



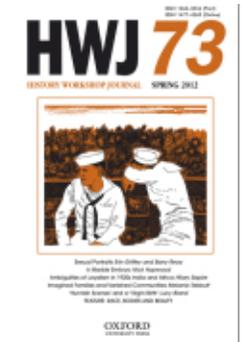
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History Workshop Journal, Issue 62, Autumn 2006, pp. 58-85 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



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Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900–40

by John Seed

Few parts of London attracted as much attention as did Limehouse between the Great War and the 1930s. Limehouse, and its ghostly double 'Chinatown', figured as a dangerous and exotic place in novels, films, magazines, even in popular songs. Images of this small riverside district squeezed among the London Docks were shaped by two authors in particular: Sax Rohmer and Thomas Burke. 'Chinatown' was a key theme in Rohmer's early fiction. Three of these appalling novels are centred on the character Fu Manchu, an evil Chinese genius plotting world domination – often from some kind of secret headquarters around Limehouse.¹ Several other Rohmer novels published between 1915 and 1920 dealt with drug smuggling and the dangerous oriental presence in the London docks.² A 1916 collection of his short stories was titled *Tales of Chinatown*. Others jumped on the Fu Manchu bandwagon. Edgar Wallace's novel *The Yellow Snake* published in 1926 had its Fu Manchu character Fing Su and an underground Chinese network in London. In Agatha Christie's *The Big Four*, published in the following year, Hercule Poirot confronted another diabolical Chinese genius seeking world domination and at one point his assistant, Hastings, was imprisoned in a Limehouse opium den. Throughout the nineteen-twenties and thirties the threat of Fu Manchu and his numerous oriental clones was recycled in comic books, magazine stories, radio shows and several film adaptations and imitations.³

A very different kind of Limehouse Chinatown was manufactured by Thomas Burke, in a number of short stories, collections of verse and newspaper articles during the same years.⁴ Here there were no evil oriental geniuses, international conspiracies or clumsy pastiches of Sherlock Holmes. Burke's Chinatown stories – fiction and journalism – owed much to Jack London. Their tough boozy narrators revealed the sordid and dangerous spaces of the East End to a nervous suburban readership. They were stories about the interaction between working-class English men and women and their Chinese neighbours. They happened in little corner cafes, in the backrooms of terraced houses, in corner shops and public-houses, and they involved petty crime, sex and much violence.

Burke's writings on Chinatown did not have quite the international currency of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu, but they were best-sellers. And they too found a ready market in the United States and were

picked up by Hollywood. One story from *Limehouse Nights*, 'The Chink and the Child', was made into the film *Broken Blossoms* by D. W. Griffiths in 1919. And this and some other stories from *Limehouse Nights* were in turn republished in 1920 with the title *Broken Blossoms*. Griffiths's film of Burke's story is evoked in 'Limehouse Blues', a jazz number from the early 1920s which became a standard in the repertoire of many jazz musicians.⁵ With added lyrics by Douglas Furber, it was turned into a hit record by Gertrude Lawrence in 1931. A few years later *Limehouse Blues* was the title of a Hollywood movie set in the London docks. Starring George Raft and Anna May Wong, this 1934 film played with a fairly conventional cast of stereotypes – the erotic and dangerous Chinese *femme fatale*, the scheming half-Chinese café-owner and drug-smuggler in Limehouse, the innocent English girl and the manly square-jawed English hero. There was an English remake of *Broken Blossoms* in 1936 and there were other films in these years in which Limehouse and Chinatown played a strategic role – *Twinkletoes* (1926) and *Piccadilly* (1929) for instance.

In a very different register, George Formby had his first record success in 1932 with 'Chinese Laundry Blues', recorded with the famous Jack Hylton Orchestra. It was a comical song about a lovesick Mr Wu in his Limehouse laundry. 'Oh Mr Wu,/what shall I do,/I'm feeling kind of Limehouse Chinese Laundry Blues'. It quickly sold 100,000 copies and was included in his first film, 'Boots Boots', released in 1934. There were a series of other George Formby songs about Mr Wu in Limehouse, including 'The Wedding of Mr Wu' (1933) and 'Mr Wu's a Window Cleaner Now' (1939).⁶

A series of best-selling novels and short stories, several English and American movies, American comic books, radio programmes, a classic jazz number and two very different hit records brought into international currency images of a Chinese underworld set in a dark, foggy, dockside district of East London called Limehouse.

* * *

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Limehouse and the whole riverside district of East London, stretching along the Thames from the Tower to Limehouse and inland north up to the Commercial Road, was a notorious slum area. Its streets of little terraced houses were squeezed among canals and railway-lines, timber-yards and sawmills, lead-works and coal-yards, dry docks, ship-repair-yards, factories and workshops producing paint, varnish, tar, chemicals, rubber, metal casks and gas mantles. There was overcrowding, along with low and irregular wages, foul air and bad sanitation, among the highest levels of child mortality and the highest levels of poverty in London.

What made Limehouse and its riverside neighbours distinctive was their maritime connection. This was the most cosmopolitan district of the most cosmopolitan city in Britain. Since Victorian times dozens of cheap



Fig. 1. 'A Chinese Shop (Limehouse)', illustration for 'Oriental London', by Count E. Armfelt, in *Living London*, ed. George R. Sims, vol. 1, 1901, p. 82.

lodging-houses and brothels, public-houses, beer-shops and dance-halls had catered for, and often ruthlessly exploited, a floating population of sailors with little English and too much money in their pockets:

Up and down Ratcliffe-highway do the sailors of every country under heaven stroll – Greeks and Scythians, bond and free. Uncle Tom's numerous progeny are there – Lascars, Chinese, bold Britons, swarthy Italians, sharp Yankees, fair-haired Saxons, and adventurous Danes – men who worship a hundred gods, and men who worship none.⁷

But this apparent chaos was underpinned by a network of small communities for sailors from different parts of the globe. Charles Dickens



Fig. 2. 'A Chinese Shop', from *Wonderful London* 22, 18 Jan. 1927, p. 1,013.

the Younger in 1879 noted how the cafes, pubs, beer-shops, boarding-houses and dance-halls along the old Ratcliffe Highway were 'each, for the most part, devoted almost exclusively to the accommodation of a single nationality'.⁸ Thus the *Rose and Crown* at the Wapping end of the Highway was mostly used by Spanish and Maltese sailors. There were other places largely catering for Germans, or Swedes, or Greeks or Italians. There was even a music-hall, *The Bell*, which provided entertainment 'for the edification of Quashie and Sambo, whose shining ebony faces stand jovially out even against the grimy blackness of the walls'. For Dickens, European and black sailors were to be found, separate but at least visible, on the open streets of Shadwell. The Chinese, by contrast, occupy a more sinister kind of space:

Hard by Quashie's music-hall is a narrow passage, dull and empty, even at the lively hour of 11 p.m., through which, by devious ways, we penetrate at length to a squalid *cul-de-sac*, which seems indeed the very end of all things. Chaos and space are here at present almost at odds which is which, for improvement has at the present moment only reached the point of partial destruction, and some of the dismal dog-holes still swarm with squalid life, while others gape tenantless and ghastly with sightless windows and darksome doorways, waiting their turn to be swept away into the blank open space that yawns by their side. At the bottom of this slough of grimy Despond is the little breathless garret where Johnny the Chinaman swelters night and day curled up on his gruesome couch, carefully toasting in the dim flame of a smoky lamp the tiny lumps of delight which shall transport the opium-smoker for awhile into his paradise.⁹

The Chinese opium den is, Dickens implies, the lowest stratum of the international hierarchy in the streets around the London docks. And it is to be discovered only through 'narrow passages' and 'devious ways'.

