

“Lilied Tongues and Yellow Claws”:

The Invention of Limehouse, London’s Chinatown, 1915-1945

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From roughly 1915 to 1945, the Limehouse district of East London was home to a small community of resident and alien Chinese. Named for Limehouse Causeway, near the East India Docks, Limehouse had been inhabited since the 16th century by successive groups of ethnic immigrants as well as working-class Anglos. Chinese seamen had sojourned there sporadically since the mid-18th century, but it wasn’t until after the Great War that Chinese men, women, and children began to form a visible community. From 1901 to 1931, the number of China-born residents of London rose steadily, from 120 to 1,194. (These figures do not account for their London-born children or grandchildren.) There were approximately 2,000 Chinese immigrants in London by World War II, at which time they abandoned Limehouse and dispersed into other areas of the city (Choo 6). Limehouse sustained extensive damage during the blitz, and in 1963 the city demolished most of the remaining buildings in the area; it then suffered a “dead” period until gentrification began in the 1970s (Choo 20).

Apart from census data and one sociological study conducted in 1962 (when many of the early immigrants were still alive), we know very little about the Chinese of Limehouse, whose community appeared and then vanished so quickly in the brief space between the wars. We know that in the 1910s and 20s, most of the immigrants were young men employed as seamen or dockworkers; the rest were laundrymen, shopkeepers, or restaurateurs, a few of whom also ran or worked in gambling houses or opium dens. Once they had established themselves, the men would send for their wives and other family members; however, it was not uncommon for Chinese men to marry working-class English women. We know that for recreation the immigrants partook of small-scale gambling and, less commonly, opium smoking; they also gathered socially to

share the news and newspapers they received from home (there was no Chinese paper published in London during this period). There were trade clubs, too, as well as a Chinese Masonic Hall, whose members supported the 1911 revolution in China to overthrow the Manchus and end the Ch'ing dynasty. About the immigrants' children little is known. A philanthropic society set up a Chinese school for them in 1935, and its one teacher taught in Cantonese. Just before the war, however, the teacher was accused of communist activities and deported; the school closed and never reopened (Choo 10-20).

Since the Chinese of Limehouse were a small, orderly community who rarely competed with Anglos for jobs, they remained to a certain extent invisible and thus, it seems, escaped much of the systematic violence with which Anglo Londoners greeted other immigrant groups, such as Germans and Russian Jews. The only recorded instance of sustained, organized hostility was that of British seamen opposed to the British merchant marine's employment of the Chinese, who worked for low wages and sometimes served as strikebreakers. This hostility came to a head during the 1911 seamen's strike, when strikers destroyed about thirty Chinese homes and laundries in Cardiff (May 116). But this seems to have been an isolated incident, and there was no such violence—none reported, at least—against the Chinese of Limehouse.

In fact, before World War I, the community was still too tiny to attract much notice at all. In his chapter on "The Alien" in *East London* (1901), Walter Besant states dismissively that "Compared with the Chinese colony of New York ... that of London is a small thing and of no importance" (204). In a study of pre-war attitudes toward the Chinese in London, Liverpool, and Cardiff, one researcher has concluded that "[a]lthough occasional notes of disquiet were expressed with respect to the Chinese presence" at this time, other evidence points to "attitudes of indifference and even acceptance" (May 111). Records show that although the public occasionally raised objections to the two "Chinese vices" of gambling and opium smoking, the police considered these activities harmless and generally looked the other way (May 117-120). As for the Chinese-Anglo marriages, I have not found (thus far) any evidence of public concern. Police did investigate the matter once in Limehouse, when a British school headmistress accused two Chinese men of corrupting teenage girls. But the inspector in charge of the case concluded that "the Chinaman if he becomes intimate with an English girl does not lead her to prostitution but prefers to marry her and treat her well" (qtd. in May 119). In *A Wanderer in*

London (1907), E. V. Lucas reports that the “silent discreet Chinese who have married English women and settled down in London ... are, I am told, among the best citizens of the East End and the kindest husbands” (157).

If before the Great War the Chinese of Limehouse were, as one researcher puts it, “of little concern to the majority of Britons amongst whom they lived and worked and created no significant problems for the ... authorities” (May 122), during the “space between” their situation changed. Though the community was still small compared with those of other immigrants in London, suddenly it was *seen*: in the space of a few years the all-but-invisible Chinese quarter became “Chinatown,” a mapped territory and a densely signifying space.

The change was wrought primarily by two popular fiction writers whose works suddenly gave Limehouse-as-Chinatown a discursive presence it hadn’t had before. For both Sax Rohmer, author of the best-selling Fu Manchu series of thrillers as well as other “tales of Chinatown”; and Thomas Burke, a less successful, but still popular writer of the same period who, like Rohmer, set many of his stories in Limehouse, the Limehouse district was London’s true Orient: a local urban territory that was an integral part of their city’s “dark underworld” of native and immigrant slumdweller, but also different—more or differently suggestive—because of what they saw or imagined to be its specifically Chinese character. Limehouse became, in fact, an obsession for both writers (though with strikingly different results) and the fictions they produced and reproduced about it helped situate it within what was already a complex and polysemous imaginative cityscape.

