

## The literary body-snatcher: Fan-quis and the children of Han

When I was a boy, one of the few types of pickles sold in the grocers was a glass jar of vegetable pickle called chow-chow. I never liked it. Its still available, and is made of vegetables such as cauliflower, green tomato and onion and is a mustard yellow. However, it has a history that extends back to the hey-days of the British Empire. Early in Volume 1 of his three volume work *The Fan-Qui in China*, of 1838, Charles Toogood Downing muses on the uses of the word chow-chow. 'When applied to little dogs and tender rats, and other delicate articles of food, it is spoken with great gusto.....Baskets, which are procured in Canton, with many compartments, are called chow-chow baskets, whole a mixture of different pickles or preserves bears the same alluring title of chow-chow.'<sup>1</sup> We should assume that this account is authentic, despite a devastating, resentful review of the book, by John Robert Morrison, writing in the Canton-printed *Chinese Repository*<sup>2</sup>.

Charles Toogood Downing has proved a bit elusive. He was taken on as a surgeon on a trading vessel, possibly for the East India Company, arriving in China in 1836, where he stayed in the Canton area for about 6 months. He returned to England, wrote his book, and continued in the medical profession, publishing at least two professional medical items on neuralgia, one a small book on *Tic Douloureux and Other Painful Affections of the Nerves*, in 1849, and an article on neuralgia which won the Jackson Prize essay of the Royal College of Surgeons for 1850<sup>3</sup>. We then find him in Tasmania, where he was registered as a medical practitioner in 1854<sup>4</sup>, and presented a paper on Norfolk Island in 1859<sup>5</sup>. The 1838 book on China has the feel of that of a young man and we might guess that he was then in his early 30s.



**Downing, Charles Toogood.** *The Fan-Qui in China*. In 1836-7. London: Henry Colburn, Publisher, 1838. 3 vols, 8vo. Lithographed frontispieces in each volume, wood-engraved vignettes on title pages. Cordier 74; Lust 21; Löwendahl 925

The object of his book, says Downing in the Preface, is to 'illustrate in an easy and popular manner, the intercourse at present subsisting between these said Fan-quis and the children of Han.' He uses 'Fan-qui' in his interpretation as signifying a 'barbarian wanderer' or 'outlandish demon', more familiar to us perhaps as 'foreign devil'; Downing suggesting that it had moved from an insult to merely specifying a foreigner. He is writing in England, from his notes. 'In looking over my note-book, since my return to England, I was surprised to find in it many things, which have never yet, to my knowledge, have appeared in any work on China.' As a medical man he had entry to hospitals and places not always accessed, but he never travelled beyond the coastal areas centred on Canton. Employed by a trader, his view is that of someone a little independent of the military, government or missions.

The work is expanded over three volumes, a three-decker, as the publishing initiative of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> C was known at the time. Downing starts with his arrival in Macao, providing a lively description of the first sighting of China, the language, the westerners, including

mention of the resident artist George Chinnery, and a ritual visit to the cave or seat where the Portuguese epic poet Camoëns sat and wrote the *Lusiads*<sup>6</sup>. Then its Whampoa and on to Canton.

Some of his vignettes are very good, even entrancing. He spends some time describing the rivers, Whampoa, the islands around the Bocca Tigris and particularly the craft on the water. *'The mandarin-boat is the most beautiful of all the craft on the river, and perhaps no boat in any other country surpasses it. It appears like a delicate insect on the surface of the water, and to the stranger would convey the idea of a small vessel fitted up in the most elegant style for a party of pleasure.....This gay-looking vessel as it is seen passing swiftly along the stream, with its white oars tipped with the golden rays of the sun, as they make the water sparkle around them, while the long pennants flutter in the wind, would not easily lead you to suppose the errand it was upon. Three or four frequently come down among the shipping and hang on behind one of the large ships which is unloading.....and resemble so many dragon-flies in a nest of bees.'*

The warships seem to be at the other end of the scale of delicacy. *'...there was lying at Calcutta, when we were there, the first Chinese vessel built after the European fashion. It was called the Loong-froong....Although built by the Chinese and called a man-of-war, it had still the appearance of a mass of the-chests and tea-caddies, and would infallibly have gone to pieces upon receiving a single cannon-ball.'* And how about the duck-boats. *'They are large and roomy, with a broad walk extending round the covered parts a little above the surface of the water. If the Irishman may be said to give the best side of the fire to his pig because he pays the rent, then the Chinaman may with equal propriety give the best of his house to the accommodation of his ducks. They have the large apartments at the after part of the boat, while the man and his family exists in a miserable hovel at the head.....In the morning the doors are opened and the birds wander round the house at their pleasure. When the sun is high, large inclined planes are let down at the sides of the boat; one towards the land, and the other towards the water. Up and down these steps the feathered bipeds travel at their pleasure....When it is time to retire, he gives a whistle, and at the sound every bird returns and waddles back into his warm and comfortable berth. When they are all on board, the stairs are hoisted to the horizontal position by means of a long bamboo lever, and every thing is then made secure for the night.'*



