

THE CHINA LETTERS:
 JULIAN BELL, VANESSA BELL, AND LING SHU HUA

by *Patricia Laurence*

In June 1934, Ling Shu Hua of Wuhan, China, writes to Margery Fry in London that she is delighted to receive a lithograph of Roger Fry's work. Her words, written on delicate rice paper, overlay red traces of insects, bees and plants: "And will you please convey our hearty regards to Mr. Roger Fry, who, ever since poor Hsu brought back his drawing on my scroll [,] has seemed to be an old friend to us" (Berg Collection, undated). One of the Fry lithographs, she notes, will grace the room of Dr. Wang, president of Wuhan University, years before Julian Bell, son of Vanessa and friend and admirer of Roger Fry—arrives at Wuhan University in September 1935 to teach English literature to Chinese students. The overlay of Roger Fry's drawing on Shu Hua's scroll—she, a painter, poet and aspiring writer—is one of many visible layerings and tracings of Bloomsbury on China and China on Bloomsbury during a formative period of modernism in the early part of the twentieth century.

In another letter from Julian Bell to Virginia Woolf in 1936, he traces her presence in his classroom at Wuhan University:

It's lovely country and the Chinese are charming; lecturing on the Moderns, 1890-1914; 1914-36. I have to read the writers; what is one to do: we all write too much; I shall make the Lighthouse I think, a set book. (undated, Monks House Papers)

When Julian introduces *To the Lighthouse* in English to his Chinese students, translations already exist in Chinese. In the 1930's, in fact, there are translations of *A Room of One's Own* and *Flush*, and Julian writes to his aunt that "China's leading woman writer, my Dean's wife with whom I'm platonically in love. . . is a passionate admirer of your work" (undated, probably fall 1936, Monks House Papers).

From the late 1920's to the early 1940's, translations of Woolf's works appear in China and Japan. When Mao Tse Tung, however, sets forth his policies for literature and art at the Yen'an Forum in 1942 and declares that literature must "become something revolutionary in the service of the people" (Mao Tse Tung 12), interest in the feudal, the bourgeois, and the foreign is criticized. Western literature disappears to surface again in the early 1980's.

Julian Bell went to Wuhan University in China, in August 1935, on a three-year teaching stint—Wuhan being about 400 miles from Nanking. He stayed sixteen months, leaving in January 1936, with a whiff of scandal, having brought Bloomsbury to China in a mercurial affair with Ling Shu Hua, the wife of the Dean

who hired him. Of his relationship with the temperamental poet and painter, ten years his senior, he writes to Virginia Woolf that his “vie amoureuse. . . had reached a point of sheer fantasy which you wouldn’t swallow in a restoration play. . . and which has forced me to resign” (Dec. 5, 1936, King’s Collection). Wuhan University was provincial; the Chinese, according to Julian, “far too moral.”

While he was there, a remarkable correspondence developed between Julian and Vanessa, 1935-1937, she writing every Sunday “like clockwork.” Vanessa writes mainly about their daily lives: the garden, the pets, the canceled Queen Mary contract, Angelica’s dressing up as Ophelia, the new baby Austen, Virginia Woolf’s illnesses. But what really preoccupies Vanessa in what I will call *The China Letters* is relationships: both Julian’s near scandalous relationship with Ling Shu Hua and the unusual—perhaps, at times, cloying—intimacy between mother and son (the word “lover” is used by Julian, Angelica and Virginia to describe it). And what draws Julian and Vanessa together in relationship in these letters and what forms the center of this paper is the aesthetically charged place of the imagination: their fascination with the landscape of China and Vanessa’s strong desire to visualize and share it with Julian.

Landscape in recent cultural criticism has been read in two ways, according to W.J.T. Mitchell. First, the history of landscapes based on landscape painting; second (and this is associated with the post-modern), the interpretive, in which the social, cultural, political and religious framings of visual and verbal descriptions of landscape are read anew (Mitchell 3). This latter approach examines not just what landscape “is” or “means” but what it “does” as a cultural practice. Since many Chinese landscapes are verbalized, painted or photographed by travelers, artists, businessmen, politicians, students, colonialists, and international diplomats during this period when Julian and Vanessa correspond, we could discuss myriad landscapes.

