

CHAPTER 4

Representations of ‘China’ in Britain

4.0 Introduction

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Media representations of China have gone from rapturously depicting an economic miracle and powerhouse that may hold the answer to the UK’s challenges, in particular post-Brexit, to a chorus of cautionary tales about Hong Kong, Xinjiang, the South China Sea, and, of course, Covid-19 within just a few years. This reflects a turn in UK–China relations; the only recently celebrated ‘golden age’ has apparently turned into ‘dust’ (*The Diplomat* 2020) or the ‘deep freeze’ (*Financial Times* 2020). When future historians write an account of the rise of racism and xenophobia in the UK (and the world) as a parallel development of the unfolding coronavirus crisis, the relationship between media coverage and public opinion will no doubt be closely scrutinised. They may try to uncover in what way the British media coverage of China’s handling of the coronavirus impacted or possibly fed the rise of racism and xenophobia in British society.

Luckily, some media studies scholars have made a start. Zhang and Shaw (2021) analysed the coverage of China’s handling of the coronavirus in three British media outlets—the BBC, Daily Mail, and The Guardian—between January and May 2020 and coded their coverage as neutral, negative, or positive. They concluded that these three media outlets did not exhibit significant differences in the themes through which they represented China when dealing

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with the same health issue. However, there were differences when it came to the different media's respective evaluation of China's actions. Overall, the researchers concluded that the general public in the UK would have consumed a largely negative or neutral coverage (85%) of China's handling of the virus. If coverage represents readership views, then the BBC consumer would seem to hold the most balanced or neutral view of China, while more than half of Daily Mail readers may form a negative view of China. This may not surprise many, yet half of Guardian readers, too, seem to hold a negative view based on the nature of its coverage. Both may, of course, be a reflection of wider public opinion and media organisations' pandering to their target audiences.

Interest in China by British media and society is, of course, not new. Britain's fascination with China can be traced to the time of Shen Fuzong, the first Chinese individual in recorded history who visited Britain as a Christian missionary and a scholar in 1685. In the following two centuries, China caught the imagination of wider British society. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, when China and other Asian countries were entangled in various degrees with the British empire as a result of its global colonial expansion, China frequently appeared in British newspapers, journals, literature, art performance, and exhibitions as a significant 'Oriental Other'. These included publications for children and young readers. Whether missionary texts, popular children's magazines, or adventure stories and detective fiction of the Victorian era, Shih-Wen Sue Chen's article shows that the representation of China in the period was dominated by racist discourse that depicted Chinese people—as representative of an alien empire—as physically alien and psychologically inferior to British children and as subjects in need of Christian salvation.

Representations of China, as our review of most recent media coverage shows, are never neutral nor consistent. They have always been associated with a particular discourse of representation that has shaped by and, in turn, has been shaping the changing state of the relationship between China and the UK over the past two centuries. Then and now, this discourse has been ambivalent, informed by an often foreboding recognition of China's potential power (Parker 1998, 72). Perceptions of China swing from a mythical and exotic culture seen through the fetishistic gaze of chinoiserie in the eighteenth century Britain and Europe (Clunas 1998; Witchard 2015), to a threat embodied in the evil fictional figure of Fu Manchu in the early twentieth century Britain (Clegg 1994). In the post-war period we then find examples of a more sympathetic representation of China and its people as an awakening populace who are able and united, taking up arms against fascist invaders and playing their part in the war (Thorniley, this volume). This sympathetic view of the Chinese people afar is offset by the discourse around isolated and subservient alien caterers in post-war UK (Luk 2009) and a 'successful' model minority in the discourse of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Britain (Pang and Lau 1998; Yeh 2014). Rarely do these discourses focus on individuals like Chiang Yee who reversed the gaze by offering a Chinese perspective on familiar British destinations, but who, as

an artist, made a significant contribution to British national ballet and hence British cultural life, as Witchard points out. Even more rarely do they bring to the fore the linguistic and cultural diversity within the diasporic Chinese world, nor do they often ask questions about the relationship between Chineseness and Sinophone identities (Shi, this volume).

