Interview with James Lande, Aug. 2016

IC: What got you interested in this particular time period in Chinese history?

JL: The late Ch'ing Dynasty was where I found Frederick Townsend Ward, after looking about for other times when Americans and other Westerners were involved in events in China. Ward I read about in Jonathan Spence's *To Change China: Western Advisors in China*, and after further research decided he was the best subject for a novel about the encounter, sometimes the clash, between Americans and Chinese. That period, too, offered a great deal for a novel due to all the extraordinary events happening then, in the 1860s, when the British and French were at war with China and the floundering Manchu regime was in a death struggle with the rebels of the Taiping. Years of research permeate the narrative of *Yang Shen*. I began with Richard J. Smith's *Mercenaries and Mandarins*, read through most of the books in his bibliography, then through most of the books in the bibliographies of all those books. Research then moved on to the world of the 19th century including, for example, antebellum America, New England, merchants, piloting and navigation, Victorian society and all the other references a historical novelist would consult until the list reached over 1,600 titles, about a third of which are cited in the reading list at the back of the novel. These incorporate both the Western view and the Chinese view of events then; about 250 titles are original or secondary sources in Chinese found in major US university libraries; about 800 titles are stuffed into just about every cabinet aboard my trailer. I learned how to read memorials in the original Chinese using John King Fairbank's *Ch'ing Documents: An Introductory Syllabus* and used them to inform both narrative and characterization. On junkets to Old and New England, I studied more original sources, and in China reconnoitered many of the locations that figure in the novel.

IC: Your protagonist Fletcher Thorson Wood is based on Frederick Townsend Ward. Why write about this minor historical figure -- what is so special about him?

JL: F. T. Ward made a lasting contribution to the Chinese people of that day. He was able to do so by learning to work together with the Chinese in mutual respect. His experience was significant because of his initiative in establishing an army to protect Shanghai from the Taiping rebels, his genius in sweeping aside the local prejudice that held Chinese to be inferior soldiers, and his contribution to the military thinking of key Chinese officials of the era. In particular, Li Hung-chang who, influenced to a degree by his association with Ward, was one of China's major statesmen for decades to follow. Ward's role is overshadowed by Chinese Gordon, who assumed command of Ward's army and made a larger name for himself, however Gordon would never have come to notice in China if Ward had not first organized and developed the Ever Victorious Army as a unique irregular fighting force.

IC: *Yang Shen* is called a novel. Could you elaborate on the line you're drawing between the writing of history and fiction?

JL: Line? What line? Immediately, history and fiction merge into one, and a novel runs through it (apologies to Norman Maclean). I suppose the question of whether *Yang Shen* is history as fiction or a historical novel arises because an answer is not clear from a reading.

We adhere closely to historical fact, but strive to keep digressions consistent with that fact, and there are many voices, some invented in order to round out the sensibilities of all the dramatis personae. Lessee now -- what is history as literature, anyway. History told with a literary flair, say Gibbon or Macaulay (so *Yang Shen* quotes Macaulay, in *History of England*: "I cheerfully bear the reproach of having descended below the dignity of history.")? Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, Washington's *Up from Slavery*, Hughes' *The Fatal Shore*? Or is it a historical novel imbued with literary qualities, like say *War and Peace*? I'm not certain there is engaging history as literature well told that does not rely on the craft of the storyteller. The liberties taken by *Yang Shen* include filling in empty spaces ("The columns supporting the House of History are so far apart that a novelist could drive wagonloads of fictional detail between them" -- James Lande), filling out brief anecdote (Folkie Tom and Dick Savage, Delevan Slaughter in the book, are only footnotes in history), inventing events (the Fitch soiree, breaking the siege of the Kiangnan Taying, Fletcher and the Loyal King glaring at each other across the bone-whitened river bank at Tanyang), and giving breadth and depth to thin historical depictions of people (what more would we know about Frederick Townsend Ward if his letters were not burnt by his family?). These liberties taken render not just what was possible, but what was probable according to the historical record. The abundant interior monologue reflects our bias for thought as well as word and deed, for both the added dimension of character and for frequent irony. Perhaps *Yang Shen* should adhere more closely to one approach or the other. Not everyone cares for my method of telling the story. Tom Carter called it "an historian's historical fiction," which probably means that for his taste there is too much historical fact, too much detail. A writer with a better understanding of, and more concern for, the market for fiction these days would probably have lightened the load for the reader.

