

Shangri-La and History in 1930s England

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the question of the existence and transmission of Buddhism in British culture in the 1930s. It argues that Buddhism found channels of transmission through popular culture, such as James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. *Lost Horizon* can be understood historically in relation to current Western ideas about Buddhism, and in response to the sense of historical crisis of Western modernity. This paper also shows that elements of a more genuine Buddhism are extracted from orientalist materials and deployed by Hilton in ways that make the novel a carrier of quasi-Buddhist ideas.

This paper addresses the question of how Buddhism continued to exist as an influence in British culture after the demise of Theosophy from around 1930. Within Theosophy's strange religio-historical system, Buddhism had occupied a privileged place; and indeed Theosophy had been a major transmitter of knowledge about Buddhism since its establishment in 1875. From 1930, however, Theosophy found itself weakened by splits and defections, and, more significantly, its message of individual spirituality and political quietism came to seem inadequate in the face of the highly politicised world in the 1930s, and the rise of new religious and political organisations such as Moral Rearmament and the Communist Party (Washington 1993, 283).

What Philip Almond has called 'an enormous upsurge in awareness of, and interest in, Buddhism in late Victorian England' (Almond 1988, 1), did not continue with comparable intensity into the first decades of the twentieth century when the methods of dissemination of Eastern religions were also gradually changing. The Buddhist Society (established 1906) was slowly creating a public presence for the religion through its organisation and publications, though it remained small. In the early decades of the twentieth century, some influential modernist writers and artists drew on Eastern ideas and imagery in their efforts to renew their societies, including W. B. Yeats and Wassily Kandinsky, though their audiences were initially confined to cultural elites (Clarke 1997, 100–105). Buddhism and other Eastern belief-systems continued to have a significant and growing presence in early twentieth-century culture; and new methods of transmission developed that extended their reach beyond academic and artistic circles.

As J. J. Clarke has observed, the interaction between East and West in the twentieth century became more and more 'a matter of complex interaction between cultures, involving a variety of interweaving agendas and ideological interests, rather than simply a matter of remote projection by one culture upon another' (Clarke 1997, 100). A popular novel published in 1933, *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton (1900–1954), may stand as a case-study of some of the complex ways in which East–West cultural interaction began to work in the twentieth century, and of the kind of 'ideological interests' that were involved in the process.

LOST HORIZON AND ORIENTALISM

Lost Horizon's importance as a disseminator of orientalism in Britain in the 1930s – and beyond – lies partly in its being a popular novel aimed at a wide readership, and in showing the presence of Buddhism running through popular as well as elite culture. James Hilton, who took an English degree at Cambridge University, and then worked as a journalist, wrote twenty-two novels between 1920 and 1953, including the enormously popular *Good-Bye Mr Chips* (1934); and from 1935 was a highly successful Hollywood screenwriter. *Lost Horizon* tells the story of a Tibetan monastery, Shangri-La, and a group of Westerners who are kidnapped and taken there. Hilton gave the English language a new name, Shangri-La, for an imaginary utopia; and he created a myth that entered the culture. The novel has a Tibetan setting and appears to treat Buddhist themes, but its Shangri-La is no ordinary Tibetan monastery, for its personnel is mostly foreign, including European; it is full of the finest examples of Western, not Eastern, culture; and it seems to be little concerned with the actual religious beliefs or practices of the region. This seems to confirm Peter Bishop's comment that the novel was 'one of the great mythologizings about Tibet [for it] gathered the threads of fantasy [about Tibet], shaped them, articulated them' (Bishop 1989, 211). Donald S. Lopez goes further in seeing *Lost Horizon* as a typical Western version of Tibet 'in which the West perceives some lack within itself and fantasizes that the answer, through a process of projection, is to be found somewhere in the East' (Lopez 1998, 6). Such critiques are valuable in reminding us of the dominant orientalist way in which the idea of 'Tibet' has been formed in the West through Western images and fantasies. And indeed Hilton drew on such cultural fantasies to characterise his Tibetan location.¹

However, Western images of the East are not fully accounted for by analyses that focus on Western representations as mere fantasies. Within texts shaped

1. For discussions of Western views of Tibet see Bishop (1989; 1993) and Lopez (1998). For a discussion of *Lost Horizon* in this context see Bishop (1989, 211, 216–18). The theoretical basis for much of Lopez's and Bishop's analyses can be found in Said 1978. Post-Saidian theories of East–West relations, which identify them as more reciprocal and two-way, can be found in Clarke (1997) and MacKenzie (1995).