Every engagement with an 'Other' offers insights into the 'Self'. While scientific interest or cultural curiosity may play a part in the various depictions of China in Britain as they have circulated over the centuries, why and how China is represented has always reflected British desires and anxieties of a particular period. What we see through Chen's and Thorniley's pieces—as much as through the shifts in contemporary media coverage—is a pattern of representation: the image of China oscillates between the two poles of positivity and negativity with the corresponding perceived needs and associated public opinions at different points in history.

China is, of course, neither a homogeneous nor a fixed entity. Over the timespan collectively covered by the four articles in this section, the term 'China' refers to an empire, a republic, Taiwan, the diaspora, and ideas of Chinese high culture respectively; it is used as a collective noun for people and bodies rather than a specific country. We refer the reader to the introduction of this volume for the many ways this is problematic and has been problematised in scholarship.

This degree of diversity also applies to those who do the representing. As the articles clearly show, creators of Chinese representation in Britain are not necessarily British. Individuals like Chiang Yee (Witchard) or Ye Junjian (Thorniley) could be referred to as 'accidental cultural brokers,' as could Jenny Lu, the Taiwanese director based in London whose film is the subject of Shi's article. Travelling back and forth across geographical and cultural boundaries, they facilitated, intentionally or unintentionally, the representation of 'China' to other cultures while their own identities in relation to Britain and British culture were surely complex and conflicted.

And finally, what about the audience of these representations? The depiction of China appearing in the children's texts in Victorian Britain was primarily intended for the domestic audience. The same was perhaps the case for Chiang Yee who caused a cultural sensation in 1930s Britain but was a largely unknown figure in China until very recently. Similarly, Lehmann, *The Penguin New Writing* editor, never published the whole manuscript submitted by Ye Junjian but only those parts that he felt would appeal to his Anglophone readers. However, audiences are not static. Chiang Yee's books have recently drawn the attention of a new generation of Chinese readers who are keen to find out how Britain was seen through the eyes of an exilic Chinese artist more than half a century ago. In the same vein, the cinematic portrayal of Chinese women in London resonates simultaneously with British and Chinese audiences.

In a globalising and, at least digitally, connected world, all actors in the complex theatre of representation and their audiences are themselves forever moving and dynamic pieces, variously occupying the position of 'Self' and

'Other,' and both representation and reception are shaped through the interplay of global and local contexts.

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4.1 Representations of China in Historical Children's Texts

Shih-Wen Sue Chen

Children's writers mediated a complex textual discourse on China for young readers in the Victorian and Edwardian period, trying to make 'knowledge' of 'the Celestial Kingdom' accessible to the British public after China was 'opened up' to the West after losing the Opium Wars. A plurality of viewpoints on China is evident in the numerous books for children that were produced in the years between the Opium Wars and the First World War. Here, I provide a glimpse into the rich texture and scope of British representations of 'China

and the Chinese' in children's texts published in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

The British children's book market changed as literacy rates rose after the passing of Forster's Education Act in 1870. The Act allowed for the establishment of board schools and authorised school boards to make attendance compulsory. By 1880, there were over one million new places in schools set up. Observing this phenomenon, publishers took the opportunity to market various forms of literature to the children of the British Empire.

Sunday School Texts: The editor and author J. A. Hammerton (1871–1949) remembered being excited about 'a beautiful colour-book on Chinese life' given to him by his great-aunt for Christmas (Hammerton 1944, 13). For those children whose families could not afford books like the ones Hammerton received, Sunday schools provided a repository of discourses on China. Children may have pulled books such as *Peeps into China*, *The Children of China*, *The Chinese Boy and Girl*, and *The Land of the Pigtail* off the shelves of Sunday school libraries, or received them as rewards. *Some Chinese Waifs* and *The Boy with a Borrowed Name* were among the various Sunday school leaflets published by religious organisations such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Religious Tract Society. These Sunday school texts were often used to encourage children to raise money for missions. While many of these missionary texts reinforced the image of the Chinese as 'Other', some authors emphasised the similarities between British and Chinese children to point out the universal need for Christianity, as I have explored (Chen 2016). By taking part in religious plays and cantatas such as *Queen Lexa's Chinese Meeting: A Missionary Recitation for Eight Girls and Three Boys*, *Busy Bees: A Missionary Dialogue in Three Scenes*, and *Missionary Cantata: Every-day Life in China*, children were exposed to representations of Chinese children, particularly girls, as pitiful, helpless innocents suffering at the hands of adults who forced their daughters to be foot-bound and gave their children 'very strange' names, as I have examined (Chen 2014).