IC: Where did you get all your nautical knowledge?

JL: Reading mostly. In the *Yang Shen* reading list there are just under two dozen references about clipper ships, maybe a half dozen on river steamers, and four more on early steamships. Alan Villiers *The Way of a Ship* was an early inspiration, Dana and others provided period detail for ships and sailing, and I spent time in San Diego with the first mate of the square-rigged bark Star of India, learning the ropes, as it were, reviewing ship handling, and even blocking out aboard the Star actions later described happening aboard Essex in the novel.

IC: Were you influenced stylistically or in any other way by Melville's *Moby Dick*?

JL: *Moby Dick* has a noticeable presence in the novel, mostly where lines from the book occur to characters in *Yang Shen*. I prefer to develop as rich a texture for principal characters as possible, and so portray much of their thought in the narrative, and part of one's thought is often given over to what one has read, as well as other experiences. In the 1860s, *Moby Dick* would have been read by some seafarers, and other contemporary reading that appears in *Yang Shen* includes *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Origin of the Species*, *Great Expectations*, Emerson, Margaret Fuller's *Women in the 19th Century*, Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico and Peru*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and so on. As far as style is concerned, any book written with much descriptive detail and convoluted plot is

likely to be compared to 19th century style, to Melville, or Dickens and the lot. One reviewer even mentions Victor Hugo. However, I feel no conscious influence of such writers -- only my own desire to write text with substance, which comes from a belief that little can be closely understood without adequate detail.

IC: When did you first realize you wanted to be a writer?

JL: Jane Roy, my high school English teacher, gets the shout-out I suppose, or the blame. She praised a couple of my adolescent stories, rather more I think because they simply stood out and not for any quality. I suppose I had "promise." I was an impressionable youth when the Army sent me to China (Taiwan) and I came of age there. The latent urge to write combined with that experience roused me to write about Americans and Chinese. In college I attempted a couple of novels while taking a few writing classes and getting a degree in Chinese Language and Literature, then returned to Taiwan and started a romantic melodrama called *The Cinnabar Phoenix* that fell back into its own ashes, largely because my reach exceeded my grasp. I was offered a $10,000 option by the author of *Tamiko*, Ronald Kirkbride, when he passed through Taipei looking for new writers, but I had not the confidence to incur so large an obligation and leave some poor schmuck shy ten Gs if I couldn't finish the book. After that I shelved writing thinking I might try again in another ten years when I had more maturity. In 1981, without any further training or experience as a writer, I began the catastrophe we know now as *Yang Shen*, exhausting thirty years and well over a half million dollars of expenses and lost income, full of puerile confidence I would succeed.

IC: Do you suppose that all that Chinese writing in your book is any less a distraction?

JL: No, the Chinese writing is a distraction, more so than, say, Spanish or French in an English novel. I have hoped that readers who do not know Chinese will quickly start to just skip past the Chinese writing, but some who do not have demanded I lose the Chinese characters entirely, which I did somewhat in the eBook of *Yang Shen*, which has a version without characters at the front, and the full text following. There are some good reasons for having the characters, however, and which I have set forth at the end of the Underfoot, which is a section of notes for each chapter which I hope readers will glance over as they read in the novel. My explanation in the Underfoot is lengthened by examples, but in summary the reasons are (1) to present meaning, emotion, or sense that has a unique expression in Chinese, but for which there is no direct equivalent in American English; (2) to represent native Chinese idiom – way of saying a thing – when distinctly different from American; (3) for the visual impact of the Chinese written character. Spanish phrase and idiom in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* have an effect on the American ear that helps create for the reader the Spanish world of the novel, and Chinese language in *Yang Shen* does the same, for the eye as well as the ear; (4) to identify names of people and places with less ambiguity – there are many confusing methods of romanization for Chinese names, but the characters mostly are always the same.