by Western stereotypes there may also be fragments of authentic knowledge, or traces of ideological counter-currents, sometimes resulting from the resistance of Asian material to European fantasies. Western images may be predominantly stereotypical or fantastic, but lodged within them may be signs of the actualities of Tibet and Buddhism, which thereby become communicable to Western readers. *Lost Horizon* is mostly composed from Western stereotypes and fantasies of Tibet, but it also reshapes them, and extracts from them some more authentic elements. These may be fragmentary, distorted or incomplete but they show how knowledge of and – equally importantly – sympathy for Buddhism were carried into the culture.

Lost Horizon won the Hawthornden Prize in 1934, became a bestseller and the first book to be published in paperback (in 1939); and it has been in print almost continuously up to the present day, in some dozen editions. In 1937 Frank Capra directed a successful film version of the book, but it is the novel that is discussed here even though the film sent some unforgettable images into circulation. I want to argue that the novel's images and ideas of the East, formed largely from Western materials, represent attempts to address problems of the West, specifically historical problems of the 1930s: namely, revulsion at the destruction wrought by the First World War, fear of another looming war and, more generally, loss of faith in the future of the modern world.

Hilton had a rich array of oriental material to explore, including other novels, and accounts of travellers, mountaineers and ethnographers; and these versions of Asia were already shaped by Western ideologies to produce images of the East that reflected Western preoccupations. His novel was largely produced from such materials pre-shaped to suit Western readers who were already practised at reading them. This is one reason why *Lost Horizon* made ready sense to large numbers of people, and is why it can be called popular. But despite such familiar cultural processing, something of the distinctiveness of Buddhist values and ideas does emerge into the novel such that it becomes one of the carriers of a Buddhism – albeit a pastiche Buddhism – in the twentieth century.

Here is a brief outline of the story. A group of Westerners finds itself endangered by a native rebellion in a Far Eastern country in the early 1930s. The English consul, Conway, manages to escape along with three others in the last plane to leave the place. But as they are flying to safety they realise they are going in the wrong direction towards and then over Tibet, but they are helpless to do anything. Eventually the plane runs out of fuel and they crash high in the Kuen Lun mountains. All they can do is await their deaths. But then a procession appears through the snowstorm, and its leader, a Chinese named Chang, invites them to the nearby monastery of Shangri-La. Having no choice, the Westerners do as he suggests. Shangri-La is perched high above a lush mountain valley, and turns out to be a place of extraordinary comfort and refinement, materially, aesthetically and spiritually. The Westerners evince a range of attitudes to the place where they find themselves against their will, with Conway's subordinate in the diplomatic service, Mallinson, being particularly hostile and eager

to leave. But departure is impossible, and gradually some of the Westerners find themselves attracted to the life of Shangri-La. Conway in particular is drawn to the place, which he discusses in conversation with Chang. To Chang's surprise, Conway is invited to meet the high lama, who, over several meetings, tells him the remarkable history of Shangri-La that began with the arrival at the Buddhist monastery of a French priest, Father Perrault, in the eighteenth century. Over the decades Perrault was joined by representatives of other European nationalities who decided to stay there, as well as a young Chinese princess. Conway eventually realises that the high lama he is speaking to is none other than the Father Perrault who first arrived in the valley two centuries before. Conway faces a further shock when he is offered the position of high lama after the present one dies, which he promptly does there and then. Wishing to stay and accept the offer of becoming high lama, Conway nevertheless feels responsible for returning the others to the West. This conflict reaches its climax when Mallinson announces that he has fallen in love with the Chinese princess, and they plan to escape. Impelled by duty, and against his deeper feelings, Conway helps everyone escape. The story ends with Conway's desperate wish to return unfulfilled, and the last we hear of him he is trying to rediscover the whereabouts of Shangri-La. Conway's inability to return to Shangri-La constitutes it as a lost object of fantasy, and creates a structure in which his – and by extension the reader's – desire for what Shangri-La symbolises is forever unfulfilled. (The film, by contrast, has Conway return to Shangri-La.)

