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Material Culture, Memory, and Mobility: Emily Georgiana Kemp's Travels in China*

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Abstract

This essay examines the texts, images, and collected objects of Emily Georgiana Kemp (1860-1939), an artist, traveler, and author, to consider the complex interplay of material culture, memories, and women's mobility. It draws on theories of object and memory, as developed by Walter Benjamin and others, to explore Kemp's professional desire and self-fashioning and account for the complexity, ambivalence, and conflicting moves in Kemp's representations of her travel in China within the fraught context of semi-colonialism. As such, I position Kemp's travel texts, watercolor paintings, and the collection of indigenous objects she donated to Oxford's Ashmolean Museum as both material objects and acts of memory. I argue that material objects, which aid travel memories in complex ways, can be understood as involved in a double movement. On the one hand, they enable women travelers to measure, frame, and professionalize the authentic experiences mobility can offer. On the other hand, they facilitate a reflexive re-evaluation of the hierarchical cultural relations upon which British imperialism depended. As an alternative to automatically privileging an Orientalist mode as a means of interpreting women's oriental travel writings, attention to objects and memory offers an opportunity for better understanding, rather than limiting, women travelers' shifting positions across cultures.

Keywords

Emily Georgiana Kemp, travel writing, material culture, objects, memory, collection, China

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After much struggle to survive the "tail of a typhoon," which made Emily Georgiana Kemp (1860-1939), an Oxford-graduate artist, proclaim her first voyage to China "unspeakably distasteful," descriptions of the arrival scene in the autumn of 1893, when her ship "emerged from the storm and sailed into the wonderful bay of Hong Kong" (*Face of China* 1), nevertheless set the cheerful tone for representations of her many later sojourns. She ebulliently recollects, in *The Face of China* (1909), that China had become for her "a land of infinite charm and beauty" (1). The narrative then swiftly moves on from Hong Kong to Shanghai, advising future travelers to "make a detour into the Chinese streets" upon their arrival (3) before giving an evocative description of local shops in Shanghai's Chinese city, which is separated from its cosmopolitan international settlement:

> The entrances to the shops are lined with Chinese lanterns of every shape, size, and colour: when lit, they cast a kindly glamour over the celestials below, very different from the pitiless glare of electric light. . . . Despite the squalid surroundings and the tininess of the shops, [visiting them] may be very valuable. . . . Along with such things [jade, bronze, ivory, china, and silver objects] are mixed the most absurd rubbish, mainly European goods. Many shops contain a row of finely carved chairs to accommodate purchasers, and elaborately decorated woodwork, such as screens with beautiful groups of figures at one end. (4-5)

Uppermost here is a sharp contrast between European industrial goods, exemplified by "the pitiless glare of electric light," and Chinese crafted objects, which obviously bear a latent Western history of chinoiserie. Kemp seems to be preoccupied with placing Chinese crafted objects and European goods ("the most absurd rubbish," in her words) at opposite ends of an aesthetic spectrum. Moreover, Chinese streets, shops, and craftworks become a site of memory for Kemp, recreating a past sustained by experiences with Chinese craftworks in a way illustrative of Walter Benjamin's "aura," namely, an object's authenticity, creativity, and embeddedness in local history and tradition (*Illuminations* 222). Chinese crafted objects carry significant weight for her in two respects: first, she uses them to project and promote her artistic taste and ethnographical interest, an orientation that ultimately differentiates her from other British women travelers visiting China, such as Isabella Bird (1831-1904), Constance Frederica Gordon Cumming (1837-1924), Alicia Little (1845-1926), and Mary Gaunt (1861-1942); second, if we borrow Benjamin's point that objects assume,

encode, and trigger memories, evoke feelings, and enable self-identification, as developed in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and other works, we can say that Kemp evokes Chinese objects to provide a model of authentic memory as well as authentic traveling experience.

In beholding the lanterns, basking in their mesmerizing light, or very likely, touching the chairs, fondling the woodwork, and gently brushing through the surface of screens in the shop, Kemp becomes enthralled, enchanted by a material world of difference, which she engages through "the multiple sensuous and socialized subjective apparatus of our bodies" (Tilley 8). In this sense, material objects function as an effective means of positioning travel memories, revealing an embodied, affective fashion through which Kemp reconstructs her traveling experience and self. Material culture hence offers an important lens to look at the ways in which women travelers use the memories that surround objects to configure self-fashioning via mobility and, simultaneously, negotiate perceived cultural differences.

Without automatically privileging the conventional modes of reading Victorian and Edwardian women's oriental travel writing, this essay draws on theories of object and memory, as developed by critics such as Benjamin, to bear on Kemp's travel narratives, paintings, and collections. Recent material culture studies have demonstrated that objects and affect are entangled. Since the affective turn, many thinkers do not place great emphasis on differentiating "affect" and "emotion," although "affect" has been addressed as intense, interstitial, or in-the-making visceral forces and feelings. In this essay, "affect" is an umbrella term for an overlapping cluster of terms such as emotion, feeling, mood, sensation, and atmosphere, forces giving contour to specific encounters between body and world. Material objects "shape emotions" and "bear historical witness to the affective relationships of people to the material world, and to other people and ideas" (Downes et al. 3). They also exert what Jane Bennett describes as "thing-power," defined as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). Instead of being powerless, passive, and inert, objects and things create their own rhythms as active participants and agents in human society and social relations, generating affective power "to define the boundaries of social communities, creat[ing] identities and a sense of belonging and place (Broomhal 177). But I would suggest that what such conceptualizations have missed is the mediating role that memory plays in making material objects' power to generate affect visible. Scholars in the fields of memory and material culture studies have traced this line of inquiry back to Benjamin who, as Andreas Huyssen remarks, "forcefully linked objects to temporality and to memory" (107). In this light, Benjamin's theories offer a useful

framework through which we can probe into the nexus of memory and material objects as configured in Kemp's artwork, collection, and texts.