There are troubles with servants, descriptions of the Company premises, plenty on food, including the dog butchers, and on something we don't hear a lot about, but which a young man might have an eye to, the flower boats. *'The gold and minute carving about them are extremely beautiful, while pots of the gayest flowers in full bloom are arranged in rows upon the roof.....the women sit out in rows on the balconies, dressed in the gayest style, with flowers in their hair and jewels adorning their persons.'* And a little later: *'It is considered very dangerous for strangers to go near these boats during the night, as, of course, being inhabited only by the vilest of the vile....'*

Into the second volume there is more on Chinese history and the administration and trading systems. And being a doctor, three chapters on Chinese medicine and practices, not much admired, but with some interesting comments on smallpox. Inoculation, via the nose

had been known from the tenth century he says, then there was the spread of cowpox vaccination, after the discovery by Edward Jenner in the 1790s. This was noted as early as 1816 by Clarke Abel, the doctor on Amherst's failing embassy. The British facilitation of vaccination was one of the more obvious benefits (there weren't many) of European intrusion into China at the time. Mission-based hospitals were also well established by this time, including that for eye diseases in Canton, and here speaks the doctor: *'There is nothing, in my opinion, more interesting to the visitor to China the present time, than the examination of this Chinese hospital in Canton.....The characters and manners of the people are here more fully laid open than elsewhere, in consequence of the intimate relation existing between the patient and his physician'*. You get the feeling that it mightn't have taken much for Dr Downing to have been persuaded to stay.



The third volume covers religion and ethics, tea and trade, the need for trading treaties, more detailed and valuable descriptions of Canton, and that good test of the ethics of any visitor, opium. Downing gives a straightforward account of the trade, it reverting to smuggling because of the Imperial interdiction of its use. He records the rapid rise in importation: *'The growing fondness of the Chinese for opium might be estimated....In the time of Lord Macartney's embassy, scarcely any mention is made of it, except as a medicine. In 1816-17, twenty-one years back, 3120 chests of the Indian opium were imported.....in the season 1836-37, no fewer than 34,000 chests were brought by the clippers.'* Downing gives an extensive description of the medical use, referring to laudanum, no doubt eagerly sought by his previous English patients. And while he clearly shows the depredations from its use, there is nowhere a condemnation of the English involvement in its Indian production and export to Canton. He does not seem to feel that it is a black and white moral issue, despite his own clear observations, but then he was employed in a trading vessel. *'It is unnecessary in a work of this nature to enter deeply into the subject, especially as the public will, in the course of a year, be fully informed on all the particulars by more able writers. I allude to the prize which has been offered by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge<sup>7</sup>, for the best essay on the opium trade, in all its bearings, historical, moral and political. The reward will doubtless be given with the greatest candour and justice, and the merits or evil of the system be exposed, without any considerations of mercantile profit or expediency. It is a great question, which involves in its consequences the happiness or misery of hundreds of millions of people.'*

Downing was writing a year or two before the outbreak of the first opium war, and there was much being written on the opium trade through the 1830s and 40s.<sup>8</sup> But not everything on China was published in London. A leading journal, *The Chinese Repository*, was published in Canton in the years 1832-1851. It was directed at informing protestant missionaries about China, and founded by the first American protestant missionary Elijah Bridgeman, who was editor at the time Downing's book was published in London.

The journal, however, not only informed its readers about all things Chinese, but some of its contributors were concerned that readers were not getting the true story. In the

issue of May 1838 to April 1839, Downing's book was given a scathing, sarcastic review by another young westerner, this one a resident who knew a thing or two<sup>9</sup>.

John Robert Morrison had a strong Chinese pedigree. His father was the pioneering protestant missionary, Robert Morrison, who first translated the bible into Chinese. After his father's death in 1834, John Robert succeeded him as Chinese secretary and interpreter for the East India Company. He was then only 20 years old. He assisted in the negotiations for the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 at the conclusion of the first opium war, translating the Treaty. He died a year later, only 29 years old. Morrison's review of Downing's book is just as much that of a young man, as was the book he was reviewing. But he had the inside running with an already in-depth experience of China, albeit that of the Canton and Macao nexus, the focus of British trade and the centre of military operations in the 1839-1842 conflict.