Children's Periodicals: Children interested in China could satisfy their curiosity by reading the wide range of magazines that flourished in the late nineteenth century. For example, the *CMS Juvenile Instructor* and *The Juvenile Missionary Magazine* frequently carried articles on China, with titles ranging from 'Chinese Children' to 'A Chinese Funeral'. Young readers could also gain information from the Religious Tract Society's numerous periodicals, such as the *Child's Companion and Juvenile Instructor*, *Child's Paper*, *The Girl's Own Paper*, and *The Boy's Own Paper*.

Stereotypical images of 'the Chinese' circulated in *The Boy's Own Paper* (1879–1967), one of the most popular children's magazines in the Victorian era. Chinese people were considered distinctly different physically, with their ubiquitous queue, slanted eyes, and buck teeth; psychologically, they were believed to be devious, cruel, and evil. One telling visual example of this stereotype can be found in vol. 28 of *The Boy's Own Paper*. On page 312, there is an engraving



Fig 4.1.a: Image from Isaac Taylor Headland's *The Chinese Boy and Girl* (1901). Source: Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3h5lg1x>.

by Leo Cheney inserted into the space between the end of one story and the beginning of another. The words 'The End' appear above the illustration. These words could either be used to signify the closure of the previous story, or be interpreted as the image caption. The engraving features the profile of a skinny Chinese man with an elongated neck and a big head standing in front of a table preparing to kill an innocent-looking puppy. With one hand, he lifts up the puppy by its neck, in the other, he holds a large scythe-like knife. Underneath his cap, a very long pigtail, adorned at the end with a ribbon, flows down his back, reaching past his knees. His narrow, slanted eyes appear even smaller in contrast to his big smile, which might suggest that he has been starving for so long that he, the stereotypical dog-and-cat-eating Chinese, is very eager to devour the dog. The adorable fat puppy stares pitifully at the readers, reminding them of their own pets and making them shudder at what will inevitably take place. While racial caricatures were present in numerous children's texts published in Britain when it was at its height of imperial power, my research has shown that diverse images of China and the Chinese appeared in children's travelogue storybooks, historical novels, adventures stories, and periodicals published in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Chen 2013).

Adventure Stories, Historical Novels, and Detective Fiction: Edwin Harcourt Burrage's Ching-Ching series provides a counterpoint to the image of the dog-killer described above. Ching-Ching first appeared in a story serialised in *The Boy's Standard* (1875–92), and later featured in his own magazine called *Ching Ching's Own* (1888–93). On the surface, Ching-Ching seems to be a stereotypical

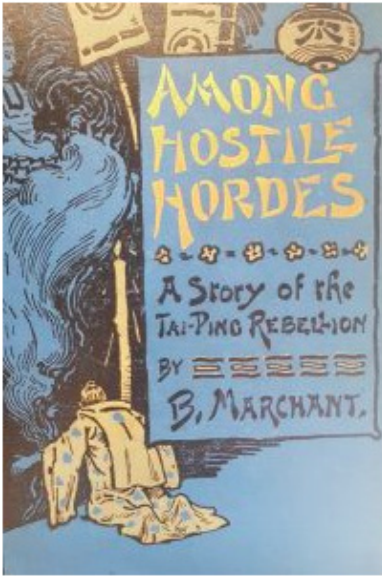


Fig 4.1.b: Left: cover of *Among Hostile Hordes*. Source: author. Right: cover of *With the Allies to Peking*. Source: Internet Archive. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3h6AnLC>.

Chinese comic relief character who speaks Pidgin English and sports pigtailed. However, child readers loved his character so much that the author decided to transform Ching-Ching from a minor sidekick into a detective hero who solves cases in England. In the early twentieth century, another 'great Chinese detective' entertained child readers: Charles Gilson's Mr. Wang (Chen 2015).