IC: This volume is only Book I and there are two more volumes to go – when will you finish?

JL: At the rate I've been going on Book II it will need at least several more years. Book I takes the story up to the first defeat of the Foreign Rifles in early July 1860; Book II then continues on through 1861 into the first part of 1862 when the Imperial general Li Hung-chang brings his Huai Army to Shanghai; Book III takes up with our hero's association with General Li and ends in September 1862 with our hero's final campaign. Over the past year or so my steam engines have been throttled down to low ahead in order to navigate around obstacles like old-age and ill health and dwindling enthusiasm for a book in which very few people take an interest. When I haven't the moxie to work on *Yang Shen,* I fill in with other projects for Old China Books, editing the memoir of a 95-year-old woman who grew up in Southern California in the 20s and 30s, and editing my *Yang Shen* journals for publication. These distractions cause further delay.

IC: How can you expect to finish this book or any others now that your waning powers languish on many years past the allotted span of more famous writers like Steinbeck, Faulkner, or Hemingway?

JL: First of all let us set aside those fellows, with whom there is no comparison. They are lodestars for the rest of us lesser lights, the definition of talent and persistence, their accomplishments something to strive for. As noted earlier, like Harry under Kilimanjaro, I have, if not entirely destroyed, at least compromised my "talent" by not using it and at this late date am scrambling to make up for the loss. I might live long enough and join the roster of Artful Codgers. Maclean wrote *River* at 74; Doerr published her first novel at 74; Updike was still scribbling at 76, Marquez at 81, Bellow at 85. Elmore Leonard is 87, Doris Lessing is 94, and Herman Wouk is 96, and they're still writing. Will-o'-the-wisps? Maybe, especially if I don't find a way out of the doldrums. Square-riggers were becalmed in the Horse Latitudes for weeks, occasionally a month or more, but with luck found wind in their sails before they starved. Dismasted and weather-worn, I may still be able to get up some wind that would take me into a current. Or maybe I'm not in the doldrums at all, maybe I'm already the walking dead and just don't know it yet, won't lie down like I'm supposed to. Imagine a gnarled hand gripping a broken quill pushing up through the soil above a coffin and scribbling in the dust.

IC: How far along is Book II now?

JL: To the sixth chapter, which describes the Foreign Rifles assault on the city of Tsingpoo in August of 1860, and which is proving particularly difficult because of a change in style. In Book I and the earlier chapters of Book II, the thought of many characters in the story has been liberally depicted to offer readers a perspective of the hearts and minds as well as the words and deeds of these people. The style has been mostly indirect interior monologue set off with "he/she thought" tags, and less often direct interior monologue in which thought is not set off with tags and weaves in and out of dialogue and narrative. In the current chapter there is no narrator at all – only the thoughts of the characters, slipping between direct interior monologue and more chaotic stream of consciousness (not so chaotic however as, say, Faulkner). The chapter has five sections, and each section has four voices. The thought of these characters occurs simultaneously but with shared events that serve as markers to help the reader follow their sequence. Work on the chapter progresses slowly due to the

necessity of working up backstory for two characters. For example, little has been said about the origins in North Carolina of the Foreign Rifles second-in-command Hannibal Benedict, and nothing about his experience as a Senate page in Washington DC, or the time he spent in India, and only a little about his service in the Crimean War, all of which must be researched and then assembled as plausible experience that will crowd into his stream of thought.

IC: Why is *Yang Shen* overburdened with features not common in a novel?

JL: Well, a glossary is not uncommon in a historical novel, for example M. M. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions*, and is as necessary for readers unfamiliar with 19th century India as for those who know little about 19th century China. Sepoy and punkawalla are as little known to today's readers as *samshu* and Parthian shot and it would be rude to include 150-year-old language in a novel without a simple expedient for finding meanings. Links to websites for a novel or blog and URL to videos like trailers are also common now in eBooks, and why not print editions? The other "features" such as an Underfoot (aka notes) and reading list, and the maps, drawings, tables, and pictures expand the context of the story and, presumably, add to the enjoyment of the novel for readers who choose to look at such things.