One landscape is that of British colonial expansion. The British sphere of influence and railways are described in the economic reports of Maynard Keynes and Archibald Rose. Working on the early development of railways in China as a way of creating a market and audience for British goods, Keynes and Rose see the zigzag lines of railways radiating out of Hankow in the early 1930’s. The Chinese landscape to Rose, part of Britain’s Economic Advisory Council, was composed of “millions of human beings in the Chinese Republic. . . functioning as pack animals at unit cost 10 to 15 times as great as freight charges on American railways” (Keynes Papers, King’s College). Reasoning that it was cheaper to use railways—the key variable, Rose notes, in America’s economic growth—than Chinese labor, he and Keynes jockey for access to the Szechuan market of 45 million people. Rose asserts, as he argues in the cool chambers of Britain’s Advisory Council in 1930—harbinger of joint venture businessmen today—that the Chinese “represent nothing so much as a vast body of consumers waiting to consume.” We read of Willard Straight, an American of about 35 years old, associated with Cornell University as part of another financial group in 1910-11, taken up by Pierpont Morgan to become his agent in China; and Sidney and Beatrice Webb state in their diary that Straight was “inspired by Shaw’s *Major Barbara* to go in for making money [in China] as a means of getting power” (Webb 131). Such are the hard facts behind the idealized settings of China represented in art or travelers’ accounts.

A more romantic landscape of the civilization of China is recorded in the letters of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson who visited China in 1910-11. Writing to Roger Fry, Dear Podge, from a temple near Peking, Dickinson expresses what is most extraordinary about the landscape of China:

I feel so at home. I think I must have been a chinaman once. I'm now in a temple in the hills west of Peking. . . . And a sense of a most dignified contemplative life that I have ever met anywhere else. . . . What a civilized people they have been. And how [the] boundaries went in punishing them for it! But I won't [go into] all that, it makes me too indignant. Peking is amazing. . . . What I want to do is to take a room in a temple and spend a week there. (Dickinson Papers, King's Collection, May 10, 1913)

E. M. Forster, Dickinson's best friend, executor and biographer, characterizes his stance: "he came to her as a lover, who had worshipped from afar for years. . . . China never failed him." But there's the darker China of Beatrice and Sidney Webb, socialist founders of the London School of Economics. They visited China and their former students there during exciting times, the fall of the Manchu empire and the establishment of the republic in 1911. Though one might have expected them to identify with the revolution, they have little but sneers for the Chinese, comparing them unfavorably with the Japanese despite the positive reports that they receive from English living in China. Sidney Webb writes:

The officials of whom there seem an abundance in all departments of Government are, of course, immeasurably inferior to the Japanese officials—a self-indulgent, indolent-looking lot, who seem to be perpetually smoking and drinking tea and who are only too ready to leave their offices at any excuse. . . . [T]hey are repulsive, dirty, disingenuous, and coarse-looking and sensual. Also, there is a general appearance of inefficiency and drift. (118)

The "moral" decay in China preoccupied them:

With regard to sodomy, ever since I came to China I have been wondering whether the vice did not prevail extensively because of the expression on the faces of the men—the vicious femininity of many of the faces. We are now told, on good authority, that in every Chinese town there are streets of "boys' homes," and that this form of prostitution is far more popular than the material and healthy one of men and women. It is this rottenness of physical and moral character that makes one despair of China—their constitution seems devastated by drugs and abnormal sexual indulgence. They are, in essentials, an "unclean race." (140)

As with all observers, we find the Webbs cloaking the landscape with the moral and the ideological.