Mr. Wang is a key character in at least nine stories, including *The Lost Column* (1909), which is set during the Boxer Uprising (1899–1901). Adventure novels such as *The Lost Column*, Bessie Marchant's *Among Hostile Hordes: A Story of the Tai-ping Rebellion* (1901) and G.A. Henty's *With the Allies to Peking* (1903) underscore the historically complex relationships between Britain and China. Boxer narratives for children published between 1900 and 1909 provided different interpretations of the same event. As I have argued, the Boxer Uprising was a pivotal conflict from which negative images of the Chinese and fears of the Yellow Peril emanated (Chen 2013). It is therefore important to consider the state of Sino-British relations during the text's production because they influenced how 'China and the Chinese' were represented in children's literature.

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4.2 Dire yet Diverse: Desperate Diaspora in Jenny Lu's *The Receptionist* (2016)

Flair Donglai Shi

Jenny Lu (Lu Jinming 盧謹明) is a Taiwanese director based in London. She set the focus of her first feature-length film on sex workers in an illegal massage

parlour on the outskirts of the city after she found out, with shock, that one of her Chinese friends had had similar experiences and committed suicide. As the title makes clear, *The Receptionist* does not dive into the world of the illegal massage parlour directly. Instead, audiences are led into it at a slow and reluctant pace by the protagonist Tina, an international student from Taiwan. Hit by the financial crisis of 2008, Tina found her literature degree useless in her regular job hunt and took up the receptionist position at the massage parlour so that she could pay her rent and stay in London.

Lu is aware of the inevitable voyeurism that comes with the plot of her story. On the one hand, making Tina the observant outsider offers a clear object of identification for the film's audiences to enter the world of these sex workers, a world that is rarely discussed without prejudice. On the other hand, this setup nevertheless creates moralist boundaries between Tina/the audiences and the sex workers. In the film, Tina slowly befriends the women in the massage parlour but never really becomes one of them. This social distance thus safeguards the audiences' ethnographic gaze towards the Other throughout the film and consolidates its fundamental conservative tone. It calls for sympathy but stops short of real affirmation for what these women do.

A British–Taiwanese co-production, *The Receptionist* contains short dialogues in English, Mandarin, and Taiwanese, and its representation of women can be examined in both the context of British visual culture and that of Taiwanese cinema.

The representation of China in British popular culture has not really improved since the 1980s. This is the case in terms of the level of visibility afforded to the Chinese living in Britain as well as the ways in which Chineseness as a generic ethnic marker is featured. Even with the end of the *Fu Manchu* film series in 1980, entrenched ideas about the Chinese threat have persisted into the 2010s. For example, in the episode 'The Blind Banker' of the hugely popular TV series *Sherlock* (2010), the heroic protagonist investigates and defeats a Chinese crime syndicate called Black Lotus lurking in the tunnels beneath London's Chinatown—a less-than-subtle mutation of the evil yellow gangs imagined by *Fu Manchu*'s inventor Sax Rohmer a hundred years ago. Similarly, in the thriller series *One Child* (2014) produced by BBC, old tropes of Oriental despotism and Cold-War red scare narratives are mixed to create an updated Sinophobia. It provides a fictional account of an adopted Chinese–British kid travelling back to her racial motherland, only to have her dreams crushed by the oppressive, authoritarian regime. Or if these haunting reappearances of the Yellow Peril are not entertaining enough, plenty of ironic self-racism about impotent Chinese men and crazy rich new immigrants can be found in the pilot episode of the 2017 BBC comedy *Chinese Burn* (Shi 2017).

Against this background, *The Receptionist* is perhaps a better fit in the series of feature films about the Chinese diaspora in Britain made in the 1980s and 1990s: *Ping Pong* (1986), *Soursweet* (1988), and *Foreign Moon* (1996). Like Lu's story, these films carry many characteristics of the ethnic *bildungsroman* and illustrate Chinese women's struggles in juggling tasks of survival and demands

from different cultural expectations. However, what sets *The Receptionist* apart is Lu's focus on the relations between women, which are to do with neither familial ties nor heterosexual romance.

