



An Australian in **CHINA**

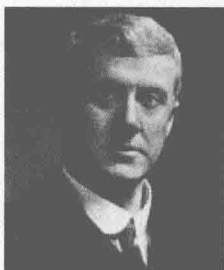
George Morrison

"A journalistic virtuoso, level-headed and fair about everything he saw . . . Morrison's book is a cracking good read." —Gareth Powell

With a New Foreword

An Australian in China

BEING THE NARRATIVE OF
A QUIET JOURNEY ACROSS
CHINA TO BURMA



BY GEORGE ERNEST MORRISON
M.D., EDIN., F.R.C.S.

With a New Foreword
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An Australian in China

By G.E. Morrison

With a New Foreword

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FOREWORD

BY ANDREW CHUBB

The journey recounted here, from Shanghai to Rangoon in 1894, sits beside those of Edwin Dingle and Isabella Bird as one of the great Old China adventures: up the Yangtze Rapids in a tiny wuban, or 'five-planker' boat to Chongqing, over stony paths across the wilds of Sichuan and Yunnan, through the Shan states to British-ruled Burma. Just under 5,000km in total, completely unarmed and without an interpreter. The point of the journey, the author said, was how easily it could be done by "anyone in the world" — but George Ernest Morrison (1862-1920) was one of the most extraordinary Australians who ever lived.

In the summer holidays of 1879-80 a 17-year-old Morrison walked from his home town, Geelong (just outside Melbourne) to Adelaide, South Australia; the following year he canoed the Murray River from Albury to the sea — over 2,500km, once again solo and unaided. Diaries from both of these adventures were published in *The Age*, and when Morrison failed his medical school exams early in 1882 the newspaper gave him the chance to run away to sea. Enlisting as an ordinary sailor on the *Lavinia*, his real purpose was to investigate the trafficking of indentured Pacific Islander laborers in Queensland, which he found to be a 'slave trade,' prompting a Colonial Office inquiry and earning Morrison the enmity of the Queensland Government.

He decided to return to Victoria by crossing Australia, north to south, on foot. The explorers Burke and Wills had perished two decades earlier on the same journey, but Morrison, not quite

21 years old, went alone and unarmed. Starting in the height of summer from the Gulf of Carpentaria near Normanton, he arrived in Melbourne four months later on April 21, 1883. At home, Morrison's achievement was greeted with a mixture of admiration and disbelief. In London, however, the *Times* lauded this intrepid young colonial: "Mr. Morrison's feat commands the admiration of all interested in exploration, and must be set down as one of the most remarkable of pedestrian achievements."

In 1884, Morrison was speared while exploring New Guinea and had to be sent to Dr. John Chiene, the surgeon in Scotland to whom this book is dedicated, for complicated surgery to remove a spearhead from his leg. He resumed his studies in Edinburgh and graduated as a surgeon in 1887. He had been working and traveling for most of the past seven years, at times so impoverished he resorted to posing as a missionary, when he arrived for the first time in China and began the journey described in *An Australian in China*.

And that title, *An Australian in China*, is not as dull as it might seem. Morrison was just that at a time when outright racism against Chinese was commonplace in Australia. In fact as gold-diggers, a few of them Chinese, flocked to Morrison's home colony, Victoria (known in Chinese as 'New Gold Mountain' — California being the 'Old'), it became the epicentre of anti-Chinese sentiment. Morrison even professes to have arrived in China with a "strong racial antipathy" towards the Chinese. All the more powerful, then, his 'discovery' that the Chinese were civilised, hospitable and showed him nothing but "the most charming courtesy". He refers liberally to the honesty and good character of his porter 'coolies', and describes the idea that "no people are more law-abiding than the Chinese" as a truism.

Travel writers today often delight in recounting the difficulties and even horrors of traveling in China. Morrison does the exact opposite. The sub-title, *Being the Narrative of a Quiet Journey Across China to Burma*, is predictable from a man who described walking solo across Australia as "a pleasant excursion".

But it would have carried a little more bite in 1895, when a quiet journey would have been contrary to many expectations—not entirely unfounded expectations, given the fast route out of poverty that highway robbery offered in the wilds of China at the time. Along with occasional severed heads in cages, Morrison matter-of-factly recounts a crucified highwayman on the west gate of Chaotong (Zhaotong) who had "survived four days, having unsuccessfully attempted to shorten his pain by beating his head against the woodwork, an attempt which was frustrated by padding the woodwork". These gruesome sights seem to have reassured the unarmed traveler, and while many of his contemporaries were haughtily condemning China's harsh punishments as evidence of barbarity, Morrison was not so quick to overlook recent history, concluding: "There are no cruelties practised in the Chinese gaols greater, even if there are any equal to the awful and degraded brutality with which the England of our fathers treated her convicts in the penal settlements."