Morrison's review carries all the resentment of a young resident expert annoyed at the intrusion of another young man who swans in, looks around for a few months, then goes away and writes a book on China and the Chinese. (Was this the book that Morrison might have wanted to write himself?). In the first few lines of his review he takes a potshot at the London book trade for exploiting the public's interest in China (Morrison is not a concise writer). *'That the reading public of England and, we may add, of America is indeed interested in whatever relates to China, or tends to illustrate the character of its people, we presume to be a fact, - not merely because the author of the Fanqui in China, so tells his readers, but also from our observation of the greediness with which, every alluring, but unsatisfying bait, that can upon any pretense be denominated Chinese, is snatched up by the indefatigable anglers of Paternoster Row<sup>10</sup>.'*



John Robert Morrison (right) with Leonardo D'Almade e Castro, who later became first Chief Clerk of Hong Kong. Painted by George Chinnery

Downing is castigated for posing as an expert, and for writing knowledgeably about things that the British public don't yet know: *'He cast about for a title; and, at once 'to astonish the natives,' and to make fair promise of something new, he adopted that of 'The Fanqui in China' — a name not unsuitable to what his book might have been but for what it really is, a more appropriate title would have been, 'A Voyage to China, made by a literary body-snatcher, under an attack of scriptital (or scribbling) fever, containing the results of observations personal upon the river of Canton, and observations through the medium of others within the compass of many books.'* And little later: *'As to the writer, - he has undertaken a task for which he was wholly incompetent, and this we will shortly endeavor to prove, not by any elaborate evidence, but by some brief quotations from the first few chapters of his first volume. Not only, however, has he professed to perform what he was utterly incompetent to execute, he has also allured his readers to bear him company, under false pretences of an easy journey, though intending to drag them over a toilsome and craggy road!'*

Here is the nub of the criticism: *'in a few brief months, spent chiefly as we have said at Whampoa .....; he should be qualified to improve upon the writings of men of abilities not less good, and of experience twentyfold, yea, fortyfold, longer than his own. Had our author kept his remarks within the sphere of his personal observations of the striking points in the position of foreigners in China, and in the character and manners of such natives as he could gain opportunities*

*of meeting — he would still have committed errors, it is probable, but - he might, with judgment, have produced a work worthy of perusal and of retention in the memory.'*

Morrison goes on to show that many of the observations and recounting of stories and experiences were likely to be false, or misinterpreted. Downing misinterprets the weather, in the prevalence of typhoons, the way the Chinese dress and style their hair, and doesn't know what a joss stick is made of. Morrison quotes Downing: *'The ghos-stick (we doubt if this be an improvement on the usual orthography of joss-stick) is a composition consisting chiefly of manure, rolled up into long sticks, and dried in the sun.!! p.19. [It is composed of fragrant wood, in the form of saw-dust, and resinous matter, with sometimes a little incense.]'*

He gives in a little at the end, though not much: *'There are many particulars in his observations upon matters at Whampoa that are worthy of attention. This was his usual residence; and there he had opportunities of observing for himself, with very little of the writings of others to trust to. Whampoa indeed is well deserving of a separate account; for there is much there that is totally different from what we ordinarily see around us at Canton, much in the actions of the people, much in the character of their intercourse with foreigners, M.'*

For those familiar with 19<sup>th</sup> C publishing, there is also a verbose jibe at the three- or triple-decker publication. *'Had our author kept his remarks within the sphere of his personal observations of the striking points in the position of foreigners in China, and in the character and manners of such natives as he could gain opportunities of meeting — he would still have committed errors, it is probable, but - he might, with judgment, have produced a work worthy of perusal and of retention in the memory: for those points that strike at first contact, are precisely the ones that are most likely to be forgotten by the writer who has had long experience. .... far more pleasant had it been for us ....to yield our need of commendation to his single volume, than it now is for us to tear the mask from the vanity that has sent forth, under a humble but rather foolish title, three fashionable - novel-like volumes of trivial observations, crude notions, idle fancies, and vain speculations, upon China, its customs, its language, ..... In place of the clever note-book which he might have given us - and in which we should not have asked perfection, he has furnished us with an omnium gatherum of scribblings, de omnibus sinensium rebus et quibusdam aliis, very much in the style of recreative communications to a Pickwickian literary club.'*

