. For example, his 1920 obituary in the *Times* reported that he had the 'prescience of a statesman and the accuracy of an historian'.<sup>29</sup> Representatives of the Chinese Government laid a wreath at his funeral and, at a lecture in his honour, the Chinese consul general to Australia described him as 'a man of whom Australia must be proud, and of whom China was proud. He was a Great Australian'.<sup>30</sup>

Morrison's life after publishing *An Australian in China* changed from that of a colonial travel writer and unhappy medical doctor to professional journalist and an important actor in the history of early Republican China. This was an extraordinary career; though, considering the model he was following and the opportunities the British Empire provided, it was not unthinkable.

## Writings on Morrison

Morrison's life and his various adventures have been the subject of a series of laudatory biographies and academic analyses. The earliest book on his life is *Chinese Morrison* (1939) by popular historian Frank Clune. In a mix of hagiography and boys' own adventure, Clune played up the exotic aspects of Morrison's career and presented him as far less racist

27 Pearl, *Morrison of Peking*, 74.

28 Frank Clune, *Chinese Morrison* (Sydney: The Bread and Cheese Club, 1939).

29 'Morrison of Peking', *Times* (London), 31 May 1920, 19.

30 Wei-ping Chen, *The Inaugural George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology* (Canberra: Australian Institute for Anatomy, 1932), 8.

than he was. According to Clune, Morrison was ‘without prejudice of race or colour. To him all human beings were human beings—just that’.<sup>31</sup> This came on top of stories of Morrison saving Chinese settlers and being a friend to Aboriginal Australians.<sup>32</sup> However, Clune was curiously blasé about Morrison shooting a Papuan tribesman.<sup>33</sup>

Peter Thompson and Robert Macklin’s *The Man Who Died Twice* (2004), the most recent biography, is essentially an attempt to induct Morrison into the Australian pantheon of heroes. Journalists themselves, Thompson and Macklin focus on Morrison’s career as a reporter. Lamenting that he is not better known, they conclude that ‘he was to journalism what Bradman was to cricket’.<sup>34</sup> Like Clune, they praise his objectivity and keen powers of observation. While they acknowledge the imperial framework within which Morrison operated, they credit him with resisting the sense of superiority that, in some ways, defined the British presence in China.<sup>35</sup>

Another journalist, Cyril Pearl, in *Morrison of Peking* (1967), acknowledged Morrison as being ‘infected with the raging imperialism of the nineties’, and showed how this formed something of a blind spot for him.<sup>36</sup> This view of Morrison the ardent imperialist aligned more closely with much of the academic literature on Morrison. Pearl also wrote about how Morrison found his love of Britain difficult to reconcile with his love of China, and often had to become adept at ‘double-think’ in order to maintain both.<sup>37</sup> In my analysis of *An Australian in China*, I argue that, instead of double-think, Morrison’s Sinophilia was limited and conditioned by his British imperial loyalty and Australian nationalism.

Academic studies of Morrison’s life tend to focus on his career as a journalist and adviser rather than the period immediately before, when he wrote *An Australian in China*. On the whole they are much more critical of Morrison than his biographers. In his biography of Edmund Backhouse, Hugh Trevor-Roper painted Morrison as an autocrat who terrorised Backhouse and did not hesitate to destroy the career of anyone who stood in his way.<sup>38</sup> Not only did Morrison not learn a Chinese language, but

---

31 Frank Clune, *Chinese Morrison* (Melbourne: The Bread and Cheese Club, 1941), 23.

32 Clune, *Chinese Morrison* (1941) 2–3.

33 Clune, *Chinese Morrison* (1941), 15.

34 Thompson and Macklin, *The Man Who Died Twice*, 349.

35 Thompson and Macklin, *The Man Who Died Twice*, 349.

36 Pearl, *Morrison of Peking*, v.

37 Pearl, *Morrison of Peking*, vi.

38 H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Hermit of Peking: The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 97.

also, Trevor-Roper argued, he never took much interest in Chinese culture at all.<sup>39</sup> Instead, Morrison always thought about China in terms of what foreign powers could get out of it.<sup>40</sup>

In a similar vein, Paul French called Morrison 'vainglorious' and disparaged him for missing two of the major events in the late Qing: the death of Empress Dowager Cixi and the Boxer Rebellion.<sup>41</sup> The views of these two historians are a far cry from the saintly picture painted by Morrison's biographers. The claim that Morrison did not take an interest in China or the Chinese, however, does not hold up against his observations in *An Australian in China*, even if his sympathy was filtered through an imperial agenda, as Trevor-Roper claimed.