Recent discussion of "women and things" in the long nineteenth century reconsiders how women, as both consumers and producers, "engaged in meaning making, identity formation, and commemoration through their production and manipulation of material artifacts" (Tobin and Goggin 1). Likewise, Benjamin argues in "Excavation and Memory" that memory is a "medium" that can "yield an image of the person who remembers" (576). I will contend that objects bathed in memory stand at the forefront of Kemp's self-fashioning, complicating the ways an artist/traveler's professional subjectivity is constructed and projected. I position Kemp's watercolor paintings, travel memoirs, and collection of indigenous items as both material objects of a country that was "changing, even to [its] remotest bounds" (*Chinese Mettle* 17) and acts of memory that are unstable and constantly shifting shape (Huyssen 108). This will account for the complexity, ambivalence, and contradictions in Kemp's representations of traveling encounters in China within the fraught context of quasi-colonialism and its affective economy. Investigating the centrality of material objects to a marginalized woman's practice of memorialization, this essay argues that Kemp employs material objects as tools of memory to mediate her travel experiences, affective responses, and cognitive perceptions of China and self.

Kemp's life and career trajectory demonstrate her negotiation of material culture and practices of memorization. Kemp was born in 1860 to a wealthy middle-class family in the Lancashire town of Rochdale, a place known as "the cradle of free enterprise, nonconformism, and high-minded social reform" during the mid-nineteenth century (Morris-Suzuki 20). Kemp grew up in the "heart of the industrial revolution" (20). Her father was a silk manufacturer before joining a woolen and flannel business with his father-in-law, Henry Kelsall. Kelsall and Kemp, an enterprising textiles firm, was the largest employer in Rochdale by the late nineteenth century. Immersion in such a family environment plausibly influenced Kemp's collector's eye for Chinese textiles, among others, as memory objects to be taken home. In addition, Kemp's parents and grandparents were devout Baptists and philanthropists, "enthusiastic adherents of the cause" of foreign missions (*Reminiscences* 10). Their homes were frequented by missionaries who fired her youthful imagination with "stories of adventure as well as heroism" (11). As a matter of fact, four of her family members (two sisters, a brother-in-law, and a niece) became missionaries in China. She, too, had hoped to follow their footsteps, but it never materialized as she set her heart on developing a different professional path.

Nevertheless, she employed the wide missionary network there to navigate in China and smooth her journey to become a traveler, writer, and artist.

In addition to her privileged childhood, Kemp's socioeconomic standing allowed her educational as well as professional opportunities unavailable to most women of her time. She studied at Somerville College, Oxford, in 1881, just two years after its founding as a women's college. In 1891, she began studying art at the Slade School of Fine Art. Under the guidance of Alphonse Legros, Kemp developed her style in watercolor, and her artworks were exhibited at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.[1] To be sure, her artistic talent was enormously valuable as it provided her travel books with numerous vivid illustrations. According to Janice O'Brien, Kemp also used her own artworks for lantern slides to enhance her public lectures. Her watercolors, therefore, dramatically increased the degree of authority and authenticity pertaining to her remembered travels. In terms of professionalism, she carved up a second path. Following preeminent female travelers like Isabella Bird, Kemp in 1907 was admitted as a Fellow of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, a title saliently appearing in all her travel books. By virtue of her travelogues, she contributed to British hegemony over empirical knowledge, on which hinged the control of the British empire (Richards 7). Her professional accomplishments in contributing to the archive of colonial knowledge regarding China received recognition in 1922, when she was awarded the Grande Médaille de Vermeil by the French Geographical Society for providing ethnographical, geographical, and colonial knowledge of China's southwest, a contested region where Britain and France vied for discursive, territorial, and economic possession. It is important to note that this was the first time the award was granted to a woman, testifying to the complex relationship between empire building and women's professionalism.

Kemp's professional career as a traveler/artist and author flourished at a time when the West took an increasing imperialist interest, both economically and geopolitically, in China, whose material culture rapidly shifted under the weight of the encroachment of colonial modernity. Her first journey to China in 1893 was succeeded by many visits over the next three decades, resulting in four books illustrated with her own paintings. Her first book, *The Face of China*: *Travels in East, North, Central and Western China* (1909) recounts two sojourns approximately fifteen years apart. In 1893 and 1894, when antiforeign sentiments were running high in China, she stayed with her sister and brother-in-law, both missionaries, in Taiyuan before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. On a subsequent visit in 1907 and

[1] See the records in Weimann.

1908, she embarked upon a six-month journey from northeastern China to British Burma via the Yangtze River. The years in between offered a vantage point from which she observed the social reform staged by the Qing government as a response to European powers' aggressive imperialist expansion, climaxing with the signing of the Boxer Protocol in 1901. Her book received mixed reviews in a cultural milieu where Yellow Peril discourse dominated the fin-de-siècle cultural scene: presenting China as "a land of infinite charm and beauty" very much went against the grain of the Yellow Peril.[2] A reviewer for *The Burlington Magazine* commented that although Kemp was closely "attached to sundry evangelizing bodies," she "shows a moderate interest in the Christianizing of the Chinese, [and] a much livelier interest in their country, manners and customs. On these she chatters shrewdly and agreeably" ("The Face of China" 167). Indeed, as keen as Kemp was to see the positive influence of missionary work, she distances herself from and even opposes the typical Orientalizing narrative of conversion. Rather, she uses her verbal and visual narratives to engage prevailing political, social, and cultural debates regarding China, a stance that becomes even clearer in her later travels and writings.