Rohmer and Burke make a compelling pair because their narrative encryptions of Limehouse intersect and compete in ways that render it what Judith Walkowitz would call a “contested terrain”— a public space that becomes a site of “conflicting and overlapping representations” (5). Whereas Rohmer’s Limehouse is strictly a den of (oriental) thieves, a place where the humdrum conceals the outré, where white men and women fall into foreign hands, where nondescript warehouses are fronts for the “Yellow syndicate,” an exotic and sinister underworld bent on ending Western civilization; Burke’s Limehouse is a tense, complex, diverse community of the working poor, with a motley crew of underclass characters and types—music-hall “artistes,” copper’s narcs, smugglers, peddlers, boxers, drunks, religious fanatics, as well as a few “beautiful souls” who find love or loveliness in unlikely places. In

Burke's Limehouse, in stark contrast to Rohmer's, Anglos and Chinese mix socially and even fall in love (albeit always ill-fatedly).

However different these visions of Limehouse may be, both can be placed within the larger context of urban exploration and the crisis of representation with which its literature was fraught at the time. In her chapter on urban spectatorship in *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (1992), Walkowitz shows that in the nineteenth century, "the fact and fantasy of urban exploration [was] an informing feature of ... bourgeois male subjectivity" (16). Whether guided by a rationalist sense of self-possession and "scientific" distance (as in Henry Mayhew), or by the consumerist and "subjective" sensibility of the flaneur (as in Henry James), the urban explorer's gaze was a steady, privileged, and proprietary one that presumed and secured a "right to the city" for the writer and his readers (16). By the 1880s and 90s, however, the public urban landscape was becoming increasingly the site and object of contests among other, emergent social actors, such as women and workers. Their claims and methods would cause and/or register many of the crises that characterized the period: "religious self-doubt, social unrest, challenges to liberalism and science, anxiety over imperial and national decline, as well as an imaginative confrontation with the defamiliarized world of consumer culture" (17). As a result, says Walkowitz, the public space traversed by the urban spectator became "an unstable construct," and social explorers' narratives lost the more secure, unified perspective they once had:

Some [writers] rigidified the hierarchical divisions of London into a geographic separation, organized around the opposition of East and West. Others stressed the growing complexity and differentiation of the world of London, moving beyond the opposition of rich and poor, palace and hovels, to investigate the many class cultures in between. Still others repudiated a fixed, totalistic interpretive image altogether, and emphasized instead a fragmented, disunified, atomistic social universe that was not easily decipherable (16-17).

These competing perspectives amounted to a crisis in representation for the urban spectator, whose defining object of consumption—public space—had become a battleground, a landscape “threatened internally by contradictions and tensions and constantly challenged from without by social forces that pressed [the] dominant representations to be reworked, shorn up, reconstructed” (17-18). Insofar as they see and write as urban explorers, Rohmer and Burke find themselves in a similarly embattled landscape: the psycho-social disturbances of the 1880s and 90s had not abated by 1910; if anything, they had intensified. Faced with the “unstable construct” of modern London, then, Rohmer and Burke follow two of the lines of response that Walkowitz describes: one vehemently reasserts a rigid hierarchical map, and the other just as strongly rejects it, elaborating instead a “fragmented, disunified ... social universe that was not easily decipherable.”

If the social explorers’ tradition and its late-Victorian ruptures form one context for Rohmer and Burke’s Limehouse fiction, a second, more important context is (not surprisingly) Orientalism. Indeed, the two traditions are continuous, machined by similar purposes, and often indistinguishable. Stallybrass and White make this connection in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), when they point out that the “constitutive ambivalence” operative in Orientalism is the same as that which structures the social explorer’s relation to the low-Other. When the social explorer ventures into the East End and other “underworld” territories marked by scenes of suffering and degradation, he confronts the low-Other with a mixture of “repugnance and fascination,” seeing an upside-down (carnavalesque) image of his aspired-to bourgeois self. As in Orientalism, this repugnance and fascination are

the twin poles of the process in which a *political* imperative to reject and eliminate the debasing ‘low’ conflicts powerfully and unpredictably with a desire for this Other (4-5).

Though finally not reducible to each other, both Orientalism and social exploration involve a mode of relating to the low-Other that is or was central to the process of (Western, bourgeois, male) identity-formation. In both cases, the subject “uses the whole world as its theatre in a particularly instrumental fashion, the very subjects which it politically excludes becoming exotic

costumes which it assumes in order to play out the disorders of its own identity” (200). The main disorder of that identity, Stallybrass and White maintain, is the fact of its being empty, a negation. As such, it is voracious, forever needing new territories in which to expand, new or recycled sources of Otherness to consume—that is, to reject in disgust and then study, imitate, and gaze upon with a mixture of fear and desire.

The voraciousness of Western/bourgeois identity was one factor that caused Limehouse finally to be seen, and to be seen as Chinatown. One important circumstance that distinguished Rohmer and Burke from the earlier generation of social explorers was that by 1910, there was little “virgin” East End territory left to discover. That previous generation—journalists such as Henry Mayhew and James Greenwood, as well as countless sociologists, Poor Law reformers, parliamentary investigators, and the like—had so “discovered” and “exposed” the East End, had so mercilessly inspected, analyzed, and “gone into” it, as to have effectively consumed its inhabitants, the once-alien urban poor. Finding new sources of Otherness would entail either remystifying those territories, re-covering what had been laid bare (as, for instance, T. S. Eliot would do, using myth, in *The Wasteland*) or finding and embellishing a secret heart more secret than the slums and sweatshops had been. As it happened, Rohmer and Burke, by different routes, stumbled upon Limehouse and recognized—quite deliberately, in Rohmer’s case—its potential as a secret heart.