MOUNTAINS, SPIRITUALITY, BUDDHISM

The novel's popular appeal, that is its readability, lies partly in Hilton's deployment of a number of motifs that were already familiar in British culture about the East and Buddhism. Tibet illustrates the point, for the novel's Tibet owes little to the historical or social conditions of the early-twentieth-century country, and more to well-worn Western discourses, which turn it into something imaginary. The Victorians' fascination with Tibet resulted in many accounts of it, so that it was already lodged in Western culture as, among other things, a location of complex wisdom. It figured in Theosophy as the homeland of the Mahatmas, the great souls who maintained the spiritual secrets of occult religion. When Conan Doyle has to find a place for Sherlock Holmes to hide out he sends him off to Tibet. H. Rider Haggard in *She* (1887) figures Central Asia and Tibet as places 'where, if anywhere upon this earth wisdom is to be found' (Haggard 1951, 4); and sets the sequel there, *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905). Hilton's Tibet connects with these pre-existing ideas that make Shangri-La interpretable in terms of remoteness, secrecy and wisdom. He had no need to invent this because it was already to hand. By reading *Lost Horizon* to discover these familiar motifs it is possible to see how truisms about the East and Buddhism (which may, of course, contain truths) were put to use for Western readers.

For early-twentieth-century Europeans, mountaineering was charged with spiritual significance, often in reaction to their sense of the exhausted state of post-war Europe. There were connections in European minds among mountains, spirituality and, in relation to climbing Everest, Buddhism. The Englishman Sir Francis Younghusband claimed that climbing Everest would 'elevate the human spirit', and show that men 'were getting the upper hand on the earth, and ... acquiring a true mastery of their surroundings' (cited in Hansen 1996, 718). When European climbers approached Everest, they found Buddhist monasteries and abbots from whom they had to win permission to attempt a climb; and when they wrote up their exploits they also wrote about these monasteries. By thinking about Buddhism within this cultural complex, we can see how knowledge of Buddhism might be mediated as it came to the West. An anthropologist of the region, Sherry B. Ortner, has written that 'the sahibs were fascinated by their visits to the monasteries – to Rumbu on the northern (Tibetan) route to Everest and later to Tengboche on the southern (Nepal) side'. The head lama of Rumbu monastery, Zatul Rimpoche, 'offered ... warm hospitality' to foreign climbers, so that the 'visit to Rumbu became ... a fixture of the early expeditions' (Ortner 1997, 149–50). The British climber J. B. L. Noel wrote about the ill-fated 1924 British expedition in his book *Through Tibet to Everest* (1927), where he describes witnessing Buddhist practices in the monastery, as well as his meeting with the head lama. Noel's attitude is notably respectful of the foreign religion, and he emphasises both the lama's cultural strangeness as well as his penetrating spiritual power:

A figure sat with crossed knees in the Buddha posture. There were draperies of costly Chinese silks. The figure sat absolutely motionless and silent. Not a soul spoke a word, or even whispered in the room ... He looked at us, but did not speak or move. Rather he seemed to look over us, through us. There was something vastly observant and yet impersonal in his gaze. (Noel 1927, 145–6)

Noel is a sympathetic reporter despite his public-school values (his commitment to 'sport' causes incomprehension among the Tibetans), and he writes from a recognisably twentieth-century position of cultural relativism that also informs Hilton's novel. This marks both Noel and Hilton as exemplars of what Edward Said identifies as a twentieth-century modernist orientalism that responded with more sympathy to oriental peoples and experienced more self-doubt about supposed occidental superiority than nineteenth-century writers, and depicted East–West encounters in an ironic light.² Noel declares after the meeting with the high lama, 'I felt absolutely hypnotized myself', but he adds a remark from his

2. Said (1994, 227). Said identifies Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, André Malraux and T. E. Lawrence as among those twentieth-century writers who 'take narrative from the triumphalist experience of imperialism into the extremes of self-consciousness, discontinuity, self-referentiality, and corrosive irony, whose formal patterns we have come to recognize as the hallmarks of modernist culture'.

companion that allows an ironic view of the scene, 'Geel! that chap is either the holiest saint or the greatest actor on earth' (Noel 1927, 146).

It was through such books, which were not primarily concerned with Buddhism, that knowledge of, and attitudes to, Buddhism reached English-speaking readers. The cultural transmission and reception of the religion was often by such indirect routes – in this case, the account of a mountaineering expedition – which carried accounts of Buddhism as secondary or marginal meanings. Knowledge received in this way was likely to be unsystematic, filtered through the eyes of sometimes idiosyncratic writers, and often suffused with strong feeling. The ideological cluster of mountains, spirituality and Buddhism, commonplace by the 1930s, conveys some of *Lost Horizon*'s understanding of Buddhism.

