

BOOKS

The Silent Traveller in New York

The midcentury travel writings of Chiang Yee detail an Easterner's perspective of the West.

BY MICHAEL MEYER — MAY 3, 2020



Credit: Karen Mardahl, [Creative Commons](#)

It starts strangely, for a book about New York: “Confucius once said that after he had reached forty years of age he had no more perplexities. I am now well over the halfway point of my life-span and yet introspection makes me more bewildered every day.”

But then everything about the book seemed peculiar: its rice-colored spine shone like a snaggletooth among all of the red ones lining the Strand's China shelves. After moving from Beijing to New York — bewildered, homesick and unexpectedly unemployed — I regularly haunted that section of the bookstore, fraternizing with the texts. This book, however, looked mis-shelved: the bright cover showed a watercolor not of the Forbidden City or Great Wall, but of Central Park's Gapstow Bridge. Its title was equally unexpected: *The Silent Traveller in New York*.

Published in 1950, the book had actually been a best-seller, the latest in a series written over four decades by the Chinese flâneur Chiang Yee. Seventeen years earlier — when he turned 30, the age Confucius said one's feet should be planted firmly upon the ground — a miserable Chiang had quit his government post in his hometown on the Yangtze to seek a new life in England. “Had I not come to London,” he wryly noted, “I should never have known there was a special time for tea.”

In China, Chiang — as an official and an accomplished painter — was gentility. In England, he was immigrant, hustling for work. He won a mail-in contest to coin Coca-Cola's Chinese name: *kěkǒu kělè* (“Deliciously Refreshing”), still used today. Reginald Johnston, English tutor to the last Chinese emperor, hired Chiang to teach Mandarin at the School of Oriental

Studies. After Japan invaded his homeland, Chiang became an exile.

As Chiang mastered English, he relied on his eyes to adjust to his new surroundings. Everyday life presented entirely new canvases. On a rainy Oxford Street sidewalk, Chiang saw the unbroken movement of umbrellas as waves of the sea, washing back from where he stood. On windless days, he could count the rings of ripples made by ducks paddling in St. James's Park. He loved the fog, which cloaked him in anonymity, allowing him to observe faces only in passing, visible and invisible at once. "People are losing their sense of wonder," Chiang wrote, "so that is why they only see London fog as a foe or a matter of rage. For myself it always leads me to imagine what life must lie underneath it."

On a visit to the Lakes District, Chiang painted watercolors of sights his hosts took for granted: birds, flowers, trees, streams, weather. They encouraged him to add captions, and back in London he submitted the pages to a publishing house under an alias.

The Silent Traveller was Chiang's translation of *yǎ xíngzǐ* ("mute walking man"), commonly used to describe a roaming Buddhist monk. "I chose this name," Chiang explained in the book's introduction, "after I gave up my office of District Governor," in China. "I had been kept talking day and night for five years or so. This did not suit my temperament and I was glad to escape from it."

At a time when less than two thousand Chinese lived in Great Britain, however, the publisher thought his alias sounded sinister. "They objected to my using the title," Chiang recalled, "in case it might induce inquiries from Scotland Yard: Why does a Chinaman want to walk silently? Many English people at the time had not forgotten about Dr. Fu Man Chu," the racist villain created by the British writer Sax Rohmer. "I laughed and suggested that it would make the book sell better."

Illustrated with Chiang's poems written in his calligraphy alongside ink drawings of the English countryside, *The Silent Traveller: A Chinese Artist in Lakeland* launched his career as a travel writer in 1936.

In an era when Western writers commonly chronicled China — "some having written without having been there at all," Chiang added, dryly — the Silent Traveller series turned the mirror, detailing an Easterner's perspective of the West. Compared to contemporary Look-What-I-Did travel writing, the series today read as a tranquil throwback, the literary equivalent of Norway's [Slow TV](#) specials. In the *Silent Traveller in Paris*, Chiang pays less attention to the Eifel Tower than he does to the women airing their pet cats on the Pont Neuf. He skips solipsism, too. Staying up all night at Les Halles market, drinking coffee and sketching the workers, he admits: "I wish I could have understood what they were saying. But perhaps I enjoyed watching them talk just because I did not understand them."