The lukewarm reception to *The Face of China* nevertheless inspired her to take another trip to China in 1910. She visited Manchuria and Korea at a time when Russia and Japan were ruthlessly strengthening their hold. *The Face of Manchuria, Korea and Russian Turkestan* (1910) is thus an up-to-date and informative account of the imperial frictions occurring in a contested land over which "Baedecker is wholly inadequate" (viii). Here Kemp demonstrates professional confidence in articulating her own voice regarding international relations. In a similar manner, *Wanderings in Chinese Turkestan* (1914) recounts her venture into northwest China in the wake of the revolution that brought an end to the Qing Dynasty's 2,000 years of imperial rule and ushered in a new, nationalistic China keen to modernize itself. In 1919, Kemp set off for China yet again. She visited thirteen provinces to "the remotest bound of the empire" (*Chinese Mettle* 17), a trip recorded in *Chinese Mettle* (1921), her last book on China. In it, she carefully observes the progress made in medical facilities, women's education, public schools, social welfare systems, and other institutions, yet she registers a profound anxiety over how such changes had affected local culture, aesthetic traditions, and national life in general. This concern, already manifest in her earlier books, is captured by the nostalgic temporality of her watercolors and collection practices, which to a great extent form an archive of personal memories of active ethical and cultural engagement with a country in transformation, an

[2] For studies of the Yellow Peril discourse and its relations to early twentieth-century Anglophone popular literature, see Frayling; and Witchard.

engagement made possible through empowering travel experiences. Such memories and experiences are inevitably consigned to the past, and yet they are reified in texts, images, and objects, as I demonstrate in the next sections after spelling out how objects like self-portraits are used to construct and project a woman's professional subjectivity.

Portraits, Self-Fashioning, and a "Female Travelling Scholar"

There is a long tradition of female British travelers using material objects to perform acts of remembrance both in public and private spheres, acts through which their traveling memories and subjectivities can be shaped and reshaped. Kemp's self-portraits, some watercolor and some photographic, neatly fall into this category of remembrance. Some of these portraits appear as illustrations in her travel books, but some are unpublished. Two are particularly intriguing. They might lead to divergent interpretations of her travel memories and subjectivity, but both convey a tangible sense of the freedom foreign travel can offer. In the first portrait (Fig. 1), a British lady wearing a classic Edwardian riding outfit confidently sits on a local pony and holds the rein tightly in her hand, sending the message that she has everything under absolute control. A few steps behind her stands an elderly, diminutive man holding a walking stick. Given his attire, we can identify him as coming from Chinese Turkistan. A grand blue mountain range looms in the background. Like many of Kemp's other paintings, this one portrays landscapes and people from a slightly low angle, avoiding the "monarch-of-all-I survey" mode characteristic of the imperial eye, the detached, panoramic gaze that aestheticizes, objectifies, and others native landscapes (Pratt 201-08). However, the fact that the proud, confident white woman recognizably dominates both the local landscape and the native man, who likely serves as her guide and translator, imparts a sense of uneasy tension. It could be read as contrasting a detached or even haughty white traveler and a submissive native man under a colonial backdrop, or more generally, two nations and cultures caught up in a hierarchical relationship. To some extent, it conjures up memories of an imperial traveling scene, evoking a privileged, disengaged tourist or frivolous globetrotter representative of Victorian women travelers widely associated with leisure travel shorn of the desire to engage the local population or gain scholarly knowledge.

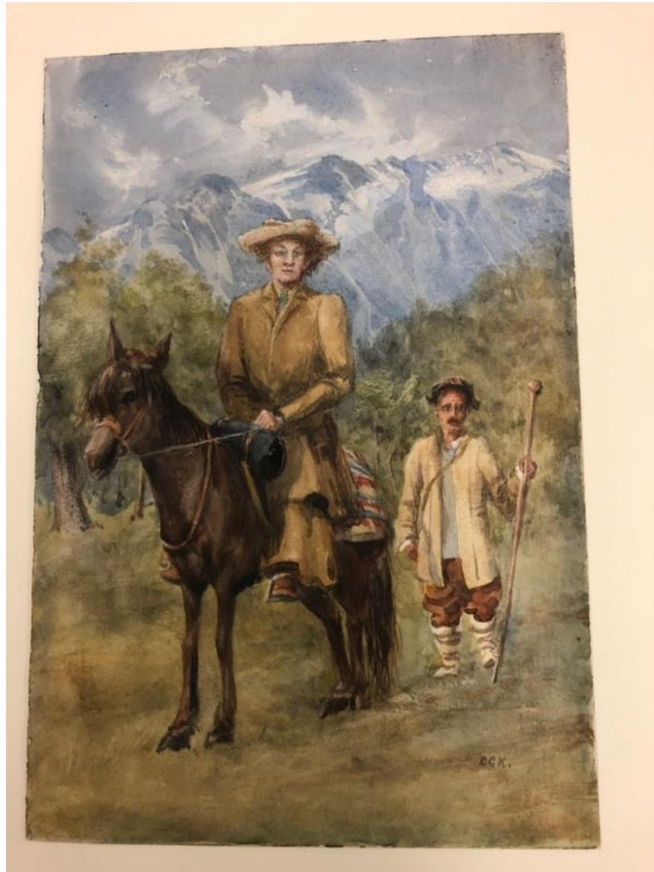

Fig. 1. Image courtesy of the Eastern Art Department, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

The second portrait, however (Fig. 2), mobilizes material objects to engage in a different kind of meaning making and commemoration, as Kemp deploys cultural capital through objects she collected during travels in China to construct and project her professional subjectivity as a multifaceted figure rather than a mere privileged tourist. It is a half-body portrait of a middle-aged woman whose austere, serious look projects a very scholarly, donnish, and professional manner. At first sight, one is struck by the strangeness of the blend of culturally loaded signs. The woman wears an indigo-blue Chinese silk robe decorated with tiny embroidered patterns around the collar, along with a long, brown, fur-lined overcoat that, according to Kemp, was

bought in Peking (*Face of China* 118). The Chinese robe entirely hides the contours of the body, unlike late Victorian and Edwardian fashion that allowed more freedom of movement. On her head is a wide-brimmed hat, with dark green strings tied under the chin. As Kemp discloses later in *The Face of China*, this "huge, pancake-like straw hat" is worn by the poorest "coolie" to "shelter him equally from sun or rain" (236-37). Firmly gripped in her right hand is a carved and adorned wooden staff, which we later learn is a "Buddhist pilgrim stick" (236). The woman stares piercingly at her spectators through horn-rimmed spectacles, confidence radiating. Most of the objects in the picture are overtly loaded with Chinese significance. Only her tightly pulled-up light brown hair and facial features provide clues that she is British.

