1898

Our journey begins on the banks of the Yangzi River, where, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Western colonial imaginary encountered its Other in the figure of the river tracker, whose supposed ability to endure pain without complaint was interpreted as a sign of both China's stagnant present and its magnificent future. Drawing on racialised typologies, Western observers described river trackers as less than human—both animal and mechanical. Even the boatmen's songs were heard only as 'tremendous noise', calling to mind Aristotle's differentiation of the human from the animal on the grounds 'that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise', which Rancière argues is the logic of the police, subtending colonial, racialised and class-based conceptions of humanity.[1] Lost to foreign eyes and ears was the fact that Chinese trackers, just like other 'coolies', were all too conscious of the physical and economic vulnerabilities that made them into 'beasts of burden'. Complaints of being treated like 'oxen and horses' and other pleas to respect the human dignity of workers would resonate in Chinese protests for years to come.[2] This language would eventually become a mainstay of the early Communist discourse on labour. As Communist organiser Li Lisan's rousing call for miners and railway workers in Anyuan in the early 1920s went: 'Once beasts of burden, now we will be human' (see Perry's essay in this volume).

‘A Cheaper Machine for the Work’

Corey BYRNES[3]

> All work such as tracking boats against the swift current of the Chinese rivers … is done by overtaxed hand labour, and thus the mass of the people are little better than the beasts of burden, docile to a degree, but with few more wants than the animals, with the additional quality of being a cheaper machine for the work.
>
> — Archibald Little (1910)[4]

On the morning of 9 March 1898, Archibald Little’s fifty-foot long, teak-hulled, twin-screwed, Shanghai-built steamship, *Leechuen* (利川), ‘made a triumphal entry’ into the port of Chongqing, the first steamship to traverse the treacherous Yangzi River gorges that separated the watery plains of Hubei from the riches of Sichuan—the ‘Land of Heaven’s Storehouse’ (天府之国).[5] In ‘demonstrating the possibility of navigating the Upper-Yang-tse, and drawing attention to its necessity’, Little and his *Leechuen* (meaning roughly, ‘Benefit Sichuan’) helped loosen the ties binding travel and trade to the wide seasonal fluctuations and the forms of labour and technology that had defined life on the river for millennia.[6] For Little, a Shanghai-based British merchant who had actively lobbied to make an experimental steamer journey up the Yangzi as early as the 1880s, regular steam navigation promised not only riches for businessmen such as himself, but also the liberation of ‘the present army of wretched trackers [who] will gradually be set free for more remunerative work’.[7]

To the Western writers who first began to reinscribe the Yangzi’s Three Gorges as empirically and scientifically knowable landscapes starting in the 1860s, the men who pulled boats up the river’s treacherous rapids were figures of fascination.[8] The work of tracking was harrowing, and trackers appeared to foreign eyes as simultaneously subhuman and superhuman. While Chinese sailors had mastered methods of ascending portions of the Yangzi River by sail, boats had to be pulled through many parts of the gorges, where massive rapids, whirlpools, hidden reefs and boul-

ders created formidable obstacles. Individual boats generally had their own crews of trackers, though they frequently supplemented these with seasonal labourers, including large numbers of men and women who established temporary villages during the winter season at especially difficult spots, such as the Xintan Rapids.[9] Cargo was often transshipped there and at other rapids, though large boats still sometimes required upwards of 300 trackers (or 'rapid coolies', as one traveller called them) to pull them across serious obstacles.[10] At best, trackers inched their way along the towpaths constructed alongside sections of the river, some of them little more than narrow, low indentations hacked into the sides of sheer cliffs. More often, they clambered over enormous boulders and precipitous, rocky shores, wading through frigid waters (the upriver journey was easiest during winter, when the water level was at its lowest) or diving into the river to free the thick bamboo hawsers that yoked them to their boat. Men who fell while tracking were often dragged along until they could extricate themselves. To fall overboard in midstream meant almost certain death. Trackers worked naked or wearing only a thin jacket, with no protection from the elements or the dangers of their work; the harshness of their labours was etched on to their bodies.

