

# Beyond the 'Shanghailanders': China through the eyes of foreigners in the 1920s and 1930s

ALEX PAN

## Abstract

This article explores foreign perspectives and insights into Chinese society during the 1920s and 1930s, by examining two foreigners' personal accounts of life in China. Adopting a microhistory approach, the paper treats these personal accounts as historically significant sources, despite their inherently limited subject matter. Moreover, as in traditional historical interpretation, the article maintains that such personal accounts can serve as microcosms that reflect and illuminate wider historical trends and perspectives.

The accounts of businessman Rex Phillips, read alongside those of travelling salesman Harry Glathe, highlight the diverse perspectives that Westerners had on China. Phillips's writings illuminate how Westerners may have viewed China as a dangerous, backwards, war-torn nation, either with disdain or relative sympathy. Meanwhile, Glathe's writings showcase a more Orientalist perspective, viewing China as a quaint, exotic, but developing country.

By treating Phillips's and Glathe's sources as historical commentaries, further insight is gained into Chinese society at the time. Phillips's letters and photographs detail his life in cosmopolitan Shanghai, while Glathe's detailed descriptions and striking photographs of southern China enrich our understandings of the diversity of Chinese social experiences during the Republican period (1912–1949). Ultimately, these sources enrich our understanding of both China's social development and the diversity of Western racial and national perspectives during this period.

## Introduction

This paper explores Chinese society and Western racism during the 1920s and 1930s through the personal accounts of Rex Phillips and Harry Glathe. While both were white businessmen who lived in China concurrently, their differing experiences and perspectives offer insight into the nature of Chinese society and how Westerners viewed China during this period. These sources are not representative of the great diversity of foreign experiences of China during this time, nor are their views representative of how most Westerners viewed China. However, I argue that limited personal accounts can still serve as a microcosm of insights that reflect and illuminate wider contemporary trends and perspectives.<sup>1</sup> From these two accounts, I argue that foreign perspectives on China varied greatly, from condescending disdain or relative sympathy towards a dangerous, war-torn nation to a more Orientalist perspective that borders on fetishising China's exoticism and beauty. In addition to providing insight into foreign perspectives, Phillips's account also sharpens our understanding of life in the foreign community in Shanghai, while Glathe illuminates our understanding of the multifaceted social developments in

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Gamsa, 'Biography and (Global) Microhistory', *New Global Studies* 11, no. 3 (2017), doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2017-0024 articulates how historians traditionally view the idea of historical representation, and how microhistorians—who tend to focus on examining a very limited subject—dismiss the importance and possibility of achieving historical representation through limited sources. Although such criticism is valid, the nature and context of the sources examined here, in the presence of other supportive scholarship and the absence of contradictory evidence, arguably allows for these sources to be considered 'microcosms' that can indicate something of common perspectives in broader society. In keeping with the traditional, conventional approach to historical generalisation—see Gamsa, 'Biography and (Global) Microhistory', 232—further examination of such personal perspectives can arguably lead to more representative understandings of social history. That being said, as the microhistorian would argue, regardless of the validity of representation, there remains immense value in examining personal sources in and of themselves.

southern China. Therefore, these sources also contribute to our understanding of Chinese society during the Republican period (1912–1949).

While there is considerable literature exploring the lives of foreigners in China and Chinese social history,<sup>2</sup> personal sources continue to be of great historical value. For instance, public sources may provide only limited insight into popular opinions, which a focused examination of personal accounts can address. To illustrate using the Australian context, while parliamentary records and popular literature clearly reflect popular racist attitudes crystallised in the White Australia Policy,<sup>3</sup> newspapers archived from the era may very well portray Australians as sympathetic to Asia.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, my source-oriented approach allows for historical sources to openly speak for themselves,<sup>5</sup> in the hope of finding 'answers to large questions in small places',<sup>6</sup> as per a loosely microhistorical approach to source analysis. While this approach faces the obvious difficulty of determining the accuracy of these historical sources,<sup>7</sup> such an approach—when coupled with a broad understanding of the existing scholarship—can enrich our existing historical understandings. Additionally, these particular personal accounts contain unpublished photographs, which are often underutilised in historical research and can offer insights into both the photographer and their subjects.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, these personal accounts enable a more nuanced understanding of individual foreign perspectives on China, especially as historians increasingly highlight that foreign perspectives and experiences in China were far from homogenous.<sup>9</sup>

Sourced from the National Library of Australia, Phillips's and Glathe's writings and photographs contrast yet complement each other to enrich our understanding of foreign perspectives on China.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, with the authors hailing from relatively understudied non-British/American backgrounds—Phillips was Australian, though identified as British, while Glathe was of Swiss and German origin, though he later relocated to Australia—our understanding of popular historical Western attitudes as well as of Chinese society during that period can be refined.<sup>11</sup> There is, for example, only limited work

<sup>2</sup> See the following paragraphs for detailed discussion on the historiography—that is, historical writing—on these subject areas.