Fig. 2. Image courtesy of the Eastern Art Department, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

The portrait's caption reads, "the Author as 'Chinese female travelling scholar.'" This ambiguous phrase partly depicts her Chineseness as a costume, posing thought-provoking questions regarding women travelers' strategic use of local costumes. In many oriental travel writings authored by women, dating back to Mary Wortley Montagu's in the early eighteenth century, the significance of clothing is particularly evident in that "beyond [clothing's] practical function, it can be seen as a form of sartorial semantics, communicating cultural identity, class affiliation or gender" (D. Bird, "Clothing" 43). Detailed attention to clothing in nineteenth-century women's travel writing may be read as "an affirmation of femininity," as Susan Bassnett argues (239). However, the use of *native* dress affords British women new possibilities of physical freedom, self-fashioning, and the communication of important messages concerning their negotiation of host and home country cultures. For instance, while traveling in China, Isabella Bird adopted local clothing, which was comfortable and free from constraints compared to its European counterpart. In forsaking the skirt and taking on trousers, as she does in Szechuan following the local fashion (242), Bird calculatedly disrupts and evades certain Victorian gender codes, revealing a desire to appropriate the freedom of the foreign other. Additionally, she also uses local dress, as shown in a photographic self-portrait that captures and freezes her traveling memories, to shore up her professional authority. In this portrait, appearing in *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, she deliberately wears a Manchu dress (the Manchus ruled China's Qing dynasty from 1636-1912), theatrically linking her status to China's ruling class. This accentuates the self-assertive staging of herself as a serious, proud traveler and photographer, proactively countering any potential threat to her authority. The Manchu dress, in Bird's case, becomes a contested site of appropriation and performance across gendered and racial codes.

Kemp's regular use of Western traveling attire tells a similar story of constructing identity by virtue of material objects and memory, but it can be usefully contrasted with Bird's practice. In the early twentieth century, Westerners covering their bodies with Chinese attire was a mildly appropriative practice frequently utilized—by Bird as well as many male travelers, such as W. H. Medhurst, Robert Fortune, and the Australian George Ernest "Chinese" Morrison—to smooth their way into China's interior.[3] As Kemp explains, however, by the time she traveled to China in 1907, "no curiosity was exhibited about us at any place we visited . . . in the Western provinces" (*Face of China* 118). Well settled into the missionary network, she invariably receives "the ungrudging helpfulness and hospitality of the missionaries" (160). She is also generally welcomed, respected, and protected by

[3] For a detailed study of male travelers' cross-cultural dressing, see Chang, "Converting."

Chinese people across the classes, but especially by top officials, such as the governor of Shandong Province and General Feng Yu-hsiang of Hunan Province. Hence, she has no need to resort to the tricks of cross-dressing to disguise herself or pass as Chinese.

The fact that Kemp selects the latter self-portrait (Fig. 2) rather than the first one (Fig. 1) as the frontispiece to *The Face of China*, accenting it with a carefully articulated but ambiguous phrase, exemplifies her self-fashioning via material objects and reveals how she would like her travels in China to be remembered by herself and others. Indeed, the portrait is far more than a transparent showcase of her physical appearance or the traveling outfit. Since the Renaissance, portraits, particularly self-portraits, reveal the "heightened perceptions of individuality, the ego glorying in its own being" (R. Porter 3). They can serve as a channel of self-exploration as much as self-expression. Laura Marcus connects self-portraiture with the desire for self-representation, likening it to self-fashioning (112). Kemp's self-portrait, with the Chinese element writ large in the caption, showcases the complex nature of her self-identity: she is a female artist, professional instead of amateurish; a "genuine traveller," as she later calls herself (*Face of Manchuria* 3); and perhaps most importantly, a scholar and a serious intellectual.

If we conjure up the social, intellectual, and professional constraints faced by English women at the turn of the twentieth century, we can better understand what drives Kemp's distinctive practice of memorialization and self-fashioning. Janet Sondheimer reflects tartly on the circumstance of higher education in the early 1900s: "faculty and university boards were solidly male, professorial chairs, apparently, were designed to accommodate only the masculine frame" (qtd. in Dyhouse 101). As late as the 1920s, female students at Oxford were still not admitted for degrees, nor were they considered full members of the university. Even though Kemp was highly educated, she had no access to academic positions, nor was she expected to develop painting, a typical feminine accomplishment, into a profession. Nevertheless, "[a] desire for professional recognition was one of the most pervasive motives for inducing [Victorian] women artists to leave the predictable security of their homes" (Macleod 2). Kemp's circumstances can elucidate some of the social and vocational constraints faced by intelligent women of her time. Nevertheless, in exerting efforts that resemble what Judith Butler has called a "practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (1), she is expressive of women's active negotiation to bid for professional authority through material objects. Women journeying for professional authority, Carl Thompson also proposes, has been a longstanding quest, but it has been long underestimated in studies of women's travel writing (131).

In this regard, it is worth emphasizing that Kemp, through her books, images, and collections, "project[s] herself as both a credible travelling artist-scholar and an astute commentator of the social and political scene in the Far East" (Kato 149). Indeed, the firsthand ethnographical knowledge in *Chinese Mettle*—embellished with her watercolors of aboriginal tribes in the "unknown part" of Yunnan and Kweichow, provinces that had not been widely visited or studied by the "learned society" at home (88)—coupled with her collection of indigenous objects, gives full testimony to her legitimacy and credibility as a serious traveler/scholar and artist, with these two professions being closely tied together. This explains her insistence on the use of watercolors and sketches, rather than increasingly popular photographs, to illustrate her travel books. In her opinion, watercolors and sketches can "show as accurately as possible what the countries and people are like, and especially [can] give correct colouring, in this way supplementing the photographs with which many previous works on these countries have been illustrated" (*Face of China* x). Thus, watercolors embody her distinctive memory of China and its people as much as they act as "an index or sign of the artist's past agency" (Jones 23). Additionally, Kemp is fully aware that among the profusion of travel writing on China,[4] many travelers deploy photographs in order to authenticate their travels and validate the knowledge they gained. To distinguish herself, Kemp resorts to different strategies that include the conflation of painting and collecting, both of which serve to materialize her agency as a traveler-artist and scholar. Through this eclectic approach, she demonstrates an abiding academic interest in China's material culture and crafted objects that, in turn, shape and reshape her traveling memories and subjectivity.