Another major academic interpretation of Morrison comes from the work of Eiko Woodhouse. As well as a substantial body of literature on Morrison in Japanese, Woodhouse published *The Chinese Hsinhai Revolution* (2004) in English. Unlike French and Trevor-Roper, Woodhouse emphasised Morrison's importance without the laudatory tone of his biographers. In her view, Morrison was highly influential and worked throughout the waning years of the Qing to serve Australia's interests at the expense of Japan and sometimes even Britain.<sup>42</sup> The height of her claims on Morrison's influence came when she argued that he helped bring on the Russo-Japanese War, the end of the Qing Empire and the entry of China into World War I in 1917.<sup>43</sup> She also described a change in Morrison's politics from pro- to anti-Japanese, something that followed the rest of Australian society in the wake of Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War.<sup>44</sup>

Adam Aitken discussed how race and hybridity are explored in *An Australian in China*.<sup>45</sup> This was, however, more a work of literary criticism based around studies of Orientalism and critical race theory than

---

39 Trevor-Roper, *Hermit of Peking*, 43–44.

40 Trevor-Roper, *Hermit of Peking*, 47.

41 Paul French, *Through the Looking Glass: China's Foreign Journalists from Opium Wars to Mao* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 73–75. The latter charge is somewhat unfair since Morrison was trapped by the siege of the legations and wounded in the fighting, and therefore somewhat hindered in his reporting. It is true that he, like many in the legations, missed the significance of the early Boxer movement until it was too late.

42 Woodhouse, *The Chinese Hsinhai Revolution*, 185–86.

43 Woodhouse, *The Chinese Hsinhai Revolution*, 13, 64, 181.

44 Woodhouse, *The Chinese Hsinhai Revolution*, 22.

45 Adam Aitken, 'Australians Going Native: Race, Hybridity and Cultural Anamorphism in G. E. Morrison's *An Australian in China*', *The Journal of the European Association for Studies of Australia* 6, no. 1 (2015): 30–41.

a historical analysis. Peter Monteath, on the other hand, contextualised *An Australian in China* within the arc of Morrison's life and described his journey as a movement from one periphery of empire (Australia) to another (the south-eastern border of China).<sup>46</sup> Studying *An Australian in China* within the context of Morrison's life shows the influences working on him at the time and highlights some of the themes in his later work as a journalist and adviser. In particular, Monteath emphasised Morrison's sympathy for the Chinese, which led him to criticise many failed imperial interventions. Despite this, Morrison was seemingly unable to turn this same criticism towards the British.<sup>47</sup> While Monteath identifies this limitation solely in the published text of *An Australian in China*, it becomes even more apparent on examining Morrison's personal writings.

## Morrison and the Special Correspondent Model

In reading *An Australian in China*, it is still clear that, for all his apparent sympathy with the Chinese, Morrison's project was implicated in imperialist projects in China. Imperialism was what made his journey possible: he would not have been able to travel anywhere in China safely—Chinese dress or not—if the Opium Wars had not forced the Qing Empire to allow British subjects to enter its territory. In theory, this freedom of entry was mutual under the terms of the Treaty of Tientsin (1858), but Australian colonies would not extend the privilege that Morrison enjoyed in China to Chinese visitors in Australia for long, despite official Chinese protest.<sup>48</sup> Morrison's observations were also dependent on the idea of objectively viewing the foreign—a key feature of Orientalist discourse.<sup>49</sup> His project—to travel through China and see with his objective gaze the truth about the country—was heavily implicated in the logic of empire and how the West produced knowledge about China at the time. The specific way in which Morrison did this was by emulating the special correspondents of the late nineteenth century.