<sup>3</sup> Gwenda Tavan, 'The Dismantling of the White Australia Policy: Elite Conspiracy or Will of the Australian People?', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1 (March 2010): 111, doi.org/10.1080/1036114042000205678; Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice, *Aliens & Savages: Fiction, Politics and Prejudice in Australia* (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 213.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *The Age*, 'China', December 30, 1935.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief introduction to basic approaches of conducting history research, see Sheng Mao, 'Review of *Zhixue de menjing yu qufa: Wanqing minguo yanjiu de shiliao yu shixue* [Methodologies of Historical Writing: Sources and Historiography on Late Qing and Republican China], by Sang Bing', *China Review* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 280–283.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 5, doi.org/10.4324/9780203500637. A detailed summary of the theory and criticisms of microhistory is superfluous here, as I did not actively incorporate theoretical frameworks into my analysis. However, Magnússon and Szijártó's work provides a useful introduction to this strand of historical analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Mao, 'Review of *Zhixue de menjing yu qufa*', 281.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent introduction to the use of photographs in historical research, see the Introduction to Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh, *History in Images: Pictures and Public Space in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California, 2012). Henriot's chapter on the photography of wartime Shanghai also highlights the importance of using photographs as historical sources for understanding historical circumstances. See Christian Henriot, 'Wartime Shanghai Refugees: Chaos, Exclusion, and Indignity', in *History in Images: Pictures and Public Space in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California, 2012), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Dikötter, *The Age of Openness* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 45–46; Robert A. Bickers and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, 'Shanghai's "Dogs and Chinese Not Admitted" Sign: Legend, History and Contemporary Symbol', *The China Quarterly* 142 (June 1995): 463, doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000035001.

<sup>10</sup> There are some Australian sources from this period that offer remarkable insight into the diversity of foreigners' experiences in China, although British and American narratives continue to be dominant. Many businessmen went to China in the wake of the Great Depression, though Phillips does not neatly fit into this category. Meanwhile, personal records from missionaries, although much less accessible as many were destroyed to escape persecution—see Lesley Dixon, 'The Australian Missionary Endeavour in China, 1888–1953' (Dissertation, University of Melbourne, 1978)—also provide valuable insight into life in diverse regions in China. Missionary records also feature many more voices from women.

<sup>11</sup> As highlighted in Sophie Loy-Wilson, 'From Man of the British Empire to Proud Australian', *National Library of Australia News* 18, no. 10 (July 2008): 11–14, Phillips did not identify as an 'Australian' but rather a British subject. However, as Phillips later discovered, there were indeed cultural differences between the British and 'Australians' in Shanghai, justifying the importance of examining Australian perspectives on China. Meanwhile, major traditional reference works in the historiography of foreigners include Albert Feuerwerker, *The Foreign Establishment in China in the Early Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Centre for Chinese Studies, 1976) and Frances Wood, *No Dogs and Not Many Chinese* (London: John Murray Publishers, 1998). Meanwhile, Robert Bickers, 'Shanghaianders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843–1937', *Past and Present* 159 (May, 1998), doi.org/10.1093/past/159.161 foregrounds the identity and perspectives of British in Shanghai. Such literature remains quite focused on British and Americans, including personal accounts, such as A. T. Steele, *Shanghai and Manchuria, 1932: Recollections of a War Correspondent* (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1977). Finally, see Frank Dikötter, *Things Modern* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007),

on Australasian perspectives on China, such as Jane Stafford's analysis of New Zealander Robin Hyde's experiences of China,<sup>12</sup> while Sophie Loy-Wilson, in utilising personal accounts, provides significant insights into the social experiences and transnational impacts of Australians living in Shanghai.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, there is much scope for further examination of such sources to better understand Australian perspectives. Meanwhile, there is increasing historical interest in exploring the varied and multifaceted experiences of European foreigners in China, beyond general discussions of racist Western attitudes or the strong focus of English-speaking foreigners in semi-colonial treaty ports like Shanghai.<sup>14</sup> For example, *Foreigners and Foreign Institutions in Republican China*, edited by Anne-Marie Brady and Douglas Brown, is a relatively recent collection of eclectic insights into the diverse foreign communities of Republican China, with a focus on examining the experiences of those marginalised in historiography, such as New Zealanders, Italians, and Koreans.<sup>15</sup> I examine my two sources in a similar vein.