This is a remarkable passage, but Dickens was neither the first nor the last to discover 'a little colony of orientals' in Victorian Shadwell and an opium den run by an octogenarian called Yahee.¹⁰ And others too represented this 'little colony' in Bluegate Fields in similarly hostile ways:

Wretched rooms in the most wretched of all the houses, where yellow Chinese sit in the midst of filth upon a heap of rags or on a dislocated couch, the refuse of a neighbouring broker's shop, and stupefy themselves with opium, while their two or three wives quarrel or fight, or cook a modicum of rice and pork over the embers of a wretched fire, or themselves lie in blank indifference on the floor...¹¹

There was no talk of a 'Chinatown' until the mid 1890s, but most of the antipathies and anxieties which went into its construction were already in circulation in this kind of sensationalist journalism. Other Victorian commentators noted Chinese seamen passing through the docks or the occasional individual who had jumped ship and was trying to scrape a living ashore:

Shabby canvas trousers, a loose and ragged blue jacket, high cheek-bones, small sunken eyes, a bare shaven face, and an untidy pigtail – such is Lazarus. He is one of the poor wretched Chinamen who shiver and cower and whine at our street corners, and are mean and dirty, squalid and contemptible, even beyond beggars generally.¹²

Richard Rowe in 1881 encountered a very different Chinaman, wearing traditional dress, obviously educated, lodging with an opium master in Shadwell – 'a slender, taper-fingered, black-moustached, almost obsequiously polite young fellow, who is sitting at a little table reading a Chinese history of the Taiping Rebellion'. He had arrived in London as a ship's cook but had decided to stay and was making some kind of living by selling penny packets of scent in the streets.¹³

Moving beyond anecdotal evidence and sensationalist journalism, precise and accurate figures of a settled Chinese population in Victorian and Edwardian London, or in Britain as a whole, are difficult to find.¹⁴ Official census figures cannot be treated as anything more than the roughest of estimates. Categories defining Chinese were always uncertain and shifted between censuses. In particular, there was a problem in categorizing nationality, as opposed to the fairly simple question of place of birth. Place of birth is not the same as ethnic or national identity. Around two-thirds of those counted in the 1881 census as living in London and born in China were in fact the children of British merchants, missionaries or soldiers. Two examples: William Chalmers, a Scotsman and an India merchant, lived on Royal Crescent with his wife and four

Table 1. Chinese in London, 1881–1931

	National	London	Limehouse
1881	224	109	70
1891	767	302	82
1901	387	120	55
1911	1,120	247	101
1921	2,419	711	337
1931	1,934	1,194	167

Data collated from the decennial census reports.

children – one of them born in London, the other three in China; the two adult children of widower William Brown, a retired merchant, living with him in Sussex Square in Paddington, had both been born in China, in the 1850s. There were a number of such British families – retired commercial men or missionaries – living in London in 1881, with children born during a temporary residence in China.¹⁵ Distinctions between those born in China who were British subjects, those born in China and who were naturalized British subjects, and those who were of alien or unstated nationality were unstable in successive censuses.¹⁶

Conversely, Chinese people born in Malaysia, British Guiana or elsewhere would not be categorized in the census as Chinese. Nor would the children of one or even of two Chinese parents born in London. Again, two examples drawn from the 1881 census returns: John Acca and his English-born wife lived over a shop in Great Peter Street, Westminster, with their six children. And William Achong and his English-born wife (and three children) had a laundry in Fulham. Is this the first Chinese laundry in London? Here were nine children with Chinese fathers and English mothers who were invisible in the census as far as their Chinese origins went. Their place of birth was, of course, London.¹⁷

A further set of complications: how accurate could census figures be when the evidence was provided by householders whose English was usually very limited and who were deeply suspicious of any enquiries by the agents of the British state? Journalistic forays and police investigations were consistently met by deep suspicion, unwillingness to communicate information and apparent incomprehension. There were certainly Chinese sailors living on shore who were in hiding and who would clearly make it their business, aided and abetted by others, *not* to be counted in the census. The Chinese lodging-house keepers in Limehouse were frequently prosecuted for accommodating more than the maximum numbers they were legally permitted. They too are unlikely to have provided accurate information to the authorities.

Census data, despite its limitations, can be used to explore both local presence and long-term trends. Between 1881 and 1931 (see Table 1) census figures suggest first, a slow and uneven increase of the Chinese in

London, rising to 1,194 by 1931.¹⁸ Second, they show that the Chinese population was extremely small throughout this period. By comparison with European immigrants the Chinese presence in Britain was negligible. The Chinese before the First World War numbered half of one per cent of the foreign-born population of Britain. In the 1920s and 1930s they constituted just over one per cent. Compare the 1,194 Chinese aliens in Greater London in 1931, for instance, with over 25,000 Poles, nearly 18,000 Russians, 11,000 Italians, and over 9,000 French and Germans. Within London there was a marked concentration of Chinese in Limehouse. Around forty per cent of the Chinese counted in the pre-1914 censuses of London were in and around a couple of Limehouse streets. In the 1921 census the highest concentration was still in Limehouse, which is inconveniently and arbitrarily split down the middle between the borough of Poplar (221) and the borough of Stepney (116). These 337 Chinese made up forty-seven per cent of the London total of those born in China and of alien or unstated nationality. By contrast, Chinese were absent from other working-class and industrial districts, such as Bethnal Green and Shoreditch in the East End or Deptford, Southwark and Bermondsey along the southern bank of the river. However, by the nineteen-twenties there were significant numbers in several core West End boroughs – Westminster (75), St Pancras (65), St. Marylebone (38), together adding up to 25% of the Chinese in London. They were also settled in smaller numbers in such suburbs as Hampstead (31), Kensington (22), and Wandsworth (18).

The 1931 census figures indicate that the movement of the Chinese to the West End and the suburbs was accelerating. The Chinese-born population of Stepney and Poplar had apparently fallen from 337 to 167 – now less than fifteen per cent of the London total. By the early 1930s the largest settlement of the Chinese was in the West End: Kensington (135), Westminster (115), St Pancras (93), Paddington (75), Holborn (68). There were also sizeable clusters further out in Wandsworth (82), Hampstead (81), Hendon (44) and Ealing (34).

The Rector of St Anne's, Limehouse was probably not too far out in 1930 when he said of the resident Chinese population around Limehouse that 'their invasion' began in the 1880s, reached its height during the Great War and had since declined. They currently numbered, he thought, about 300, sometimes increased temporarily by Chinese crews.¹⁹ Other sources indicate a similar kind of trajectory, though suggesting a slightly later peak in the late 1920s. If, for instance, we count the number of Limehouse businesses with a Chinese name listed in the various Directories of the period – admittedly a blunt instrument – we find steady growth until the early 1930s (see Table 2). In the 1890s we find no Chinese businesses in Pennyfields; Limehouse Causeway had only a couple of tobacconists and a boarding-house. By 1911 there were at least nine Chinese businesses around Limehouse – including several tobacconists and lodging-houses. The post-war years saw a rapid increase. By 1919 there were fourteen

Table 2. Chinese businesses in Limehouse, 1894–1951

	1894	1899	1906	1911	1919	1923	1926	1928
Total	3	2	1	9	14	18	16	18
Pennyfields	0	0	0	4	8	10	9	9
Limehouse Causeway	3	2	1	5	6	8	7	9
	1930	1932	1934	1937	1940	1943	1951	
Total	24	26	26	17	11	9	8	
Pennyfields	12	12	13	8	8	8	6	
Limehouse Causeway	12	14	13	9	3	1	2	

Data collated from directories, 1894–1951.