Dim and hidden, the illegal massage parlour run from an ordinary suburban English house is a space of homosocial bonding that doubles as the main site of Tina's journey of *bildungsroman*. Here she meets a diverse group of Chinese-speaking sex workers, including the money-oriented *mamasan* Lily, the Taiwanese single mother Sasa, funny Chinese Malaysian student Mei, and Anna, the obedient and reserved newcomer. As she initiates her new job in the parlour, Tina tries to keep her distance from the women with a holier-than-thou attitude during meals. However, she eventually moves in with the girls after her puritanical white British boyfriend discovers that she has been lying about her new job and kicks her out. In this process, Tina becomes more and more integrated in the world of the sex workers and forges meaningful connections with them. In contrast to its largely sympathetic and humanistic portrayal of these women, the film's depiction of men is almost always negative and does not afford them much complexity of character.

Unlike the generic way many British cultural products depict Chinese people living in Britain, *The Receptionist* takes a very Sinophone approach towards its Chinese-speaking female characters and foregrounds the linguistic diversity among the different accents and dialects used in the parlour. While Mei's Malaysian accent often delivers comic effects to temporarily relieve the desperate atmosphere of their working environment, Lily's harsh northern Chinese tones coupled with an unapologetic materialism make her the most unlikeable person in the house. Although these features enable the audiences to see Chineseness as larger and more complex than the nation state of China, the Sinophone as employed in this film does not confine itself to Shu-mei Shih's paradigm against Chinese hegemony (Shih 2010). In the film, the women encounter racist glances from their white neighbours and endure precarity and hardships in an unfriendly Britain paved with frustration and hostility rather than gold and opportunities. As the director admits, these women's marginality in relation to white middle-class Britain unites their diverse Sinophone backgrounds, and thus '華人' (*huaren*) as an ethnic and cultural identity in this context becomes an inclusive and yet place-based force against white racism and economic precarity, rather than the kind of exclusive critique against Chinese hegemony advocated by Shih and other scholars (Xie 2016).

Moreover, rather than depicting a hegemonic China oppressing Taiwan and the other communities in the diaspora, *The Receptionist* brings in more complex social dynamics among its Sinophone subjects and provides subtle criticisms against Taiwanese nationalism or cronyism instead. In the middle of the film, Tina steals money from Sasa and then frames the mainland Chinese girl Anna (Lu's fictionalisation of her real-life friend). Anna is then forced to take more sex work upon herself as punishment, which eventually leads to her suicide. Later, during a conversation about missing Taiwan as their home after Anna's death, Sasa reveals to Tina that she actually helped Tina cover up her

theft even though she knew all along that Anna did not take the money. The bond between Tina and Sasa is therefore partially built on this shared Taiwanese identity, which propelled them to treat the mainland Chinese girl Anna unfairly and left them with strong senses of guilt.

At the end of the film, Tina returns to her hometown in the Taiwanese countryside to help rebuild her family's farms after a devastating typhoon. She finds peace at home and tells Sasa in a letter that if she ever decides to come back as well, she must let her know. In many ways this homecoming call is reminiscent of the nativist (*xiangtu* 鄉土) tradition in Taiwanese literature and film. For example, the famous novella 'A Flower in The Raining Night' (*Kan hai de rizi* 看海的日子) by Huang Chun-ming also centres on the tough journey of a female sex worker, who returns to her native village with a son and is finally accepted by a community with warmth and kindness (the story was made into a film in 1983). This nativist message is brought up in *The Receptionist* more than once with the metaphor of the earthworm, and the sentence 'If the earthworm leaves the soil for too long, it will die' is repeated in Tina's letter to Sasa as the last line of the film. Admittedly, 'just go back to where you come from' is a rather escapist, if not outright essentialist, solution to the diasporic condition no matter how dire the situation is. In other words, the film's critique of racism and sexism indeed stops at the level of ethnographic empathy and redemptive homecoming.

Just minutes before Tina reads these lines in her letter, the film shows Sasa and her son wander in a London park and receive flyers about a church event. When asked about where she lives, Sasa hesitates and is unable to respond. What the film seems to suggest with this ending for Sasa is that the only way for the diasporic sex worker to make peace with herself is to get rid of her professional identity and diasporic condition altogether. Namely, she should become a 'good and normal' mother in Taiwan. As such, the persistence of a strong conservatism against the transgressive power of both cultural displacement and sex work becomes the most limiting aspect of the film, a film that is otherwise interesting and refreshing in its representation of a diverse group of Chinese-speaking women getting by in the unseen corners of British society.