Firstly, I examine Phillips's correspondence. An Australian businessman who lived in Shanghai from 1924 to 1937, Phillips wrote many personal letters back home to his family, through which we can better understand how he and his family, as Australians, viewed China and the Chinese. Secondly, I examine Glathe's travel diary. A travelling salesman of Swiss and German background, Glathe's unpublished but polished records, compiled from his travels around southern China from 1934 to 1936, provide insightful contrast to Phillips's views, in turn highlighting the diversity of foreign perspectives. While these sources contrast each other in content and nature, both challenge and reaffirm many of our understandings of foreign perspectives on China, especially since they were roughly contemporaneous with each other.

The vivid descriptions and photographs enrich our understandings of Chinese social history during the Republican period. Much has been written on the Chinese social history of this era by numerous historians.<sup>16</sup> Traditionally, historians have tended to portray Republican China, between empire and communism, as a weak, fragmented, corrupt society trapped in incomplete revolution.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the 1986 *Cambridge History of China* introduced the Republican period as not only a period with a 'low level of "modern" development', but a generally horrific society in which 'the physical and especially the human destruction inflicted ... beggars any description'.<sup>18</sup> However, this traditional view has been increasingly challenged, even by 'traditional' historians like John F Fairbank, as they acknowledge the complexity and paradoxical nature of development during this period.<sup>19</sup> Contributing greatly to this dynamic historiography are foreigners' primary sources: works such as Frank Dikötter's *Things Modern* draw heavily from non-Chinese accounts. Nevertheless, Australian and Continental European sources

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3–4 for an introduction to how various 'romantic travellers' and 'nostalgic historians' viewed China. Dikötter strikingly outlines how Orientalist perspectives such as Glathe's were rather commonplace.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Stafford, 'Robin Hyde's *Dragon Rampant* and 1930s Travel Writing', in *East by South: China in the Australasian imagination*, ed. Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar and Keren Smith (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), 190.

<sup>13</sup> Sophie Loy-Wilson, *Australians in Shanghai: Race, Rights and Nation in Treaty Port China* (London: Routledge, 2017), doi.org/10.4324/9781315756998. Loy-Wilson has also examined Rex Phillips in detail, as evidenced in her book.

<sup>14</sup> Wood's *No Dogs and Not Many Chinese* is an excellent example of traditional historiography on foreigners' experiences in treaty ports, i.e. cities opened to foreigners in the nineteenth century. Additionally, while there is abundant historiography that may be categorised as examining the history of racism rather than 'the history of foreigners in China,' for example, this area of historiography seems to be lacking in studies of how Westerners viewed China and the Chinese people during the 1920s and 1930s. In contrast, there is considerable literature on how Westerners viewed Japan and the Japanese during the twentieth century. See, for example, John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986), which examines Western perspectives on Japan during the Second World War.

<sup>15</sup> Anne-Marie Brady and Douglas Brown, eds., *Foreigners and Foreign Institutions in Republican China* (London: Routledge, 2013), doi.org/10.4324/9780203105122.

<sup>16</sup> This paper draws heavily from Dikötter's *The Age of Openness* for a broad but concise summary of Western historiography on Republican China. Key 'traditional', established Western historians of Republican China include John K. Fairbank, William C. Kirby, Mary B. Rankin, and Albert Feuerwerker.

<sup>17</sup> Dikötter, *Age of Openness*, 2–3.

<sup>18</sup> Mary B. Rankin, John K. Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker, 'Introduction: Perspectives on Modern China's History', in *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 13, ed. John K. Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 27, doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521243384.002.

<sup>19</sup> Dikötter, *Age of Openness*, 2–3; Elizabeth J. Remick, *Building Local States: China during the Republican and Post-Mao Eras* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1tg5j7r.

remain relatively marginalised in this historiography: hence, the detailed descriptions and candid shots within these collections contribute to knowledge of this subject.

## Rex Phillips: Australian perspectives of Shanghai

Rex Phillips's writings provide a microcosm of insights that inform our understanding of foreign perspectives on China. His letters to his family suggest that he shared anti-Chinese sentiments, like many other members of the foreign community in Shanghai.<sup>20</sup> However, his letters—in apparently attempting to convince his family of his personal perspectives—also suggest that his family held relatively sympathetic attitudes towards China.<sup>21</sup> In addition to these insightful views on how Australians viewed China, Phillips's rich descriptions and vivid photography also enrich our understanding of Shanghai society during the 1920s and 1930s.