Chinese businesses – grocers, tobacconists, a boot-maker, a couple of restaurants. These businesses peaked at twenty-six in the early 1930s. Numbers began to fall away after 1932.

We can track here the development of some kind of émigré Chinese community. Its cafes, shops and lodging-houses were places to meet and exchange news and gossip. Shops served as post-offices where letters could be left and collected and banks where money could be left in safe keeping. There was no local Chinese newspaper but notice-sheets of news from China were sometimes pasted on a wall in Pennyfields. There was an Oi T'ung Association set up in 1907 and the Chung Sam Workers Club founded in the early 1920s – both providing support to Chinese seamen and both politically aligned with the Kuomintang. Its existence was short-lived, however. In 1934 Limehouse Causeway was widened and a maze of alleys and side streets, including several occupied by Chinese businesses and lodging-houses, were demolished. But the primary causes of the long-term decline of the Chinese community in the area were to do with the port.

We need to focus more closely on population figures. The Chinese population of Limehouse according to the 1881 census numbered seventy men. But, if we examine individual household returns we find that the permanent Chinese settlement apparently consisted of two shops and a boarding-house close together, at numbers 11, 12 and 14 Limehouse Causeway. Ho Pown and Chin Chang were partners in a grocery shop at number 12 with a Chinese servant and two Chinese visitors. Next door there was a Chinese clothier with six boarders, all of them Chinese mariners. Across the road at number 11 Ohn Sing ran a provisions store with a Chinese servant and two boarders, both Chinese seamen. The rest of the Chinese counted in the census were seamen temporarily ashore in London. Not far away from Limehouse Causeway was the Strangers' Home on the north side of West India Dock Road which was providing temporary accommodation for eleven Chinese seamen. Another three were lodged at a boarding-house a few hundred yards to the west on St George's Street. No less than thirty-one Chinese were on board three ships moored in the

docks on census day. And finally, two Chinese seamen – a ship's carpenter and a ship's steward – were temporarily lodged in the prison upstairs in Limehouse police station.²⁰ In other words, a Chinese population of seventy turns into a permanent population of half a dozen, perhaps ten at most.

Careful scrutiny of individual household returns for the census of 1901 seems to indicate that 'Chinatown' was even less substantial.²¹ Limehouse was a more cosmopolitan district than it had been twenty years earlier, with Swedish, Danish, German, Italian and Russian households crowded into its narrow streets. There were also a number of common-lodging-houses packed with sailors and transients of all nations. There were only three Chinese households on Limehouse Causeway. At number 6 lived Lam Hing Sowe, a shop assistant, and two Chinese boarders. At number 21 there was Wang Shing, a thirty-four year-old shopkeeper and dealer in Chinese goods with seven boarders, all Chinese sailors. And finally at number 14 Charles King, a thirty-eight year-old shopkeeper born in China lived with his English-born wife and child, plus five Chinese sailors, a Russian widow, her son, a boot-maker, and her two grandsons, born in London. No other Chinese inhabitants were recorded in the 1901 census for the streets around Limehouse, not even for Pennyfields. The Chinese community in the London docks in 1901 seems to have consisted of two Chinese shops and three resident Chinese men, plus the English wife and child of one of them and a number of sailors temporarily ashore.

1901 is the last census for which individual household returns can be examined. After this date we have access only to the general census reports. These indicate that there were 247 Chinese men and women in London in 1911, about 100 of them around Limehouse. Were many of these transient seamen too? Around fifty per cent of Chinese men counted in the national census for 1911 were listed as merchant seamen. And other evidence suggests a preponderance of seamen among the London Chinese. According to an LCC document of the following year, 'Licensing of Seamen's Lodging-houses', there were four licensed Chinese seamen's lodging-houses in Pennyfields, another on Limehouse Causeway and a further four on West India Dock Road. By 1914 there were several more in these locations. Some of these were of a considerable size and begin to explain how the numbers of Chinese in Limehouse apparently swelled.²² Thus King's lodging-house at 38 Pennyfields could accommodate forty-three and others could squeeze in between ten and twenty.²³ In other words, the census figures for the Chinese population in Limehouse continued to include significant numbers of seamen merely passing through the port. The numbers making up a stable Chinese community were much lower, to be numbered in dozens rather than hundreds, though we need to add their English wives and children of course. We will return to the question of numbers later.

Chinatown, an 1895 article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* accurately stated, was no more than a single street of shops and boarding-houses: 'It exists by and for the Chinese firemen, seamen, stewards, cooks, and carpenters who serve on board the steamers plying between China and the port of London'.²⁴ This remained the case for the next fifty years. It was this dependence which generated the rapid growth of Chinese businesses in Limehouse during the First World War, continuing throughout the 1920s. And it was this dependence which brought about their decline in the 1930s. Chung Chu, who kept a café on Limehouse Causeway, said in 1931 that the slump in shipping entering the London Docks was killing the Chinese population. There were now about a hundred families living in the area but they were drifting away and there was no future for the Anglo-Chinese children: 'the boys find work hard to get, and the girls drift about the streets ostracised by white girls of their own age. They, and not the white wives, are the broken blossoms'.²⁵ A public appeal for funds for the 'Chung Hwa School' on Pennyfields in 1933 confirmed this picture of an isolated and declining Chinese minority:

In the East End of London there are some hundreds of children with Chinese fathers and British mothers. These children (many of them born during the war-years, and therefore of school leaving age) are facing difficulties unrealised by most people. The district is cut off from most of the rest of London in a way which does not happen in a town of smaller size. Further, the depression has been more keenly felt in this, the dock area of London.

Most of the Chinese fathers were seamen, cooks, and so on, 'too poor to give them the 'initial push' on the road of life'.²⁶ The school, along with much else in Limehouse, was destroyed in the Blitz. There were still some Chinese sailors entering the port during the Second World War and some Chinese lodging-houses and businesses remained open. Others however were closed and many Chinese were evacuated to the relative safety of the West End or the suburbs. In 1951 Peter Fryer for the *Daily Worker* found a few cafes and laundries, some Chinese seamen, and a fairly impoverished population of fifty resident families: perhaps a quarter, he thought, of what it had been before the Blitz.²⁷

It is, of course, from the 1950s that a very different kind of Chinatown began to be developed in the West End of London around Gerrard Street. In the early 1960s Ng Kwee Choo interviewed several workers who had jumped ship in the 1920s and '30s and found jobs ashore. But they looked with some resentment on new generations of post-war Chinese immigrants in the West End, mostly from Hong Kong. The older generation were generally from mainland China, especially Kwangtung, and looked back with some nostalgia to the inter-war years when the London Chinese were still a small and close-knit community.²⁸

A final but crucial point: the streets that are always specified as Chinatown – Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway – were never at any time

exclusively Chinese. Visitors were often struck by the obvious Chinese presence. As George Sims reported in 1905:

There is no mistake about the Chinese element. The Chinese names are up over the doors of the little shops, and as we peer inside them we see the unmistakable Celestial behind the counter and Chinese inscriptions on the walls.²⁹

The visible strangeness of Chinese shops and signs and faces was similarly commented on by many visitors in the 1920s and 30s. There was, however, no territorially distinct and ethnically homogenous Chinatown in Limehouse. From the 1890s through to the 1950s the Chinese were a small minority in a mixed community of tradesmen, casual labourers and transient sailors. Chinese boarding-houses and shops and cafes existed side by side with English working-class families, pubs, shops and tradesmen and a multi-national population catering for sailors of a hundred different nations.