Shopping, Collecting, and Souvenirs as Travel Memories

Various forces were at work in drawing Kemp toward Chinese material cultures, motivating her to appreciate, purchase, and collect local products and even to immortalize her memories of them as she traveled. First, there is the legacy of chinoiserie, a craze for porcelain and Chinese-inspired decorations, such as wallpaper, textiles, and furniture. Peaking in the mid-eighteenth century, chinoiserie "continued to wax and wane" (Gan 18), staging a revival during the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century. Part of the residual effect of chinoiserie is that it casts a whimsical geniality over Chinese things, from decorative art and architecture to other notions of China, as shown by the local street episode discussed at the start of

[4] See the five-volume *British Travel Writing from China, 1798-1901*, edited by Chang.

this essay. Second, Kemp's engagement with Chinese objects harks back to the cultural history of tourism associated with the Grand Tour, which is generally represented as involving a landed gentleman who travels to increase his knowledge by way of purchases, collections, and aesthetic experiences related to material objects. However, recent scholarship revisiting this history from a gender perspective shows that women tourists likewise deployed material strategies to construct their identities and used souvenirs to claim authority as traveling subjects (Gleadhill 21).[5] Kemp's textual accounts regarding her productive engagement with Chinese material cultures and crafted objects can be seen as touched by the legacy of both histories.

In her narratives, Kemp presents herself as a tourist consumer who constructs place-bound memories around material objects and her experiences of them, casting a whimsical, genial eye over sites where she might collect Chinese things or chinoiserie. She is invariably attracted by the hustle and bustle of street life, especially curio shops, antique stores, local markets, and even street-side peddlers. Shopping, to be sure, constitutes the most exciting part of her travels in China; she very often associates fond memories with pleasant shopping experiences. On many occasions, after "glorious" hours shopping, she lavishes words like "charming," "beautiful," and "fascinating" on places where she indulges her desire for "attractive things" (*Face of China*, 162-63; 99; 224). In such moments, selecting and purchasing local products dispels the discomfort and unpleasant feelings generated by daunting journeys through remote places where the convenience and comfort of modern travel are absent.

Shopping is just one mode of Kemp's wide range of engagement with China via its material cultures, but it suggests the significance that collecting had for her. In Orientalist narratives, collecting non-Western objects is susceptible to the taint of colonialism and the imperial gaze, carrying a measure of appropriation and classification, as Edward Said suggests (20). However, I argue that this does not explain everything in Kemp's case, especially when we consider the affective ground upon which collectibles serve as both carriers and generators of traveling memories. Her acts of collecting resonate more with Benjamin's theories about how collection is bound up with ownership, memory, and its renewal. In "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin states that ownership is "the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them" (67). Collecting, for Benjamin, is thus a cognitive and affective practice that allows one to be alive in collected objects, a medium for the collector to renew his or her connection with the past. In other words, the collector is remembered by his or her collections. What is

[5] See also Kowaleski-Wallace.

collected is not merely material objects, but also memories. This is not to say that objects contain or store memory; rather, "objects provide the ground for humans to experience memory," as Andrew Jones points out (22). Benjamin further remarks, "[every] passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" (60). Memory is unstable, finite, and chaotic, causing conflicting subjective experiences. For Rey Chow, Benjamin argues that "[t]ogether, the twin obsession with ownership and with memory suggest that collecting carries with it a desire for possessing history, even if such a possession can only come in fragmented, incomplete forms" (2). We can draw an analogy between Benjamin's collection of books and Kemp's obsession with the objects of a country that, in her eyes, will soon be engulfed by colonial modernity, a process that will denationalize China on its journey to becoming Westernized. In this regard, Benjamin's theory of objects, collection, and memory provides a fitting framework to bring out the complexity and ambivalence in Kemp's representation of her traveling encounters as experienced and remembered.

As a matter of fact, Kemp populates her travel memoirs with detailed information about her collection of a large variety of local objects through various means. Her acts of collecting are the result of her own curiosity and desire and the generous assistance offered by local people over the course of their negotiations. To a lesser extent, Chinese friends and acquaintances give her special objects as tokens of hospitality. She even makes exchanges with random people she meets on her travels. For instance, in Kweichow, a Chinese woman brings her some "charming embroidered spectacle-cases" as a gift, and to return the kindness, Kemp presents her with a "woolen jacket" (*Chinese Mettle* 103). All these objects have one special thing in common: they come into Kemp's possession because she regards them as what Benjamin describes as "the scene, the stage" ("Unpacking My Library" 60). They are the scaffolding upon which her memories and the authenticity of her travels rest. This explains why Kemp often used them to illustrate her public lectures (O'Brien 108).

Textiles form the most important part of the Chinese collection Kemp brought back to England and afterwards bequeathed to the Ashmolean Museum. This is also true of her watercolors, the majority of which feature local costumes in various styles, associated with different classes and regions. In addition to being the result of residual chinoiserie and her family background, Kemp's persistent interest in textile handicrafts might also be seen as conforming to a gendered culture in which late nineteenth-century consumerism and advertising played a substantial part in the construction of women's subjectivity, training their eyes to appreciate exotic fashions. Amongst the collection's women's clothing and footwear, there are two silk

embroidered robes, one of which resembles the blue one Kemp wears in the frontispiece to *The Face of China* (Fig. 3). There is also a pink silk brocade jacket; a pair of embroidered trousers; a colorful skirt such as those worn by Han Chinese women; a pair of "flower pot shoes" usually worn by Manchu women of high social status, for whom foot binding was strange; and a pair of sandals worn by some tribal women from Kweichow, a province described as "one of the most backward parts of China, and [it] has rarely been visited by travellers" (*Chinese Mettle* 40). Women there, coincidentally, didn't practice foot binding, either. As Kemp writes, "[as] a rule they [the Miao women] wear nothing on their feet," and only some of whom "could afford it wear sandals"—the "prettily embroidered ones" are merely for special occasions (119).