'Immemorial Methods'

By the end of the nineteenth century, the tracker, with his naked body and 'immemorial methods', had long been a potent symbol of both the supposed Chinese ability to endure pain and the 'lack of imagination' that had locked the nation in its eternal past.[11] The failure to rationalise the work of tracking by introducing mechanical devices rendered it a tragicomic ritual of endless, crazed repetition. For Lawrence John Lumley Dundas, second Marquis of Zetland, tracking was little more than a farcical allegory of geopolitics:

> The thought that not unnaturally occurred to me was, what a marvellous thing it is that in the whole course of the two or three odd millenniums during which the Chinese have been struggling with the navigation of the Yang-tse, they have failed to evolve so simple a mechanical contrivance as a windlass! With the most primitive hand-winch a couple of men could have effected all and more than the dozen delirious maniacs in a quarter of the time, and at an expenditure of an infinitesimal fraction of the human

> force. It would be difficult to find a more striking example of that complete lack of imagination which has doomed China to a perpetual back seat among the competing Powers in the present advanced stage of the progress of humanity.[12]

Without the spark of imagination necessary to transcend the physiological limits of the human body or the willingness to adopt innovations from abroad, China was doomed to a struggle of repetition without progress. Dundas's equating of progress with labour-saving devices and stagnation with the 'delirious' movements of Chinese bodies shows how the interaction of labour, technology and race in the navigation of the gorges was filtered through the lens of popular conceptions of national difference. The idea of hard labour with minimal gain that figures in many Western descriptions of trackers evokes not only the 'not unnatural' idea of Chinese history as stagnant, but also a more complex conception of labour in a specifically 'Chinese' mode.

In the late nineteenth century, the figure of the 'coolie' was seen to possess a 'biological' capacity to work hard and long on a meagre diet of rice (and opium) while enduring 'low levels of constant pain'.[13] This trait made him a 'machine' far better suited (economically and physiologically) to the depredations of industrialised work or hard labour than the meat-eating white man, whom he threatened to supplant.[14] Beneath the surface of this 'yellow peril' rhetoric lurked even greater perceived threats—that familiar forms of labour would be (or had already been) supplanted by transnational and industrialised modes of production and that the appearance of such modes and the men who brought them into being destabilised what Eric Hayot describes as 'the measure of "humanity" itself'.[15]

For the 'measure of "humanity"' to have been thrown into doubt at the end of the nineteenth century must have seemed especially dire. Just as the world was measured, mapped and scientifically reinscribed during this period, so, too, was the human body subjected to an unprecedented degree of measurement and classification. With the articulation in the middle of the nineteenth century of the first law of thermodynamics (which holds that the energy of a closed system remains constant), French and German scientists came to see 'nature as a vast machine capable of producing mechanical work or … "labor power"'.[16] The physiologists who followed in their footsteps treated the body as a 'human motor' that worked according to the same principles found in nature. If the energy

contained within nature was inexhaustibly productive, the same might hold for the human body, assuming it could be managed properly. Freed from earlier religious and moral frameworks, the human body entered a realm of scientific measurement, rationalisation and systematisation that promised to unlock its natural capacity for work and, with it, the door to social progress (that is, increased production).[17]

As a paragon of Chinese endurance—and 'a cheaper machine' than even a beast of burden, as Little describes him in the epigraph to this chapter—the tracker would seem to pose two related problems for European productivist theories. First, his 'labour power' is disconnected from the models of socioeconomic development in which the idea was first developed. The foreign visitor was confronted by a system in which the transfer of natural forces through the human failed to fuel the progress of society. The human machine and the natural machine found along the Yangzi was in many ways superior to those in the West, but their social manifestation was profoundly out of order. As a result, energy was wasted in the maintenance of an ancient way of life, absorbed by the vacuum of Chinese history. Second, while his capacity to perform backbreaking work on a meagre diet seemed to fulfil the dream of labour without fatigue, he achieved this ideal without scientific rationalisation, through a specifically racial, and thus threatening, capacity. It is his Chineseness that allowed him to work in a manner that was not just unlike the work of Euro-Americans, but subhuman, animal and thus potentially superhuman.