Rex Phillips's anti-Chinese sentiments, especially those that highlight the physical differences between the foreign-controlled and Chinese areas of Shanghai, indicate the prevalence of racist mindsets among the foreign community in Shanghai. This affirms our understanding that though there was no universal 'Shanghailanders' mindset among foreigners in Shanghai, such a mentalité was certainly common among foreign residents, including Australians.<sup>22</sup> This is evident in Phillips's descriptions of the contrast between the International Settlement and the Chinese parts of Shanghai. According to Phillips, 'the foreigners ... built a wonderful modern city in Shanghai, with beautiful roads, tall reinforced buildings, properly policed, with modern sanitation', whereas the Chinese 'have not advanced in their ideas since the foreigner came to their country'.<sup>23</sup> Phillips describes the Chinese parts of the city as consisting of 'a lot of rottenly constructed hovels ... rottenly policed, absolutely no sanitary arrangements, mud and cobble, narrow lanes for roads, and filth, filth, filth where-ever you go'. This clear delineation and air of superiority reflects the racist mindset of many foreigners, evidenced in other areas such as the rumoured 'No dogs or Chinese' signs, or the disgust many foreigners felt towards Chinese servants for their unsanitary habits.<sup>24</sup> The fact that Phillips took notice and reported on such differences further suggests how his—and many other foreigners'—racist outlook was common across nationalities in Shanghai's foreign community.

Phillips's crude descriptions of the origins and nature of China's complex political circumstances further reinforce our understanding of how certain foreigners viewed Shanghai. Phillips makes clear his perspective and attitudes in his descriptions of the Nationalist advance of 1927, when the Nationalist army of the south embarked north on its mission to unite a warring China. Like many foreigners in Shanghai, Phillips was relatively unconcerned with this Nationalist advance, underestimating the strength of the Nationalist army.<sup>25</sup> This suggests a relatively common attitude among Shanghai's foreign community regarding such political issues. Similarly, Phillips's assertion that the 'foreign community as a whole resented the day of mourning' on the anniversary of Sun Yat-sen's death further

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, 'Cosmopolitan Connections and Transnational Networks', in *At the Crossroads of Empires: Middlemen, Social Networks, and State-Building in Republican Shanghai*, ed. Nara Dillon and Jean C. Oi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 218, doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9780804756198.003.0010. Wasserstrom highlights that there is evidence for both harmonious and discriminatory attitudes from foreigners towards local Chinese.

<sup>21</sup> For example, in Phillips's letter dated 26 February, 1932, his discussion of Australians' 'natural hate of Japanese' implies that Australians viewed China relatively sympathetically, while Phillips also generalises about the West, noting that 'We are foolish and civilised enough to enter into diplomatic relations with the Chinese to a degree where we get simply tied up in knots'. Phillips's persuasive tone and comments indicate some sympathy towards China from Australians. See Rex Phillips, letter, 26 February 1932, Papers of Rex, Clarence, and Madge Phillips, 1924–1946, MS9942, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>22</sup> A 'Shanghailanders' typically refers to a foreign resident in Shanghai, usually British. See Robert Bickers, 'Shanghailanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843–1937', *Past and Present* 159 (May, 1998): 198. See also Wasserstrom, 'Cosmopolitan Connections and Transnational Networks', 218, which affirms that the stereotypical image of the snobbish, racist foreign resident was a major, though not all-encompassing description of common perspectives among foreign Shanghai residents. See also Bickers and Wasserstrom, 'Shanghai's "Dogs and Chinese Not Admitted" Sign', 463.

<sup>23</sup> Phillips, letter, 15 March 1927.

<sup>24</sup> Bickers and Wasserstrom, 'Shanghai's "Dogs and Chinese Not Admitted" Sign', 463; Frances Wood, *No Dogs and Not Many Chinese*, 212; Bickers, 'Shanghailanders', 198.

<sup>25</sup> Phillips, letter, 30 March 1927; Nicholas R. Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire* (Hanover: Middlebury College Press, 1991), 210.

indicates that many foreign residents of Shanghai paid little attention to the activities of the Chinese community.<sup>26</sup>

The strength of a shared foreign view is also evident in Phillips's pro-Japanese stance in the military conflict between China and Japan, often termed the Shanghai Incident of 1932. Indeed, Phillips's perspective, in describing himself as 'very pro-Japanese' despite his 'default' anti-Japanese tendencies,<sup>27</sup> are not dissimilar to the ambivalence and even praise the foreign community expressed towards the Japanese in their conflict, as historian Nicholas Clifford also highlights.<sup>28</sup> As such, Phillips highlights that commonalities and uniformities indeed existed in foreign perspectives in Shanghai. Even if Phillips's self-identity as a British subject or an Australian continued to evolve,<sup>29</sup> his letters clearly mark him identifying as one of 'the foreigners',<sup>30</sup> sharing similar sentiments about the Chinese with other resident Shanghai foreigners.