---

46 Monteath, 'Peripheries of Empire', 192.

47 Monteath, 'Peripheries of Empire', 193.

48 Mountford, *Britain, China, and Colonial Australia*, 100.

49 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), 32.

Victorian special correspondents were the result of the formation of British mass print culture colliding with the emergence of a new, more self-conscious imperialism.<sup>50</sup> The ‘new journalism’ of the late Victorian era aimed to deliver facts in a clear and concise manner—something especially important as telegraph networks spread throughout the world—but it also aimed to make the news exciting.<sup>51</sup> Dull news would not sell to a growing reading public at a time when press competition was becoming fierce. Australian newspapers began to adopt the model in the 1880s, just as Morrison was starting his career as a journalist.<sup>52</sup>

Special correspondents were a particular hero of the ‘new journalism’ within the British Empire. The lives of correspondents such as William Howard Russell, Archibald Forbes and, Morrison’s personal hero, Henry Morton Stanley generated almost as much interest as the news they sent back.<sup>53</sup> A sense of adventure permeated the role of the special correspondent, as they were imagined to be on the frontline of great events. There, they would get to the essence of what was happening and make a mad dash to the nearest telegraph station so that the news might be brought back to the public in the metropole.<sup>54</sup> Like Victorian travel writers, they were expected to write romantic and picturesque content but, instead of observing from afar, they were expected to be part of the story.<sup>55</sup> The style of special correspondents had to be vivid, concise and thrilling and, if they could satisfy their audience’s thirst for blood, so much the better.<sup>56</sup>

Throughout his life Morrison idolised these heroic special correspondents, particularly Stanley, the adventurer who went in search of the famous missionary, doctor and explorer David Livingstone in modern-day Tanzania.<sup>57</sup> When travelling down the Murray River, Morrison had named his canoe after Stanley, a mark of both how much he admired the man and his desire to follow his hero’s example. In a letter to his mother before signing on to a blackbirding ship, he wrote: ‘only as a newspaper correspondent can I expect to distinguish myself above the common herd

---

50 Griffiths, *The New Journalism*, 13–14.

51 Griffiths, *The New Journalism*, 7.

52 Sally Young, *Paper Emperors: The Rise of Australia’s Newspaper Empires* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2019), 76.

53 Griffiths, *The New Journalism*, 53.

54 Griffiths, *The New Journalism*, 36–37.

55 Griffiths, *The New Journalism*, 33.

56 Griffiths, *The New Journalism*, 29, 42.

57 Thompson and Macklin, *The Man Who Died Twice*, 8.

... It is the noblest, in my opinion, of all the professions.<sup>58</sup> Given that the letter was about Morrison's upcoming career move, he was probably trying to reassure his mother about his job prospects, but it also clearly indicated the esteem in which he held newspaper correspondents.

In writing *An Australian in China*, Morrison emulated this model on a larger scale, travelling to another periphery of empire and summarising it for an audience 'back home'. He sought the picturesque, as travel writers in China did, but the participatory role of special correspondents required actual interaction with the Chinese. Lacking opportunities to satisfy his audience's thirst for blood, he carefully courted controversy to generate interest in his book.

## Western Missionaries versus the 'Highly Lucid and Educated Chinaman'

A major point of controversy in Morrison's book lay in his view of missionaries in China. Most late Victorians encountered missionary work mainly through missionaries' own writings, which took for granted that missionary work in China was a worthy cause.<sup>59</sup> When missionaries implored the readers of, for example, the periodical *China's Millions* to 'pray that [God] will speedily open the as yet unopened parts of the [Qing] empire to resident missionary work',<sup>60</sup> there was no question that it would be a good thing. Morrison set himself in opposition to these missionary writings in his own account of China.