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4.3 *The Silent Traveller* and Sadlers Wells (1942)

Anne Witchard

The artist and writer Chiang Yee is best remembered for his *Silent Traveller* books, a series of illustrated travelogues that presented Anglophone readers with a Chinese perspective on familiar destinations. Informative, thought provoking and humorous, they found a wide readership and are still enjoyed today. Chiang Yee's contribution to the art of ballet however is quite overlooked, perhaps because – as it turned out – it was a one off. But it is an episode that has much to tell us about his artistic versatility and about his wider significance to British cultural life.

After his Hampstead home was destroyed in the Blitz, Chiang Yee relocated to Southmoor Road, Oxford (in 2019 the recipient of a Blue Plaque), where he would reside for the next 15 years. In the penultimate chapter of *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, titled 'Friday the Thirteenth', he describes the woes of the London commute and bewails the inadequacies of the train system, erratic no doubt due to the exigencies of wartime rather than because on this particular day, as an old lady points out to him, it is Friday the Thirteenth (Chiang 1944, 172).

Chiang Yee had become something of a regular commuter because he had been commissioned to design a new ballet, *The Birds*. And, as he explains: 'There seemed perpetually to be some detail or other for which my attendance was required – some costumes had been finished and were to be fitted, or certain materials that I had chosen had proved unobtainable and others must be selected. And always the matter was urgent. No time to be lost' (Chiang 1944, 169–70).

He had been appointed by Constant Lambert, the celebrated conductor with Ninette de Valois' recently formed Sadlers Wells company, a great gathering point for artists which, after a passionate wave of wartime patriotism would emerge as the Royal Ballet. Lambert was a remarkable man, something of a Sinophile and in order to appreciate his choice of Chiang Yee, it is important to recognise the significance of a British national ballet at this time – and Lambert's part in establishing it.

Until the arrival of Sergei Diaghilev's ground-breaking Ballets Russes in 1910, ballet on the British stage had been an amateur affair. The effect of the Ballets Russes was to raise the status of British ballet from a rather risqué music-hall entertainment, frequented mostly by men, to an artistically respectable art form. Unlikely as it might seem, the conditions of the Second World War were to prove the hotbed in which the young seedling of British ballet grew to maturity and to popularity. Soldiers on leave eagerly swelled the regular audience and the dancers' reputations grew from minority cult to star status. It seems likely that one reason for Constant Lambert's wish for *The Birds* to be given a Chinese design was a nod to the various Ballets Russes productions of *The Nightingale*, based on Hans Christian Andersen's chinoiserie fairy tale, 'The Emperor's Nightingale' composed by Igor Stravinsky.



Fig 4.3.a: Beryl Gray as 'The Nightingale'. Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Diaghilev had always employed the most cutting-edge artists rather than theatre designers to work on his ballets, and in asking Chiang Yee to design *The Birds*, Lambert (who had worked with Diaghilev) was following suit.

The lesson Lambert learned above all from Diaghilev was that ballet could be an intoxicating creation in which dance, music and design are one. *The Birds* was a brand new ballet choreographed by Robert Helpmann to showcase the talents of the company's up-and-coming young ballerina, 15-year old Beryl Grey. Elaborate feathered costumes required frequent trips to London at short notice. Chiang Yee, we learn, managed to get to his rendezvous on time despite it being Friday the 13th and he goes on to describe the fittings. He arrived at the studio of costumier Matilda Etches to find Helpmann attempting 'to put on his head the tailpiece of the male dove's costume, which was fan-like and looked, on him, like a Red Indian's feathered head-dress' (Chiang 1944, 172).

Reviews of the ballet were mixed and suggest that the design was its strongest suit – *The Dancing Times* described its 'ravishing garden setting and charming costumes'. Horace Horsnell in *The Observer* (17 May 1926, 19) loved its pretty 'animated chinoiserie', writing: 'The birds ... are delightfully dressed by Chiang



Fig 4.3.b: Costume Design for Male Dove. Courtesy of Royal Ballet Benevolent Fund., Royal Opera House Archive with kind permission of San Edwards (Chiang Yee's Estate).

Yee, and roost, one feels, not in his decorative wallpaper trees but in cabinets of rare porcelain.' Elspeth Grant in the *Daily Sketch*, (25 November, 1942) called it 'light, sweet, delicious' and James Redfern in *The Spectator*, (27 November, 1942, 11) found it 'an entrancing ballet' with a 'rewardingly complete unity of style in music, choreography and décor'.