At the same time that the Webbs describe this darker China, ideal and quaint Cathay landscapes are published in Arthur Waleys's fligree translations of Tang poetry back in England, or are seen daily on the popular English Blue Willow plates: popular landscapes that conjure emperors, concubines and imperial palace splendor. But what we find in the letters of Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf and Ling Shu Hua, is a landscape of mind. Vanessa and Julian do not participate in what Mary Louise Pratt labels "the imperial gaze," but imaginatively voyage, and develop a way of looking at the culture and landscapes of China that produces a transformative aesthetics, a new aesthetic vocabulary of the East.

Their stance counters Edward Said's views as represented in his 1978 work, *Orientalism*, in which "orientalism" is a "text" created by scholars, colonial administrators, novelists, and his more recent *Culture and Imperialism*, 1993. Not only is Said's definition of the East limited, confined to Muslim and "Bible lands," barely glancing toward the Far East, but he locks the East and the West in a polarized political dialogue presenting a unitary China and a monolithic West. When we, however, deconstruct the East into Chinese warlords, Japanese aggressors, the Kuomintang and the Communists, we find many different Chinas and multiple Easts, including, but not confined to, Said's version: no one culture, it seems, has a monopoly on greed and territorial expansion. What the conversation that follows reveals is that Vanessa and Julian are part of a community that "resists" imperial discourse. Communities of artists, women or travelers with a distinctly modernist spirit often resist rigid boundaries of nation, race, and ethnicity as Sue Horton attests in her recent book, *Difficult Women, Artful Lives*, as she writes about "the restless boundary crossing" (4) of Isak Dinesen and Olive Schreiner in Africa.

But on to the landscapes of the China Letters. Vanessa writes to Julian in China about his "painter's eye":

I always feel you (I see so many things in the same way but you've made it all much more vivid to me than anyone else has)—you know I always think you have very much of a painter's eye—you notice colors, even the color of night, in a way very few but painters do. Also you have the great advantage of being able to put it into words. So that all you tell me is alive and terribly exciting and I feel as if I'd almost seen it with you. (10/21/35, Tate)

In another letter, she compares Julian's "painter's eye" as more perceptive than the idealized way of seeing China of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, who visited in 1913-14, and notes that "indeed you make me understand much more than I've ever understood before. Your accounts are like a fresh wind blowing on all these intensely subtle mysterious notions that Waley and most people seem to have about China" (10/25/36, Tate).

Their perfect delight in seeing landscapes together is documented as well in the correspondence that occurs between Vanessa and Ling Shu Hua after Julian's death in the Spanish Civil War in July 1937. Both painters, they, in a new-found relationship, experience joy in seeing things together. Two years after Julian's death, Vanessa writes to Ling Shu Hua:

Your letter is very sad. I am glad that you write what you feel to me—please always do so. Then it is possible for me to do the same to you and so we can have intimacy with each other. I think Julian had made something between you and me possible by his death that perhaps we could not have had if he were alive—so let us make the most of it dear Sue. (9/16/38, Tate)

Writing to Vanessa from China in 1935 of the forward movement of his affair with Ling Shu Hua, Julian says:

Oh Nessa dear you will have to meet her one of these days. She's the most charming creature I've ever met and the only woman who would be a possible daughter in law to you (she isn't, being married with a charming child and ten years too old) that she really is in our world and one of the most gifted, the nicest, most sincere and interesting people in it. (11/22/35, King's Collection)

Though far away, Julian is present in Vanessa's feelings as if she'd "almost seen the landscape" with him, and Ling Shu Hua, a painter like Vanessa, is, as Julian says, "really of our world." "Seeing"—the aesthetic gaze—is what brings them together across cultural boundaries and continents. And it forms a strong bond between Julian and Shu Hua also. While sailing away from China on his way to France in March 1937, Julian writes, "you're the only human being I really enjoy looking at scenery with" (King's Collection, 3/17/37).