This potential lay in its being an East End neighborhood that was both overlooked and palpably Chinese. The latter would have conferred an aura of mystery upon it automatically, given the West’s centuries-old idea, central to Orientalist thought, that the Orient and Orientals are essentially inscrutable. The supposed inscrutability of China in particular was enhanced by its relative remoteness. Although generalizations about the Orient implicitly included the Far East, until the early nineteenth century British Orientalism—as an academic discipline, literary tradition, and network of political-military institutions—principally focused on the Bible Lands and India. For Rohmer and Burke’s generation China claimed far less space in the cultural memory than did Egypt and Arabia, which had been the primary referent for “the Orient” for over a thousand years (Said 16-17).

Yet China was becoming—or was forced into being—an increasingly important British interest, and recent “troubles” there, causing and signaling

this changing relation, had been very much in the news (the Second Opium War, the Boxer Uprising of 1900, the republican revolution of 1911, to name a few). If recent history warranted an expansion of the space allotted to China within the cultural memory, Rohmer, as we will see later, was designedly aware of it. Thus it is doubly suggestive that he (reportedly) said, “I made my name on Fu Manchu because I know nothing about the Chinese! *I know something about Chinatown, but that is a different matter*” (qtd. in Van Ash 72; my emphasis). China and Chinatown were two different matters: Rohmer understood that the cultural work of “placing” China required not useful information about the Chinese as an ethnic, racial, cultural, or socio-economic reality, but rather a strong image, and an idea of place. The image, an unreality concocted from Orientalist stereotypes, needed Chinatown to bring it home; Limehouse would serve to twin the image and express it locally, so that what had been remote was now inwrought and memorable, the Orient’s signature found in the very blueprint of a London neighborhood, in its architecture and arrangement, streets and alleys, attics and sewers, and all its hidden rooms. As we will see, Burke too finds the Orient’s “signature” in Limehouse, but his tracing and retracing of it causes confusion more than (or at least prior to) division—a confusion of inks, as it were, a commingling of the Orient’s with his own, so that China seems to “occupy” him, his own body and memory, as much as it occupies London. The ideological use Burke makes of China is less intentioned and obvious than Rohmer’s, but no less ideological for that—more so, rather—since mapping it onto London’s heart entails transcoding it onto his own heart as well. In any case, the essential premise, in both Rohmer and Burke’s fiction, is that *The Orient is Here*, and it functions as a kind of mnemonic geography, as a device for placing and remembering an idea of China and, in turn, an idea of England, Englishness, and the West.

One implication for Orientalism is that the Orient becomes mobile, a portable rather than fixed spatial field. As an ideology, Orientalism depended on and benefitted from its geographic “obviousness,” the seemingly natural geographic division between East and West that got elaborated as a kind of racial, cultural, and historical determinism. “Geography,” observes Edward Said, “was the essential material underpinning for knowledge about the Orient. All the latent and unchanging characteristics of the Orient stood upon, were rooted in, its geography” (216). In the Limehouse fiction, however, the Orient gets loosed from its traditional geographic moorings, translated across Western

borders, and reconstructed on British soil, as the secret heart of London, the city that represented already the heart of Western civilization. In Rohmer's version, that secret heart is corrupt: Limehouse is the source and being of corruption, the site and expression of an Oriental plot. In Burke's version, the secret heart is, instead, uncanny: as the site of initiation into an Oriental secret that gets transmitted imperfectly across a cultural divide, Limehouse is the "strange familiar" that both occasions and characterizes Western self-knowledge. In Rohmer, the Orient is literally here, as a cancer against which England and Englishness must strive; in Burke, the Orient is here no less literally, but its meaning lies in its transformative power and the figurations its presence engenders.

Despite and even because of their differences, the maps that emerge from the Limehouse fiction of Rohmer and Burke remind us that place can be invented and made to signify. Their imaginative border crossings yield narratives that—though often shallow art—are deep representations, their two versions of Limehouse being also two versions of the modern urban experience and two articulated possibilities for a British urbanite self. These maps, experiences, and selves draw upon, and signify within, other texts and contexts that were part of the cultural geography of London at the time. In this paper I will focus on urban spectatorship and Orientalism, but it bears noting that there are other discourses and signifying practices—melodrama, spiritualism, occultism, a popularized bohemianism, silent film, and slum fiction—that could help us read Rohmer and Burke's Chinatown as an encrypted text, one fashioned from cultural currents—and a writing opportunity—that "the space between" provided.

From early youth until he died, fittingly, of the Asiatic flu, Sax Rohmer pursued the East as an amateur Orientalist. His imagination (such as it was) was drawn to and fired by the Orientalist fiction, the vocabulary, images, tropes and symbols with which his 19th-century predecessors had invented, disciplined, and made a discipline of the "Orient." He consumed Orientalist texts both scholarly and spurious, from Lane's *Modern Egyptians* to books on Eastern magic, medicines, poisons, and insects; and he was a collector—of Eastern lore at first and later (when he could afford to travel) of Eastern "experiences" and artifacts. As a young man, of course, he had dreamed of a career in the East, but failing the civil-service exam cut his dream short.