In the first chapter of *An Australian in China*, Morrison mocked the efforts of missionaries in China by wryly noting that 'the aggregate body [of missionaries and native workers] converts nine-tenths of a Chinaman per worker per annum; but the missionaries deprecate their work being judged by statistics'.<sup>61</sup> He continued this refrain of ineffectiveness throughout his account, such as when he drily noted that the 'abundantly blessed' work of one missionary had resulted in six converts over three

---

58 G. E. Morrison, *Correspondence 1850-1923*, SLNSW Archives, ML, MSS 312/35, 214.

59 R. G. Tiedmann, 'Western Primary Sources', in *Handbook of Christianity in China Volume Two: 1800-Present*, ed. R. G. Tiedmann (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), 33, doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004114302.i-1050.

60 'The New Year', *China's Millions* (1890), 1.

61 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 5.

years.<sup>62</sup> Despite his acerbic comments, however, he seemed sympathetic to the individual missionaries or missionary groups themselves. For example, he described the China Inland Mission (CIM) as ‘a body of courageous workers, brave travellers, unselfish and kindly men endowed with every manly virtue that can command our admiration’, with little sense of irony.<sup>63</sup> He drove this point further by describing a ‘poor thing’ working at the CIM station in Suifu, contrasting her health in England, ‘full of life and vigour’, against that in China, ‘forgetting what is the sensation of health’, being indicative of her personal sacrifice for a greater cause.<sup>64</sup> By taking the position that the mission was futile but the missionaries noble in their suffering, Morrison managed to criticise the missionary project without personally insulting the missionaries.

In his original draft of *An Australian in China*, Morrison’s criticism was not nearly so tempered. For instance, a great deal of his praise for the missionaries is absent, suggesting that these were later additions. Like his claim that the missionaries converted ‘nine-tenths of a Chinaman’, Morrison used hyperbole to mock their efforts, but in a much harsher way:

There are already 2 converts and luckily there are 3 very earnest enquirers who await the first vacancy as time permits. This much is not discouraging and there is a remarkable hope that the city will have 1000 baptised converts by the end of the next glacial epoch.<sup>65</sup>

Whereas he praised individual missionaries in his published work, Morrison was highly critical of missionaries in general in his diary:

The chief characteristic of the [China Inland] Missionaries is ignorance. Few of them are educated[,] many are almost illiterate. Any braindead bootpolisher who feels that he has a mission may be serviced in the C. I. M. and sent to China to crush the highly educated and lucid Chinaman.<sup>66</sup>

---

62 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 65.

63 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 69–70.

64 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 71.

65 Morrison, *Books for Publication*, Item 2, 23.

66 Morrison, *Books for Publication*, Item 2, 23.

This was accurate in the sense that many British missionaries were selected for their spirituality rather than their level of education; American missionaries, by contrast, were almost universally college graduates.<sup>67</sup> However, Morrison was equally dismissive of American missionaries:

The American missionaries glory in the possession of high sounding titles. Most of them are M. D. and if they have not received this degree from any university then they are usually granted it by the courtesy of their friends.<sup>68</sup>

The suggestion that American medical missionaries had not earned their qualifications continues the refrain of ignorance and suggests a general contempt for missionaries rather than any concern for the effectiveness of their efforts in China as in his published book.

Peter Monteath describes Morrison's views on missionaries in *An Australian in China* as 'ambivalent'; however, Morrison's original notes show that this ambivalence was a result of later moderation.<sup>69</sup> In setting out for his journey, Morrison was trying to emulate his heroes, the special correspondents, in both the nature of the journey he took and the content of his writing afterwards. However, to write in the style of special correspondents, Morrison had to be controversial without being unacceptable. Even in its more moderate form, he received a great deal of criticism from religious quarters, including from the Bishop of Ballarat in a letter to the *Argus* that claimed: 'Dr. Morrison's statements about countries he had visited had been emphatically challenged by others who had been there.'<sup>70</sup>

In both his private and public writings, then, Morrison challenged the missionary project to various degrees. It is tempting to see this as an anti-imperialist critique of agents of cultural imperialism. *An Australian in China* certainly had praise for the Chinese woven through the text, mostly regarding the courtesy that was shown to Morrison. At the end he wrote:

---

67 Ian Welch, "'Our Neighbours but Not Our Countrymen": Christianity and the Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Victoria (Australia) and California', *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 13 (2004–2006), 176, doi.org/10.1163/187656106793645204.