IC: The same question pertains to the section of notes you call the "Underfoot."

JL: In the Underfoot rests "much of the impedimenta that missed the sailing of *Yang Shen* and was stowed away out of sight" where it would not hinder the narrative. Sometimes when a secondary source was paraphrased and credit was obligatory a note was put in the Underfoot rather than clutter the narrative with footnotes better left for dissertations. And there also are the icebergs of information of which only the tips appear in the narrative. Often it seemed a shame to discard such fine things as Chinese junks, walled cities, Chinese official ranks, piloting Chinese rivers, the sternwheeler *Vulcan*, the pedigree of the real river steamer *Confucius* and the architecture of her fictional namesake, historical events adapted to fictional purpose, or biographies of actual people adapted as fictional characters, and much more. The Underfoot serves like a "behind the scenes" or "the making of..." feature now often found on movie DVDs and provides more information about the story.

IC: What sort of things do you do when not writing?

JL: For several months of the year I spend time in southern California's Anza Borrego desert volunteering with the State Park's paleontology program, working in a collection of vertebrate fossils from that area that go back seven million years. In 2014 I took several months of the summer to conduct an amateur survey of the intertidal ecology of the California coast. For the past two years you might have come upon me in a small truck camper boondocking in places like Joshua Tree National Park or exploring caves across the southwest into New Mexico. For the publisher Old China Books, I've been editing a memoir, some journals, and experimenting with videos and audiobooks, and from time to time have put on the Old China Books book blog posts about progress with *Yang Shen* Book II.

IC: What is your work schedule like when you're writing?

JL: At my peak ten or so years ago, I was up at 6:00am and wrote on a laptop until about noon, broke off for exercise, had an early dinner usually watching a movie, then went back to work again at about 4:00pm and worked until 10:00pm. Generally I was dry camping in the wilds and had no Internet access and was not distracted by email and such things (email and online research were done weekly at local libraries). I did this seven days a week, excluding driving days between campsites and utility days for shopping, laundry, and so on. My target was 1000 words a day for 20 days which yielded about 50 pages in a good month. Since 2010 this routine has fluctuated. Now I try to be working by 7:00am, break off at 2:00pm or so, and most of last year sat out with two martinis reading until 4:00pm, cooked and ate dinner watching a movie, and then went back to work at around 7:00pm for another couple of hours if I haven't hadn't had too much to drink.

IC: How did you go about publishing the book?

JL: When *Yang Shen* Book I was completed in 2011, I had copies printed POD at Lightning Source, after securing permissions, working up all the design myself, including the cover and proofreading. I then put the book into eBook formats and uploaded a .mobi file to Amazon and other online Book retailers. Before this I had built a website for *Yang Shen*, preceded by website for the publisher Old China Books, and later started a WordPress blog and created three videos for the novel, one a trailer, to which there are links in the blog. The cover had two iterations, starting with a red and yellow concoction for the first edition that one person remarked looked like a Chinese restaurant menu, and then morphing into the present blue cover with the Jack Spurling clipper ship for the second edition. As I proofread and edit the books myself, the second edition was issued after removing over 400 errors. Temporarily there was also an eBook edition titled *Yankee Mandarin* from which was removed all the Chinese writing and the other impedimenta, but leaving the glossary. Before long KDP (the Kindle police) decided it was the same book as *Yang Shen* and removed it from Amazon. Recently I spruced up my YouTube channel to better support marketing the novel. Marketing, of course, for a POD book, at least this one, has been a washout. The crux is that there's no point in paying a lot of money for advertising that the book will never make back in sales. No need to dig this money pit any deeper.


James Lande

Old China Books is a cyberpublisher, existing only in cyberspace at oldchinabooks.com. OCB was created to publish books related to China of the 19th and earlier centuries, in particular the historical novel *Yang Shen* As their concerns converge, greater understanding of the encounter between America and China seems merited, as it occurs today and as it happened in the past. OCB may serve in a small way as a bridge to further understanding. Nevertheless, we also are expanding our list to embrace other works as well, including journals, memoirs and poetry.