'Absence of Nerves'

The idea that one could clearly define racial and national qualities was developed over the course of the nineteenth century through both mainstream scientific thought and the closely related pseudo-sciences of phrenology, physiognomy, eugenics and social Darwinism. As part of far-reaching expansionist ideologies, the bodies of non-Europeans were subjected to methods of physiological and ethnographic measurement that naturalised racial difference, usually defining the other as deficient, degraded or primitive.[18] Popular racial theories were even used to distinguish between different 'types' of Chinese. Archibald Little refers to his boat's lead sailor and his brother—among the 'first specimens of the "Four Streams" (Szechuan meaning Four Streams) province [he] had yet met'—as 'tall, fair-skinned [and] dolicocephalic', which was a term used in craniometry, phrenology and eugenics to describe a long, thin

head type associated with northern Europeans.[19] In European accounts of China, this sort of racial typology was based mostly on anecdotal information (from travellers and missionaries, exported images and journalistic and scholarly works) rather than direct 'scientific' measurement. By the turn of the twentieth century, it had developed into part of an extensive discourse of racialised bodies and national 'types' distinct from universalist scientific theories of human productivity.[20] The ideal body might still be a 'human motor', but there were as many makes and models of motor as there were nations and races.

The most influential account of Chinese difference was Arthur Smith's *Chinese Characteristics*, published in 1890 and reprinted numerous times since, which presents a taxonomy of Chinese national character in twenty-seven chapters. Smith's style—what Lydia Liu calls his 'grammar of truth'—relies on a 'discursive power that reduces the object of its description to a less than human animal through rhetorical and figurative uses of language'.[21] In his chapter on the 'Absence of Nerves', Smith begins with a description of nervous agitation as an inescapable effect of 'modern civilisation'—a condition that 'include[s] all our readers'.[22] It is against the ubiquity of nervous afflictions in 'modern' nations that the Chinese 'absence of nerves' signifies. As he points out, however, this difference is unlikely to be physiological:

> It is not very common to dissect dead Chinese, though it has doubtless been done, but we do not hear of any reason for supposing that the nervous anatomy of the 'dark-haired race' differs in any essential respect from that of the Caucasian. But though the nerves of a Chinese as compared with those of the Occidental may be, as the geometricians say, 'similar and similarly situated', nothing is plainer than that they are nerves of a very different sort from those with which we are familiar.[23]

Through an imaginary, but still gruesome, dissection of 'dead Chinese', Smith repeats the dialectic that structures his entire work: though part of a single humanity, defined here by the geometrical arts of modern medical science, the Chinese remain unmistakably different. Having failed to find this difference under the skin, Smith locates it in a catalogue of Chinese characteristics: the ability to 'remain in one position' for a long time, to go without exercise, to 'sleep anywhere', to breathe without ventilation, to bear overcrowding and to endure 'physical pain'. In each case,

'freedom from the tyranny of nerves' is empirical evidence of a Chineseness that leaves neither outward nor inward trace, as well as a reminder that the Chinese may one day pose a threat to 'the Caucasian'.[24] Throughout, Smith's catalogue of difference poses the Chinese as not just other, but also threatening, especially in an imagined future in which China has modernised: 'We have come to believe, at least in general, in the survival of the most fit. Which is best adapted to survive in the struggles of the twentieth century, the "nervous" European, or the tireless, all-pervading, and phlegmatic Chinese?'[25]

Smith makes only one reference to 'boat-trackers', in a chapter titled 'Content and Cheerfulness', on the 'chronic state of good spirits … [called] "cheerfulness"' and the form of 'conservatism' that makes the Chinese perfectly content with 'the system under which they live'.[26] He describes trackers as 'some of those whose labour is most exhausting … [and yet] not only are [they] not heard to murmur at the unequal distribution of this world's goods, but when they have opportunities of resting do so in excellent spirits'.[27] As the most extreme, and thus most typical, of labourers, they prove the general rule of Chinese industry and endurance that Smith and others are at pains to establish, and of which cheer and contentment are merely subsidiary characteristics. But even this easy accommodation to harsh conditions poses a potential threat, as he reminds his readers: 'We repeat that if the teaching of history as to what happens to the "fittest" is to be trusted, there is a magnificent future for the Chinese race.'[28] The tracker is thus poised to enter the future with pain as pleasure and biology as destiny.