One would think that Julian had abandoned his aesthetic gaze from his life choices. Of the third generation of Bloomsbury, he was committed to politics in the 1930's—not only because war seemed to be his hobby since the time he was a young boy (ironically playing American soldier and other war games during the C.O. period with Duncan and Clive) but also because he strove, after a certain point, to leave the practice of poetry and painting behind (not having been particularly encouraged by his family), and to become a good man of action. This was revealed not only by his participation in the revolutionary politics of China and Spain, but also in his expressed desire "for a violent finish in hot blood" (1/18/36 JB to VB, King's). Throughout these years, he sought confirmation of his political vision from his brother, Quentin; his uncle, Leonard Woolf; and Maynard Keynes, the economist; consciously moving away from "the escape of the inner life" represented by Vanessa and Duncan, the disengaged second generation.

Their “escape” is described by Virginia Woolf in a letter to Julian in China in 1936. She tells of a visit to Charleston and limns the tensions between politics and art that are part of her and of Julian’s own grappings:

We had tea at Charleston, on Sunday, and found them all very well, and I think once more hopped out of the frying pan onto the cool green pastures of painter’s art. How I envy them [Vanessa and Duncan]. There they sit, looking at pinks and yellows, and when Europe blazes all they can do is screw their eyes up and complain of a temporary glare in the foreground. Unfortunately, politics get between me and fiction. (5/21/36, King’s).

This wonderful image of Vanessa and Duncan “looking at the pinks and yellows when all Europe blazes” crystallizes the aesthetic vision. Even Julian notes in a letter from Wuhan that he “was really frightened when Nessa started writing about politics. . . a really appalling situation if Nessa noticed it.” (JB to VB, undated, Monks House Papers).

This raises Virginia Woolf and more recently, Denis Donoghue’s question, “what is real and to whom.” She states in her 1940 essay, “The Leaning Tower,” that “the poet in the thirties was forced to be a politician. That explains why the artist in the thirties was forced to be a scapegoat. If politics were ‘real,’ the ivory tower was an escape from ‘reality.’” If the range of aesthetic/political vision were to be represented at this moment in 1936, Julian would stand for an articulated political view; Virginia Woolf, an aesthetic vision caught in the glare of politics; Vanessa and Duncan, absorbed in the aesthetic vision hardly aware of politics; and Ling Shu Hua, living in the midst of the War of Resistance against Japan, moving westward to Sichuan with her daughter to avoid the oncoming troops.

Despite differences in the generations and temperaments to be described in my forthcoming work, *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes*, what Julian, Vanessa and Ling Shu Hua share in the China letters is what Vanessa calls “the painter’s eye.” Julian’s naturalist prose sometimes soars; his letters, unwritten poems. Often outdoors in China with a gun or a boat, Julian writes of the pleasure of being out on a lake in China:

The boats a great fascination—we’re having windier weather, and last Sat. Sue and I sailed some yen [sic] miles or more—it must have been more like twenty in distance covered, of course—into a fascinating green country with empty mountains coming right down to water’s edge, and farm houses and ruined gazebos and temples and fishing families—its the best way I know of seeing the country. (6/16/36, Kings)

The correspondence reveals Julian’s gifts for description—letter-writing, his most prolific genre—and his poetic “eye” that never brought him the more obvious

successes as an artist in life. I select a few examples to illuminate not only his descriptive gifts, but also the tropes of the landscape of China shared by Julian and Vanessa. In writing of a trip to Peking, he describes the Western Hills:

Our day in the Western Hills spent looking at temples. Some of them are very lovely, beautifully proportioned courts of white marble: lots of bas-relief that seems to me decent decoration, and some good statues. There's a colossal sleeping Buddha in a sort of copper-gold who, I fancy, distinguished statesmen send him presents of colossal slippers. Then, as you'll see from the photos, we climbed a small mountain. I really lost my heart to the Western Hills. They're mountains—from the plain very jagged, but they roll and heave like early bronzes of buffaloes. And they're a superb size and color. I really could live very happily in Peking. But I think I prefer Charleston. (2/1/36, Tate)

The tropes of temples, Buddhas, and mountains appear frequently in the writing of British artists and travelers. Having seen the Western Hills this summer in Peking, I can vouch for the poetic suggestiveness of Julian's description. If one's idea of the orient includes exotic landscapes, then Vanessa's curiosity and Julian's descriptions are no exception. Writing to Shu Hua, he describes himself sailing:

Well, I didn't go to the dismal party after all. Because I went sailing that afternoon. . . . I slowly drifted back, bathing, and just as I was going to anchor and go in a little wind came up. It rose very fast and after a tack or two across the [?narrows] it was blowing half a gale and it seemed silly to go in. So I went on sailing and sailing with a lovely warm wind. All my clothes got wet, so I took them all off; the wind was warm enough. The moon came up almost as bright as day and I sailed right up its path on the water, over to Mo San with the boat putting her lee bow right down into the waves, and white foam and spray shooting up. It was one of the most romantic things I ever did. (9/35, Berg)

Writing to Vanessa, he observes that "the world grows unimaginably beautiful. . . such blues of lakes and sky and mountain shadows" (12/6/35, King's); in another to Virginia, "the blood orange moon rising through the clouds" (3/12/36, King's); in another to Ling Shu Hua, he writes of their shared love of landscape, noting that she would have liked seeing "the snowy mountains of Crete coming out of a mist" (3/9/37). After Julian's death, all three women are drawn together (their relationship recorded in Virginia's correspondence, 1937-1938, and Vanessa's 1938-55) to share their grief. They also share a curiosity about each other's culture and aesthetics—belying the stereotypes of Bloomsbury exclusiveness, cultural isolation and snobbism.

In addition to letters, Julian sends home crates of folk art, pottery and silks: Han pots, “celadon green” pottery noting that “the Chinese don’t go in for plates and not at all for saucers.” He sends the green glazes, stuffs, silks and pewter, and Vanessa wishes, “if only I could go out with you into the villages you describe I’m sure I could get lovely things” (11/7/35). Vanessa encourages him to bring back lots of things and these commodities as well as the fashions in London, part of the craze for chinoiserie, inspired in part by the Imperial Exhibition at the Burlington Galleries, 1935-6, prepare the way for England’s more serious engagement with Chinese aesthetics as recorded in Roger Fry’s Slade lectures on Chinese art, 1935. The International Exhibition of Chinese Art, held at the Burlington Galleries, London, November, 1935-March 1936, was a collection of outstanding Chinese treasures: bronzes, sculptures, porcelains, paintings, calligraphy, pottery, textiles, jades, carvings in red lacquer, cloisonné. An important cultural event, it was responsible for breaking British culture into the aesthetics of China. After visiting the show, Vanessa writes:

They are a queer people. The early things are simply lovely, the bronzes and pots. In fact I think there are lovely things to be found at all ages. But they get terribly skillful later and seem unable to resist using colors that aren’t really those they feel most about. It seems as if all their instinct were for things in a very narrow range and infinitely subtle. The relief on the bronzes for instance when kept low is amazing. So right and exquisite and always in proportion to the subtle and restrained . . . incredibly lovely. But when they get on to bright color they become hideous and garish and don’t seem to know how to manage them at all as if it were against the grain. . . . My theory is that China—the landscape—is like their good painting—all subtle blues and browns and grays with suggestions of other colors and that people are always affected by what they live in. Not that they just copy it which of course they do, but somehow the general scheme gets into all their being and they can’t escape it and always really think and feel within that range. (12/15/35, Tate)

But what does this cultural contact yield: Julian’s travel to China, the letters and the Chinese art he sends back, Vanessa and Ling Shu Hua’s correspondence, and then visits in the 1940’s in London, Vanessa and Duncan’s visit to the first full-scale exhibition of Chinese art in London. England and China begin to learn each other’s aesthetic and cultural vocabularies. It produced then, as today, cultural and aesthetic bricolage—the combining of different elements, vocabularies, motifs and tropes in clothing, art, writing. We can discern this hybrid vision in some of the letters to Ling Shu Hua.