BUDDHISM IN CULTURAL MEMORY

The relation of Buddhism and religious toleration is an idea that emerges from a similar kind of cultural complex. It was through Theosophy that Buddhism became known to many Europeans and Americans around the turn of the twentieth century, and Theosophy encouraged toleration of religions generally on the grounds that they were different manifestations of a universal, hidden, ancient religion. A founder of the British Buddhist Society, Christmas Humphreys, wrote how he was drawn to Theosophy at Cambridge because of its 'all-embracing platform' and 'exposition of an Ancient Wisdom-Religion' of which 'Buddhism is the noblest and least-defiled of the many branches of the undying parent tree' (Humphreys 1968, 18). For many middle-class people like Humphreys, there were links, probably because of Theosophy's depiction of Buddhism, among Theosophy, religious toleration and Buddhism. This complex too finds its way into Hilton's novel, for religious toleration is one aspect of the book's liberal, modern outlook. When Chang is confronted by one of the Westerners abducted to Shangri-La – Miss Brinklow, a lady Protestant missionary – about what the beliefs of the place are, he faces the challenge from what she calls 'the true religion' by proffering instead the principle of moderation: 'I should say that our prevalent belief is in moderation. We inculcate the virtue of avoiding excess of all kinds – even including, if you will pardon the paradox, excess of virtue itself' (Hilton 2005, 73). It is the principle of moderation that produces the utopian social harmony among the inhabitants of the valley beneath the monastery: 'our people', he adds, 'are moderately sober, moderately chaste, and moderately honest' (pp. 73–4). Hilton's liberal outlook emerges here as he uses 'moderation' to be wittily subversive of the strict morality of nineteenth-century puritan Christianity. Shangri-La itself includes different nationalities – Europeans, Chinese and Tibetans – and, as Chang says, it has 'various faiths and usages, but we are most of us moderately heretical about them' (p. 74). In the valley there are Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist temples used by the people for worship, and again Chan points a moral for the reader: 'The jewel has facets', said the Chinese, 'and it is possible that many religions are moderately true' (p. 105).

According to Philip Almond, to liberal Victorians who were not opposed to other religions (as Miss Brinklow is), Buddhism could appear in a positive light: it seemed to show 'what was best in the flexible and tolerant religious mind of the time'; in addition, 'Buddhist ethics was seen as superior to all, Christianity alone excepted'; and it was thought to be superior to Christianity in its 'tolerance of other religions, and its non-violent methods of evangelization' (Almond 1988, 35–6, 112, 128). Hilton drew into his novel this constellation of influences from Theosophy and nineteenth-century views of Buddhism; and by dramatising such discourses that were active in the culture he was able to make readily interpretable sense for his readers. So, for example, when on the way to Shangri-La Mallinson says they could all be murdered, and Conway answers suavely, 'As a matter of fact, murder is the very last thing one would expect in a Buddhist monastery' (Hilton 2005, 55), the sentence invokes Buddhism's reputation, formed gradually in nineteenth-century Britain, for non-violence and religious toleration.

This study of *Lost Horizon* is seeking what might be called collective memory, or general cultural memory, of Buddhism rather than the novelist's particular ideas. By reading *Lost Horizon* for familiar motifs of various sorts, it becomes possible to glimpse how Buddhism was working as an active cultural element in the inter-war years when it seems to sink from view. What we find are popular ideas of Buddhism that had become familiar and comprehensible as a result of the West's cultural processing of the East: the cycle of writing, dissemination and reception. Hilton researched for his novel in the British Museum; although it is not known precisely what he read, and he did not tell us, it is possible to speculate on the basis of the book's content.³ My purpose is not to discover exactly what Hilton read in the British Museum among the multitude of books concerned with Asia and Buddhism, but to identify some prominent fragments of knowledge and salient motifs about Buddhism that he discovered as he delved into collective memory. What he discovered there – complexes of knowledge and feeling – took the particular shapes they did when he worked them into his book as the result of the historical pressures of 1930s Europe and America. As Maurice Halbwachs has argued, memory 'is always situated in the present; memories do not take us into "the past," rather they bring "the past" into the present' (cited in Storey 2003, 84).