To summarize: in one way the census figures consistently overemphasize the numbers of Chinese living around Limehouse by including seamen temporarily ashore. At the same time, there were always some Chinese seamen with English wives and children around Limehouse who were overseas at the time of the census. Contemporary estimates vary widely, as we have seen. For what it is worth, I trust Chung Chu, the local Chinese restaurant owner, who in 1931 said there were around a hundred Chinese families in Limehouse.³⁰ This is confirmed by a local policeman, with twenty years experience in the district, who told an inquest in 1934 that there were no more than 100 Chinese men living in the area.³¹ A sympathetic correspondent to *The Times* in the same year similarly gave a figure of around 100 Chinese in Limehouse.³² And in 1935 a survey cited by Michael Banton gave a figure of 100 Chinese in Limehouse, adding that 'they have decreased in numbers very considerably'.³³ The 1931 census figure of 167 would thus include fifty or sixty transient seamen. But the Chung Hwa School appeal in 1935 mentioned 'some hundreds of children with Chinese fathers and British mothers'.³⁴ Taking this into account and adding the unknown numbers of wives and children, the real figure for the Chinese community is probably closer to the Rector's 1930 estimate of about 300, with some fluctuations of numbers of seamen. The figure was probably higher during the 1920s with as many as perhaps 200 or more Chinese residents at various points, numbers of them, as we have seen from the 1931 census, moving into other parts of London.

* * *

Whatever the precise numbers, the question remains: how did these few riverside streets, with their small Chinese settlement, become such a focus of national attention? How did drab Limehouse become exotic 'Chinatown', one of the most exciting and dangerous 'places' in Britain by the 1920s?

First, it inherited something of the dangerous mystique of the opium den. In the opening scene of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Dickens created the archetypal image of the dockside opium den, though he was utilizing accounts already in circulation as well as his own experience in a notorious den in Shadwell.³⁵ The opium den came to represent in a powerful and endlessly-repeated image, a strange fusion of poverty, filth and pleasure – at once attractive and repellent. By the 1890s it had lost none of its ambiguities. And new versions of the opium den appeared – for instance, in a Sherlock Holmes story in the *Strand Magazine* and in Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*, both published in 1891.³⁶

By the 1890s the dangers and the delights of opium were no longer located somewhere around Shadwell and the Ratcliffe Highway. They began to be associated with the London Docks a mile or so to the East, where both Wilde and Holmes had located their opium dens. Increasingly opium was linked to a specific social and cultural space within the docks – the Chinese settlement in Limehouse. One of the contributors to Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* seemed to suggest that the old-fashioned opium den catering for English visitors had gone and was replaced by dens around Limehouse for Chinese seamen.³⁷ A well-informed article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1895 hammered home the link in its very title: 'Chinese London and its opium dens'.³⁸

A variety of circumstances began to make the association of opium, the docks and the Chinese minority a much more potent image. A 1907 newspaper article headed 'Opium Smoking and 'East End Dens' warned that there were now at least six places where opium smoking occurred, all in the Chinese district of the docks. This was a dangerous and unsavoury area, especially for those more accustomed to the West End: 'But the opium victim, intent on satisfying his desire, rubs shoulders with criminals and desperadoes of the worst type, careless of the risk he may be running'.³⁹ Thus opium smoking, among the Chinese of Limehouse, was no longer a youthful adventure. Now it was corroding the moral backbone of sections of the middle classes. The article went on to signal another dimension of the opium problem, one which was to figure prominently in the fictions of Sax Rohmer and in sections of the press after 1918. The patrons of one Chinese restaurant which provided opium in luxuriously-furnished upstairs rooms included 'Society women seeking a new sensation'.⁴⁰

This kind of press attention and the linkage of Limehouse, Chinese immigrants and opium with moral danger and English women was recurrent in pre-war years. A particularly spectacular instance was a large double-page illustration in the *Illustrated London News* in 1909 under the capitalized headline: 'The Life of Lower London 1: A Scene that Should be Impossible in the World's Greatest City'. Sketched on the spot by the paper's special artist, Cyrus Cuneo, it represented a dark backroom in which Chinese men crowded around a table gambling for heaps of coins or sat around smoking opium. The text at the foot of the page informed the reader: 'There are

a number of Chinese opium-dens and gambling-hells in the East End, and they are frequented chiefly by members of the Asiatic crews of ships discharging cargo in the East and West India Docks'. Drama was heightened by further information that once discovered Cuneo was ejected from this den and barred from entry into others in the district.⁴¹

Press attention reached a crescendo in the immediate post-war years. Two scandals brought a national spotlight on 'Chinatown' in the autumn of 1918. First, in August a prosperous shipping merchant died of an opium overdose in the West End flat of his mistress. The heavily-publicized inquest heard that on the night of his death he had visited Chinatown and that only a few days before a Chinamen had visited him.⁴² More spectacularly, Billie Carleton was found dead in her Savoy Hotel suite the morning after her starring role at the great Victory celebration at the Albert Hall on 28 November. The inquest decided that she had died of cocaine poisoning and again connections to Chinatown were made.⁴³

The press had a field-day with sensationalist stories derived as much from the fictions of Sax Rohmer as from any substantial evidence. Rohmer himself quickly cashed in, turning the Carleton case into a novel: *Dope: a Story of Chinatown and the Drug Traffic*. Full-blown paranoia was whipped up by the *Daily Express*. One article in October 1920 screamed in large headlines: 'Yellow Peril in London', 'Vast Syndicate of Vice with its Criminal Master', 'Women and Child Victims'. 'A Chinese syndicate, backed by millions of money and powerful, if mysterious, influences is at work in the East End of London.'⁴⁴ As fast as the London police captured its Chinese agents and the magistrates imprisoned and deported them, new ones appeared. Stories were everywhere of a Chinese 'Moriarty' who never strayed from the back streets of Limehouse but knew everything that passed in the wider world and exerted immense authority on his myriad of subordinates. 'In the underworld his name is uttered only with that respect due to a master.' And white women, suborned by the Chinese in ways left to the reader's imagination, were the particular victims of this international drugs and gambling syndicate:

White Englishwomen seem to exert a remarkable fascination for them.

But the white women who fall into the clutches of the 'yellows' are not Londoners, but mainly come from provincial inland towns. They are without exception young and pretty, but in what manner they are attracted to the Chinese quarter in of London has not been unravelled.⁴⁵

Not be outdone *Evening News* headlines in the same week shrieked: 'The Lure of the Yellow Men', 'English Girls' "Moral Suicide"'. It recounted stories of young and attractive English girls drawn into a world of drug addiction, gambling and sexual abuse. Even children were not spared: 'The police have acquaintance with cases where young children have fallen victims to the lure and the lust of the coloured races'.⁴⁶ We are in the ideological territory here of Burke's fiction and Griffiths's film *Broken Blossoms*.

Smuggled into the London docks in the bilges and engine-rooms of cargo-ships or, in smaller quantities, hidden in the clothing of Chinese seamen, opium found its way into the hands of Limehouse shopkeepers or other agents in the docks. The Chinese dealer cultivated local English 'girls':

He . . . went into the streets, selected some of the prettiest girls he could find, and lavished luxury on them. For their rags and penury he gave them fine clothes and wealth, and after about four months with him they were sent forth into the West-end to spread the cult.⁴⁷

They in turn cultivated 'the wealthier kind of profligate' in clubs around Leicester Square, introducing them to the opium pipe. These subsequently converted their friends. Thus addiction to the drug spread into the city via the Chinese in Limehouse and the English women they had seduced.