Chiang Yee's costume and set designs are stored in the archive of the Royal Opera House.

Note

Thank you to The Royal Ballet Benevolent Fund for permission to reproduce the featured images.

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4.4 Representations of China in *The Penguin New Writing* (1940–1950): How Chinese Writers Shaped Responses to China

Tessa Thorniley

The publication of the literary journal, *The Penguin New Writing* (TPNW), spanned a traumatic period of history including WWII and its aftermath, and in China, the Second Sino-Japanese War. It was a period when representations of China in Britain shifted as sympathy for the plight of the Chinese people increased, particularly after Britain and America declared war against Japan at the end of 1941. This shift was reflected in the literature about the country and its people published in Britain at that time, most noticeably in newspapers, magazines, journals and in the output of publishers with Leftist and/or pro-Communist political sympathies which viewed Japanese occupation as an act of fascist aggression.

After securing the backing of Penguin Book's co-founder Allen Lane, TPNW, soon became one of (if not *the*) most successful literary magazines published in Britain during WWII. Alongside the British and Chinese writers whose short fiction and literary criticism about China is briefly introduced here, the journal published original fiction, reportage, poetry and criticism by: George Orwell, Elizabeth Bowen, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, V.S. Pritchett, W.H. Auden and Cecil Day-Lewis among others.

At the helm was the autocratic editor, John Lehmann, who is probably better known for his 1930s *New Writing* periodical (of which TPNW was a successful offshoot) and as co-owner of Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press. Lehmann's contribution to the promotion of international writers has received scant critical attention, even though the magazine's circulation - which reached 100,000 shortly after the war - points to an extremely wide readership for a literary magazine and around a third of the contributors (to Lehmann's *New Writing* venture in its entirety from 1936–1950) were non-British. As well as literature from and about China, TPNW featured paintings by official British war artists who travelled to Hong Kong and Burma, but here I will focus on ten stories.

Access to modern Chinese literature in the 1930s and early 1940s Britain was limited. While publications such as *Life & Letters Today*, *The New Statesman & Nation*, and *Left Review* published short stories and poetry by Chinese writers, there were few serious literary editors inclined to or capable of seeking it out. And while Lehmann's pro-Communist affiliations had steered his initial interest in and sympathy towards China, he required a wider network of translators and experts - which came to include the Sinophile Harold Acton and the Chinese writer Xiao Qian (Hsiao Ch'ien 蕭乾) - before he would consider publishing works in Chinese translation.

One of Lehmann's early collaborators was Ralph Fox, the British Communist whose contribution in the first issue of TPNW (1940) was published

posthumously after his death in the Spanish Civil War. Fox's story, set in Mongolia where he had travelled, is a dialogue between a narrator and a lama or holy man in which they muse, over tea and airik, on Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Fox's tale is an exploration of the potential for deeper understanding between East and West, and it sets the tone for ideas relating to China (and indeed Russia) in the journal.

In the same issue, Lehmann published a short story by the Chinese writer Zhang Tianyi (Tchang T'ien-Yih 张天翼) whose longer fiction is still being translated today (Zhang Tianyi [tr. David Hull] *The Pidgin Warrior*, Balestier Press, 2017), a grim and powerful account of the suffering of Chinese civilians and soldiers during the period of early Japanese occupation in the north of China and civil war. In his memoirs, Lehmann wrote of the 'brotherhood of oppression' which united contributions to his magazines from around the world, Zhang's story being a particularly striking example of this spirit of writing.

Lehmann's most significant and fruitful link with China came through his close friendship with Julian Bell (son of artists Clive and Vanessa Bell and nephew of Virginia Woolf) who briefly taught English at Wuhan University. In correspondence, Bell introduced his best pupil, Chun-chan Yeh (Ye Junjian 叶君健), to Lehmann and they struck up a friendship that lasted for several decades, long after Bell was killed fighting in Spain. In 1939, Ye sent Lehmann a manuscript of the translations of 20 wartime short stories by Chinese writers which he had worked on while engaged in semi-official propaganda work in Hong Kong.