Phillips's apparent attempts to persuade his family of his anti-Chinese and pro-Japanese views suggests that his family back in Australia had opposing views. This is particularly clear in Phillips's description of the background to the Shanghai Incident in 1932, when Shanghai was evidently widely publicised in international news media during a period of conflict between China and Japan. In his letter to his mother, Phillips positions himself as something of an expert on the subject, offering to 'clarify the situation a little for you'.<sup>31</sup> This is in response to Phillips's assumption that perhaps his family's 'natural hate of Japanese, as Australians, is the predominating thought in your minds as far as this dust up in Shanghai is concerned'. This contextual information suggests that Australian—or indeed international—media was pro-Chinese, but also suggests that Australians had a relatively positive image of China, especially when compared to the Japanese. Indeed, Phillips's writing reinforces the idea that Australians were relatively anti-Japanese. He notes that he '[dislikes] the Japs. as a nation', but affirms that he is 'very pro-Japanese in this undeclared local war'. As such, Phillips's letters imply that general Australian perspectives may have been relatively sympathetic towards China and antagonistic towards Japan. This enriches our understanding of Australian views towards China by complicating our understanding of existing sources, especially since the Japanese were positively described as 'heroic'—and Japan called a 'very progressive country'—in Australian newspapers.<sup>32</sup>

The characteristic tone and context in which Phillips conveys such sentiments further highlights nuances in how Phillips's family—and, by extension, other Australians—understood China. For example, Phillips's letters home often included an assurance of safety, suggesting that his family considered China a dangerous place. Indeed, after the Nationalists' 1927 capture of Shanghai, Phillips directly addressed his mother's concerns and emphasised his personal safety, especially as the British were defending Shanghai against the 'slit-eyed swines'.<sup>33</sup> This not only highlights Phillips's trust in the British—which again implies a sense of foreign unity—but also highlights how Phillips's family viewed China as a dangerous country. Indeed, Phillips tells his mother, 'for the life of Mike, DON'T WORRY',<sup>34</sup> further suggesting that China could be seen as a dangerous place, perhaps in addition to a twinge of sympathy in their ongoing struggle against the '[hated]' Japanese.

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<sup>26</sup> Phillips, letter, 3 June 1929. Sun Yat-sen was—and remains—one of the most celebrated figures in modern Chinese history, often regarded as the father of the Republic and the central figure in the revolution against the Qing dynasty. For a summary of foreigners' perspectives in Shanghai, see Wasserstrom, 'Cosmopolitan Connections and Transnational Networks', 218.

<sup>27</sup> Phillips, letter, 26 February 1932. See, for example, Rotem Kowner, "'Lighter Than Yellow, But Not Enough': Western Discourse on the Japanese 'Race', 1854–1904", *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 1 (2000): 131–132, doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X9900895X which highlights how the Japanese were generally viewed as a threat after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, peaking with even 'demonic' depictions by the time of the Pacific War.

<sup>28</sup> Clifford, *Spoilt Children*, 274.

<sup>29</sup> Loy-Wilson, 'From Man of the British Empire', 14.

<sup>30</sup> Phillips, letter, 15 March 1927.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, letter, 26 February 1932.

<sup>32</sup> See *Tweed Daily*, 'Heroic Japanese', February 25, 1932, 3; *Western Mail*, 'Japanese Purchases', April 9, 1931, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips, letter, 30 March 1927.

<sup>34</sup> Phillips, letter, 15 March 1927. A quick survey of archived Australian newspapers supports the idea that the Chinese were not inherently viewed badly. For example, *The News* (Adelaide), 'Starving Chinese', 29 June, 1935, 6 features a photograph and caption of a Chinese peasant invoking pity, while a later article—*The News* (Adelaide), 'Chinese!', 14 September, 1939, 15—calls the Chinese 'clever'. For a



Phillips took many dozens of photographs which accompanied his letters to his family, which—when read in context with his letters—reinforce his disdain for the Chinese, yet also continue to suggest his family's relatively sympathetic views towards them. When read in context with his somewhat persuasively toned letters, these photographs—often of daily life and wartime scenes<sup>35</sup>—suggest Phillips's desire to persuade his family to share his feelings of disdain.<sup>36</sup> Phillips's photographs of the conflicts in Shanghai often feature the defences of the International Settlement, emphasising his safety amid troubling societal developments (see Figure 1). Again, the perspective of these photographs, in emphasising Phillips's safety, further suggests his family's fears for him in a volatile social situation. Moreover, Phillips's photographs, with the exception of a few portrait shots, usually maintained distance between himself and the Asian subjects of his photographs, whether Chinese or Japanese (see Figure 2). His photographs, to some extent, also highlight the disparity between Chinese and Western development and technology. For example, one of Phillips's many photographs clearly shows the disparity between a well-constructed block home in the orderly International Settlement, juxtaposed with relatively poorly built boats (see Figure 1). These depictions show that Phillips often highlighted divisions and differences between foreigners and the Chinese to his family, conveying the inequality between the two groups. Given the context in which these photographs appear, it appears that Phillips was, to some degree, attempting to convince his Australian family to turn from their sympathetic views on China, thus highlighting two different Western perspectives of China and the Chinese.