Chiang's books are also a return to an era when Westerners were interested in what foreigners had to say about them. Even though *The Silent Traveller in New York* appeared at the height of McCarthyism, the first of *The New York Times*' rave reviews began, "Imagine the pleasure of finding this enchanting book." A second reviewer called Chiang's observations "refreshingly different," and said that he "sees more of the city than most of us ever will."

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Disembarking in America for the first time, Chiang doesn't buy a guidebook. "I dislike its imperative tone," he writes. "This the visitor should not miss. I like to see things of my own freewill. I do not attempt to see everything, nor do I mind missing something important or outstanding. Life is too short."

Instead, Chiang wanders. Lower Manhattan's skyscrapers make his shadow appear thinner and taller on the sidewalk, until he feels "like a figure being elongated in an El Greco painting." Looking at the blazing Times Square marquees, he thinks, "How beautiful it would be for someone who could not read!" Public transit is "a joyride on a particularly lively merry-go-round." He would get off at a stop, "look round the neighborhood, then go down the subway again."

Often Chiang sketches what he found, including oyster and jumbo peanut pushcarts, newsstands, men napping on an East River pier, a diverse group of children blowing bubbles on the IRT, poodle puppies in the display windows at the florist Irene Hayes, willow trees on Harlem Meer, Jefferson Market Court's peaked towers, and the gentle bend of Gay Street. Not a few of these discoveries, I realized after buying the Strand's copy and following Chiang's footsteps, still could be seen.

The book's 137 illustrations show no postcard landmarks, and only one of the massive projects Robert Moses was then commanding to reshape New York. But Chiang is unmoved while standing on the George Washington Bridge. He chides himself for being unable to appreciate its achievement the way he could a simple span at Kew. "There, the mutter of the Thames water running with the tide made me feel closer to the earth; the Hudson water was too far below to be perceptible to the ear."

Feeling foreign, with the scrutiny of detachment, can bring a new clarity to a place. Chinese sages, Chiang writes, extol the virtue of returning to a child-like mind, but Americans are offended if you call them childish. They would rather you tell them that they *look* young. From atop the Empire State Building, Chiang sees Central Park revealed "as a small lacquer tea-tray, inlaid with green and bluish jade, to represent trees and lakes." The park's magnolias, a tree indigenous to China, reminds him that the Chinese soup spoon was modeled to resemble its petal.

In China, I had used soup spoons for years, and not once considered their unique shape. Nor, on my morning run, had the brown back of the Metropolitan Museum of Art invoke, as it does for Chiang, a Chinese monastery's wall. I also had never thought to recognize the park's distinct trees — the sycamores, field maples, silver birches and "group of lofty pines" near the Museum of Natural History.

"In this very man-made city," Chiang writes, "Nature's presence is seldom noticed, yet during my stay I experienced a bigger downpour of rain, a heavier fall of snow, and a stronger blast of wind than anywhere else! It was as if Nature were trying to show off before those who have tried to conquer her."

The Silent Traveller series, like the best travel writing, compels one to move. I started leaving my phone at home to ride the MTA merry-go-round, from Pelham to Far Rockaway, from Inwood to Jamaica. Instead of complaining about what New York isn't, I finally saw the breadth of what it is. Much of it, frankly, is a mess. But simultaneously — and bewilderingly — New York showed itself to be, as Chiang concludes this enchanting book, "That pleasant place where every kind of impossibility is daily becoming possible." Sometimes it takes an outsider to show us the truth.



Michael Meyer is the author of three books about China, including *The Road to Sleeping Dragon: Learning China from the Ground Up*.

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BY EYCK FREYMAN

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