NOTES AND QUERIES

A TALE OF SOUR GRAPES:
MESSRS. LITTLE AND MESNY
AND
THE FIRST STEAMSHIP THROUGH THE YANGZI GORGES

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In 1898 Archibald Little was the first man to take a steam-vessel up through the dangerous Yangzi Gorges amidst great acclaim. This was a red-rag to William Mesny who, in 1905 in his Shanghai periodical Mesny's Chinese Miscellany, furiously wrote that had he been listened to in 1875, a steamboat could have completed the journey up the Gorges within a year or so of that date.

The 3,200-mile long river, referred to by westerners as the Yangzi is known to the Chinese as Changjiang, Long River, or Da Jiang, the Great River. The foreigner name, Yangzi, is a misnomer from the Chinese reference to the first stretch from the Yellow Sea, approximately a day or so sail up from Shanghai to Yangzhou, hence Yang.

The River can be divided into four sections. The first stretch from the sea to Wuhan [Hankou and Wuchang], some 600 miles upstream, is navigable for blue water vessels during the summer and small draught steamers at all times of the year. It may come as a surprise to read of the emergency run in September of 1931 of the British aircraft carrier, H.M.S. Hermes to Hankou during major floods. The Chairman of the Nationalist Flood Relief Commission, T V Soong, requested the British C-in-C for assistance using RAF reconnaissance aircraft from H.M.S. Hermes to assist the Chinese in flood survey patrol work.

The second stretch upstream from Wuhan to Yichang is always navigable to small draught vessels and is a very boring run passing, as it does, through a flat plain with many dykes.

The third stretch from Yichang to Chongqing is fast flowing downstream through the narrow and dangerous succession of Gorges, so popular with foreign tourists. The great variations in water level
racing through the Gorges make this section difficult and dangerous both at low and high water. Chongqing, the chief commercial port of western China and an important distribution centre, was opened to foreign trade by an Additional Article [1890] to the Chefoo Agreement of 1876. This stretch also includes the River down to Chongqing from its junction with the Min River at Yibin [Suifu].

The fourth and final stretch, the Upper Yangzi of 1,600 miles, is torrential almost from its source in Eastern Tibet far to the west, down to Yibin, it has several major tributaries.

We, however, are interested in the Gorges. They have long been regarded by Chinese junkmen and especially foreigners who had travelled through them as passengers on river junks, as one of the most difficult stretches of river navigation on earth, with a current in places running at 13 knots.

Our story concerns two British expatriates in China who, as far as we know, never met as they were of different social circles. One is Archibald Little, a British Shanghai merchant, married to a British lady and William Mesny, a struggling entrepreneur also in Shanghai but married to a Chinese. Paul King wrote that ‘One of the foreign tea-tasters who each year visited Kiukiang [Jiujiang] was Archibald Little, who was never very successful in business but found himself in Yichang in the uphill work of establishing as a fact that the rapids in the upper reaches of the Yangtze could be negotiated by steam craft. In my [King] time the Navy was represented in Yichang by H.M.S. Kinsha - the famous pioneer merchant steamer on the Upper Yangtze owned and operated by the late Archibald Little.’

The first steamer to ascend the upper waters of the Great River, the Yangzi, through the Gorges above Yichang and as far as Chongqing during the low water season in the month of March 1898 was the 9-ton steam launch, Leeuchuen [Li Chuan], the property of Mr. Archibald Little who travelled aboard the steamer with his wife.

Archibald John Little was born in London in 1838, and arrived in China in 1859 where he remained, apart from short visits back to Britain, until 1907 when he returned there and died the following year. He was a merchant, traveller and writer and is as well known to some as the
husband of Mrs. Archibald Little who was a traveller and writer in her own right and who in 1895 founded the Heavenly Foot Society for the suppression of the cruel practice of binding and spoiling the natural feet of Chinese girls.

The story now goes back thirteen years. In 1885 Little planned to set up a company to build a couple of steamers after his own design to sail up to Chongqing to open up the vast and fertile province of Sichuan. This led him first to spend six months in one of the ordinary boats of the river learning all he could about the rapids, swirls, currents, depth and other details of the upper waters of the river. He went back to London where he soon formed a company, and an experimental steamer of five hundred tons burden was put on the stocks in Glasgow from designs drawn by Mr. J McGregor, the chairman of the company, conforming to the designs furnished by Archibald Little. The steamer was completed during the summer of 1887, and shipped in sections to Shanghai, where she was put together by one of the local ship-builders and launched towards the end of 1887. She was christened the Kuling, and was about five hundred tons burden, one hundred and seventy-five feet long and twenty-eight broad. She was eight feet deep, perfectly flat-bottomed and drew only two feet four inches of water empty, a mere trifle over four feet with a full cargo, and was especially adapted for navigating rocky and dangerous rapids. The boilers and engines were amidships. She was driven by two sets of compound engines, with a stroke of five feet, and worked with a pressure of one hundred and sixty pounds of steam. She had two stern wheels and a balanced rudder astern of the wheels.