Fig. 3. A woman's winter robe collected by Kemp. Chinese women of the period usually wore large, loose clothes, which would conceal their bodily contours. Image courtesy of the Eastern Art Department, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

It is important to note Kemp's obsession with local women's shoes that, however, do not fall into the category of foot binding, a cultural practice that has fascinated and shocked many Western travelers. Some have criticized foot binding as the epitome of Chinese brutality and a "cultural monstrosity" carrying a "stench of barbarism" and tainting the entire social system of China (D. Porter 2).[6] For many Western women travelers in China, Mary Gaunt for instance, foot binding was inevitably associated with an utterly oppressed Chinese womanhood.[7] Kemp's collection of footwear, from which the otherwise popular bound-feet shoes are conspicuously absent, reveals her extensive and diligent curiosity about the manners, customs, and costumes of local people. It also signals her intention to eschew the stereotypical description of the Chinese as appealing to "the inhumanity of the sacrifice [foot-binding] requires" (D. Porter 1-2). After all, in Kemp's opinion, the prevailing idea of "the cruelty of the Chinese as a race" is subject to serious question (*Face of China* 123). Textiles as such can thus be read as agents of memory, recording Kemp's productive, open-minded engagement with local peoples and cultures.

Kemp's particularity as a woman artist and traveling scholar is also evident in her complication of the correlation between women and chinoiserie. In *Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*, David Porter singles out a number of compelling reasons why the prominent artist and aesthetic theorist William Hogarth "lash[es] out with such uncompromising fury against the popularity of the Chinese taste" in an era when women were the primary consumers of chinoiserie such as imported teacups (85-86). One of the most intriguing reasons is that Hogarth's "repeated insistence on the worthlessness of the Chinese style . . . is intimately bound up with his perplexing silence on the question of female aesthetic agency" (85-86). Porter goes on to propose that Hogarth rejects chinoiserie not so much because of its "underlying aesthetic values . . . but rather out of a sobering recognition that to grant the validity of the Chinese taste would be to legitimate a regime not only of female aesthetic self-determination, but also of the autonomy of female desire more generally conceived" (91). To put it simply, chinoiserie and its consumption fulfilled women's desire for and expression of agency and autonomy. The tradition of chinoiserie, then, serves as a useful lens to look at Kemp's consumption and collection of Chinese objects, especially during a time when for other Westerners, "the main interest of the country

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[6] See also Ko and Zito.

[7] See Gaunt, *A Woman in China* and *A Broken Journey*. For a discussion of Gaunt's encounters with foot binding and Chinese women's pained bodies, see Wu. See also Kuehn, "Encounters" and "Knowing Bodies."

lies in its mineral worth" (*Face of China* 29). However, she goes against the grain, developing an abiding interest in silk and other aesthetically appealing objects. Kemp is a rich instance of a modern woman who, liberal-minded and equipped with a high level of artistic and ethical sensibility, uses—or, we could say with Benjamin, is used by—Chinese objects to memorialize China and, as a result, express her own aesthetic agency and self-determination.

Collecting local objects that physically and psychically endure speaks to Kemp's intention to shore up her authority and authenticity, a professional subjectivity she is keen to project. This is especially true if we read her collected objects as souvenirs. Souvenirs exemplify the capacity of material objects to serve as traces of authentic memories, as Susan A. Stewart argues in *On Longing*:

> [The] capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative. Through narrative the souvenir substitutes a context of perpetual consumption for its context of origin. (135)

To be sure, a woman's journey to places that, as Kemp constantly emphasizes, are rapidly changing or located in "an out-of-the-way corner of the empire" (*Face of China* 13) is unrepeatable, or repeatable only through representation and memory. The Chinese objects assembled by Kemp en route—silk, embroideries, a copper box, a skin box, jade, an umbrella, and other knickknacks and local specialties—can thus be seen as souvenirs, traces of memories. Her memories of China are deeply invested in and, in some sense, re-materialized as these objects. Objects, especially those donated to the Ashmolean Museum, invent an authentic narrative of her travels in China.

Disorderly Mobility, Porous Infrastructure, and Nostalgic Memories

Yet another way to understand Kemp's mode of collecting objects is how it witnesses the larger push and pull between two different cultures. The Chinese objects she possesses, wears on her body, and takes home can be read as

representative of a high degree of engagement with cultures beyond the bounds of curio shops, suggesting a desire to acknowledge and appreciate the cultural signification material objects carry. Dúnlaith Bird addresses the question of recognition and its relation to subjectivity, contending that it was possible for late nineteenth-century Western women traveling in the East to "move beyond a Hegelian dynamic of power and appropriation to arrive at an intersubjective and dialogic recognition which relies on moments of mutual acknowledgement and understanding" (*Travelling* 195). This is true but, as I will suggest, we should be mindful to avoid romanticizing Western women's cross-cultural engagement with the Other. Various compounded privileges of race, class, and even taste, complicated by the prevailing affective economy that made China a source of fear in the early twentieth century, could blinker them into seeing and remembering China and its people in limited terms. In large measure, during the period of high imperialism, women's travel writings in particular were subjected to operations of filtering, censorship, and self-censorship. With these caveats in mind, we should still stay hopeful in terms of bringing to light the promise of sociability, friendship, and interpersonal dialogues in Kemp and other women's traveling encounters.