The three volume, or three- or triple-decker book was a publishing innovation stemming from the later 1820s and prevalent over then next few decades. Downing's publisher Henry Colburn was a leader in the field. The volumes were designed, you might say cynically, to lure the reader into having to pay for the second and third volumes in order to finish the work, and at prices which only the well-off could afford. They were picked up by the pioneers of the public lending libraries such as Charles Mudie, where the same objective was achieved in having the public pay separately for each part. They disappeared near the end of the century when Mudie and others stopped buying them. You will accordingly see many novels, by authors such as George Eliot and Trollope, originally published as three volumes, with regular authors often forced to pad out their work to fill the space. It was less usual for a non-fiction work to be published in this format.<sup>11</sup>

In the end, the invective from Morrison is wearying, and you feel for Downing, who only wanted to record what was clearly an exciting, eye-opening experience, plus make a bob or two. He has also separately been taken to task for his comments on smallpox.<sup>12</sup> As with most contemporaries, he believed that the disease originated in China, but says also

that the Chinese invented inoculation. Both the Kangxi and Qianlong Emperors were inoculated against it. Vaccination came in with missionaries and others such as George Staunton, in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> C, post-Jenner.<sup>13</sup> As to the origin, it is unknown, the first written account being by the Chinese in the 4<sup>th</sup> C CE, but it seems to have been around centuries, if not millennia, earlier.

Downing seems to have stuck to medical and social issues in his later literary life, presumably less open to the criticisms of those who assumed ownership of the Western knowledge of all things Chinese.

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<sup>1</sup> **Downing, Charles Toogood.** *The Fan-Qui in China*. In 1836-7. London, Henry Colburn, 1838. Vol.1, p 99.

<sup>2</sup> *The Chinese Repository*, Canton Vol. 7, from May 1838 to April 1839. 1839, pp 328-334,

<sup>3</sup> **Downing, Charles Toogood** *On Tic Douloureux and other Painful Affections of the Nerves : With suggestions for their treatment by means of the aneuralgicon. Illustrated by numerous cases , and an engraving of the apparatus .* London, John Churchill, 1849; Review: *Neuralgia; Its Various Forms, Pathology, and Treatment. Being the Jacksonian Prize Essay of the Royal College of Surgeons for 1850, with Additions.* *Provincial Medical & Surgical Journal* (1844-1852), Vol. 16, No. 9 (Apr. 28, 1852), pp. 214-217.

<sup>4</sup> *Medical History Newsletter.* Australian and New Zealand Society of the History of medicine, Inc. No 44, 2014, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> **Downing, Charles Toogood,** *On Norfolk Island, its character and productions.* *Papers & Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania*, vol. 3, no. 2 , pp. 195-212, 1859.

<sup>6</sup> <https://ianferg.nz/camoes-and-the-lusiads/>

<sup>7</sup> The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was formed by Henry Broughan in 1826 and disbanded in 1846. Its publications in the Library of Useful Knowledge were well-known both in England and in the colonies and overseas trading posts. A China branch of the Society was formed in 1834 centered in Canton, 'to convey a more positive impression of Europe and America to Chinese readers by transmitting Western scientific, technological, and cultural information in books and periodicals published in the Chinese language.' [Lazich, Michael C., *Placing China in Its "Proper Rank among the Nations": The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China and the First Systematic Account of the United States in Chinese*, *Journal of World History*, September 2011, 22(3), pp 527-551].

<sup>8</sup> There is a useful bibliography at [file:///C:/Users/ianbf/Downloads/\[9781526133434%20-%20Creating%20the%20Opium%20War\]%20Bibliography%20\(5\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/ianbf/Downloads/[9781526133434%20-%20Creating%20the%20Opium%20War]%20Bibliography%20(5).pdf)

<sup>9</sup> ART . VII . Review : *The Fanqui in China, in 1836-37.* By C. Toogood Downing, esq. London, 1838. 3 vols. *The Chinese Repository*, Canton Vol. 7, from May 1838 to April 1839. 1839, pp 328-33.

<sup>9</sup> Paternoster Row was then, and for decades before, a centre of London publishing, though not the address of Downing's publisher Henry Colburn.

<sup>10</sup> An excellent account of the three-decker is given in: Adam Smyth. *The Book-Makers. A History of the Book in 18 Remarkable Lives.* London, The Bodley Head, 12024.

<sup>11</sup> **Heinrich, Ari Larissa.** *The Future Repeats itself: COVID-19 and its Historical Comorbidities.* *China Story Yearbook: Crisis.* Chapter 6. Australian Centre on China in the World. 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Smallpox vaccination at the edges of the Empire. <https://ianferg.nz/482-2/>