Moral outrage was reinforced by male envy:

The existence in the East-end of London alone of hundreds of these women living on food many an Englishman cannot buy, taking the best seats at the theatres, and living in well-appointed homes in the West-end, proves the magnitude of the traffic.⁴⁸

Dozens of newspaper and magazine articles in 1919, 1920 and 1921 reinforced these supposed connections between Chinese seamen, Limehouse shopkeepers, suborned white girls and the West End demi-monde. The sensationalism that followed the death of Billie Carleton had hardly died down when the death of another young white woman in April 1922 again brought the spotlight on to an embattled Chinatown. A twenty-two year-old West end night-club dancer, Freda Kempton, was found dead of cocaine poisoning. A Chinese man, Brilliant Chang was implicated but managed to avoid arrest on this occasion.⁴⁹

Once more the tiny population of Chinese in London attracted immense and hostile press attention. Chang was a partner in a fashionable restaurant on Regent Street where several of the staff were caught in possession of drugs during 1922 and '23. By the end of 1923 he had moved his base to Limehouse Causeway where he was watched by the police and arrested and questioned on several occasions. Finally in 1924, on the basis of dubious evidence, he was sentenced to fourteen months in prison followed by deportation. 'The yellow king of the 'dope runners' has been caught at last in the net of British justice', the *Daily Express* announced, representing Chang as the spider at the centre of an international web of mostly female agents.⁵⁰ And the Recorder of London told Chang: 'It is you and men like you who are corrupting the womanhood of this country'.⁵¹

* * *

So much for the national press and the moral guardians of the state. What about the attitudes of the wider population, and especially the

working-class population of the London docks? There was clearly some local resistance to the growing Chinese presence in the streets of Limehouse before 1914. One correspondent to the *East End News* in 1908 grumbled about the noisy Chinese fireworks, about the young Chinese men hanging around the streets cracking nuts and spitting on the pavements, about their association with young white women and about the outbursts of violence among them.

It is high time something was done to stop the influx of these people who are a menace to clean respectable inhabitants. They now seem to be scattering themselves all over Limehouse and elsewhere.⁵²

A few months later he (or she) renewed these complaints and again warned about the creation of a Chinese enclave in Limehouse: 'It seems we are drawing to a time when these foreigners will take absolute command of this locality.'⁵³ Another correspondent wrote in support a few days later.⁵⁴

Violence within the Chinese minority in Limehouse attracted hostile press attention. There were occasional but spectacular street battles, often to do with gambling, leaving some in hospital and others in police custody, though they rarely touched anyone outside the Chinese minority. Sharper and more sustained antipathies were generated among sections of the local population around two very material issues: employment and housing. These were whipped up by political interests, by trades unions and by the press. In October 1900 a correspondent wrote to *The Times* from the Junior Constitutional Club warning about the dangers of Chinese immigration: 'It will doubtless be startling to the public when the fact is known that colonies of Chinese are silently forming and working in our very midst'. Recent court cases had revealed over forty Chinese men working at a laundry off Tottenham Court Road and there were Chinese laundries in other parts of London. His warning about this 'industrial invasion' was especially directed at trades unionists and he noted that the USA and 'our colonies' had taken measures to protect themselves.⁵⁵

Events in South Africa focused national attention on the question of cheap migrant labour from China. During 1904 some 20,000 Chinese labourers were imported into the South African gold mines to offset the shortage of labour there. This became a major issue in the 1905 General Election when the Liberal opposition moved a vote of censure against Balfour's Tory government because of the slave-like conditions in which the Chinese were living and working. The memory of 'Balfour's Blunder' and 'Chinese Slavery' was kept alive by the Liberal Government, as a confirmation of its Gladstonian credentials. Voices of the Labour left might occasionally denounce exploitation of natives in the Empire but this rhetoric did not quite connect with the day-to-day fears of British trade unionists about the importation of cheap labour. And others kept alive these memories of Chinese slave labour as a different kind of warning. As one

Table 3. Occupations of Chinese men, England and Wales, 1911

	Number	% of occupied Chinese males
Merchant navy	480	49%
Laundry	348	36%
Retail	62	6%
Cooks, waiters, etc.	35	4%

Source: Census 1911, Table 79, pp. 377–89.

correspondent to the *East End News* put it in 1908, in a startling non sequitur:

We cried aloud in England when the Chinaman was in South Africa. Why should we say nothing when they on our own shores seem to be prospering better than our own?⁵⁶

In fact, the tiny Chinese minority provided little competition in the English or the London labour market.

Four areas of work occupied 95% of Chinese men in England and Wales. In the kinds of ordinary trades found in every city of the time – transport, for instance, or the building trades – the Chinese migrant was absent.

However, as Table 3 indicates, there was one area of the labour market in which the Chinese did compete with the English working class: the merchant navy. Tensions exploded in the London Docks in 1908 when British seamen repeatedly stopped Chinese crews from signing on at the Board of Trade offices at East India Dock Road, a few hundred yards from the streets of ‘Chinatown’. There were violent clashes and police had to escort the Chinese safely home. Questions were asked in the Commons and Winston Churchill gave assurances of government concern about the use of Chinese labour on British merchant ships.⁵⁷ During the transport worker’s strikes in Cardiff in July 1911 there were anti-Chinese riots during which all thirty-three Chinese laundries in the town were destroyed. Nothing on this scale occurred in London but there was continuing tension and sporadic violence. This blew up into something more serious in the summer of 1916. The Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union organized protest meetings around Limehouse and Poplar against the increasing use of Chinese labour on British ships. There were wild accusations, voiced by union leaders and even by their lawyers in court, that some of these Chinese seamen were spying for the Germans. Several of these protest meetings spilled over into demonstrations which turned violent. Windows of Chinese shops and houses in Limehouse were broken, though nobody was hurt. One local inhabitant protested that the demonstrators represented neither the people of the district nor unemployed seamen. He (or she) had watched the crowd on one occasion and found British merchant seamen conspicuous by their

absence: 'they consisted of a few men wearing munition badges (therefore not out of work), gangs of boys and lads of the hooligan class, a few girls, and a few Scandinavians – probably amused spectators'.⁵⁸

Union pressure continued. At the Trades Union Congress in Birmingham in September 1916, seamen's representatives complained that in Liverpool alone there were 4,000 Chinese living in lodging-houses which no Englishmen would be allowed by law to maintain. One speaker claimed to have witnessed opium smoking and gambling. Most shocking of all, he had seen English girls of fourteen going into Chinese lodging-houses at two and three in the morning – though what he was doing himself in such a dubious place at such an hour and how he knew the ages of the girls he did not explain. A motion was passed expressing alarm at the increased use of Chinese labour on ships and calling on the government to repatriate all who could not prove that they were British citizens.⁵⁹ In March 1917 there was further violence in Limehouse but this time among Chinese seamen themselves. There were serious injuries and at least twenty arrests during several days of clashes between those who were members of the union and those who were not.⁶⁰

In May and June 1919 anti-Chinese rioting again broke out around Limehouse. Rumours were rife that Chinese seamen were signing on for much less than British sailors would accept. An angry crowd of unemployed British seamen gathered outside the Board of Trade Offices on East India Dock Road and later there were attacks on individual Chinese and damage to property before a strong police presence restored an uneasy order.