ORIENTALISM AS CRITIQUE

Like many writers before him, Hilton uses a version of the Orient in order to criticise life in the West, and what he selects as oriental is chosen for its power

3. Possible sources for *Lost Horizon*, as well as those mentioned above, are the life of William Martin Conway, Lord Conway (1856–1937), British mountaineer in Tibet, explorer, Slade professor of fine arts at Cambridge University, and member of Parliament; the mythical Tibetan kingdom of Shambhala as mentioned in the Gesar of Ling epic, in David-Neel and the Lama Yongden (1933); and the description of the monastery of Kum Bum in Huc (1852).

to critique specific features of Western life. Some aspects of his fictional Tibet appear in the novel precisely because they are not like Europe. Western competitiveness is criticised when the hero Conway gazes at the Kuen Lun mountains. He is pleased, he says, that their being less high than other ranges 'might save them eternally from the climbing expeditions; [since] they offered a less tempting lure to the record-breaker' (Hilton 2005, 42). He rejects 'the Western ideal of superlatives', and exploitation of the natural world for record-breaking adventures, and values the mountains beyond Shangri-La for being 'distant, inaccessible, as yet unhumanised' (p. 42). On another occasion, Mallinson, the young Englishman, complains about the Tibetans being 'typically Oriental: you can't get them to do anything quickly and efficiently' (p. 81). But for Conway, we are told, 'it did not appear that the Eastern races were abnormally dilatory, but rather that Englishmen and Americans charged about the world in a state of continual and rather preposterous fever-heat' (p. 81). This criticism of modern life for its speeded-up nature, familiar from Wordsworth on, is another of the novel's well-worn cultural topoi in which the Orient typically features as a pre-modern or anti-modern element.⁴ Moments like these confirm J. J. Clarke's idea that in Western culture from the eighteenth century, Eastern ideas, 'though perceived as "other", ... have been used in the West as an agency for self-criticism and self-renewal' (Clarke 1997, 27). (They have often also been used, it should be added, to confirm so-called European superiority). Contrasts of East and West are used repeatedly in the novel, and become one of its structuring principles and one of the ways in which its action is to be interpreted. So even when events in Shangri-La are not explicitly contrasted with the West, there is an implicit contrast, and meaning comes from that contrast, which is usually to the West's disadvantage.

The contrast is built into the hero himself, the epitome of the Englishman of the time, scholar, sportsman, man of action (even compared to the heroic Elizabethan soldier and poet, Sir Philip Sidney), who is the figure who encounters the East most deeply. Conway stands for us – English and American readers – and his encounter with Shangri-La shows what might be possible for us. Like an Aristotelian tragic hero, he stands for his community, suffering on our behalf to show us the possibilities and limits of our own experience. That experience goes beyond the usual disillusionment with the West. Conway is shown engaging with fragments of quasi-Buddhism that suggest the possibility of Westerners being transformed so as to have culturally alien spiritual experiences, or to find their ideology changing. The moments in the novel that show the protagonist's transformations are part of its fascination for Western readers, for they show the East's potential impact on the West through an exemplary Westerner. This takes Hilton beyond the limits of conventional orientalism in which the West merely imposes its fantasies on the East, for there are moments in *Lost Horizon* where the

4. See, for example, Makdisi (1998, 10): 'Indeed, a certain fascination or even obsession with the pre- or anti-modern (Nature, the colonial realm, the Orient) occupied the very center of the British romantic critique of modernization'.

power to impress the other runs from East to West. Some of these moments show the emergence of specifically Buddhist experience.

BUDDHISM AND WESTERN MODERNITY

As the kidnapped Westerners climb up the high mountains towards the monastery, their breathing becomes difficult in the thin air. But Conway experiences this naturally as what might be called a fundamental Buddhist state of mindfulness and integration:

One had to breathe consciously and deliberately, which, though disconcerting at first, induced after a time an almost ecstatic tranquillity of mind. The whole body moved in a single rhythm of breathing, walking and thinking; the lungs, no longer discreet and automatic, were disciplined to harmony with mind and limb. (Hilton 2005, 60)

In its union of body, mind and environment, this seems to suggest the attainments (albeit unconscious) of Buddhist meditative practice. Conway, we are told, has 'a mystical strain ... in curious consort with scepticism' (p. 60), and as he reaches Shangri-La he is ready for 'the offer of new experience' (p. 61), which includes the spiritual dimension he exhibits during the climb. It seems that Hilton was happy to highlight specifically Buddhist elements of what he found in his researches.