68 Morrison, *Books for Publication*, Item 2, 25.

69 Monteath, 'Peripheries of Empire', 188.

70 Samuel Ballarat, 'Dr Morrison's Strictures on Chinese Missions', *Argus*, 14 August 1895, 6. Morrison published a reply to the bishop on 13 November, and a number of correspondents sent letters in a debate with varying levels of pettiness.

I cannot speak more highly of the pleasure of my journey than to declare that I felt greater regret when it was finished than I ever felt on leaving any other country.<sup>71</sup>

His claim that he developed a lively sympathy for the Chinese seems to be genuine, at least from his perspective. Morrison's references to 'unoffending Chinese' and 'the highly educated and lucid Chinaman' show that, at the very least, he shared in the broader Chinese contempt for missionaries. Such criticism of Western intervention in China did not extend to many other themes in his book.

## **'No Time Would Be More Opportune': Morrison on the Chinese Army**

Such impressions of Morrison's sympathy for the Chinese are flatly contradicted by his comments on the Chinese Army stationed in Yunnan and his racial theories regarding the Chinese. Where Morrison's private writings aligned with his public travel literature, his support for the British Empire and the racial theories of his time becomes more apparent. Reading both accounts of Morrison's time in China, it seems that he became more jingoistic the further south-west he travelled, and the closer he came to the borders of China and British Burma.<sup>72</sup>

His observations frequently turned to the poor condition of China's soldiers and forts. He noted a dominant view in British diplomacy that China must be placated 'rather than endanger any possible relations, which may subsequently be entered into, with a hypothetically powerful neighbour'.<sup>73</sup> He then compared this hypothetical power with the actual power of the soldiers accompanying him, who usually had no working muskets and had sold their gunpowder to pay for food.<sup>74</sup> Morrison expressed a similar sentiment in his journals when he noted that 'some soldiers are armed[,] others unarmed. Equal danger to be apprehended from the one as from the other'.<sup>75</sup> In both his published work and his notes, China was far from a powerful neighbour to be placated, but rather a paper tiger with barely the strength to defend itself.

---

71 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 280.

72 Monteath, 'Peripheries of Empire', 189.

73 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 241.

74 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 242.

75 Morrison, *Books for Publication*, Item 4, 195.

The poor state of the Chinese military and the outbreak of the First Sino-Japanese War also led Morrison to argue that the time was right to strike in China. Crossing the River Salween—the ancient border between Burma and China—Morrison regretted it was not the current border between China and British Burma. He argued that ‘no time would be more opportune’ to push the British border to this point, and that ‘but little persuasion’ would be required to gain it.<sup>76</sup> A note made by Morrison mirrored this sentiment: he was ‘none the wiser why the boundary of Burmah [sic] should not be pushed further inland ... along the course of the Salween’.<sup>77</sup> Neither his book nor diary contained much of an argument as to what benefits this would bring.

In these arguments on the Chinese military, Morrison positioned himself as defying the common thinking around China, although his use of the ‘umbrella soldier’ trope of Chinese soldiers was almost as old as the first Western presence in Canton.<sup>78</sup> The difference with his argument, however, was that he did not position China’s military weakness in the language of martial races that was so typical of these claims.<sup>79</sup> Morrison had a great deal of praise for the Chinese as a ‘race’, even though this praise was often loaded. His arguments instead centred on the corruption and inefficiency of the Qing state. This is a theme that would only grow stronger over the course of Morrison’s later reporting in China.<sup>80</sup>

For Morrison in *An Australian in China*, China was a territory ripe for further imperial intervention, although he was not necessarily arguing for total conquest. By the end of the nineteenth century, the carving up of China—as had been done in Africa—was widely regarded as impractical by the British.<sup>81</sup> Morrison did, however, argue for continuing the policy of taking more concessions from China, a process that reached its peak in the 1890s as *An Australian in China* was being published.<sup>82</sup> Unlike in the case of missionaries, then, Morrison was an enthusiastic supporter of British military intervention in China.

76 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 239.