In the background of these outbreaks of antagonism to Chinese labour during the Great War was the existence of the Chinese Labour Corps. By the beginning of 1916 there was a desperate shortage of soldiers at the front and in supplies. There was also a shortage of manpower on the home front and especially in the docks. In May 1916 the French initiated the use of imported Chinese labour and the British government followed. The French state deployed Chinese labourers across the economy. They worked in munitions and chemical factories, arsenals, ports, coal-mines, steel-works and transport. The British Government imported directly from China around 95,000 labourers between 1916 and 1918. They were not used in direct front-line combat, though around 2,000 of them were killed. But nor were they used, with very few exceptions, on the Home Front either. They played a key role in supporting front-line troops – building huts, repairing roads and railways, digging trenches, filling sandbags, and so on.⁶¹ The War Office had originally discussed how large numbers of Chinese labourers might be deployed in Britain to release young men for military duties. Their restriction to mostly unskilled tasks behind the front lines in France was ascribed by the Webbs, of course, to lobbying behind the scenes:

It was... only the determined private resistance of the Trade Unionist leaders of the Labour Party that compelled the Government to abandon

its project of introducing several hundred thousand Chinese labourers into Great Britain.⁶²

Grass-roots trade union hostility and the traditional resort of the powerless to riot on the streets of Limehouse was likely to have been as significant an influence on government policy on this issue.⁶³ Needless to say the important role of these Chinese labourers in the war effort did not earn them the right to emigrate to Britain after the Armistice. Between December 1918 and September 1920 they were all repatriated.

Antagonism in the London docks to the Chinese as cheap labour was exacerbated by conflicts over housing. There was an acute housing shortage in the area. In June 1919 a crowd attacked a house in Poplar into which two Chinese men and their English wives were moving. There were rumours that a demobilized British soldier had been refused as a tenant. The wives were besieged in the house and had to be rescued by the police. The house was then set on fire and furniture destroyed.⁶⁴ Over several days following there were angry crowds in the area, attacks on a nearby Chinese laundry and threats to destroy the whole Chinese quarter, as well as sporadic attacks on black seamen.⁶⁵ Again hostility to the Chinese persisted. Under the headline, 'London's Expanding Chinatown', an article in the *Daily News* in 1920 said that the expansion of the Chinese population beyond its Limehouse base was provoking local hostility because of the housing shortage.⁶⁶ In 1924 an investigation found the housing situation in the area critical. The author himself, for an experiment, had tried to procure a room, without success. The presence of immigrants was a bone of contention. As Phelps put it: 'The foreigners accused, in most of the tales of woe I have heard, are either Chinese or Jews'.⁶⁷

The Star summarized the sources of anti-Chinese resentment at the end of the war:

As Englishmen joined the Army, Chinese came in to replace them in many instances in the factories and in the kitchens of hotels and restaurants. The Chinaman gave up the sea for a shore job, earned good money and then he and his compatriots overflowed from his original quarter, forming alliances in some cases with white women.⁶⁸

In other words, while courageous young Englishmen went off to fight for King and Country, these Chinese immigrants took their jobs and their homes, earned good wages and seduced their women.

Resentments were fuelled by consistent exaggerations of the size of the Chinese population. At a well-publicized court case in May 1916 a local police superintendent stated that there were thousands of Chinese living in Limehouse and a lawyer for the seamen's union claimed a few weeks later that 'the Chinese population had grown from 1,000 to 8,000, and a large number of British seamen were pushed out by them'.⁶⁹ At the London Sessions in 1921 Sir Ernest Wild said that numbers of Chinese in Limehouse

had reached 4,000 until police action had led to its rapid reduction to about 300.⁷⁰ According to a journalist in 1926, the Chinese population of Limehouse had dropped in the previous year from 2,000 to around 1,000, mostly as a result of a police crackdown.⁷¹ Other newspapers produced equally ludicrous figures. One in 1926 claimed that before the war Limehouse had had a Chinese population of 2,500 – clearly a wild overestimate.⁷² As the Chinese novelist Lao She wearily commented in 1929:

If there were twenty Chinese living in Chinatown, their accounts would say five thousand; moreover every one of these five thousand yellow devils would certainly smoke opium, smuggle arms, murder people then stuff the corpses under beds, and rape women regardless of age...⁷³

There is much more to be said about this – about how the Victorian opium den was transformed into a broader space for the interplay of sexuality, Empire and drugs; about anxieties surrounding inter-racial sex; about some kind of historically-specific crisis of masculinity at the end of the war; and about how these intersected with fears and frustrations about unemployment, low wages and housing shortages in working-class districts like Limehouse and Poplar. This potent ideological mix of fears and resentments was the brew out of which the writings of Sax Rohmer and Thomas Burke emerged and to which they in turn contributed. Fu Manchu and the tales of *Limehouse Nights* were merely the latest instalments of an ideological repertoire which was utilized by journalists, policeman, magistrates and even local people. And much much more needs to be said about the experiences and perceptions of the Chinese population itself.⁷⁴ Enough has been said, however, to begin to explain why a small district in the London docks with a population of a few hundred Chinese, many of them seamen temporarily ashore, should have attracted an inordinate amount of public attention, especially during the Great War and the years immediately after.

* * *

In exploring the ideological construction of Chinatown we are dealing with an imaginary cartography, which projects onto the real cityscape its own shadowy ideological antagonisms and fears. 'Ideology', as Althusser put it, 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.'⁷⁵ And yet a question remains. How was the gap between the imagined Chinatown and the evident and perceived Limehouse negotiated? I want to begin to conclude with a parable about urban imaginaries. One night in the early 1870s, James Greenwood set off to find 'Tiger Bay' in London's East End:

Everybody addicted to the perusal of police reports, as faithfully chronicled by the daily press, has read of Tiger Bay and of the horrors

perpetrated there – of unwary mariners betrayed to that craggy and hideous shore by means of false beacons, and mercilessly wrecked and stripped and plundered – of the sanguinary fights of white men and plug-lipped Malays and ear-ringed Africans, with the tigresses who swarm in the ‘Bay’, giving it a name.

A name – but a local habitation? Wandering lost around the dark foggy streets of Shadwell he asked a passing policeman for directions to Tiger Bay:

‘There ain’t no place of that name hereabout’, said he, ‘you must ha’ been misdirected.’

‘I think you must forget, policeman’, I replied. ‘Unless the newspapers are wrong – which is hardly likely – Tiger Bay is a tolerably well-known place in this district.’

‘Pish! The newspapers!’ returned Mr. Policeman in tones of such profound contempt as naturally grated harshly on my sensibilities, ‘What’s the newspapers? There’s a precious lot appears *in*’em that never appears *out* of’em. Because they call places out of their names it doesn’t follow that I’m to encourage ‘em.’⁷⁶

I’m not sure how much irony Greenwood is intending here. Anyway, with the policeman’s guidance he soon finds what he is looking for – public-houses in which prostitutes (tigresses), and their pimps, are fleecing sailors. However, I’m less interested here in Greenwood or the pubs of Shadwell than in the policeman. He raises some important questions about urban space – about how certain forms of writing, in this case ‘the newspapers’, name and map and invent the city, and in ways which local inhabitants do not necessarily recognize. This placeless place ‘Tiger Bay’ had been written about from at least the 1850s, though by the 1870s it was already fading into memory. And yet it was a place only for a certain kind of readership of newspapers and books. There is, in other words, never a single urban imaginary but always a number of different and contending ones.