The word 'quasi-Buddhist' is used to characterise Shangri-La's religion because it is ostensibly a fusion of Buddhism and Christianity. In the book, it turns out that in 1719 a Capuchin monk was sent by Rome from Peking to discover if any Nestorian Christianity had survived in Tibet, when he discovered the decayed Buddhist monastery. The Capuchin took it over as a Christian monastery, but over time, as he studied Buddhist scriptures, he absorbed their doctrines. The monastery became a synthesis of the two religions, with the ideal of moderation governing its beliefs and way of life. In Shangri-La, Conway has a number of conversations with this very Capuchin monk, now the high lama and over two hundred years old, who recognises in Conway a spiritual wisdom that leads to his being offered the position of high lama, an offer that Conway takes seriously. The high lama recognises in Conway a set of qualities that have a distinct, if implicit, Buddhist tinge, which are the product not of Conway's oriental studies or religious conviction but of his experience as a soldier in the First World War. The high lama says to Conway, 'your wisdom has the ripeness of age. Surely some unusual thing has happened to you?' (p. 170). Conway replies, 'No more unusual than has happened to many others of my generation', namely fighting in the war. According to the high lama Conway has 'an odd quality ... that I have never met in any of our visitors hitherto ... It is, if I had to put a single word to it, passionlessness'. Conway replies, 'you can label me "1914–1918" ... I used up most of my passions and energies during the years I've mentioned, and though I don't talk much about it, the chief thing I've asked from the world since is to leave me alone' (p. 150).

In the word 'passionlessness', the third Noble Truth of Buddhism seems to be echoed, that freedom comes from the cessation of demanding desire. Conway himself wonders if 'the exhaustion of the passions is the beginning of wisdom' (p. 171). What we seem to be seeing here is a cluster of signs that are implicitly 'Buddhist'. Certainly the spiritual life Conway is offered in Shangri-La employs techniques and goals that seem Buddhist-inflected: the promised spiritual gains are 'calmness and profundity, ripeness and wisdom, and the clear enchantment of memory. And, most precious of all, ... Time' (p. 148). The monks, we are told, 'devote themselves ... to contemplation and to the pursuit of wisdom' (p. 94); and the high lama 'spends almost his entire life in clairvoyant meditation' (p. 166). Conway, and by extension the reader, can interpret these signs within the twentieth-century discourse of a fuzzily outlined but distinct Buddhist spirituality associated with Tibet.

But Conway's experience is not self-consciously Buddhist, since the hero has travelled along this spiritual path as a result of his wartime traumas, by way of the transformations wrought in him by the history of the West. West meets East through Conway, who represents the disillusionment of the post-war generation, sickened by the war and the modern world that emerged from it. The uniqueness of this historical experience is emphasised, as well as the uniqueness of the subjects produced by it. Conway is able to encounter the novel's Eastern spirituality (mostly fantasised as it is) by virtue of the transformations wrought in him by the war, by which fortuitous historical development he has acquired a state of mind with remarkable affinities to some aspects of Buddhist mentality. The war left him emotionally exhausted, and it also left him with a typically modern sense of the emptiness and futility of life: after the war, he says, he feels 'a sense of almighty boredom and fretfulness' (p. 170).

Existential disillusionment goes further to include loss of faith in God and humanity: when he thinks about what has happened to his generation, he attributes it to 'The will of God or the lunacy of man – it seemed to him that you could take your choice Or, alternatively ... , the will of man and the lunacy of God' (p. 40).