The manuscript was never published whole but Lehmann selected several stories from it which he felt would resonate with his Anglophone readers. These included short fiction by Yao Xueyin (Yao Hsueh-yin 姚雪垠), Bai Pingjie (Pai Ping-chei 白屏阶), S.M (a pseudonym for Ah Long 阿垅, or Chen Shoumei) and a second story by Zhang. All had been written during a period of relative optimism in the war against Japan, when China was unified under the Second United Front.

The underlying narrative theme in these works is the shifting consciousness of the Chinese people, particularly the peasantry who are seen taking up arms against a common enemy in rural areas as guerilla fighters. The stories suggest a populace that is awakening, and seeking to overcome its shortcomings, to play its part in the war. A sharp satire by Zhang (his second short story in *TPNW*) takes a swipe at the ineptitude and moral corruption of certain types of Nationalist government officials. While there is a strong underlying leftist agenda to the stories, for Lehmann, any propaganda value had to be outweighed by literary qualities.

The need for representations which brought the people of China to life in the West had been highlighted by the American journalist and writer, Emily Hahn, in 1937 when she pleaded for her Anglophone readers to see China as 'a living sister' rather than a 'dead ancestor'. Xiao Qian similarly criticised those who



Fig 4.4.a: Ye Junjian (Chun-chan Yeh). Courtesy of Ye's son Nienlun Yeh with kind permission.

viewed China as a 'heap of bones and stones'. Using satire, humour and sharp dialogue, the stories in *TPNW* conveyed the country's unity and the dynamism of its people and by doing so they also pushed against Western archetypes of Chinese soldiers as inept, badly led and ineffective, of officials as inhumane and of the people as passive or backward.

From the end of the war Lehmann published short stories by Chinese writers living in Britain and writing in English, including by that time, Ye, but also Kenneth Lo, (Lo Hsiao Chien 羅孝建), best known today as author of 40 Chinese cookery books and the restaurateur behind *Memories of China*. Lo's tale in *TPNW* 24 (July 1945) was a short story based on the extraordinary real life account of the Chinese seaman Poon Lim (Pan Lian 潘濂) who had become a global celebrity after he survived for what was then a record 133 days adrift on a raft in the South Atlantic Ocean. In Lo's story, Lim is described as orderly, physically and psychologically capable, calm and rational and as an individual whose Chinese upbringing had equipped him to endure what few others had ever managed. This representation of Lim ran very much counter to press reports of marauding Chinese seamen, commonly found in newspaper reports around the time. As a Chinese liaison for Chinese seamen based in Liverpool during the war, Lo had been in a position to observe and document their lives and was keenly aware of the prejudices and injustices they suffered while serving on British merchant ships.



Fig 4.4.b: Kenneth Lo, Cambridge 1936–1941. Courtesy of Lo's family with kind permission.

Ye travelled to Britain in 1944 at the behest of the British Ministry of Information to raise morale ahead of the Normandy landings with tales of Chinese resistance. During the time he spent in Britain, until 1949, Lehmann supported and promoted Ye's writing career and welcomed him into his literary network. When Ye came to publish his own short stories and his first novel in English they received glowing reviews in the literary press. His two short stories published in *TPNW* after the war reflect on the tension between traditional and modern China and the brutality of the old ways.

By publishing works of modern Chinese literature by unknown Chinese writers alongside established British, European, and Russian writers, Lehmann sought to elevate modern Chinese literature for his Anglophone readers around the world. His archived correspondence from this period in Austin, Texas, is explicit about his intention to elicit sympathy for China's cause by publishing the work of living Chinese writers. His efforts attracted the attention of George Orwell, then at the BBC's Eastern Service, who ran a series of broadcasts about China's modern literature after reading stories in Lehmann's journals. Acton was among those in Lehmann's China network who shared his enthusiasm for China's contemporary literature and in an article about literary developments in the country for *TPNW* 15 (1943), Acton highlighted its innovative qualities.

This period was the first time in Britain that a body of Chinese writers represented themselves and their country. The trajectory of Ye's (and several other Chinese writers') literary careers, is suggestive of an openness towards and interest in more nuanced representations of China in Britain. Lehmann, *TPNW* and his Chinese network had a fascinating role to play in these unofficial Sino-British relations where sympathetic representations of China briefly flourished prior to 1949.