Unabashed, and otherwise unemployable, he turned to writing fiction, and through his fiction managed to make the East a career anyway, by bringing the Orient home to London. His early stories, which had Eastern settings and themes, proved popular and tagged him as a writer with “Oriental enthusiasms.” So when, in 1911, a magazine editor familiar with his work asked him to write an article on “Mr. King,” a reputed Chinese drug trafficker operating out of Limehouse, Rohmer found himself in a privileged position, poised to deploy the symbology he’d absorbed in staking out an as-yet unrepresented “Oriental” territory—one conveniently right in his own backyard. Seizing his opportunity, Rohmer would proceed to Orientalize Limehouse just as Orientalists throughout the tradition had Orientalized the Orient. And just as that Orient was, as Said demonstrates, the stage on which Europe played out the East-West drama it had invented to help define itself, Rohmer’s Limehouse would become the local Oriental stage on which he’d fashion a persona and a career. It was both the site and opportunity for the series of performances that composed his life and work.

Many years later, long after Fu Manchu had made him famous, Rohmer claimed (in a conversation with his biographer) that at the time he went in search of Mr. King, it was an “established fact” that almost all of the Chinese in Limehouse were our “enemies.” They were cunning criminals, he said, outlaws who confounded the police because they “did nothing in the expected way,” “thought differently,” and spoke an alien tongue. Moreover, they were not independent (since, he explains, “To the Asiatic mind, our conception of humanity in terms of individuals is an absurdity”) but instead were organized into guilds, powerful syndicates controlled by their “parent societies” in China and “holding monopolies on every kind of profitable activity—political, religious, commercial, and criminal” (qtd. in Van Ash 73-74). Rohmer cites no source for these “facts,” nor, as we have seen, is there evidence of their being, before Fu Manchu came along, commonly-held beliefs about Limehouse. They are Rohmer’s fantasy, and the assumptions and stereotypes on which they are based—the Chinese are insidious and wholly alien; the “Asiatic mind” is herd-driven and unassimilable—are orthodox Orientalism. They are also conspiracist. Said says that psychologically, Orientalism is a kind of paranoia (72). And evidence of paranoid-conspiracist tendencies can be deduced from Rohmer’s other pursuits, too: as a committed, practicing spiritualist and a member of at least one secret society (The Hermetic Order

of the Golden Dawn), Rohmer clearly had an affinity for the language of Secrets, Plots, and Keys and for the style of thought that delights in the idea of mysterious, occult forces (supernatural and/or malign and human) causing events and phenomena.

Rohmer's fantasy of a Limehouse controlled by a Chinese criminal network quickly grew into an idea for fiction. Once he realized that "what was happening in Limehouse was happening likewise in the Chinese communities of foreign cities throughout the world," he "fell to dreaming":

Suppose, I asked myself, a number of those sinister organizations— perhaps, even all of them—were in turn responsible to the direction of some super-society? Such a society would hold the power to upset governments, perhaps change the very course of civilization... (qtd. in Van Ash 74).

In this paranoid, imaginative leap, Rohmer emplots the ordinary space of Limehouse with an Oriental plot, the "Yellow Conspiracy" that will then emplot all of his Limehouse fiction: from his *Tales of Chinatown* (1922), in which Chinese criminals undermine the peace and safety of the metropolis; to the opium books (*The Yellow Claw*, 1915; *Dope*, 1919; *Yellow Shadows*, 1925), in which Chinese smugglers threaten the West's survival by turning thousands of Anglo Londoners into drug-slaves; to the Fu Manchu series, in which the evil doctor and his band of Eastern assassins attempt to establish a "Yellow Empire" in the West. In every case, Limehouse is the Western headquarters of a worldwide Eastern conspiracy; a portal through which we glimpse the silent, plotting Yellow hordes (often represented by Limehouse's yellow fog: says one narrator, "I had closed the window to exclude the yellow mist, but subconsciously I was aware of its encircling presence, walling me in") (*The Si-Fan Mysteries* 2); and a site of contagion where unwitting Anglos catch the "Yellow vices" of opium-smoking and lecherousness and fall prey to exotic, often erotic forms of cruelty. An extreme example is *The Trail of Fu Manchu* (1934), where the doctor, his world-domination schemes hampered by lack of funds, uses opium and beautiful Asian women to capture and kill Englishmen, then feeds their bodies into a giant gold-making furnace—hidden, of course, beneath the ordinary-seeming squalor of Limehouse.

Rohmer's emplotment of Limehouse arose from both genuine conspiracism and, not unrelatedly, a deeply-inscribed Orientalist interpretive frame. But it was also a market-savvy move in a deliberate game of self-invention. In an anecdote that may be a fiction (and all the more cunning if it is), Rohmer claimed that one evening, before he'd ever heard of Mr. King or imagined Fu Manchu, he asked his ouija board "How can I best make a living?" and in reply it spelled out "C-H-I-N-A-M-A-N" (qtd. in Van Ash 63). A year or two later, when, searching for Mr. King, he envisioned his Limehouse-centered Yellow Conspiracy, he knew he was "on the right track": "Conditions for launching a Chinese villain on the market were ideal," he recalls; "the Boxer Rebellion had started off rumors of a Yellow Peril which had not yet died down. Recent events in Limehouse had again drawn public attention eastwards" (qtd. in Van Ash 75). Villain and setting were thus chillingly calculated to suit market conditions; to further stack the deck, Rohmer then wrote a self-perpetuating role for himself within the fiction: from the start, his Limehouse stories overwhelmingly insist that, since the Orient is Here, Orientalist expertise is the West's only effective weapon in the battle against it. The Metropolitan Police fight bravely, but one or two "brilliant" and "daring" Orientalists—who are always, like Rohmer himself, amateurs—save the world from destruction every time. We recognize them as Kipling's White Men (Rohmer's narrators even quote Kipling), and if the Empire needs them in the East, it needs them—and Rohmer—much more so at home, where Burmese *dacoits*, Indian thugs, Chinese torturers and other "Yellow Devils" fill the secret passageways of Limehouse, of London, the heart of the Empire and of Western Civilization.

Rohmer finally did find Mr. King in Limehouse, and his tale of the encounter encapsulates both the role he invented for himself and the Chinatown he invented for his readers. When he at last glimpsed the "elusive Oriental," it was from the mouth of a dark, foggy alley where, acting on a tip, Rohmer crouched, watching a dilapidated building across the street. Suddenly,

The headlamps of a glossy limousine ... lighted up the dark, narrow street. I ducked back into the shelter of my alley as ... [a] uniformed chauffeur—some kind of Asiatic—jumped out smartly and opened the car door ... A tall, dignified Chinese, wearing a fur-collared overcoat and a fur cap, alighted and walked in. He was followed by an Arab

girl wrapped in a grey fur cloak. I had a glimpse of her features. She was like something from an Edmund Dulac illustration to *The Thousand and One Nights*. The door closed. ... Minutes passed and I continued standing there in the grip of such excitement as I had never felt before. For a mere instant while the light flooded out from the opened door, I had seen the face of the man in the fur cap, and in that instant my imaginary monster came to life. ... I knew that I had seen Dr. Fu Manchu! His face was the living embodiment of Satan (qtd. in Van Ash 76-77).

This is the archetypal Orientalist posture of Western seer to Eastern seen, of the Intrepid Explorer infiltrating, at some personal risk, the territory of a mysterious and wholly alien Other and finding that it corresponds not only inevitably, thrillingly with what was sought—but in excess of it. That gap between the second- and first-hand experience of the Orient is an erotic one for the Orientalist, and the erotic excess is (as Roland Barthes might find) the narrative itself—not only the narrative of the event, but all the narratives to follow, for which this narrative is generative and prototypical. But Rohmer also captures and carries home from Limehouse something else besides its narrative potential, and that is the strong image he needs to actualize it. The image he takes is a face, a Chinese face flooded with light, exposed, and—and this was Rohmer's triumph—not merely exotic but *shocking*. Shocking precisely because it is surrounded by the conventional trappings of a wealthy Englishman—cap, coat, limousine, chauffeur, and beautiful woman in fur. To Rohmer it's an Eastern wolf in Western clothing, representing in condensed form Chinatown's insidious relation to London and, on a larger scale, the Orient's emperilment of the Empire, the threat of a "huge yellow claw reaching out to strangle the West" (*The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu*). Playing the explorer, Rohmer discovers (what he needs to believe is) the real Chinatown, uncloaks the "enemy within." It could have come to nothing; instead, twenty-five years later, Rohmer's Limehouse fiction had made him one of the most popular and highest-paid writers of his time. Pulp fiction it is, but its very success testifies to the brute strength (though not the truth) of his interpretation, to the forcefulness with which he lay imaginative claim to the terrain in question.

That claim, though widely accepted, did not go unchallenged, however. Although Thomas Burke (to my knowledge) never mentions his contemporary or otherwise alludes to him, his emplotment of Limehouse stands in curious counterpoint to Rohmer's. Burke's Chinatown is, like Rohmer's, wholly Other, but its otherness is its virtue, that which gives it the power to impress itself upon—and thus help write—the self. When Burke insists, through his stories, that the Orient is Here, he points at once to Limehouse and to his own heart, which is the heart of a child of the city, a heart crisscrossed by London streets and especially by Limehouse Causeway, which made the first and most important mark. In this sense, of course, Burke's invention and use of Limehouse amount to merely one more example of the West's ethnocentric pursuit of self-knowledge via a racial Other; but his engagement with place (however imaginary) and his larger purpose—to map out and give meaning to a fragmentary urban experience—condition this pursuit and the version of Limehouse that results. Though it can be maddeningly racist, this version is more often poignantly confused, as an attempt at cross-cultural communication that gets undone by the message Burke expects to receive. Believing that Limehouse holds the key to the puzzle of the self, he returns to it repeatedly, straining to grasp—and thereby perpetuating an idea of—an Orient that never has existed except in the West's (fertile) imagination.

Thomas Burke (1887-1945) was an East End orphan who grew up next door to Limehouse, in Poplar (Ferguson 41). Throughout childhood, Burke suffered the disappointments of poverty, but he found relief and refuge in the public library, where he discovered Literature. He aspired to write fiction and, in his late teens, when he had become a city clerk, wrote his first short story after-hours on his office typewriter. He sent it to *T. P.'s Weekly*; the editor rejected it but encouraged him to keep writing. He struggled to do so and mostly failed—until 1915, when *Nights in Town*, a book of essays and sketches, finally established his reputation as a London-travel writer, paving the way for *City of Encounters* (1932), *London in My Time* (1934), *Living in Bloomsbury* (1939), and the autobiographical *The Wind and The Rain* (1924). But it was a book of short stories, *Limehouse Nights* (1916), that made his career. By 1926, three of its stories had been adapted for Hollywood films, after which (says one critic) “arose the singing of ‘Limehouse Blues’ and ‘Chinatown, My Chinatown,’ while a good deal of chinoiserie was worked into decorations and *objects d'art*” (Ferguson 41). Despite his complaint that

the book had been “tied so tightly round [his] neck that [he was] sick of ...the word Limehouse” (*City of Encounters* 66), Burke turned out *Twinkletoes, A Tale of Limehouse* (1918), *More Limehouse Nights* (1921), *A Tea-Shop in Limehouse* (1927), and *Abduction: A Story of Limehouse* (1939).

Burke’s Limehouse fiction shares with his other London-travel writing the narrative voice and sensibility of the lone flaneur obsessed with observing his city and its scenes, its shifting “character and moods,” and the spectacle of its often chaotic significations. To convey the unfathomable mystery and complexity of his metropolis, Burke and his narrators employ the flaneur’s conventional tropes: the city is like a woman, or God, or the human heart, like a poem or a palimpsest: “London is as unknowable as a king or as the man in the bus, and the king and the man in the bus are as unknowable as the God above them.” “What one knows of London,” he maintains, “is what London chooses to reveal, and even that little is only revealed to those who love it. You cannot ‘learn’ London by study, but you can know it by love. The taxi-driver and the smart provincial ‘know London,’ and at the same time know nothing of it” (*City of Encounters* 15-16). Burke came to know London by ceaselessly walking its streets and by living everywhere in it. Unlike Rohmer, who, as he came up in the world, followed the predictable bourgeois trajectory from East End to West End to high-end suburbs, Burke practiced a “continual pitching and striking of camp in sharply different districts,” thereby “making acquaintance with all kinds of life and all kinds of people” (*City of Encounters* 28). He had over forty different London addresses in all, each one of which, he says, disclosed a different London. Thus, whereas Rohmer draws a binary map, dividing the city irredeemably into overworld and underworld, East and West, Burke’s map is decentered, multiple, and necessarily incomplete.

As did Rohmer, Burke too had a defining moment of encountering the Oriental Other in Limehouse. Unlike Rohmer’s, however, Burke’s encounter was not a premeditated Orientalist one, the result of a deliberate quest for an Oriental Experience. Burke spent his childhood in Limehouse, wandering its streets and alleys, wondering at its shops and populace, and musing, in the unfettered way of a ten-year-old, on the meaning of what he saw. When he writes of this time as an adult, however, we hear a telling clash of terms, his memory having become a battleground where authentic event and Orientalist discourse vie for control of the representation:

In moments of restlessness... I would escape down the road and wander in a street of no-time and no-place; a street of spices and golden apples, where men, dark or lemon-faced, wearing the raiment of pantomime, swam through the mist or held the walls in living statuary. There lived all wonder and dismay, and the rewards that come to us in dreams. What drew me to it I do not know, but I loved to be there, to touch shoulders with its shadows, or to stand at the window of Quong Lee's [shop] filled with a Want I could not name.... I would often go down to [the river], and stand on the wharf for an hour, staring at the water and the boats, wondering what it all meant and whether Quong Lee's shop-window would explain it (*The Wind and The Rain* 20-21).

Chinatown as timeless and placeless, as shrouded in mist and peopled by "living statuary"—these are standard images from the Orientalist repertoire, images so omnipresent in Western culture they would have been available even to a writer like Burke who (unlike Rohmer) never made the Orient an object of deliberate study. Convenient and comfortingly familiar, these images imply for the adult writer who resorts to them exactly what they were designed to imply, and always have implied: that the Orient and Orientals are passive, unchanging and inscrutable, and that they conceal, behind silence and immobility, an essential Mystery, the Secret, the occult meaning of life. And yet we hear another voice in the passage, straining to be heard above this borrowed one: the voice of the inquisitive child, a budding flaneur, drawn not so much to an ideological Orient as to difference itself.

When Burke writes of his first actual meeting with Quong Lee, the voices compete even more clearly. One day, as the young Burke gazed into Quong's shop window, the merchant suddenly beckoned, inviting him in:

With a sense of desperate adventure, as of cutting myself off from the friendly world, I went in. He smiled. I smiled; though not easily: I was trembling. Then he turned and ... held out to me a piece of ginger.

Again I hesitated; and in the moment of hesitating the thing happened. In that moment I knew a joy sharper

than any I had known, and with it came a sense of time arrested and crystallised; a sense of eternity; a fancy that always, behind the curtain of time, this thing had been; that always Quong Lee had been sitting [there]; that for all time he had been holding out a piece of ginger and I had been standing before him, with the pins-and-needles of emotion in the back of my neck, holding out my hand to him. With it came, too, something more than joy; something that I know now was at once joy and knowledge and understanding and serenity. The Secret. I knew then all the beauty and all the evil of the heart of Asia; its cruelty, its grace and its wisdom. And I felt that whatever else might move or change, ... Quong Lee and I would not change. Always he would be sitting behind the counter of that shop, beckoning to me, and always I would be holding out my hand.

Then it was gone. ... I was back in the world of time and place; but a world with a difference. Something had happened to me... I had achieved contact, and the [Limehouse] Causeway would forever be a part of me. I had turned my first corner (*The Wind and The Rain* 21-23).