Western civilisation is in the grip of a 'world crisis' and is headed towards destruction. According to the American financier who is among the Westerners, 'there was a reek of dissolution over all that recollected world The whole game was doubtless going to pieces' (p. 121). The dilemma they face is that of Western modernity: the loss of traditional religious beliefs, a loathing of modern, competitive forms of life, a sense of subjective emptiness. And the whole of Western civilisation is heading towards another destructive war that will destroy it: the high lama describes what will happen and the part that Shangri-La will play in it:

[The storm] will be such a one, my son, as the world has not seen before. There will be no safety by arms, no help from authority, no answer in science. It will rage till every flower of culture is trampled, and all human things are levelled in a vast chaos But the Dark Ages that are to come will cover the whole world in a single pall; there will be neither escape

nor sanctuary, save such as are too secret to be found out or too humble to be noticed. And Shangri-La may hope to be both of these. (p. 189)

Shangri-La, then, is a product of Western history, and its purpose and meaning is to be found in fulfilling a Western historical destiny. That is why it contains the finest products of Western civilisation – its musical instruments and music, its painting and books – and why the Westerners have been kidnapped and brought there. It faces West rather than East; and through the screen of a syncretistic ‘Eastern’ religion the novel addresses a historical Western crisis: the double historical crisis of the existential despair of a generation involved in the First World War, and the sense that Western culture is heading towards barbarism and destruction. *Lost Horizon* is Buddhist in so far as selected and refracted Buddhist elements are employed in an attempt to address these immediate historical problems.

Eastern ideas also serve Western ends in relation to the idea of time. Western civilisation’s impasse springs partly from the shattering by the First World War of progressive time; and its impending disaster is imagined in terms of Christian time: the apocalypse, the revelatory judgement on a period of time. Shangri-La offers an alternative to the catastrophe to come because it offers a solution to the problem of modern Western time. If it were simply pre-modern it would be just another candidate for Western colonialism and modernisation, but as a utopia it has found a way of coming to terms with modernity: it has modern plumbing and other mod cons, and manages to import those features of the modern world that it wants to use. More significantly, it has overcome the temporality of the modern world with a temporality of its own that may owe something to the Buddhist notion of karma: it stretches historical time by virtue of its religious practices. The high lama lived for over two hundred years, and the pretty young Chinese princess turns out to be over one hundred. As human time becomes extendable, so too the time for human wisdom to accumulate is extended. Hilton does not use reincarnation or karma explicitly in his plot but he presents historical time as stretchable through Shangri-La’s religious regime, a judicious mixture of yoga and drug-taking, apparently, so that the monks’ wisdom is a result of their long lives. As in Buddhism, time becomes an evolutionary medium, and in this way transcends the fluctuations of short-term history. Hilton was also no doubt thinking of Darwinian evolution, by way of George Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* of 1922; and this is where Darwinian evolution meets Buddhist karma, for both postulate that change takes place over generations of life. Hilton, though, presents the fantasy of evolution taking place within one extended lifetime, of a wisdom of lifetimes being reachable by a single individual. This alternative temporality to the West’s represents another example of the book’s addressing immediate cultural concerns by way of adapted Buddhist notions blended into familiar Western discourses.

CONCLUSION

This paper's initial question of where Buddhism was present in British culture of the 1930s finds one answer in the suggestion that knowledge about Buddhism and (perhaps more importantly) feelings about it were current in popular culture, although not necessarily in explicit forms. Hilton discovered in his Western sources pre-shaped notions and attitudes about the East that he could further shape into features of his novel that Western readers would readily recognise and interpret. These notions were put to the familiar orientalist function of critiquing the West, particularly Western modernity. What emerges is always mediated, again and again, through Western discourses. But he also found secreted in these often stereotyped accounts elements closer to genuine Tibet and Buddhism that he extracted and deployed. One of the things Hilton effected – wittingly or not – was to help to release into English-speaking culture some ideas around Buddhism that could be read positively, shaping what his readers might think and feel about Buddhism, and so helping sustain Western collective memory of Buddhism in the 1930s and beyond.

In Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, we see a Westerner coming within a hairsbreadth of shifting his emotional, ideological and spiritual sympathies from his British beliefs to those of a quasi-Buddhist East. This is a step forward from the nineteenth-century sense of the non-assimilable nature of Buddhism to the West; and represents a fantasised future possibility. Conway does not commit himself to Shangri-La; rather, he ends up with a loss that is ambivalent, holding in place a craving for Shangri-La along with anxiety about what gaining it would mean. His ambivalence symbolises the West's uncertainty about the value of the supposed contemplative, passionless life associated with Buddhism, and the losses that such a commitment would entail: losses of self, power and national identity. One of the meanings mobilised by the myth of Shangri-La is that 'Buddhism' becomes a thing to be searched for. The novel may be ambivalent, but Conway's move towards embracing an Eastern spirituality is a forerunner of what will come later in the twentieth century.

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