Turning back to ‘Chinatown’, in his posthumously-published autobiography Burke recalled, with remarkable insouciance, his writing of *Limehouse Nights*:

At the time I did them I had no knowledge of the Chinese people, and all I knew of Limehouse and the district was what I had automatically observed without aim or purpose during my unguided wanderings in remote London. I had thus been able to write those stories with the peculiar assurance a man has who knows nothing of what he is writing or talking about.⁷⁷

This book had brought him ‘an extraordinary number of letters’, many of them assuming that the stories and the sketches were documentaries based

on his own experience. Some of his readers, taking the persona of these stories as the reality imagined him as ‘a big husky fellow accustomed to knocking about in the tough corners of the world – a sort of Jack London’. ‘They do not of course, bear the slightest relation to my actual life.’⁷⁸ And yet of course, it was Burke himself who created this Jack London persona in various supposedly non-fiction writings that supported his fiction. For instance, in an article published in 1919, he represented himself as someone brought up as a child among the wharves and cranes of the dockside. And as someone who knew intimately the world of the sailors and dockers, including the Chinese and Lascars who were to be found along the waterside pubs and cafes: ‘I am glad I have clicked the chopsticks in Limehouse Causeway with the yellow boys who can talk of Canton and Siam and North Borneo and San Francisco.’⁷⁹ In other articles he similarly represented himself as a tough, boozy denizen of the London docks. Burke then presents his fictions as social documentaries and seems to have persuaded at least some of his readers that they were not fictions at all.⁸⁰

Similarly, despite moving to New York, Sax Rohmer continued to stress that Fu Manchu originated in Chinatown in Limehouse. Two of his own accounts of how he came to conceive of Fu Manchu pinpointed a single moment in a foggy back street in Limehouse in the years shortly before the First World War. Rohmer, a young journalist, had a commission to investigate rumours of the existence of a mysterious Chinese man who was alleged to be the master-mind behind the supply of opium and other drugs through the London docks. In a 1934 radio talk on BBC Rohmer claimed:

I made many friends in the Chinese quarter, with its background of river noises, its frequent fogs, its sordid mystery. I found nothing to inspire romance. Then one night, and appropriately enough it was a foggy night, I saw a tall and very dignified Chinaman alight from a car. He was accompanied by an Arab girl, or she may have been an Egyptian, and as I saw the pair enter a mean-looking house, and as the fog drew a curtain over the scene, I conceived the character of Dr. Fu Manchu.⁸¹

The template for Fu Manchu and the rest of his cosmopolitan retinue long pre-existed Rohmer. ‘She reminded me of an Edmund Dulac illustration for the Arabian Nights’, he said of the Arab girl who accompanied the mysterious Chinese man in that Limehouse back street. And of course, she was precisely that, and an erotic minor character in a thousand popular romances.

Limehouse was transmuted into Chinatown not just in the stories of Rohmer and Burke but also in the supporting documentation which they created as context for those writings. They manufactured authorial persona who were daring and intrepid explorers of an actual Chinatown and whose

stories were fictionalized reports of that actuality. In other words, they shaped the reader's sense of the relationship between the fiction and the world which, supposedly, that fiction was representing. Here, however, we encounter a discrepancy. Why cannot the daring and intrepid reader find this exciting reality in the actual streets of Limehouse?

In the case of Burke, the absence of an exciting Chinatown is largely explained temporally. Its moment has always already passed. A collection of journalistic pieces published in 1919 was full of nostalgic accounts of this world that was lost.⁸² 'Chinatown Revisited' recounted a visit in 1917 after an absence of several years. The streets of Chinatown were a sad disappointment. There was no Chinese tea to be had. Opium was now exorbitantly expensive and hard to find. The Tong feuds had been effectively suppressed by the police. And even the traditional Feast of the Lantern at the Chinese New Year had dropped out of the local calendar. 'The spirit of the commercial and controlled West breathed on us from every side . . . All for the best, no doubt; yet how one missed the bizarre flame and salt of the old Quarter.'⁸³

At the pub on the corner of Pennyfields, he said, 'we found the usual crowd of Chinks and white girls' but it was all very decorous. There is now, he grumbled, no corner of Chinatown where one can take 'the curious visitor thirsting for exotic excitement'. Even the drug world of Limehouse, 'the glamorous shame of Chinatown', had disappeared.

Nothing remains save tradition, which now and then is fanned into life by such a case as the drugged actress. Yet you may still find people who journey fearfully to Limehouse, and spend money in its shops and restaurants, and suffer their self-manufactured excitements while sojourning in its somnolent streets among the respectable sons of Canton.⁸⁴

Ah yes, but Thomas Burke, and now his intelligent reader, know better.

Another common device to connect the evidently drab, impoverished and boring streets of Limehouse with this alternative world, this heterotopia of sex and drugs and violence, was to represent this Chinese world as profoundly hidden.⁸⁵ The way to it is obscure and labyrinthine, and few are likely to find it. This is the central strategy of Rohmer. Chinatown is a distinctive territory. It even has clear borders. One of his stories opens in a pub described as 'only a few hundred yards from the official frontier of Chinatown'.⁸⁶ But if it occupies a specific space, it is also hidden, concealed. A police detective reflects in *Tales of Chinatown*: 'There is a night life in Limehouse, as he had learned, but it is a mole life, a subterranean life, of which no sign appears above ground after a certain hour'. It is a place 'which harbours those strange, hidden resorts the rumour of which has served to create the glamour of Chinatown . . .' In *The Yellow Claw*, a novel of 1915, the Limehouse opium den, the Cave of the Golden Dragon, is underground and occupies the

buried remains of an ancient monastery (hints of the Hell-Fire Club). Its entrance is concealed behind a Chinese business in an obscure back street of Limehouse.

In the story, 'The Key of the Temple of Heaven', Madame de Medici, a beautiful and dangerous Chinese woman, inhabits a 'secret house in Chinatown with its deceptively mean exterior and its gorgeous interior.' Here she indolently stretches on silken cushions on an Egyptian divan under a Persian canopy of cloth-of-gold, surrounded by priceless oriental artifacts. And here, attended by a series of identical Chinese servants, she exerts a dangerous hypnotic power over any man that enters her orbit. But nothing of this interior is visible to the uninitiated visitor to Chinatown. This is close to Rohmer's own narrative of the origins of Fu Manchu in 1957:

As I walked on through the fog I imagined that inside that cheap-looking dwelling, unknown to all but a chosen few, unvisited by the police, were luxurious apartments, Orientally furnished, cushioned and perfumed. I saw a spot of Eastern magnificence, a jewel in the grimy casket of Limehouse.⁸⁷

A variety of writers, attracted to Limehouse for saleable copy in the 1920s, similarly exploited the device of a hidden Chinatown, a concealed oriental underworld. Chinatown, according to Stephen Graham in *London Nights* in 1925, is 'so much over-written, so much suspected'. Walking through its dead, deserted streets in the middle of the night, it is what is *not* there which is more important than what is:

Limehouse Causeway sleeps, Pennyfields sleeps. Pekin Street seems as remote from reality as Pekin. All is shuttered. Lamps on brackets illuminate blank first-floor windows. There is not a shriek, not a scream, not a murmur, not a whisper, not a policeman on the corner, nor a waiting motor. The respectable Chinese sleep with their Whitechapel wives. If they have secrets, they seem to keep them well.⁸⁸

Other writers voiced this sense of something secret concealed behind the walls of these apparently mundane streets. H. V. Morton, fresh from his successes reporting the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun, recounted in one of a series of vignettes of contemporary London for the *Daily Express*, how he slipped out of a West End hotel and within half an hour was in Limehouse, 'enjoying one of London's strangest contrasts'. The writing works to place Limehouse in a very different kind of space, not easily integrated with the 'normal' space of London:

As I walked on through dark streets, it seemed impossible that the restaurant I had left, with its elegant women, its discreet string orchestra, its air of assured comfort and well-being, could exist in the same world with these gloomy avenues, like a slum in hell, through which shivering

lascars shuffled, hugging the shadows, while Chinamen peered with mask faces and sharp eyes from dim doorways.⁸⁹

Morton disclaimed any intention to add to the romance of Limehouse because there was no romance there, only squalor. And yet this squalor, he goes on, does seem to conceal ‘a vicious splendour’:

There is an air of something unrevealed in those narrow streets of shuttered houses, each one of which appears to be hugging its own dreadful little secret. As you go on through them, past hunched figures who give way before you, it seems that, at any moment, you might stumble on the key to the mystery; that you might open a filthy door and find yourself in a palace sweet with joss-sticks, where queer things happen in a mist of smoke.⁹⁰

Limehouse is the most over-rated excitement in London, Morton says in another of his vignettes, and yet when you are actually there at night you experience the atmosphere and can forgive the romances written about it: ‘it is a dramatic theme that just howls for a plot: a stage that cries for a drama...’⁹¹ Again, what is *not* there overshadows what is – the imagined drama turns some mundane streets into an empty stage. And the empty stage always requires a drama.