Figure 1. The plight of Chinese refugees trying leave the underdeveloped Chinese areas to enter the safety of the orderly Foreign Settlement. The caption to the photograph notes that it is 'one of our block homes on the left'.

Source: From the National Library of Australia's MS9942 collection.

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somewhat dated but clear summary of how anti-Chinese sentiment may have gradually declined as the decades of the twentieth century unfolded, see Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> An important historiographical contribution of Phillips's photographs is that they give us detailed insight into the early Japanese and Chinese skirmishes on broader Shanghai society. Unfortunately, a detailed examination into this area is beyond the scope of this article. See Henriot, 'Wartime Shanghai Refugees' for a solid introduction to this area.

<sup>36</sup> Of course, analysing these photographs relies on some interpretation and imagination. However, this is standard practice when using documents as historical sources, and arguably it should be no different with photographs, as argued in Henriot, 'Wartime Shanghai Refugees', 25.



Figure 2. Head and shoulders above the rest: This somewhat juxtaposing, patronising group pose visually highlights Phillips's views of racial difference in China.

Source: From the National Library of Australia's MS9942 collection.

## Harry Glathe: Exoticised insights into rural China

In contrast to Phillips, Glathe's diary enriches our understanding of foreign perspectives on China by highlighting a relatively Orientalist view of China. Additionally, his rich descriptions and vivid photographs not only provide insight into Glathe's perspectives, but also highlight the disparities and unevenness in Chinese society during the Republican period.

While Phillips derides the backwardness of China's cleanliness, Glathe proffers a less contemptuous view in merely observing certain aspects of Chinese society as 'primitive', such as transport and accommodation.<sup>37</sup> As such, Glathe gives insight not only into his personal perspectives, but also into the nature of China's development in the 1930s. For example, Glathe's perception of backwardness was made in contrast to other features that were 'modern', such as the military.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, certain technologies and features were described with modernity in mind, such as the description of the town of Shiuchow as 'quite modern, with electricity, telephone, rickshaws, and few nice hotels'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, modernity is also implied in the description of Waichow as 'a clean city, there are even numbered rubbish bins for refuse'. Such observations offer a glimpse into the nature of development in Republican China. For example, in highlighting that 'even the smallest hamlets have schools, although much stress is laid on sports like handball, football and tennis', Glathe reinforces our understanding that education expanded greatly in Republican China, even in remote areas.<sup>40</sup> It also offers insight into how sports was valued in the government curriculum, corresponding with the views of scholars like Hsiao-pei Yen, who highlight how the Nationalist government sought to promote physical exercise as part of education.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Harry Glathe, *Diary*, Papers of Harry Glathe, 1934–1995, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Glathe, *Diary*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Dikötter, *Age of Openness*, 65–66.

<sup>41</sup> Hsiao-pei Yen, 'Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation: The Modern Girl and the New Life Movement', *Asian Studies Review* 29, no. 2 (2005): 178, doi.org/10.1080/10357820500221147.

Although Glathe makes some observations on China's modernisation processes, he still tends to regard China as quaint and old-fashioned. Glathe's admiration of the heritage of China—from 'Mountains, famous for their beauty and variety' to 'beautiful and massive old city walls'<sup>42</sup>—highlights how Glathe preferred to view China as rustic and quaint, untouched by modernity. Indeed, Glathe takes little interest in the 'modern' aspects of China. For example, although the city of Namhung was comparatively modern with 'wide streets' and 'new concrete buildings', Glathe considered them 'without character', with the city of Namhung generally having 'very little of interest'.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Glathe's surprise in considering it 'quite a revelation [sic] to see the military installations and the troops ... well equipped, well trained',<sup>44</sup> implies an expectation of backwardness. These rather patronising perspectives further reinforce how Glathe regarded China as exotic, sharing similarities with late nineteenth-century European views of an exoticised Asia, which continued well into the twentieth century.<sup>45</sup>