Morrison warded off trouble by quickly learning the rules of the Chinese 'face' game. His basic strategy was to inflate his own importance, which in reality, given he had little money and few connections, was not high: "An official chair with arched poles fitted for four bearers was in the common-room . . . the landlord offered me another room, an inferior one; but I waved the open fingers of my left hand before my face and said, 'puyao, puyao' (I don't want it, I don't want it). For I was not so foolish or inconsistent as to be content with a poorer quarter of the inn than occupied by the officer, whatever his button. I could not acknowledge to the Chinese that any Chinaman travelling in the Middle Kingdom was my equal, let alone my superior."

Rather than allowing this assumed superiority to taint his views of the Chinese, however, Morrison reserves his venomous pen of ridicule for missionaries. Morrison accepted—or rather, expected—accommodation and goodwill from missionaries at every opportunity; most likely both traveler and missionary were glad of each other's company. But the critique of the latter

within this book is sardonic and devastating. Quoting, as he is apt to do throughout, from the missionaries' own publications, Morrison calculates the rate of success of the China Inland Mission at "a fraction more than two Chinamen per missionary per annum". Particularly memorable is the observation that a successful soul-saving required the prospective convert to accept the eternal damnation of his father and all his ancestors when "chief of all virtues in China is filial piety". Morrison praises many missionaries he meets, as individuals, and he credits them with an admirable earnestness of purpose for their attempts to explain Jesus' exhortation to rebellion against one's parents in a land where the punishment for parricide was the so-called 'death by a thousand cuts'. (The condemned would usually die quickly and after only several cuts.) The mission itself, Morrison argued, was simply hopeless.

Morrison's criticism of the missionaries must have rung particularly powerfully in London, coming from a staunch imperialist who believed that being dominated by Britain was a nation's privilege. Indeed, as he crosses the Shan states, long-time tributaries of the Son of Heaven, Morrison helpfully suggests the British Government might like to annexe the territory, providing details of each Chinese outpost's troop numbers, weaponry and weaknesses. At the same time, his defence of the Chinese and their ways, and his matter-of-fact style speaks of his fair-mindedness. Upon reaching Tengyueh (Tengyue), the site of British Consul Margary's murder in 1875, he recounts the outrage, but then points out the high number of "unoffending Chinese" who had been murdered in "civilised foreign countries"—another reality his upbringing in colonial Victoria would have impressed on him.

The insight and understanding he showed in *An Australian in China*—along with a healthy imperial zeal—brought him to the attention of the London *Times*' editors, who in 1897 commissioned him as the newspaper's first Peking correspondent. Unlike other correspondents like Robert Coltman and J.O.P. Bland, Morrison never learned Chinese. Yet this somehow did not prevent

him from becoming the East's (if not the world's) most famous and influential foreign correspondent and a genuine player in international relations. He used his newspaper's prestige and influence to cultivate intimate relationships with the Peking diplomats at a time of near-constant international intrigue. Russia was moving in on Chinese Manchuria; Japan was eyeing off Russia in Manchuria; Germany was claiming Shandong and across China the 'Treaty Powers' were jostling over spheres of influence.

And in 1900 the Boxers were moving in on all the foreigners. According to Coltman's account of the siege, *Beleaguered in Peking*, before the Rebellion reached Peking in 1900 Morrison had advocated early preparations for conflict, but his advice was ignored. During the siege, Morrison was injured but he did not meet the fate reported by the *Times* in his July 1900 obituary. That long piece of hagiography, despite its false premises, still contained an important pointer to Morrison's role in Peking: "Nobody who knew Dr. Morrison and the honest fervour of his patriotism would ever have suspected him of subordinating [British] interests to . . . professional success." He was certainly no journalist in today's sense of the word