'Same as Oxen and Horses'

In reality, trackers and other boatmen were all too conscious of their physical and economic vulnerabilities. What appeared to the Western writer as contentment and cheer belied a tragic sense of self. Linguistically inaccessible to most Western travellers, this sense of self was expressed orally through the boatmen's work songs, or *haozi* 号子. As numerous travellers noted, these songs and chants were an integral part of the Yangzi soundscape, though usually they registered as little more than 'tremendous noise', loud enough to drown 'the roar of the rapid' or damage one's hearing.[29] The most common *haozi* consisted of a call-and-response structure that provided a clear and flexible system for pacing the work of tracking, while others constituted 'mind maps' of the region or expressed

romantic longing.[30] Songs complaining about meagre pay, cruel bosses and middlemen and the dehumanising labour of tracking were also common. Not unlike the Westerners who were so shocked by their labour, boatmen frequently compared themselves to animals:

> 日子不如牛和马
> Our lives cannot compare to those of oxen and horses
>
> 船工终年如马牛
> The boatmen through the year are as horses and oxen
>
> 我们船工的生活真悲惨
> The lives of us boatmen are tragic indeed
>
> 风里来雨里去牛马一般
> In wind we come, in rain depart, same as oxen and horses[31]

Unlike Western writers, whose animal metaphors were grounded in racist conceptions of Chinese atavism, however, boatmen described themselves in this manner to draw attention not only to the harshness of tracking but also to how their poverty impinged on their ability to establish and maintain proper social ties, especially marriage.[32] As in the leftist literature that made rickshaw-pullers iconic urban workers, the *haozi* of Yangzi boatmen drew attention to the bestial nature of tracking to reassert the humanity of the tracker.[33]

A 'Decrescent Order'

The 'all-pervading … Chinese', of which the tracker was an extreme example, were both excluded from modernity and deemed to possess a super/subhuman capacity to weather the shocks of modernity because they offered a site for the schizoid marriage of the West's superiority complex and its anxiety over modernity's enervating effects. If the first law of thermodynamics makes possible a productivist ideology of labour power, the second law of thermodynamics, which holds that entropy in a closed system increases over time, forces a reckoning with the 'inevitability of decline, dissolution, and exhaustion'.[34] According to Anson Rabinbach:

> [T]he paradoxical relationship between energy and entropy is at the core of the nineteenth-century revolution in modernity: on the one side is a stable and productivist universe of original and indestructible force, on the other an irreversible system of decline and deterioration … The powerful and protean world of work, production, and performance is set against the decrescent order of fatigue, exhaustion, and decline.[35]

Whereas the fatigue, nervous ailments and physical illnesses of modernity in industrialised Europe and America threatened to blunt the competitive edge that had raised the Caucasian races so far so quickly above the Chinese, the Chinese 'absence of nerves' conjured the (enduring) spectre of a role reversal. As both proof of Western progress and promise of Western decline, the tracker of Smith's *Chinese Characteristics* was an essential partner within the 'paradoxical relationship' of modernity.

In Smith's account, the tracker as coolie functions as both harbinger of a Chinese future and symbol of the Chinese past because he embodies a timeless racial essence—the telos of progress could be just as easily fuelled as foiled by the stagnant East. There is no irony here. After decades of scholarship dedicated to dissecting orientalist discourse, it is easy to recognise such antinomy as the engine of difference propelling colonial power structures and maintaining their latter-day manifestations. Just as the 'Chinese landscape' might refer to a timeless land of wonder or a region scientifically mapped and measured, the tracker came to embody contradictory conceptions of Chineseness. Shaped by the rhetorical template of Smith's book, the tracker and the coolie were simultaneously primitive and primed for future dominance. What is missing from Smith's secondhand account, however, but present in most firsthand accounts of trackers, is a sense of horror at the brutality of their labour and sympathy for their suffering. If evolving ideas of 'labour power' allowed observers to pit the tracker and coolie against labourers of other nationalities and races, an older and more powerful discourse of sympathy encouraged them to consider the tracker as part of a shared humanity, even as they described him as a 'less than human animal'.