77 Morrison, *Books for Publication*, Item 4, 267.

78 This trope was based on the idea that Chinese soldiers were inherently unwarlike. A common refrain among the treaty port English, supposedly based on easy victories in the Opium Wars, was that ‘a boatswain and a dozen bluejackets’ would be enough to take any Chinese port. For more on this trope, see Bickers, *The Scramble for China*, 44, 369.

79 See Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

80 Pearl, *Morrison of Peking*, 180.

81 Mountford, *Britain, China, and Colonial Australia*, 219.

82 Bickers, *The Scramble for China*, 323.

## 'Which Is to Be Our Colonist, the Asiatic or the Englishman?': Morrison on Race

Just as with the military, Morrison also demonstrated the limits of his sympathy towards the Chinese in discussing race. Aitken focuses on how Morrison presented China and the Chinese as 'anamorphic': capable of being 'desirable or disgusting' depending on one's perspective.<sup>83</sup> In the same vein, Yuko Kawai, writing in a current American context, has explained this kind of race construction by arguing that supposedly positive or negative racial stereotypes form a dialectical rather than a contradictory relationship, which often results in ambivalent representations.<sup>84</sup> This ambivalence is present throughout Morrison's observations of the Chinese in *An Australian in China*. The same supposedly positive claims about Chinese virtue fed into his claims of Chinese threat.

Morrison praised many of the characteristics that he claimed to have observed in the Chinese. These manifested particularly among the baggage carriers he employed and the soldiers that escorted him. He described them as 'capital fellows, full of good humour, cheerful, and untiring'.<sup>85</sup> He drew favourable comparisons between the average Briton and Chinese person: 'I have seen [Chinese] men ambling along the road, under loads that a strong Englishman could with difficulty raise from the ground.'<sup>86</sup> In his diary he wrote in a similar vein about the soldiers:

Imagine a rich traveller in England who spoke no English offering Tommy Atkins 2 pence for travelling on foot at forced speed 38 miles to bring him a telegram ... I doubt if the English soldiers would bow so gratefully as the Chinese.<sup>87</sup>

After bidding goodbye to his final group at the Chinese border he wrote:

It surely speaks well of the sense of responsibility innate in the Chinese that, during all this time, I never had in my employ a Chinese who did not fulfil, with something to spare, all that he undertook to do.<sup>88</sup>

83 Aitken, 'Australians Going Native', 39.

84 Yuko Kawai, 'Stereotyping Asian Americans: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril', *Howard Journal of Communications* 16, no. 2 (2005): 115, 126, doi.org/10.1080/10646170590948974.

85 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 89.

86 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 90.

87 Morrison, *Books for Publication*, Item 4, 39.

88 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 280.

This established a notion of Chinese honesty at odds with many contemporary racist depictions.

Morrison's positive description of Chinese people began to take on a sinister aspect, however, when he described physical differences among the Chinese. For example, on the topic of Chinese punishments, Morrison reflected that 'no people are more cruel in their punishments than the Chinese, and obviously the reason is that the sensory nervous system of a Chinaman is either blunted or of arrested development'.<sup>89</sup> His diary makes the same argument, which suggests he thought these claims would be accepted by his audience and needed no modification.<sup>90</sup>

Aitken, citing D'Cruz and Steele, attributes Morrison's account of Chinese punishments to an Australian tendency to judge Asian countries by the standards of Western democracy.<sup>91</sup> However, it is not clear that D'Cruz and Steele are necessarily pointing to a historical trend, as most of the evidence they cite is based on more recent commentary.<sup>92</sup> Morrison's later support for the authoritarian Yuan Shikai would suggest that his views on democracy were ambivalent at best. While he avoided a cultural condemnation based on Western standards, he instead followed a medical approach that carried its own anamorphic potential. Morrison made these observations at a time when the medical community agreed that European nervous systems were inherently vulnerable to a tropical climate.<sup>93</sup> As well as the resistance to pain or physical hardship that Morrison noted, a deadened nervous system would explain why Chinese people were so successful in tropical locations such as Malaysia or Canton. Perhaps more significantly for Morrison, it would ensure their success in the fetid climate of the Northern Territory, where he believed the Chinese had already driven white Australians out.<sup>94</sup> This tied in to recurring fears around the vulnerability of the 'empty north' in Australia at the turn of the century.<sup>95</sup> Morrison made these fears explicit when he discussed the role of Chinese people in Australia.