Glathe's more specific observations on various aspects of Chinese society suggest a relatively sympathetic view of China. For example, Glathe makes some striking in-depth observations on the nature of slavery in Yunnan, but does not make any condemning remarks. In another instance, where Glathe contracted an illness after staying in a local tavern, he remarks that 'in spite of illness I learnt a lot from these education goings on offered for free',<sup>46</sup> referring to the behaviour and activities inside the Chinese tavern. Furthermore, Glathe describes a strange practice of homeowners he encountered in his travels, who—eager to generate more income—rented out seats in Glathe's bedroom 'to watch me getting up'. However, instead of deriding this peculiarity, Glathe 'got accustomed to this and frequently gained good information or interesting news from them' in Chinese. In all cases, he views particular social customs in Chinese society rather indifferently. Glathe's relative willingness to learn about Chinese culture, customs, and society is further highlighted in his photographs. Consisting mostly of traditional religious motifs, statues, and architecture, as well as street scenes and natural scenery, these images all suggest a great curiosity and interest in Chinese culture. However, they are also juxtaposed with evidence of a modernising, developing China. Glathe's amateur Sinological interest in a 'traditional' China reinforces our understanding of how foreigners may have continued to hold Orientalist views towards China as an exotic, distant, and mystical location.

However, Glathe's extensive notes challenge traditional historiographical views of a completely backwards China during this period, emphasising the multifaceted and almost paradoxical nature of Chinese society. For example, Dikötter highlights that historians have traditionally focused on how transport was neglected by the government, but argues that great developments took place during the Republican period that improved transport infrastructure.<sup>47</sup> Glathe's unique perspective, however, reinforces that development was relatively piecemeal and not necessarily uniform. For example, Glathe contends that transport in Yunnan province was 'difficult and primitive'.<sup>48</sup> He makes mention of 'some half-hearted attempts [sic] ... to build roads' that were quickly destroyed in bad weather, further suggesting the underdevelopment of the road network. This contrasts with Dikötter's positive appraisal of the remarkable development of China's roads throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, while Glathe stresses the lingering problems plaguing road construction on the regional level, Dikötter tends to dismiss these shortcomings and focus on the big picture of general road improvement throughout China. Another example from Glathe's notes highlight how 'railways and buses provide faster transport than the rivers, but many places can only be reached by sedan chair or on foot' in the province of

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<sup>42</sup> Glathe, *Diary*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Glathe, *Diary*, 1. This observation, however, corresponds with historiographical understandings of China's military development. For example, see Chi Man Kwong, 'Intellectual Officers, Professional Journals, and Military Change in the Northeast and National Revolutionary Armies, 1928–1937', *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 11, no. 2 (2017): 180–208, doi.org/10.1080/17535654.2017.1380364.

<sup>45</sup> Keren Smith, 'The Compass of Fashion', in *East by South: China in the Australasian Imagination*, ed. Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar and Keren Smith (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), 289–290. See also Dikötter, *Things Modern*, 3–4.

<sup>46</sup> Glathe, *Diary*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Dikötter, *Age of Openness*, 65–66.

<sup>48</sup> Glathe, *Diary*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Dikötter, *Things Modern*, 80.



Kwangtung, while ‘the railway ... was in a deplorable condition’.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, however, the city of Namhung in northern Kwangtung featured ‘wide streets’. These observations indicate that while there were certainly areas of advancement in transport—challenging existing historiography on the local history of the county<sup>51</sup>—many aspects remained relatively undeveloped. This therefore enriches our understanding of the nature of transportation in Republican China, highlighting the uneven nature of its development. As such, Glathe enriches our historiographical understandings of the almost paradoxical nature of Republican China, which, as Dikötter summarises, also anticipates how many historians view infrastructure development during the Republican period.<sup>52</sup>



Figures 3 and 4. Glathe generally had very different photographic interests to Phillips, with his travel diary filled with photographs of temples, roads, and various street scenes, reflecting his amateur Sinological interests.

Source: From the National Library of Australia’s collection, MS 7820.

Glathe’s rich details of social life in China also include considerable discussion of opium, reinforcing our historiographical understandings of the prevalence of opium smoking in Republican China. Opium is a widely studied topic for its major social impacts on late Imperial and Republican China, and historiography generally suggests that opium smoking was a major social activity that permeated all parts of society.<sup>53</sup> Glathe’s firsthand descriptions of opium use in Yunnan provide more concrete insight into how widespread opium use was, characterising the inhabitants of Yunnanfu—the main city in Yunnan province—as ‘the most opium besotted crowd I have ever seen’, with ‘the whole city of Yuuanfu [sic] ... permeated with the sickly sweet aroma of opium fumes’.<sup>54</sup> This corroborates with our understanding of Yunnan as one of the major opium producers in the 1930s, as historian Edward Slack suggests,<sup>55</sup> while also reinforcing historiographical understandings of the role of opium in everyday Yuannese society.<sup>56</sup> Glathe’s account further consolidates our understanding of opium as a widespread habit, practised regardless of class or social status.<sup>57</sup>

Glathe’s summary of Kwangsi province provides a useful reflection of his views and impressions on the development of China:

Kwangsi is being developed systematically and with commendable enthusiasm. One must remember that this province, too, has a backward peasant population, and foreign ideas are generally mistrusted.