If Chinese handicrafts help produce Kemp's memories of delightful travel experiences, the local infrastructure, including means of transport, hotels, roadside inns, and other material conditions, engender slightly different channels and connections: what Paul Smethurst calls "disorderly mobility," which is "essential to the traveller's encounters with difference, with serendipity, and with motion in a psychological and ontological sense" (2). I will add that this state of "disorderly mobility" is analogous to the fact that like other memories, travel memories, tainted as they are by pervasive external ideologies and one's own values, are complex and not always stable or reliable—hence we see travelers make many conflicting, disorderly movements in their remembered travels. There is also the issue of women's vulnerability to and in China. Trekking through "impossible places" beyond the limits of European civilization, Kemp remembers her mobility as full of travail and bodily discomforts entailed by the barely modernized material circumstances of traveling. Very often, preconceived Western notions such as propriety and privacy are challenged, tested, and occasionally put into jeopardy by the messiness of traveling beyond the beaten tracks. For instance, throughout her travel books, feelings of anxiety over a lack of privacy are constantly projected onto the infrastructural spaces where Kemp and her servants stay and onto their transport vehicles. In a houseboat during a river journey along the Yangtze River, for example, her room is separated from her servants only by a thin curtain hung up to "supplement

the flimsy partitions," which "consisted of a few loose planks, with gaps of one or two inches wide between them, and at quite a slight touch they fell down" (*Face of China* 254). As she journeys deeper into China, readers even more frequently confront the porous and permeable nature of inns and houses where they halt for the night: "rather like cellular clothing in its porousness" (254). In Kweichow, she is annoyed by similar conditions but astonished by the lack of any boundary between human being and livestock, with the latter "[sharing] the building, all living on the most intimate terms with the owners" (*Chinese Mettle* 100). The local houses and "villainous" inns in remote rural regions do not provide travelers with desirable protection against various kinds of intrusions (*Face of China* 151).

Thin and flimsy, the partition or screen that Kemp sets up with her luggage and curtains evokes feelings and memories of encroachment, which soon materializes:

> At our next halting-place, Ch'a-tien, we had to put up with miserable quarters: our tiny room looked on to the street, so that we had a large and interested audience all the time; they lined up on the window-sill across the road, a good point of vantage, while the small fry discovered quite a unique point of observation. There was a hiatus at the bottom of the woodwork of the wall about a yard long and six inches deep, so by lying with their faces flat on the ground and close to the opening they could get a fair view of our doings. (*Chinese Mettle* 101)

Kemp proves unable to step out of this farcical performance staged by local inhabitants because she is the central actress of the show. The window, neither glazed nor covered, and the crevice at the lower end of the wall give curious native people a rather eager glimpse of the strangers and their doings. In a humorous rendering of this scene, Kemp finds "rows of bright eyes . . . quite uncanny" (101). The imagery of native "eyes" comes to the fore, indicating that "the returning gaze of others" is always there, "demanding recognition as subjects of history," as Mary Louise Pratt suggests (216). Here native people's commanding gaze zooms in on and scales up Kemp's own displacement, strangeness, and otherness, turning her into an object of observation and disclosing her uninvited intrusions into the local landscape.

The porosity of the material spaces Kemp traverses, which are marked by fissures, crevices, and gaps, takes on a metaphorical dimension, for it implies the permeable nature of the boundary separating the traveler and local population. In *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*, Ian Baucom points out that British architectural forms were crucial to the maintenance of the empire because

they are imbued with spatial power that could "magically translate, or render into English, the identity of the colonial subject" (70). Chinese spaces, however, resist being changed into British ones. The boats, inns, and other temporary spaces Kemp occupies tend to partially translate her identity into Chinese, or at least something that is not unequivocally "British." Her sense of the futility of maintaining heroic mastery over the spaces she moves through symbolically enacts the unattainable ideal of imperialist travelers who seek to dominate oriental spaces; they can neither separate themselves from the host country and its people nor assume a detached stance.

The impossibility of a traveler maintaining absolute separation from the local population registers one of the major trends in recent scholarship on women's travel narratives: the examination of "the liminal, the permeable and the structurally undetermined" (Reus and Gifford 2). Through holes and fissures, the traveler and native person may catch sight of each other as living individuals who see, hear, touch, feel, and think. Traveling from Szechuan into Yunnan, Kemp carefully observes one of the aboriginal tribes, the Miao, who wear "their picturesque dress" and "keep absolutely aloof from the Chinese" (*Chinese Mettle* 206). She studies these "very shy people," their fashion, hairdos, method of carrying babies, how they marry, and how they bury the dead. Apparently, this fits into the ethnological tradition of Orientalist travel narratives, but it also does more than that. Often, the linear ethnographic representation unexpectedly ruptures, creating textual suspensions, hesitations, and fissures in the discourse of imperial travel. For instance, an interruption arrives when Kemp browses local shops to "find a few small things of interest to buy":

> When we [Kemp and her traveling companion] were in the main street standing chatting together at a short distance from our host, who was making a bargain for us, a woman came along and eyed us up and down attentively. She then began to speak to us, and although we did not understand anything she said, the subject was very obvious, as she pointed at her own waist (or rather the place where it should be visible) and then at ours, after which she made a small circle with the fingers and said, pointing at us, "Very pretty." (219)

The syntactic control here is rendered obvious. Keeping the sentence sprawling and running until the whole process of communication comes to an end implies feelings of reassurance, relaxation, and ease when they are gazed upon by the woman. One more salient device is Kemp's use of direct speech when the woman's voice emerges.

Short as the declaration is, it disturbs Kemp's narrating pace, which seldom ebbs. Although it is mediated through the translation and Kemp's self-editing, the native woman's short articulation gestures toward the possibility of allowing native people's voices, feelings, and judgments to enter the textual stage. The narration does not give any information about whether Kemp calls into question the English custom of forcing waist-tightening corsets onto women's bodies. But on the following page, we find that she brightens up immediately after this surprising interlude. As she tells us, she is soon to enjoy the "the most amusing time" on the street by admiring the nightly exhibition of "ingenious" Chinese lanterns (219), once again showing that her memories of spaces and places are mediated by material cultures.