Or a film. Under the *Evening Standard* headline, ‘Sinister Sensation in Chinatown’, another hack did the conventional walk around Limehouse on a foggy night. He trotted out the usual hackneyed images of dark silent streets and shuttered windows out of which ‘yellow long-eyed faces looked out’ before concluding, presumably tongue in cheek:

It may be, of course, that the Chinese are proud of living in a district which looks so sinister, and do all they can to intensify the atmosphere in the hope that a film producer will come along to buy the place and give them all fat contracts.⁹²

H. M. Tomlinson, who knew the area better than most journalists, remarked in an article of 1926 that anyone wishing to explore at first hand the London docks would find little helpful guidance in the literature on London: ‘He must, for one thing, surrender the alluring prospect of visiting lurid Oriental “dens” in Limehouse and elsewhere. After all, what he should want is the reality, not the romance...’⁹³ And in a book of 1934 he remarked with equal scepticism that East Enders are amused by little tours of Chinatown and its dens from the West End. ‘When is the romantic nature of haunts of that sort to be put with the cases of stuffed birds and the wig-stands?’ The dens of vice of any seaport are, he says, drab and tedious. And yet, he too begins to question his own questioning of the myth of Chinatown:

But I suspect that the truth, or as near to it as a man may get, would be queer enough to attract attention, even in Limehouse as it is.

I wish I knew it. It is difficult to see it behind the doors, and nothing much shows along the pavements.⁹⁴

Again, there is a hidden Chinese world. At the heart of these drab working-class streets there was a different kind of space, by turns dangerous, forbidden, erotic, intoxicating – a heterotopia – but a space which cannot be reached by any normal means. A space which in fact only *seems* to be not there.

Greenwood's sceptical police constable – 'Because they call places out of their names it doesn't follow that I'm to encourage'em' – reminds us that there are several urban imaginaries and that the one most easily accessible to the historian through newspapers and other kinds of contemporary writing is likely to be biased towards the socially and culturally dominant. But his empiricist common-sense misses the ways in which ideology always, in Althusser's words, 'represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'. It is that imaginary relationship, its very fictive dimensions, which made Chinatown so potent and flexible a signifier, adjustable to a variety of social and political crises in London at the end of the First World War.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

Earlier versions of this paper have been given at the Literary London Conference at Goldsmith's College London in 2003, at research seminars at Kingston University and Roehampton University in 2004 and at the Docklands Museum in London during the Chinese Film Festival in February 2005. I thank Anna Davin, Suman Gupta, Peter Weston, Jerry White and several *History Workshop* editors for comments on an earlier draft. Only after this paper was accepted did I discover Shannon Case's excellent essay, 'Lilied Tongues and Yellow Claws: the Invention of London's Chinatown, 1915-45', in *Challenging Modernism: New Readings in Literature and Culture 1914-45*, ed. Stella Deen, Aldershot, 2002. Our interpretations are, I think, complementary.

1 Sax Rohmer's three early Fu Manchu novels are: *The Mystery of Fu Manchu*, London, 1913; *The Devil Doctor*, London, 1916; *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, London 1917.

2 Rohmer's other relevant works dealing with the docks, the Chinatown area and drugs are: *Yellow Claw*, London, 1915; *Tales of Chinatown*, London, 1916; *The Golden Scorpion*, London, 1919; *Dope*, London, 1920.

3 Warner Oland starred as Fu Manchu in *The Mysterious Fu Manchu*, 1929, *The Return of Fu Manchu*, 1930 and in *Daughter of the Dragon*, 1931. Boris Karloff made a particularly impressive Fu Manchu in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, 1932. The evil Ming the Merciless, in the *Flash Gordon* film series (1936-1940), is cousin to Fu Manchu.

4 Relevant works by Thomas Burke include: *Nights in Town: a London Autobiography*, London 1915; *Limehouse Nights*, London, 1916 (*Broken Blossoms*, London, 1920 and *In Chinatown*, London, 1921 were selections from *Limehouse Nights*); *Out and About London*,

London, 1919; *Whispering Windows: Tales of the Waterside*, London, 1921 (also published as *More Limehouse Nights*, New York, 1921); *The Wind and the Rain: a Book of Confessions*, 1924; *East of Mansion House*, London, 1928; *The Pleasantries of Old Quong*, London, 1931 (also published as *A Tea-shop in Limehouse*, Boston, 1931); *City of Encounters: a London Divertissement*, London, 1932; *Night-Pieces: Eighteen Tales*, London, 1935.

5 There are recordings of *Limehouse Blues* by Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, Stefan Grappelli, Benny Goodman, Oscar Peterson, Sonny Rollins, Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie, Glenn Miller – even by Gerry Garcia and Grateful Dead.

6 See *George Formby Complete*, ed. Andrew Bailey and Peter Foss, London, [1973].

7 J. Ewing Ritchie, *The Night Side of London*, London, 1857, p. 66. See also Joseph Charles Parkinson, *Places and People, being Studies from Life*, London, 1869; 'Down East. Gaslight Wanderings. No. 3', *The Metropolitan*, 14 Sept. 1872; Montagu Williams Q.C., *Round London: Down East and Up West*, London, 1892.

8 *Dickens's Dictionary of London: an Unconventional Handbook*, ed. Charles Dickens the Younger, 1879, pp. 218–19.

9 *Dickens's Dictionary*, p. 219.

10 For an amusing demystification of the Victorian opium den, and this one in particular, see Matthew Sweet's chapter 'Last Exit to Shadwell' in his *Inventing the Victorians*, London 2001, pp. 86–103.

11 Thomas Archer, *The Pauper, The Thief and the Convict*, 1865, p. 134.

12 [Joseph Charles Parkinson], 'Lazarus, Lotus-Eating' (*All the Year Round* 15, 12 May 1866), reprinted in his *Places and People*, p. 423.

13 Richard Rowe, *Life in the London Streets, or Struggles for Daily Bread*, London, 1881, p. 42.

14 For a good introduction see Philip J. Waller, 'Immigration into Britain: the Chinese', *History Today* 35: 9, September 1985, pp. 8–15.

15 For the 1881 Census Returns I have used *The 1881 British Census and National Index CD Rom Library*, Birmingham, 1999.

16 See *Census of England and Wales 1891, vol. 4, General Report, with Summary Tables and Appendices*, London, 1893, PP 508. See also Colin Holmes, 'The Chinese Connection', in *Outsiders and Outcasts. Essays in Honour of William J. