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Staging China, Excising the Chinese: *Lady Precious Stream* and The Darker Side of *Chinoiserie*

Diana Yeh

On 27 November 1934, ‘a traditional Chinese play’, *Lady Precious Stream* premiered at the Little Theatre in the Adelphi off the Strand. Within months, its author, Shih-I Hsiung, an unknown student from China, was hurled into worldwide fame. *Lady Precious Stream* ran for three years in London, vying in 1936 with Michael Egan’s *The Dominant Sex* as the longest running play. It was attended by powerful figures in British society including the Queen and successive prime ministers and critically acclaimed by J.B. Priestley and H.G. Wells, while George Bernard Shaw and Sir Barry Jackson selected it for the Malvern Theatre Festival. While there had been plays ‘done in the Chinese manner’ such as *The Yellow Jacket* (1913) and *The Circle of Chalk* (1929) on the English stage before, *Lady Precious Stream* was the first written by a Chinese playwright. It played a major role in reviving the fashion for ‘all things Chinese’ in the 1930s and contributed to the unprecedented success of the International Chinese Exhibition of Art at the Royal Academy in 1935.ⁱ This chapter examines the success of *Lady Precious Stream* in the context of British *chinoiserie* fashions in the first decades of the twentieth century. This at once comprised a fascination with ‘China’ among the social, intellectual and artistic elite, and the more denigrated vogue for mass-marketed ‘Chinese’ exotica among the wider public. In achieving both critical and popular acclaim, *Lady Precious Stream* highlights the connections between the two, and demands an acknowledgement of *chinoiserie*’s darker side.

Chinoiserie conventionally refers to a collection of objects, or a taste for decoration, in the Chinese style. Whether a ‘Western’ or ‘Chinese’ product, it signals ‘a purely European idea of China’, either ‘the fabulous Cathay’ or, more widely, ‘any fanciful interpretation of Chineseness’, and is inseparable from wider imaginings of the ‘Orient’.ⁱⁱ Recently, it has been applied beyond the decorative arts to highlight the continuing aesthetic investment in an exotic China across cultural forms from literature to theatre, film, music, and others, into the twenty-first century. This chapter considers *chinoiserie* as a constitutive element of British modernism in the first decades of the twentieth century. Yet it also conceptualises *chinoiserie* as a powerful social force that has played a significant role in sustaining the social order, and which therefore has profound implications on the lives of those defined as Chinese. Understanding *chinoiserie* as inseparable from racialisation processes central to the project of imperialism, this chapter locates it within broader questions of the racial formations of modernity, highlighting its interconnections with questions of civilisation, empire, war, gender, and nation in Britain and China. The chapter first considers Hsiung’s attempt in the writing of *Lady Precious Stream* to contest *chinoiserie* fantasies and define a modern Chinese national identity. It then discusses the first production of the play by the People’s National Theatre, recognised for disseminating innovations in European theatre, examining its use of long-established traditions of *chinoiserie*. Finally, by discussing the contradictory reception of the play, in which it was variously hailed as a piece of *chinoiserie* and as a work of avant-garde modernism, this chapter interrogates the politics of racial exclusion operating through *chinoiserie* and modernism.

Contesting *chinoiserie*

In the first decades of the twentieth century, while Britain was recovering from the devastation of the First World War which had undermined its imperial confidence, China was making new inroads into world affairs which Britain recognised reluctantly. China had heralded its 140,000 labourers recruited by the Allies as the ‘vanguard of China’s new national identity’, but though thousands of Chinese labourers lay buried in cemeteries in Europe, Britain claimed that China’s war contribution had involved not ‘the loss of a single life’.ⁱⁱⁱ During the 1930s, China embarked on a new cultural diplomacy, exemplified by its participation in the 1935 International Exhibition of Chinese Art. Exhibiting a venerable and cultured past, it showed that China’s new modern identity would emerge from an enlightened civilisation ‘not made with the bayonet, but ... founded upon peace, virtue, and affection’.^{iv}

By this time, British theatrical modernists had long looked towards the East. In England, Gordon Craig drew on Chinese theatre, and – via Ezra Pound – W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Sturge Moore and John Masefield drew on Japanese Noh. The stage traditions of China and Japan appeared to encapsulate key modernist principles of internal unity and antirealism, and led to experimentations with stylised performances, masks or painted faces, choruses and minimalist stages. Meanwhile, in China, writers such as Hu Shi, Ouyang Yuqian and Hong Shen sought inspiration from realist European drama. Shih-I Hsiung, a translator of Bernard Shaw, James Barrie, John Galsworthy and Thomas Hardy, was among them. Yet, when he arrived in London in 1933 with a modern realist play that he had written for the British stage, Shaw had advised him: ‘Try something different. Something really Chinese and traditional.’^v Hsiung thus resolved to adapt for British audiences *Wang Baochuan*, a popular story set in the Tang dynasty and often performed in Beijing opera. Like Wen Yiduo, Yu

Shangyuan and others in China who argued that European realism distracted from the pure form of theatre, Hsiung's adaptation largely kept to Chinese stage traditions, maintaining elements of Chinese convention – the use of property men and symbolic scenery, costumes and make-up, but omitting the orchestra and the singing parts.^{vi} Yet in its crafting of a modern national identity his adaptation, which he titled *Lady Precious Stream*, challenged *chinoiserie* constructions of the questionable morality of the Chinese.

Though by the 1930s, fears of a Yellow Peril had subsided, racist constructions of the Chinese continued to circulate throughout popular culture; men as emasculated servants or tyrannical fathers or evil Fu Manchu types who delighted in cruelty and sexual depravity, and women as subjugated wives and daughters or exotic vamps. Even scholarly perspectives of the Chinese wrestled with China's apparent exceptionalism in its violence and lack of humanity, its rigid social hierarchies and unbending patriarchal culture. Hsiung sought to challenge such constructions.

From the outset, he emphasises that Prime Minister Wang, who continually fails to rule his family with an iron hand, 'is not the villain of the piece'.^{vii} In other versions of the story, when his daughter refuses to allow him to choose her husband, Wang decides that she should throw an embroidered ball to a party of suitors and marry whoever catches it. In Hsiung's version, Precious Stream instructs the family's lowly gardener Hsieh Ping-Kuei to receive it. The filial order is thus challenged by the 'obstinate minx' Precious Stream.^{viii} Later, a character, condemned to death by Prime Minister Wang in the original plot, is saved by Madam Wang, who orders his pardoning, saying: 'All the best families ... are ruled by the wife. My husband here will tell you that he has always listened to me, and he *will always* have to listen to me!'^{ix} Her compassion is echoed by Precious Stream who reduces the captive's

punishment of four hundred strokes to forty. Hsiung simultaneously upturns British fantasies of the Chinese propensity for – if not delight – in cruelty and torture, and of a patriarchal China, populated by tyrants and submissive wives and daughters.

On marriage, Precious Stream and her husband live in poverty in a cave. Soon, Hsieh is ordered to leave China to join an expedition in ‘a strange land known as the “Western Regions”’.^x Precious Stream awaits him for eighteen years, thus demonstrating, despite her wilful ways, her ultimate feminine virtue. While ‘the Western Regions’ historically referred to areas now known as Central Asia and sometimes the Indian subcontinent, Hsiung references a modern cartography remapped by western missionary, colonial and military incursions into China. He presents Chinese imaginings of the West, via a racial imaginary, as a land where ‘all, male and female, have red hair, green eyes, prominent noses and hairy hands’. In a mirror image of Eurocentric imaginings of China as the comically topsy-turvy world of Cathay, the Western Regions are constructed as a place where ‘the customs are exactly the opposite to those of China’, a fanciful idea, ‘as absurd as believing there is a race which laughs when sad and weeps when happy!’^{xi} Hsiung’s concern with the West’s imperial interests in and looting of China finds expression in references to *chinoiserie* fashions. China is described as a land where ‘they have very queer furniture and very strange decorations’. He explicitly pokes fun at British *chinoiserie* when the princess remarks: ‘After they have been to one of my at-homes I am sure those who love to be in the fashion will order some woollen stuff from the Western Regions’.^{xii}

In his depiction of a romance between Hsieh and a red-haired, green-eyed princess of the Western Regions, Hsiung engaged with stock representations of interracial love. These almost always involved either white heroes succumbing to the

dangerous attractions of Asian or Eurasian females or Chinese men as sexual predators of young white girls. Hsiung was familiar with such conventions through Somerset Maugham's *East of Suez* (1922) and the works of Edgar Wallace. While in orientalist fantasies, the East – whether the 'Far East' or the East End of London's Chinatown – is constructed as a place of sexual adventure and depravity, in *Lady Precious Stream*, it is in the Western Regions that an illicit liaison unfolds. The Chinese male, for once, plays the romantic lead, but it is the princess of the Western Regions who actively pursues him. Though 'unspeakably attractive', her dress symbolises military and sexual aggression. She wears a 'uniform' combining 'a military pattern and a fashion plate' and, with a nod to the exoticism of British women's fashions of the 1930s, 'two long pheasant feathers stick out of her helmet' and 'a white fox fur encircles her neck'.^{xiii} She also has a rather decadent penchant for wine – and can drink one hundred cups – which allows Hsieh to intoxicate her and escape, but on awakening, she sets off in pursuit of him again. If the sexual and military aggression of the Princess contrasts with the feminine virtues of Precious Stream, the pacifism of the Chinese and the violence of Westerners is symbolised more widely via bodily gesture. As one of the Princess's aides acknowledges: 'Our way of saluting is like raising the hand to hit a dog', while their 'mode of saluting is like churning cream'.^{xiv}

In the end, the Princess of the Western Regions is paired up with a minister of foreign affairs. Hsiung declared that he altered the stock version where Hsieh would have Precious Stream as his queen-proper and the Princess as his vice queen in order to comply with China's post-1911 law forbidding polygamy. In modernising Chineseness, he also sidestepped associations of both 'barbarism' and *chinoiserie* reveries of a world of concubines. Introduced to the Minister, the Princess enquires,

‘where did you learn your charming manners, Your Excellency?’. In the acting version of *Lady Precious Stream*, the Minister replies: ‘In London’, prompting a chorus of disapproval from the Wang family – ‘Disgraceful!’; ‘Scandalous!’; ‘Disgusting!’; ‘Shameful!’.^{xv} Once again, it is the West that is constructed as the place of depravity, and one which horrifies the morally upstanding Chinese.

Though discouraged from presenting a play on modern China, in turning to ‘something really Chinese and traditional’, Hsiung’s *Lady Precious Stream* aligns with wider attempts among Chinese government officials, artists, and intellectuals in the 1930s to draw on the antiquity of China’s culture and traditions as the basis for which to critique the West and in so doing construct a legitimate modern identity. Paradoxically, such attempts dovetailed with the British recourse to ancient China as a means by which to reassert an increasingly fragile imperial identity.

Staging China

The People’s National Theatre, set up by J.T. Grein and the actress Nancy Price, is credited with making a ‘singular contribution to the non-commercial London West-end theatre of the 1930s’.^{xvi} When Grein, the Dutch-born founder of the Independent Theatre in London, withdrew in 1931, Price became the honorary director.

Envisioning drama in ‘high-minded, serious terms’, she was renowned for a concern with ‘contemporary, international and modernistic England’ and for staging works of high literary and artistic value that would be rejected by the commercial theatre.^{xvii}

These included works by Ibsen, Strindberg and Pirandello. Some, for example, Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1881) and the Czech brothers Karel and Josef Capek’s *The Insect Play* (1921), experimented with novel methods of staging. Price turned to foreign plays in part due to the poor standard of playwriting in Britain but also because the realist plays dominating the British stage required ‘large casts and expensive settings’

prohibitive to a theatre funded through subscription, even if it did boast ‘many hundreds of members in the Colonies and also in all the countries of Europe’.^{xviii} With its bare Chinese staging, *Lady Precious Stream* seemed like an ideal venture.

Price’s high-minded principles, however, seem incompatible with Hsiung’s candour about *Lady Precious Stream* – that ‘no cultivated Chinese would regard the original as worthy of the name of literature’ as ‘it belongs to the commercial theatre’.^{xix} Yet she was perhaps encouraged by Lascelles Abercrombie’s comments on the play: ‘We are reminded of the Japanese colour-prints: a plebian amusement in their native home, an art of delicious refinement when transported to Europe.’^{xx} This is precisely the route that *Lady Precious Stream* would take: though Bernard Shaw agreed with Hsiung that it was a ‘two-penny-halfpenny melodrama’, many would see it as ‘a highbrow masterpiece’.^{xxi} Disregarding warnings that she was ‘mad’ to ‘gamble her last penny’ on *Lady Precious Stream*, Price told Hsiung: ‘I know this is going to be a great success, possibly the greatest success London has had for some time.’^{xxii}

Price’s certainty lay in her appreciation of the powerful concoction of intersecting British interests in China and she arranged the production accordingly. In the programme, *Lady Precious Stream* was advertised as the ‘first European production of a traditional Chinese play ... produced according to Chinese convention’. Though in Hsiung’s original version, there is no mention of music, ‘Chinese traditional music’ and the use of gongs, a leitmotif of stage and screen *chinoseries*, was introduced. To maintain a high-minded tenor however, Price incorporated a scholarly element into her wider publicity. She scheduled a public debate on ‘The Chinese Stage’ and published in the *People’s National Theatre* magazine, Hsiung’s article, ‘Some Conventions of the Chinese Stage’, alongside a

series of Tang dynasty 'Poems from the Chinese' and 'Odes collected by Confucius'.^{xxiii} Although the People's National Theatre staged both 'the best modern plays and the finest plays of the past', Price's interest in China seemed firmly located in the past.^{xxiv}

Her interest in China did not necessarily extend to its people. By this time Asian actors had performed on the West End stage – most famously, Anna May Wong and Rose Quong in Basil Dean's *The Circle of Chalk* (1929). Though Hsiung's later attempts to cast Chinese players suggest an objection to yellow-face practices, only white performers were cast, despite their lack of experience with Chinese dramatic conventions. Hsiung faced 'unending' challenges as 'none of them wanted to take it very seriously' and 'The foreign princess found it very difficult to learn our way of riding on horseback, and wanted to scamper about, using the whip like a rope'.^{xxv} Yet yellowface practices were less controversial than using Chinese players, and a white cast, which included the distinguished Shavian actor Esmé Percy and the West-End veteran Roger Livesey, gave prestige to the production.

Price sought to generate appeal, above all, through longstanding traditions of *chinoiserie*. Costumes and make-up played a central role, but in way that upturned the non-naturalistic symbolic function that had so inspired modernist British dramatists and that had been preserved in Hsiung's original text. Wang, for example, had to appear 'with a natural face without any make-up and wearing a long black beard which indicates that he is not the villain of the piece', while the Generals were to be 'in fantastic make-ups and embroidered armour covered with silk gowns'.^{xxvi} Yet, in the production, the symbolic function of the costumes and 'fantastic make-ups' – despite the popularity of masks among British modernist dramatists – was erased, the

latter reduced to the purpose of making up the white cast to pass as ‘thoroughly Chinese.’^{xxvii}

Costumes also played a realist role. The programme highlighted that Sir James Lockhart, formerly one of the most important colonial officials of Hong Kong and his wife, Mr W. P. Kerr and the historian Eileen Power (previously engaged to Reginald Johnston, tutor of Emperor Puyi) had loaned some. When speaking to the press, Price drew special attention to them, saying, ‘You noticed the embroideries worn. They are exceedingly precious and valuable.’ Journalists were also informed that Lady de Chair, who had decorated her home ‘most artistically ... in Chinese style’,^{xxviii} lent the executioner’s robe, ‘the like of which has not been known to pass out of China’.^{xxix} The costumes endowed the production with imperialist prestige and scholarly authenticity, while playing up to the elite vogue for *chinoiserie* fashion. Omitted from their public presentation was the fact that many had been stock theatre costumes, that a blue silk kimono had been used, and that those from China, varying in age ‘as widely as a thousand years’, were ‘hopelessly of the wrong period’.^{xxx}

The production maintained the Chinese convention of using a few key items to symbolize diverse objects – a table to represent a rock, a whip to indicate a horse, for example. Yet these were not the properties of interest to Price. Her focus was on things ‘Chinese’ – but only those of antiquity – which excluded, for example, the ‘modern Chinese daily paper’ listed in Hsiung’s description of the props. In the original text, Hsiung had referred *en passant* to objects such as a ‘wine-pot’, ‘cups’, ‘embroidered tapestry’. In the production however, they became central. As Price highlighted to the press:

The wine pot – you thought it was a teapot – is white jade of the Ming period (1300–1600). The wine cups are inlaid with silver leaf as to the interior; the

outside is chased with the most beautiful little patterns in mother-of-pearl. Of course, our English teapot is really the wine-pot of China – the Chinese smile at seeing us pour tea from a wine-pot. They use a jug.^{xxx1}

In detailing the objects' materials, worth and decoration, highlighting their antiquity and correcting assumptions of their use, Price not only imbued the production of *Lady Precious Stream* with authenticity and cultural value, but also performed a scholarly, ethnographic knowledge of China, which constructed her own identity as part of an imperial elite. By further encouraging audiences to inspect how 'interesting and symbolic' were the 'two Chinese hanging tapestries' used in the production (again loaned by the Lockharts – and including one made in silk from the late Qing era), Price acted as a gatekeeper to things Chinese, benevolently bestowing upon audiences an opportunity to come up close to authentic China.^{xxxii}

The central role of costumes and props was emulated in subsequent productions. At the Little Theatre in Bath, for example, a 'Chinese Exhibition', displaying 'priceless embroideries, china of the Ming dynasty, bronzes, jade, pictures on rice paper and fine needle-work' was held to 'assist in the atmosphere of the play'.^{xxxiii} The scholarly ethnographic concern with Chinese objects allowed Price to distance the production from Hsiung's description of *Lady Precious Stream* as a piece of 'commercial theatre', yet that her strategy was dependent on *chinoiserie* fashions is clear in her characterisation of the play as 'essentially a piece of pretty make-believe'.^{xxxiv} The commercial potential of the play was essential to her theatre's survival, and *chinoiserie* had profitable appeal among the wider theatre-going public. *Lady Precious Stream* was promoted as 'The Perfect Christmas or Wedding Gift' and 'The Chinese Treasure Chest' shop in New Bond Street, which sought to attract those 'interested in the lovely things of China' advertised in the programme. Edwardian

Japanese fans, painted with a lakeside scenery with green and white flowers, were bought from theatre stockists and imprinted with 'Lady Precious Stream: P.N.T. Production' to advertise the play. The circulation of *Lady Precious Stream* continued in the mass-market. The actress Louise Hampton, praised 'for her marvellous make-up and perfect playing as the wise Madame Wang' had her character portrait painted for Ogden's cigarette cards.^{xxxv} Evidently delighted, Hampton further contributed to the marketing of her image as a fashionable Chinese-adorned new woman, by making and dressing 'a doll exactly like herself in Lady Precious Stream' with 'rings on its fingers and pearls in the wig' to donate as a gift for fundraisers.^{xxxvi}

The taste for *chinoiserie* was central to Price's crafting of *Lady Precious Stream* into 'the greatest success'.^{xxxvii} Paradoxically, for a modern experimental theatre, which used income generated from *Lady Precious Stream* to fund productions of the works of W.B. Yeats, its recourse to *chinoiserie* contradicted the non-naturalistic symbolism of the Chinese stage. By using things Chinese to authenticate its production, the People's National Theatre transformed *Lady Precious Stream* into a purportedly realistic representation of elite Chinese life as imagined via tales of Cathay. As such, the production was at odds with Hsiung's original intentions to present a modern national identity via 'an old Chinese play'. The ambivalence of the production accounts for the diverging viewpoints in the reception of the play, which further points to the salience of *chinoiserie* constructions of China.

Consuming chinoiseries

Weeks prior to the premiere of *Lady Precious Stream*, T.S. Eliot's play *Sweeney Agonistes* (1925–6) opened to an audience that included Virginia Woolf, Bertolt Brecht and W.B. Yeats. Like Hsiung's work, Eliot's first dramatic venture challenged the naturalistic conventions of the British stage. Though also drawing on jazz,

vaudeville, melodrama, and minstrelsy, the play's staging was inspired by Noh to which Eliot had been introduced by Pound and Yeats. Yet Eliot's concerns were not purely aesthetic – he had cited *Sweeney* when discussing his wish, via theatre, to be 'something of a popular entertainer' speaking to a 'large and miscellaneous audience' to achieve 'direct social utility'.^{xxxviii}

Perhaps encouraged by Eliot's interests in non-naturalistic stage conventions and perceiving shared perspectives on the role of the dramatist, Hsiung wrote to Eliot in 1935 asking for a preface for his new translation, *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (1935). When Eliot declined, Hsiung invited him to performances of *Lady Precious Stream* but was always politely deflected.^{xxxix} Despite mixing with writers such as Xu Zhimo, Ling Shuhua and Ye Junjian, and other members of the Crescent Moon who were close to the Bloomsbury group, Hsiung remained on the outskirts of high modernist circles. His version of China contravened ideas of a pure, authentic East favoured by the Bloomsbury set. Certainly, the young Northrop Frye dismissed *Lady Precious Stream* as a 'slickly tailored piece of Chinoiserie'.^{xl}

If Frye disparaged *Lady Precious Stream* as *chinoiserie*, it was precisely this that made the play popular in a way that Eliot and other modernist dramatists could never achieve. Price's attention to Chinese costumes and objects paid off. Reviews highlighted that: 'The costumes, which are exquisite, and tapestries, lacquer trays, jade wine pot, and cups have been lent by collectors, and are of rare value'.^{xli} Within months of its opening, news circulated that none other than Queen Mary, who had 'a wonderful collection of tapestries and china and jade from the flowery land', had chosen the play for her first theatre visit after the jubilee.^{xlii} Queen Mary's choice had not been arbitrary. The use of Chinese things in her public life has been described as 'a powerful denial of the decolonization demands of the volatile new China which

was emerging'.^{xliii} Such a view is supported by the publicity around her attendance of *Lady Precious Stream*. Noting that she arrived dressed in 'probably the finest example of Chinese embroidery in England at the present day', newspapers reported that when she requested costumes be brought to her box for inspection, she was 'particularly intrigued' by 'the genuine article' lent by Lady de Chair. In emphasising that 'the Chinese Minister ... was surprised that such a robe could be found in England', the press not only confirmed the authenticity of the garment but simultaneously conveyed China's subordination to the British in relation to both knowledge of and ownership of its own material culture.^{xliv}

That the interest in Chinese things in Britain continued to be shaped by imperial attitudes towards China and its people is further demonstrated by analogies drawn between *Lady Precious Stream* and material Chinese objects. Even prior to the Exhibition of Chinese Art, which contributed to a wider fever for things Chinese, the play was described as an 'exquisite piece of literary porcelain'^{xlv} and praised, rather patronisingly, for its 'naïve purity of sentiment which pervades, like the mellowed gold in a Chinese tapestry'.^{xlvi} The relegation of *Lady Precious Stream* to a static object among objects worked to contain and nullify its subversive political agenda.

Lady Precious Stream was also explicitly described in *chinoiserie* terms as 'a delicate fancy, a cup of the finest porcelain filled to the brim with the unbelievable'. Referencing orientalist tales of *The Arabian Nights*, the writer celebrated its depiction of 'romance such as was known to Haroun al Raschid'.^{xlvii} For J.B. Priestley, it was 'like a willow pattern plate coming to life before our eyes',^{xlviii} while following an open-air performance, *The Observer* found that, 'The willow-pattern service is even more decorative beneath the boughs of Regent's Park ... It was always good China; its silky glaze remains undiluted'.^{xlix} By insisting 'on the vacuity of their object of

admiration', such *chinoiserie* interpretations had an important function.¹ Delighting in the surface decoration and 'fancifulness' of the play enabled a disavowal of the play's challenge to an imperial and racial order that was weakening.

Chinoiserie fantasies were not restricted to cultural objects, however. One reviewer remarked that: 'To do justice to S. I. Hsiung's "Lady Precious Stream", one would like to have the pen of Ernest Bramah, or to become Kai Lung for a little while'.ⁱⁱ Bramah was the author of *chinoiserie* stories, and Kai Lung, his central character, a supposedly Chinese story-teller. Hilaire Belloc commended the stories for obtaining 'their effect of subtle humour and philosophy by the adaptation of Chinese conventions to the English tongue'.ⁱⁱⁱ Such was their popularity that a group of politicians and literary men set up a Kai Lung Club and wrote to each other 'in the mandarin style'.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The pleasures of simulating Chineseness via linguistic mimicry if not racial masquerade entailed a simultaneous destabilisation and reinstatement of the racial and colonial order. Following one production of *Lady Precious Stream*, a journalist wrote of meeting 'the "Most Honourable Buddie", the lordly little Peke, who rules Miss Price with many bamboo rods of iron':

All I got was 'No-ee, no-ee, bow-wow-ee', which is Pekinese for 'I've had a lovely time in Eastbourne, but I have an engagement at the Little Theatre, London tonight'. So I said 'Goodbye-ee, Lord Precious Budee-Budee' . . . We don't eat dog in England. I am wondering if dogs ever eat men in China.^{liv}

Price partook in the fashion among British women of owning a Pekinese dog, which has been interpreted as 'an important expression of upper-class and imperialistic British femininities'.^{lv} The anthropomorphism of the comment, however, makes it uncertain if the journalist was referring to Hsiung, and with the mimicking of pidgin English, effects an association between 'Chinese' and 'dogs' redolent of the attitudes

of imperialists in China. The dehumanisation of the Chinese was common in *chinoiserie* plays – the main character in *The Mandarin's Daughter* (1851) was named 'Chim-Pan-See' – and continued in events surrounding *Lady Precious Stream*.

In an apparently philanthropic gesture, in 1935, Lady Astor 'lent her big drawing room in St James' Square' for 'a most unusual and interesting entertainment' in aid of a Limehouse children's charity. The press described how 'London society people' were able to enjoy the pleasures of variety theatres, when, in willow-plate fashion, strange Chinese were brought in to perform in front of a backdrop of ancient things: 'Against old tapestries in Lord Astor's drawing room Chinese tumblers put themselves into extraordinary shapes'.^{lvi} The entertainment also included a children's performance of Hsiung's play 'Mencius Was a Bad Boy', of which 'not least of the attraction was to hear the little slit-eyed, Oriental personalities speaking ... in purest East-End English'.^{lvii} As late as in the 1950s, the BBC referred to Hsiung as a 'Chinaman', while in the 1960s, he was described as 'almost as delicate and as diminutive as ... Chinese art treasures',^{lviii} and again likened to a static object or a miniature figurine. The construction of *Lady Precious Stream* as *chinoiserie*, and *chinoiserie* imaginings of Hsiung and other Chinese people as comical, curious creatures, even 'things', were necessary acts to contain the threat posed by their subjectivity and agency and to maintain the racial and (post)colonial order.

Civilized China?

Despite these *chinoiserie* perceptions, Hsiung's attempt to rehabilitate the Chinese did not go entirely unnoticed. Lascelles Abercrombie and Allardyce Nicoll saw in *Lady Precious Stream* evidence of a universal humanity. Harold Conway listed it among 'Plays that Succeed Anywhere' alongside a stage version of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Eugene O'Neill's *Ah! Wilderness*, as all were 'actuated by motives and

emotions which are common to all humanity'. In particular, 'the adorable, many-sided Precious Stream' struck a note with audiences, and was described as 'one of the great feminine characters of all literature'.^{lix} By contrast, Hsiung's presentation of 'the West' via the Princess of the Western Regions was, in the words of one critic, 'a little more difficult to accept'. Though it is unclear if her character was understood as a challenge to the moral superiority of the West, it was certainly 'the business-like way she went about things' that was deemed 'disturbing'.^{lx} There was also relief that although 'East meets West, in the person of the Princess of the Western Regions', fortuitously, 'the alliance ... is not a permanent one'.^{lxi} In other responses, constructions of the absolute difference of Chinese morality thwarted Hsiung's attempt to redefine the Chinese. 'The latitude allowed a wife in negating a husband's pet theories' in the play was not understood as a challenge to stock notions of male Chinese tyrants and submissive women, but rather suggested that 'the Chinese author has been contaminated by Western ideas'.^{lxii}

This idea of contamination by the West was inseparable from the shock of the First World War and the profound sense of a loss of values that reverberated in its aftermath. As another war loomed, *Lady Precious Stream* reaffirmed 'the fundamental solidarity of human nature', which seemed to have vanished, and by reinstating virtue in women, also comfortingly reasserted pre-war gender relations. Speaking of *Lady Precious Stream*, one Sunday in 1935 at St Peter's Church Piccadilly, Father May extolled:

The beauty of fidelity as seen in the mother in her tender care for her daughter and the daughter in the uncomplaining hope with which she awaits her husband ... We want mothers to be like Madame Wang and wives to be like Precious Stream.

Notably, in a context of longstanding depictions of the Chinese as uncivilised heathens, May concluded, ‘The play ends on a note of mercy and forgiveness, and as such we should, I fear, have to look far to find so Christian play as this, which comes to us from a non-Christian country.’^{lxiii}

The exaltation of the moral example provided by *Lady Precious Stream*, was, however, marked by an ambivalence in its anticipation then disavowal of its laughable lack of scenery and properties:

the picture of the mother who arrives between two flags on which are rough drawings of cartwheels [does] not move us to laughter as we might have thought but almost to tears.^{lxiv}

Comedy was a common element of *chinoiserie* plays – Hazelton and Benrimo, the authors of *The Yellow Jacket* had played the property men for comic effect, since they found them, ‘very funny’.^{lxv} Such plays circumscribed responses to *Lady Precious Stream*. Ivor Brown, for example, felt he had to resist a comic interpretation, not for its misplaced understanding, but because:

I must confess myself not amused by the convention of knocking at non-existent doors and climbing non-existent stairs: when all the characters have done this about nine times, it seems to me that the joke, if there every was one, is definitely over.^{lxvi}

The staging of the play was continually noted for its ‘quaintness’, leading *The Independent* to wonder:

whether the technical methods of the Chinese theatre to-day are really as crude and, according to Western ideas, as far behind the times as this play would have us believe [and] from which we have long since progressed . . . Yet Lady

Precious Stream has a naive and subtle charm which in spite of, or perhaps because of, its crudities makes a very definite appeal.^{lxvii}

In such primitivist responses to *Lady Precious Stream*, the civilized elevates itself through a condescending appreciation of its imaginary opposite, China. Yet the questioning of European civilization in the interwar period also prompted responses in which China could be taken seriously as providing not only moral but also aesthetic alternatives to a decaying culture.

Modernist China?

Though recognising the Chinese conventions of *Lady Precious Stream* from *The Yellow Jacket* and *The Circle of Chalk*, W.A. Darlington pointed out that in Hsiung's play, 'they were treated as a matter of course' – and 'the property men were used not to create laughter but to help illusion'.^{lxviii} The question of illusion had been central to debates on British theatre since the late nineteenth century. For theatrical purists campaigning against the commercialisation of the West End, *Lady Precious Stream* offered relief from the extravagant stage settings used in realist dramas and popular entertainments. The leading theatre critic James Agate declared that *Lady Precious Stream* 'towers over everything else on the London stage' as 'it doesn't need any scenery'. Like theatre reformers such as Yeats, Strindberg and William Poel, Agate believed that modern drama could be resuscitated by returning to the purity of the Elizabethan stage. Referring to Hsiung's use of a Reader, Agate asked, 'Can anything be happier? Can anything be nearer the Elizabethan tradition of shoving on a placard with the words: "A Wood near Athens"?'^{lxix} In the wider press, *Lady Precious Stream* was similarly compared to the 'humour, romance and poetry of our Elizabethan stage', with critics identifying 'something in its quality to remind us of "Twelfth Night" or "A Winter's Tale"'.^{lxx}

While these critics hailed *Lady Precious Stream* as a refreshing contrast to realism, the poet and playwright Gordon Bottomley found respite from the seemingly endless Oriental extravaganzas on offer. Alongside Oscar Asche's *Chu Chin Chow* (1916), Lytton Strachey's *The Son of Heaven* (1913) opened in 1925 in an opulent oriental palace in a set designed by Duncan Grant in the spirit of Diaghilev's ballet, and Dean's *The Circle of Chalk* (1929) had no less a spectacular stage setting. Meanwhile, as *Lady Precious Stream* was in its second year, Ivor Novello's big budget *Careless Rapture* (1936) delighted audiences with its recreations of a fairground on Hampstead Heath, a Chinese garden, a Chinese street scene, an earthquake and a vast Oriental temple with nearly a hundred dancers. For Bottomley, *Lady Precious Stream* was admirably chastening and authentic: 'we have never held the gorgeous East in fee more inexpensively or convincingly before'. An 'ecstasy of enjoyment' came not the discovery 'that many of the essentials of our twentieth-century dramatic method are inessential'.^{lxxi}

Like many modernists at the time, Bottomley's wrath was directed at the 'anaemic, feeble ... shrivelled' state of British theatre. Two months prior to the opening of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art, he wrote:

In this pregnant time of the discussion of international loans and influences, the ancient land of China might reasonably claim that its loan of Mr. S. I.

Hsiung to the British theatre should rank among the most important.^{lxxii}

Seeking to revive modern poetic drama, Bottomley first adopted Jacobean traditions and then, claiming to precede Yeats, the minimalist staging of *Noh*. Yet he believed that Chinese drama 'has everything to tell to British theatre that the British theatre most needs to learn', as it 'seems to be the only drama that has kept the activities of its theatre whole and complete, as the theatre of Greece'.^{lxxiii}

Infused with nostalgia for the lost unity of the past, the parallels drawn between Chinese, Elizabethan, and Greek drama allowed *Lady Precious Stream* to mark the way forward for British theatre, by returning it to the apparent simplicities and certainties of its own past.

If such perspectives contained China within an unchanging past, others dovetailed more neatly with Chinese attempts to use that past to found a modern national identity. Uturning primitivist assumptions, China could be constructed as the ultimate modern, avant-garde, other. One critic declared that the use of property men and symbolic scenery in *Lady Precious Stream* placed: ‘the Chinese Theatre ahead of the most advanced producers in the West’.^{lxxiv} Others drew comparisons between the play and productions by Compagnie des Quinze, a progenitor of modern avant-garde theatre. At a time when the film industry began to threaten the stage, *Lady Precious Stream* even competed with new cinematic technologies – ‘untrammelled by scenic changes, unimpaired by limitations of space, the imagination of the audience is directed across limitless space that even the cinema could not equal’.^{lxxv} While the Bloomsbury core remained unenamoured by Hsiung’s modernised Chineseness, Michael Sayers, a protégé of Eliot and theatre reviewer for his literary magazine *The Criterion*, singled out *Lady Precious Stream* alongside Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* as the only noteworthy plays of 1935:

The cinema couldn’t do them ... They were successful because they indicated to the public the existence of an art ... which had seemed almost on the verge of extinction. I mean, of course, the art of theatre.^{lxxvi}

Although excited by *Lady Precious Stream*’s apparent modernism, many tended to attribute this to Price:

Miss Price, I repeat, has not relied upon mere novelty. What she has done is to introduce to audiences, whose tastes are debauched by the realism now in vogue, the beauty of convention, and therefore of order, in art ... Her stage is what every stage essentially should be... The mind delights in its new found liberty to imagine, and the eye gives it just enough ground for invention. We are free.

When Hsiung is mentioned, it is only as Price's assistant – 'she has had the help of the author, Mr S.I. Hsiung', or his name sandwiched between 'Miss Price ... and the actors'.^{lxxvii} In another review proclaiming that *Lady Precious Stream* made 'a big step forward in the renaissance of the theatre', Hsiung's role was again obliterated, while 'Price and her company ... earned not only the admiration but the gratitude of all lovers of the beautiful art of the stage'.^{lxxviii} Paradoxically *Lady Precious Stream* could point the way forward for British theatre, either by leading it back to its own apparently pristine past or by taking it beyond the imaginable future. Its modernism, however, could not be attributed to Hsiung.

Conclusion

Despite changing relations between Britain and China in the first decades of the twentieth century, as Britain's imperial might was weakening and as China made its entrance into world affairs, the British love affair with *chinoiserie* did not necessarily radically alter racial and colonial attitudes towards the Chinese. China's diplomatic attempts to construct a modern national identity via its ancient past contributed to the vogue for things Chinese but coincided with a British recourse to Cathay as a vehicle through which to reinstate an increasingly fragile imperial identity. Although exhibitions of Chinese people, popular in the nineteenth century, were no longer held,

chinoiserie plays in yellowface tradition and *chinoiserie* fashions for Chinese dress, objects, and performances contributed to the prolongation of the consumption of Chinese things and people as exotic curios in new social spaces.

As the first play written by a Chinese playwright to be staged in Britain, *Lady Precious Stream* marked a new moment for British theatre, but its production in fact worked to maintain the status quo. Not only was Hsiung dissuaded from presenting China to British audiences through a modern realist play, but his challenge to *chinoiserie* fantasies of China via a modern adaptation of ‘an old Chinese play’ became coopted by an institution that was otherwise known for disseminating innovations in theatre. In producing *Lady Precious Stream*, the People’s National Theatre was celebrated for its modernist experimentations with non-naturalistic stage conventions. Yet, tapping into a widespread interests among the British for things Chinese, its extensive use of *chinoiserie* in fact upturned the non-naturalistic conventions of *Lady Precious Stream* and provided audiences with another opportunity to consume a purportedly realistic representation, authenticated by Chinese things, of that strange land known as Cathay.

Lady Precious Stream was variously enjoyed and disparaged as a piece of *chinoiserie* but also hailed as a highly moral and modern work of avant-garde art. Such apparently conflicting views shared similarities. Elite *chinoiseries* and the populist vogue for China intersected, in constructing and consuming not only objects, but also *Lady Precious Stream* and even Chinese people as *chinoiserie*. By attributing the play’s moral and modernist import either to a static, generalised ‘Chinese culture’ or to Nancy Price, and in erasing Hsiung’s attack on the Western Regions and his contestation of *chinoiseries*, such views excised the modern political, moral and creative agency of Hsiung and Chinese people more widely. British investments in

fanciful visions of China were thus not purely aesthetic. Consequently, *chinoiserie* can be understood not only as a term applied to objects or cultural forms in a Chinese style but as a practice and a mode of discourse that is constitutive of the racial formations of modernity. *Chinoiserie* not only shaped British modernism but was central to its racial politics. Despite the varied uses of *chinoiserie* in modernist culture, fashion and criticism, its darker side is apparent as its elite and popular expressions ultimately converged in serving to maintain the colonial and racial order by excising, not only from modernism, but also from modernity, the Chinese.

ⁱ For further discussion of the play, see Yeh, D. (2014), *The Happy Hsiungs: Performing China and the Struggle for Modernity*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

ⁱⁱ Porter, D. (2001), *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 136; Jacobson, D. (1993), *Chinoiserie*, London: Phaidon, p. 27; Witchard, A. (2009). *Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown*, Farnham: Ashgate, p. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Xu, G. (2005). *China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 147, 146.

^{iv} Cheng, F. T. (1951). *East and West: Episodes in a Sixty Years' Journey*, London: Hutchinson.

^v *Times of Malaya*, 24 June 1935.

^{vi} Tian, M. (2008). *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth-Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, p. 2.

^{vii} Hsiung, S. I. (1934), *Lady Precious Stream: An Old Chinese Play Done into English according to Its Traditional Style*, London: Methuen, (hereafter LPS), p. 1.

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- ^{viii} Shen, S. (2006), 'S.I. Hsiung's *Lady Precious Stream* and the Global Circulation of Peking Opera as a Modernist Form', *Genre*, 39(4), pp. 85–103.
- ^{ix} LPS, p. 158.
- ^x *Ibid*, p. 78.
- ^{xi} *Ibid*.
- ^{xii} *Ibid*, pp. 78, 162.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid*, pp. 82, 85.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid*, p. 164.
- ^{xv} Hsiung, S. I. (1936), *Lady Precious Stream (Acting Edition)*, London: Methuen, pp. 120–121.
- ^{xvi} Wearing, J. P. (1996), 'Nancy Price, and The People's National Theatre', *Theatre History Studies*, 16, pp. 71–89, p.71.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid*.; *North China Herald*, 17 February 1936.
- ^{xviii} *West Australian*, 18 November 1935.
- ^{xix} See Abercrombie, L. (1934), 'Preface', *Lady Precious Stream*, London: Methuen, p. ix.
- ^{xx} *Ibid*.
- ^{xxi} Hsiung, S.I. (1939), 'Afterthought', *Professor of Peking: A Play in Three Acts*, London: Methuen, p. 174; letter from S. I. Hsiung to George Bernard Shaw, 9 March 1943, BL Add MS 50523, f. 42.
- ^{xxii} *West Australian*, 18 November 1935; Hsiung, 'Afterthought', p. 167; *Times of Malaya*, 24 June 1935.
- ^{xxiii} *PNT Magazine*, 1934, 1(13).
- ^{xxiv} *West Australian*, 18 November 1935.
- ^{xxv} Chiang, Y. (1938/2002), *The Silent Traveller in London*, London: Signal Books, pp. 144–145.
- ^{xxvi} LPS, pp. 1, 7.
- ^{xxvii} *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1935.

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- ^{xxviii} *British Australian*, 23 May 1935.
- ^{xxix} *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1935.
- ^{xxx} Chiang, *London*, p. 144; Hsiung, 'Afterthought', p. 171.
- ^{xxxi} *Eastbourne Gazette*, 5 December 1935(?).
- ^{xxxii} Wilson, V. (2005), *Chinese Textiles*. London: V&A Publications.
- ^{xxxiii} *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 23 November 1935.
- ^{xxxiv} *Eastbourne Gazette*, 5 December 1935(?).
- ^{xxxv} *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 November 1934.
- ^{xxxvi} *PNT Magazine* January 1935, 2(1).
- ^{xxxvii} *Times of Malaya*, 24 June 1935.
- ^{xxxviii} Chinitz, D.E. (2003), *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 125.
- ^{xxxix} Letters from T. S. Eliot to S. I. Hsiung, 22 May 1935 and 20 November 1936. Hsiung Family Archive, Washington.
- ^{xl} Denham, R. D. (ed.) (1996), *The Correspondence of Northrop Frye and Helen Kemp, 1932–1939*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 568.
- ^{xli} *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1935.
- ^{xlii} *British Australian*, 23 May 1935.
- ^{xliii} Cheang, S. (2008), 'Dragons in the Drawing Room: Chinese Embroideries in British Homes, 1860–1949', *Textile History*, 39(2), pp. 223–249, p.231.
- ^{xliv} *Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 1935; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1935.
- ^{xlv} *The Daily Sketch*, 4 January 1935.
- ^{xlvi} *New Statesman and Nation*, 19 January 1935.
- ^{xlvii} *Play Pictorial*, 1935, 66(392), pp. 3–7.
- ^{xlviii} Priestley, J.B. (1950), 'Preface', *The Story of Lady Precious Stream*, London: Hutchinson.
- ^{xlix} *The Observer*, 18 July 1943.
- ¹ Porter, *Ideographia*, pp. 136–139.

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- ^{li} *Glasgow Herald*, 24 December 1946.
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[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37217>, accessed 10 September 2013].
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- ^{liv} *Eastbourne Gazette*, 5 December 1935(?).
- ^{lv} Cheang, S. (2006), 'Women, Pets, and Imperialism: The British Pekingese Dog and Nostalgia for Old China', *Journal of British Studies*, 45(2), 359–387, p. 362.
- ^{lvi} *News Chronicle London*, 2 May 1935.
- ^{lvii} *Observer*, 21 April 1935.
- ^{lviii} Letter from Freda Lingstrom to S.I Hsiung, 1 December 1951; *Honolulu Advertiser*, 16 June 1966.
- ^{lix} *Observer*, 17 January 1935; unknown newspaper, 26 May 1936; *Fortnightly Review*, December 1935.
- ^{lx} *Play Pictorial*, 1935, 66(392), p. 5.
- ^{lxi} *Coventry Herald*, 31 October 1936.
- ^{lxii} *Harrogate Advertiser*, 5 August 1936.
- ^{lxiii} *PNT Magazine*, 1935, 2(2), p. 29.
- ^{lxiv} *Ibid.*
- ^{lxv} Cited Harbeck, J. (1996), 'The Quaintness and Usefulness of the Old Chinese Traditions: The Yellow Jacket and Lady Precious Stream', *Asian Theatre Journal*, 13(2), pp. 238–247.
- ^{lxvi} *The Observer*, 17 January 1935.
- ^{lxvii} *Independent*, 19 January 1935.
- ^{lxviii} *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 November 1934.
- ^{lxix} *Sunday Times*, 29 November 1934?
- ^{lxx} *Morning Post*, 31 July 1936(?)

^{lxxi} Bottomley, G. (1935), 'Preface', in Hsiung, S. I., *The Romance of the Western Chamber*,

London: Methuen.

^{lxxii} **Ibid.**

^{lxxiii} **Ibid.**

^{lxxiv} *Brighton Gazette*, 2 December 1936.

^{lxxv} **Ibid.**

^{lxxvi} Sayers, M. (1935), 'A Year in Theatre', *The Criterion*, LX1, p. 648–662, p. 650.

^{lxxvii} *Catholic Herald*, 19 January 1935.

^{lxxviii} *Eastbourne Gazette*, 5 December 1935(?).