Furthermore, this anecdote reveals Kemp's ethical outlook to the extent that it orients her toward face-to-face interaction, one of the central features of "the mobilities paradigm," as championed by John Urry, Mimi Sheller, Tim Cresswell, and others (Sheller and Urry 216; Cresswell 4). As they point out, face-to-face interaction can be generative of "intense affect" (Urry 54) that lingers in memories. In *The Face of China*, the days spent in perilously slow treks along the "slippery" and "sticky" road in wet weather do not pour cold water over her optimism, although for the first time, she accuses her servants of being "most disreputable . . . and much less satisfactory as carriers" (158). On the next page, however, she appears to admire "carefully attended to and manured" plants and the pastoral scene of a family sharing the toil of farming before presenting an "amusing dumb conversation":

> Often the women came around and smilingly interrogated us. Then we went through an amusing dumb conversation of the most friendly sort. The subject is usually the same—feet—and they never fail to admire our English boots, if not our feet. We, on our side, express much admiration of the exquisite embroidery of their shoes, though we do not admire their feet. (159)

The choice of the word "interrogate" suggests the acute self-awareness of being a self-invited guest. Interestingly, this passage moves beyond depicting a scene in which the traveler is curiously stared at by ignorant and specter-like native people, a kind of master motif in Western women's travelogues during this period. Another remarkable aspect of this lively scene is that it once again evokes memories attached to material objects. The "English boots" and the "exquisite embroidery" of Chinese shoes seem to possess an animating power. Even though "feet" is the main topic, what in fact catalyzes the events—as interrogation turns into conversation—is the

material object. In this regard, boots and shoes reveal what Diana Coole calls "agentic capacity," namely the ability to "make a difference, produce effects and affects, alter the course of events by their action" (451).

Journeying to China's interior enabled Kemp to gain a vantage point on the effects unleashed by the increasing intrusion of foreign objects into China's material culture. She frequently documents how everyday European commodities interact with local products, an interaction fraught with tension. Tim Youngs contends that commodities taken by women travelers to the East became "important means of negotiating and affirming identity at a time when it is under threat [such as when traveling in an unfamiliar environment]" (18). Youngs also remarks that for Victorian women journeying to Africa, there existed "a considerable reluctance to see one's own cultural material being appropriated or 'misappropriated' by others" (128). This is because "the sight of well-known goods having their supposedly fixed value suddenly freed or disrupted is disturbing, for if such commodities are revealed to be unstable, so must be the self that is defined in relation to them" (128). For Youngs, the uneasiness felt by subjects can be intentionally displaced onto objects. However, Kemp's case differs in several ways. European commodities are not estranged or mishandled but brought into contact and even competition with Chinese objects, and in most cases, Chinese ones are shown to outperform their European counterparts. Kemp does share "a deep nervousness of seeing the bourgeois world recreated" (Youngs 130), but for a slightly different reason. As Kemp conjectures, the replication of the European "bourgeois world" in China will come at a heavy price for the Chinese. This causes her poignant anxiety. She laments what is taking place in her host country in the 1920s, when "its historic and artistic value is being ruthlessly swept away" under Western influence (*Chinese Mettle* 20). She fears that all the "good and great in its literature, art and customs" will be cast aside or, even worse, replaced by Western culture (20). Kemp earnestly admonishes her readers that "[a] denationalized Chinaman is a poor product" (21). Explicit here is Kemp's wish that China should modernize in its own way rather than aping the West at the expense of its own culture. Yet, also tangible is a lingering nostalgia for China as a "product," an aesthetic China in particular, which was rapidly disappearing but captured by Kemp's watercolors and collections.

Indeed, an Orientalist nostalgia for a China arrested in time and fixed in its antiquity irritated many Chinese nationalist intellectuals in the decades following the founding of a new China in 1912. One notable example, Lu Xun, the most celebrated modernist writer of the period, intensely disliked nostalgic and essentially Orientalist foreigners who longed for an old, exotic China to spice up their travel tales.

Nevertheless, there is much to defend in Kemp's nostalgic memories and narratives. Although her watercolor illustrations and collected objects evoke a static world, her texts celebrate the recent sweeping changes in China, especially the evident progress in education, public health, industrialization, and governance. Her conflicted vision of China, intimately tied to its material culture and aesthetic tradition, does not seem to be characterized by a desire to see the country locked into backwardness and constrained by its history. Instead, Kemp is best interpreted by attending to the aesthetic and affective ways in which material culture and memory interact with each other in her negotiation of cultural difference and self.

Conclusion

In *Chinese Mettle*, Kemp presents an interrogation directed at her: "'Why do you go on journeys to such impossible places? . . . Can it possibly be for pleasure? How can anyone like,' and here the eyebrows are raised and a shade of disgust, politely veiled, is visible, 'to stop in awful inns and visit cities full of dirt and smells? What is your *real* reason for travelling in the interior of China?'" (1). Signs of contempt and "politely veiled" disgust, however, meet with an answer likely to surprise many of her comfort-loving British readers: "PLEASURE is the main lure to China, and a sort of basilisk fascination which is quite irresistible" (11). This "basilisk fascination," with its mythological suggestion of a petrifying, menacing power, lends to Kemp's textual constructs a sense of transgressive pleasure enabled by her traveling encounters in China in general and her affirmative engagement with its material cultures and fascinating objects more specifically. Kemp's pleasant memories also originate from her capacity to make the most of what the liminal space of foreign travel can offer: it adequately accommodates her professional ambition to be a creative, creditable artist/traveler and scholar with authentic knowledge of China; and it permits a reflective, productive way of perceiving cultural difference that reconfigures the relationship between self and other. Thus, the spaces and material objects that enable turn-of-the-century women's travel memories can be understood as involved in a double movement: first, they enable these women to measure, frame, and most importantly, professionalize the authentic experiences mobility can offer, and second, they facilitate a reflexive re-evaluation of the hierarchical cultural relations upon which British imperialism regarding China depended. A focus on the interplay of material culture, memory, and mobility thus opens up rather than limits questions concerning the complexity and ambivalence central to women's travel texts

and beyond, offering an important window through which we can see women travelers' shifting positionalities across cultures.

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