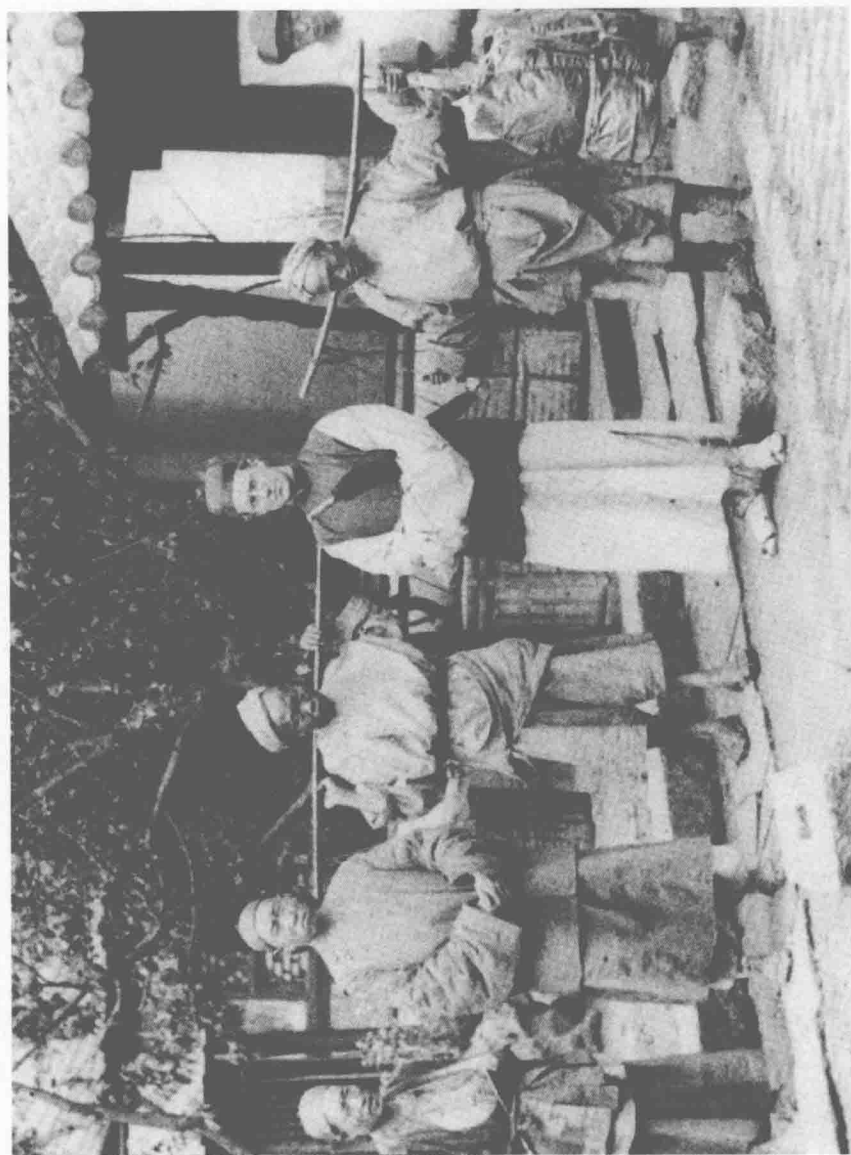
But whatever might be said of his reporting, his influence was extraordinary. Seeing Russia as Britain's primary enemy after the Boxer Rebellion, Morrison devoted himself to encouraging Japan to go to war with that country in Manchuria, whilst urging support for Japan among the British public. He got the result he wanted—the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War was even known to some as 'Morrison's War'—and accompanied the victorious Japanese troops into Port Arthur (Lüshunkou).

Before long, however, Morrison turned against Japan, in the process pitting himself against the *Times*' editors, who continued to support Japan in line with British Government policy. Eiko Woodhouse interestingly argued her 2004 work, *The Chinese Hsin-hai Revolution*, that Morrison's primary concern was for Australia, rather than the British Empire—that the ease of Japan's victory over Russia convinced him it was now a direct threat to Australia

and that this explains his abrupt about-face. A simpler explanation is that Morrison feared Japan's rise and saw the alliance as a threat to the British Empire in Asia. Whichever the case, Woodhouse shows how Morrison's rose-tinted view of China's ailing government—which he propounded in order to thwart Japanese ambitions to Chinese territory—led him to miss the 1911 Xinhai Revolution. His lack of foresight at that time is indeed curious given 15 years earlier, in *An Australian in China*, he had predicted, based on his first-hand observations: "The Manchu dynasty shall be overthrown, and a Chinese Emperor shall rule on the throne of China." That Chinese Emperor, it turned out, was the crafty manipulator Yuan Shih-kai, whom Morrison decided to serve as an adviser, though Yuan's rule would last only days before monarchy was again abolished. But however questionable his judgement in backing Yuan, however arrogant Morrison may have become in later years, *An Australian in China*, written before fame and power beckoned, remains a truly great piece of travel writing and reportage delivered with a charming, often self-effacing irony.

Morrison's last eight years, from 1912 to 1920, were spent mostly as an adviser to the struggling Republican Government as the country fractured into warlord rule. Yet for all his sympathy for China and the Chinese in their own country, and for all his honesty about the realities of life for Chinese in the British colonies, Morrison remained resolutely opposed to Chinese migration to Australia. In fact, this book contains a vigorous declamation against the evils of Chinese emigration anywhere. A certain irony, then, lies in his being honored each year through the G.E. Morrison Lecture in Ethnology at the Australian National University—an initiative of Chinese-Australian rights activists in the early 1930s—while he remains to most Australians, almost inexplicably, forgotten.

Andrew Chubb
Series Editor
Shanghai, January 2009



THE AUTHOR IN WESTERN CHINA

AN AUSTRALIAN IN CHINA

BEING THE NARRATIVE OF
A QUIET JOURNEY ACROSS
CHINA TO BURMA

BY
GEORGE ERNEST MORRISON
M.D. EDIN., F.R.G.S.

MDCCCXCV

TO

JOHN CHIENE, M.D.,

F.R.C.S.E., F.R.S.E., ETC.,

PROFESSOR OF SURGERY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH,

WHO GAVE ME BACK THE POWER OF LOCOMOTION.

I GRATEFULLY

INSCRIBE THIS VOLUME.

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