The Kuling reached Yichang at the end of February 1889 and all was ready for the passage through the Gorges, when Mr Gregory, the British consul, backed by the Chinese authorities, refused to allow the steamer to proceed, as no permit had been received from either the Congli Yamen [Chinese Department of Foreign Affairs], or Sir John Walsham, the British Minister at Peking. The rest of the story was so characteristic of Chinese procrastination and delay. To put it simply and bluntly, the British Minister refused to coerce the Chinese in any way, and so the Kuling was eventually sold and the scheme abandoned.

The matter of the Upper Yangzi navigation remained in abeyance until the Chinese defeat by the Japanese in the war of 1895 when the
Japanese were able to demand the formal opening of Chongqing to steamers, and a clause to this effect was embodied in the Treaty of Shiminoseki. By this treaty, under the favoured nation clause, the Chongqing and the Upper Yangzi became open to the world and Little immediately applied to the then British Minister, Sir Claude Macdonald [of the later Boxer Seige fame], who encouraged Little to proceed and promised energetic support. Little ordered a twin-screw steamer to be built in Shanghai, fifty-five feet long and ten feet beam. It steamed at nine knots, and though he would have preferred a larger and more powerful vessel he had to cut his coat according to his cloth. This was the Leechuen.

He left Yichang on 15th February 1898 for the 500-mile voyage through the Gorges, ascending some 500 feet during the journey to Chongqing. The story, told by Archibald Little in his *Through the Yangtse Gorges,* describes the most frightening moment when at dusk in the Scissors Gorge, making about six knots they bumped over a sharp rock that cut through the inch planking, broke two hardwood frames and sent water spouting up over the saloon floor. Fortunately they soon spotted a steep patch of sand on to which they ran the boat. Then, overnight, they stuffed cotton, white lead and tallow into the cracks; nailed blankets down with planks all over and by dawn had stopped the leak sufficiently to be able to get under way again. The rock had only newly fallen from the cliff above and had been unknown to the pilot. They reached Chongqing eleven days up from Yichang and the only photograph I have seen of the Leechuen during her epic journey is a very fuzzy snap of high cliffs with the Leechuen amidstream, a not so large speck, her billowing smoke being almost twice her size.

Two British gunboats, H.M. S Woodcock and H.M.S. Woodlark, made the same journey fifteen months later in May 1899, and then, in June, the first merchant steamer, Pioneer, followed them up to Chongqing.

We now turn to William Mesny. In 1878 and 1879 he travelled across south-west and central China calling on the most powerful and influential officials and gentry, advising them to adopt modern means for developing the riches of the country and bettering their conditions. Mesny was a Jerseyman who spent most of his life, from first setting foot in China in 1861 until his death in Hankou in 1919 endeavouring to make his fortune. He was never backward in relating how he had the ears of many of the most influential Chinese of the day and although
they listened to his plans to modernise China and how he could raise the capital to assist them succeed in doing so. They always went their own ways, often adapting his plans but - as he stressed - without his guiding hand they were never the success they could have been had he been permitted to supervise them.

In 1905 he described how back in 1879 he had travelled to Sichuan from Guiyang where he had been trying to persuade the Guizhou Provincial Governor, Chen Yuying, to develop the resources of the province by means of a railway from Guiyang to Yongxian in Guangxi province, connecting that city with Canton by a line of steamers on the Yun and West Rivers. He then spent over six months in Chongqing, again offering to supply funds and plans for building suitable steamers to navigate the upper waters of the Yangzi, through the Gorges as far as Chongqing and beyond to Yibin. He added that he was able to speak with authority on the navigation of the upper Yangzi by steamers, ‘but no one would listen to me, and even intelligent foreigners, when consulted on the subject, declared I was a visionary and an imaginator of many impractical plans.’ Some ten days later in a subsequent issue of his Miscellany he wrote ‘Whilst here in Shanghai in November 1875, I offered to superintend the construction of a suitable steam-boat for navigation on the upper Yangzi, as far up as Yibin and Chengdu, but the wise Britishers of those days declared that was an impossibility, because British naval officers had studied the subject and declared it to be impossible. I proved to be a good quarter of a century ahead of the progressive age.’ Steam-boats now navigate the Upper Yangzi for all that, though they are not as useful as they might have been, had they been devised and constructed under the guidance of a mastermind!


3 Facing p. 288 of Little’s book, *Through the Yang-tse Gorges or Trade and Travel in Western China*.

4 William Mesny: *Mesny's Chinese Miscellany*: Shanghai : 1st January
H.M.S Hermes moored port side to the pontoon at Hankow in September 1931, i.e. with her stern facing upstream, as her crane was aft on the starboard side, for working seaplanes on to the river (courtesy of Jonathan Parkinson)
Charles and Anne Lindbergh mooring to Hermes after arriving on 30th September 1931 during their world flight (courtesy of Jonathan Parkinson)