---

89 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 104.

90 Morrison, *Books for Publication*, Item 2, 541, 547.

91 Aitken, 'Australians Going Native', 33.

92 J. V. D'Cruz and William Steele, *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2003), 42.

93 Laurence Monnais and Hans Pols, 'Health and Disease in the Colonies', in *The Routledge History of Western Empires*, ed. Robert Aldrich and Kirsten McKenzie (London, New York: Routledge, 2014), 270–98; Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 97.

94 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 223.

95 David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850–1939* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2012), 116.

Towards the end of *An Australian in China*, Morrison argued in support of nascent White Australia policies based explicitly on the same positive racial traits that led him to sympathise with the Chinese. Morrison argued that '[the Chinese] can outwork an Englishman, and starve him out of the country'.<sup>96</sup> This led to a racially exclusionary conclusion:

Admitted freely into Australia, the Chinese would starve out the Englishman ... There is not room for both in Australia. Which is to be our colonist, the Asiatic or the Englishman?<sup>97</sup>

The image of Asian settlers swamping the European population of Australia has been a common one since Chinese people first started working in Australia.<sup>98</sup> White Australians justified their colonisation of the continent on the grounds that they were more productive on land that they had taken from Aboriginal Australians. The possibility of greater Chinese productivity, then, created anxieties about the legitimacy of white colonisation.<sup>99</sup> These anxieties manifested in a panic over Asian settlers and the exclusion of Chinese people from Australia, something that Morrison expressed his support for.

The section where Morrison outlines the threat of Chinese immigrants appears to be missing from his notes, which suggests it was a later addition. Much like his arguments about missionaries, it could have been changed to make his work more appealing, or it could simply be the result of later reflection as he sailed to England. Just as Kawai articulates, for Morrison, the positive and negative racial traits that he observed did not contradict, but fed into each other. Similar arguments were made by Charles Dilke and Alfred Deakin at the time and these may have influenced Morrison's thinking; however, his personal experience and observations would have lent further weight to these claims.<sup>100</sup> Although such arguments were not unique to Australia, they caused tension between the British colonial administration and Australian colonial governments during the 1880s and 1890s as the Chinese Government attempted to pressure the British into ending immigration restriction.<sup>101</sup> Morrison's views on race articulated a support for immigration restriction at a time when it was a controversial topic within the empire.

---

96 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 223.

97 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 223–24.

98 Walker, *Anxious Nation*, 37–38.

99 Walker, *Anxious Nation*, 38.

100 Mountford, *Britain, China, and Colonial Australia*, 207–09.

101 Mountford, *Britain, China, and Colonial Australia*, 216.

Whether he was praising or expressing anxiety about the Chinese, Morrison always presented them in racialised terms that emphasised their alien nature, as shown through his argument that the Chinese nervous system was blunted. At times he viewed this alien nature positively, and left China without ‘the strong racial antipathy’ so typical at the time.<sup>102</sup> But he never erased that antipathy completely, and his affection for the Chinese was always conditional on their remaining in China. He saw no place for them in Australia.

## Conclusion

Studying the public and private travel writings of George Morrison highlights the extent to which he moderated the claims he made about China as a result of his journey. Morrison was perfectly willing to criticise some aspects of the Western presence in China such as missionary activity, but was equally happy to advocate further concessions from the Chinese to entrench the standing of the British Empire in the country, while maintaining the racial boundary between China and Australia. Morrison was an atypical Western traveller in China and left China with a great deal more sympathy for the Chinese than when he started. What has been shown in this analysis, however, is that there were important limits to his apparent renunciation of Sinophobia.

---

102 Morrison, *An Australian in China*, 2.

This text is taken from *ANU Historical Journal II: Number 2*,  
published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,  
Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/ANUHJII.2020.01](https://doi.org/10.22459/ANUHJII.2020.01)