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<sup>50</sup> Glathe, *Diary*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Remick, *Building Local States*, 47.

<sup>52</sup> Dikötter, *The Age of Openness*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Edward R. Slack, *Opium, State and Society: China’s Narco-Economy and the Guomindang, 1924–1937* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 42.

<sup>54</sup> Glathe, *Diary*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Slack, *Opium, State and Society*, 42.

<sup>56</sup> Angang Dai, ‘Wanqing zhi minguo Yungui yapian de chanxiao lujing’ [The Producing and Marketing of Opium in Yunnan and Guizhou from Late Qing Dynasty to Republican China], *Shilin [Historical Review]* 5 (2010): 88.

<sup>57</sup> Slack, *Opium, State and Society*, 42.

Furthermore, these people are suddenly confronted with a volume and wealth of Western knowledge and technology, all unexplored by them, that it would be a miracle if they were to select only what is good for them. And we have to allow for this when they make their many mistakes.<sup>58</sup>

This remark offers insight into the nature of development in China during the Republican era, as well as Glathe's tendency to patronise the subjects of his observations. While traditional scholarship emphasised the backwardness of Republican China—and some recent scholarship highlights the willingness and enthusiasm of the Chinese to adapt all things 'modern'<sup>59</sup>—Glathe, along with recent scholarship, emphasises the unevenness of 'modern' technological and infrastructure development; indeed, he characterises the people of Kwangsi as a 'backward peasant population'. As such, Glathe's perspective also works to qualify scholarship which emphasises the progressive, adapting, and non-xenophobic mindset of even the most remote settlements in China's interior.<sup>60</sup> However, Glathe's patronising perspective towards the Chinese also implies a sense of racial superiority, not unlike that of Phillips and other Australians throughout history.<sup>61</sup> However, in his acknowledgement that 'we have to allow for ... their many mistakes', Glathe seems to recognise that he and many foreigners like him had a tendency to patronise the Chinese, reinforcing that his Orientalist views were not exclusive to him.

## Comparisons and conclusions

Phillips's and Glathe's personal accounts are ultimately idiosyncratic, but nevertheless provide some insight into how foreigners viewed China during the 1920s and 1930s. Although Phillips and Glathe had very different experiences of China, their combined perspectives complement each other to enrich our understanding of foreign perspectives on China. Glathe highlights how foreigners may have considered China an exotic, quaint, but developing country, sympathising with the nation yet continuing to regard its people from a patronising Orientalist viewpoint. Phillips, however, with his disdainful outlook, shows how China could also be viewed as a dangerous, backwards, war-torn nation, though Australians may also have held a lens of pity, as revealed when Phillips seeks to persuade his family. There was obviously a great diversity of 'Western' views of China, and although these authors' views may not contribute anything particularly revolutionary or original in historiography, their stories and perspectives—as presented in their accounts—nonetheless refine and enrich our historical understandings.

Additionally, Phillips and Glathe provide significant insight into various aspects of Chinese society, including the lives of foreigners themselves as they lived in China. Phillips's racist beliefs reinforce our understanding of common perceptions of China among the foreign community in Shanghai, highlighting that while nationalities and self-identity differed,<sup>62</sup> racial prejudices against the Chinese and Japanese traversed those barriers. Phillips's outsider's perspective on the conflicts in China during this time also highlight how little foreigners were impacted by the violence of what was to develop into a lengthy and brutal war, and how foreigners understood such conflicts. Glathe's travel diary, meanwhile, greatly enriches our understanding of Chinese society during this time, on topics as varied as slavery and opium smoking in Yunnan to inter-city transport in rural Kwangtung. As such, both Phillips and Glathe's personal accounts offer insights into much more than their personal views on China. Understanding Western perspectives and experiences in China therefore sharpens both our understanding of Western understandings of China as well as Chinese history itself, as we continue to explore the usefulness of personal accounts in understanding a variety of historical areas.

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<sup>58</sup> Glathe, *Diary*, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Dikötter, *Things Modern*, 73, 261–262.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Shi Li, 'Explorations into White Australia's Sense of Superiority over Chinese', *International Journal of China Studies* 6, no 3 (December 2015): 313.

<sup>62</sup> Loy-Wilson, 'From Man of the British Empire', 14.

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