The language here shifts markedly from describing a genuine frozen-time moment when a child enters into subjectivity—recognizes that I am I and You are You—to rewriting that recognition as dogma, as the formula “West is West and East is East, eternally.” The reasons for this shift are, I think, complex and worth considering. The young Burke probably *did* make “contact” with Quong Lee (it began a friendship that would last twelve years) and that initial experience—first of a cultural divide and then of connection across it—was no doubt formative. It was, in fact, a triple border-crossing: into subjectivity, into adulthood (with its simultaneous loss of childhood), and into a negative racial (not-Chinese) identity. In memory, then, Burke’s (lost) childhood and the Chinatown and Chinese man he knew as a child are inextricably knotted together.

And thus he falls—conveniently and unfortunately—into an Orientalist trap, which is the long-standing tropological pairing of childhood and the East (a pairing that Joyce’s “Araby,” for example, gently and movingly

ironizes). Hence in Burke's writing, Chinatown and childhood become interchangeable objects of (narrative) desire: outside of time and change, shrouded in mystery and consigned to oblivion, they are yet forever sought after, inviting recovery but irrecoverable, having divulged only once the Secret that the adult/West eternally tries but fails to grasp again.

That was the meaning of [Quong's] friendship; through him I peeped and saw and understood the beauty and sorrow of things. He opened the outer door, and for one moment he showed me the inner door and gave me its key.

But I could not turn it. And though I have tried and tried, I never have turned it. Never has the magic of the artist guided my hand to help me to show what I knew in that moment when the ginger was held out to me (*The Wind and The Rain* 26).

Having experienced once, during that epiphanic moment in childhood, the "joy and knowledge and understanding and serenity" of the Secret, Burke longs to experience it again, to return to the mental or spiritual place where it happened. He has tried to get there through art, tried "to show what [he] knew in that moment," and this has made his art a kind of wandering, a quest characterized by the act and language of urban exploration. In Burke's restless London-travel writing, Limehouse, where he "turned his first corner," is a frequent point of return. In his autobiography, too, he cycles back to it: *The Wind and The Rain* opens and closes with chapters both called "Causeway"—the first about his youthful haunting of Limehouse Causeway and his meeting with Quong Lee, the last about his return to Limehouse as a struggling 23-year old writer. And he revisits it, of course, in his Limehouse fiction itself, where his lifelong desire to reclaim the lost "Orient" of his childhood gets dramatized in tales of frustrated desire between Anglos and Chinese.

A particularly revealing passage is the first paragraph of his first and best story in *Limehouse Nights*, entitled, unhappily, "The Chink and the Child." It is the story that D. W. Griffith adapted for his early silent film *Broken Blossoms*. Burke's story, set in Limehouse, is about a doomed romance between Lucy, a motherless Anglo starveling of 12, and Cheng Huan, a Chinese shopkeeper who falls in love with Lucy and tries to rescue her from her abusive

father. Cheng installs Lucy in an altar-like bed in his room, adorns her with Chinese clothes and trinkets, and, conquering or sublimating his sexual desire, vows to love and protect her, platonically, forever. In the end, the father beats Lucy to death for having “gone with a Chinaman”; Cheng then kills the father and himself. Burke begins the story like this:

It is a tale of love and lovers that they tell in the low-lit Causeway that slinks from West India Dock Road to the dark waste of waters beyond. In Pennyfields, too, you may hear it; and I do not doubt that it is told in far-away Tai-Ping, in Singapore, in Tokio, in Shanghai, and those other gay-lamped haunts of wonder whither the wandering people of Limehouse go and whence they return so casually. It is a tale for tears, and should you hear it in the liliated tongue of the yellow men, it would awaken in you all your pity. In our bald speech it must, unhappily, lose its essential fragrance, that quality that will lift an affair of squalor into the loftier spheres of passion and imagination, beauty and sorrow. It will sound unconvincing a little—you know...the kind of thing that is best forgotten (22).

Like the waters that connect London to “darkest Africa” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a “waste of waters” here connects Limehouse to China. Water carries the “yellow men” to and fro, and the yellow men carry—not conspiracies, as in Rohmer—but stories, tales such as this one about Lucy and Cheng Huan. As a form of cultural exchange, the tale-telling is ubiquitous, anonymous, and uncontrolled, and our narrator seems to appreciate, without fear, the latent power it represents, which is the power of representation, the power not of strangling yellow claws but of speaking liliated tongues. In this particular story (of interracial love, child abuse, poverty, and murder), Anglo Londoners appear brutal, bigoted, and perverse; and that *this* representation circulates—in Chinese—from Chinatown to China and back again, suggests that London’s disturbing secrets don’t stay locally confined, but leak out, rumored by the Other, in his own language, only to return later, “so casually,” to haunt us in our own. Here, as throughout Burke’s Limehouse fiction, Chinatown is the site of this daily, ungoverned exchange, the busy space of cross-cultural

translation and the sometimes comic, but more often tragic, misunderstandings that attend it.