Fantasizing about a life in England with Shu Hua in an intense period of their relationship, Julian creates a scene and suggests the hybrid vision that Shu Hua will embody. He writes, “we will walk down the garden path and you shall write Chinese poems and paint Chinese pictures about English scenery” (King’s Collection,

12/17/36). Later Vanessa writes to Shu Hua when she visits London in 1949 and has a show at the Adams Galleries, and she too, like Julian, expresses her interest in the “hybrid” vision of a Chinese artist in London. Instead of Lily Briscoe’s Chinese eyes, we have represented in these letters the fascination with Ling Shu Hua’s English eyes. Vanessa writes: “I am sure people will be interested in seeing how London looks to a Chinese artist. One has seen so many paintings of Chinese scenes, but very seldom any of one’s own familiar surroundings” (7/11, undated, Berg). Looking at her paintings in the Adams Gallery, Vanessa admiringly writes:

But when we [Duncan and Vanessa] came to look at them more carefully I was really very much impressed by your qualities as an artist. It is most interesting of course to see European landscape through Chinese eyes and I thought some of the most successful were those of Switzerland. (12/13/49, Berg)

The Chinese saying “[H]e regards a camel as a horse with a swelled back” may be used to illustrate the larger cultural framework that create what Julian, Vanessa and Ling Shu Hua see. For, like all of us, they “see,” but they cannot see what makes them see. What is familiar to them from the culture of England shapes to some degree what they see elsewhere. As Julian gazes at a visual landscape of China, and Vanessa at a verbal and imaginative one, their scale of comparison is Europe. In one letter, Vanessa remarks “how huge” Julian looks in his Chinese robe and “The country too looks to me also fascinating and very like Provence—I don’t think it would seem to me strange—somehow it looks to me familiar and inviting as though we would be at home in it. I find it easy to imagine the color” (1/17/36 Tate). And yet later, when Julian’s involvement with Shu Hua becomes more troubled, she pleads, don’t “you miss people of your own kind . . . you mustn’t spend your life in China.” In another, she implores, “But I realize how difficult it must be for you darling—how isolated from one’s kind one must sometimes feel with such strange, alien, though charming creatures all round one” (3/11/36 Tate).

“The vast mass of new aesthetic experience” in China, as Roger Fry expressed it in one of his reviews, excited these artists. It is important for us as critics to remember that political and historical reality is one order of reality and other orders must not be denied. The imaginative and aesthetic reality represented in this paper by a community of intellectuals and artists seeing together—Vanessa, Julian, Ling Shu Hua, Virginia Woolf—and the rich cultural and artistic bricolage that emerges in the dialogue between China and England—are also “real.” For when we look at a people looking at landscape and art together at a particular moment in cultural history, it is rather like a visual chord in which we see many things at once. For the response to the culture, landscapes and art of China—like Virginia Woolf’s lighthouse—is not one thing—not just a monolithic East or a unitary West—but the reflection of myriad minds and communities—Bloomsbury being just one of them.

[Editor's Note: Parts of this article may appear in the forthcoming work *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury and China* to be published by Stanford UP.]

NOTES

1. Berg Collection, New York Public Library. All future references to this collection of letters will be noted parenthetically as "Berg Collection." Other citations of letters will follow the same convention. Monks House Papers, University of Sussex Library, Sussex, England, will be noted in the text as "Monks House Papers"; Modern Archives, King's College Library, Cambridge University, England manuscripts will be noted as "King's College"; Tate Library, London, England, will be noted as "Tate Collection."

WORKS CITED

- Fry, Roger. "Oriental Art" in *Living Age* (26 March, 1910): 794-798.
- Horton, Susan. *Difficult Women, Artful Lives: Olive Schreiner and Isak Dinesen, in and out of Africa*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994.
- Mao Tse Tung. "Talks at the Yen-an Forum On Literature and Art," *Mao Tse Tung on Literature and Art*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1967.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturization*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1978.
- . *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Webb, Sidney, and Beatrice. *The Webbs in Asia: The 1911-12 Travel Diary*. London: Macmillan, 1992.
- Woolf, Virginia. "The Leaning Tower," *The Moment and Other Essays*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948.