This tale itself, our narrator tells us, is both a product and instance of such (mis)translation. In the “bald speech” of English, the Anglo-Chinese romance is merely an “affair of squalor,” a bit of naturalistic detail reduced from the “loftier” Chinese original, which, he implies, had the status and transformative power of poetry and myth. Just as Lucy and Cheng Huan perish in their respective border crossings, their tale loses its “essential fragrance” in crossing from Chinese to English, turns “unconvincing,” loses the truth-power it once had. The differences insisted upon here—between “bald” English and “fragrant” Chinese—condense and invoke a whole series of oppositions (functional/ornamental, rational/irrational, clear/mysterious, and so on) that, in Orientalist discourse, “eternally” distinguish West from East, and by activating them the narrator effectively Orientalizes the tale he is about to translate. And because the English version is not merely unconvincing but “the kind of thing that is best forgotten,” its Chinese original represents for him not only the Orient but everything (such as childhood and the low-Other) that the West forsakes for the sake of its civilization and identity. In this connection, “best forgotten” sounds both prescriptive and wistful: what’s forgotten and best forgotten is still desired, and hard to forget entirely. Some whiffs of it remain, to tantalize, to remind, to sadden. In these few introductory lines, then, the narrator not only encloses the tale within, and thus reproduces, the Orientalist fiction; he also effects, quite effortlessly, a complex transcoding between that fiction’s “Orient” and an imagined “original” (pre-Westernized) self.

If the perceived differences between English translation and Chinese original occasion this inscription and transcoding, those processes are underwritten by the fact that the whole “translation” business is a fiction, an elaborate frame. The Lucy-Cheng Huan story is Burke’s own: it did not originate among the Chinese of Limehouse and then travel to China and back again, changing hands and tongues along the way. So why this particular frame, this faked foreign intervention? We could say that, being a Westerner, Burke needs his fragrant frame as an opiate—that is, to get into the only frame of mind, an altered and illicit one, where the low-Other can be met/imagined. We could say further, as might Stallybrass and White, that this low-Other is himself, that the “Oriental” frame he erects and steps into is the carnivalesque

stage that enables him to transgress the prefabricated boundaries segregating his present self from all those Other/past selves that threaten it and so are best forgotten. This stands to reason, since the story is also his “own” in the sense of its being a version of his own “chink and child” experience—that is, his intense childhood love-affair with Limehouse and Quong Lee. Writing it as fiction, Burke recasts his childhood/Orientalized self as Lucy and his adult/Westernized self as the body of cultural forces that inevitably stalks and kills her. By providing the distance that enables intimacy, this self-othering fiction and its Orientalizing frame allow Burke to forget-remember his (illicit) Limehouse experience. But they also entangle him further in the overcoding of that experience *as* an “Oriental” one, thereby repeating the process of designating, rejecting, and desiring the Other that was set in motion the moment he placed/found himself on the Western side of the “I am I, You are You” equation.

The Chinatown that Burke and Rohmer invent is, of course, phantasmal and hopelessly overdetermined, a territorialization machined by the mutually-reinforcing discourses of Orientalism and social exploration, which together ground, structure, and provide a language for both the xenophobic conspiracism that inspires Rohmer and the ethnocentric self-searching of Burke. The two discourses also authorize the process by which both men “make a career of the East” by cashing in on their Limehouse experiences—Rohmer to redeem, well, *cash* (as he admits) and an idea of England, Burke to redeem something like a pre-subjected self.

It is tempting to think of Burke’s cashing-in as more redeeming than Rohmer’s since Burke’s is less patently opportunistic, since his relation to Limehouse is more fraught, thoughtful, and ambiguous, and since his writing style is more nuanced and “literary.” It is even more tempting when we learn that while Burke was pensively haunting the Limehouse he loved and living modestly as a publishing-house clerk, Rohmer was busy selling Fu Manchu to Hollywood and cooking up entrepreneurial schemes exploiting the image of Limehouse he had made—by, for instance, inventing an “Oriental” perfume, employing a dozen Chinese men to manufacture it in Limehouse, then selling it in a department-store stall, using one of the men as a prop, complete with hammed-up “Chinaman” costume and gestures (pigtail, robe, lots of bowing).

But the very thematic, stylistic, and autobiographical elements that make Burke's writing more attractive also make it, because it is attractive, the more potent agent of the ethnocentric ideology it tenders. The codes seem more natural, are harder to crack. In its role as local Orient, a Limehouse that (with)holds the secret of the self is more uncanny and more plausible, more "strangely familiar," than one that houses an evil Chinese doctor's corpse-fueled alchemical furnace; in its role as flaneur's signifying terrain, a Limehouse limned as one of London's many marginal centers seems more modern, and potentially more free, than one mapped according to the old, rigid, overworld/underworld hierarchy. Yet Burke's Limehouse is still a mirror for the West, an Other that exists primarily for the Western self's consumption, a means rather than an end.

Still, in the end, and unlike Rohmer's, Burke's Limehouse hints at more, trapped in self-reflection though it is. Alfred Kazin remarks (in his introduction to the 1973 reissue of *Limehouse Nights*) that although Burke "was hardly a great writer... he had the root of real writing in him" because "he was hypnotized by his subject" (19). Kazin's choice of "hypnotized" is felicitous. Entranced, Burke believes he has received an other-worldly message from Limehouse, although "never has the magic of the artist guided his hand" to help him carry it across intact. He can't resort to Chinese, the way that Eliot resorts to Sanskrit at the end of *The Wasteland*, since his goal is translation, a way of rendering "the Secret" into his Anglo here-and-now. Yet while and because it fails, Burke's translation admits another reality, entirely lacking in Rohmer, which is that of a polyglot urban scene, with its innumerable dramas of immigration and assimilation and the messy, makeshift mappings that try and fail to contain them. Although London's Chinese residents remain muted in, or are muted by, his representation, the suggestion of lilled tongues at least begins to unsay Rohmer, turning readers' attention away from the fantasy of yellow claws and toward the possibility, however unrealized, of speech.

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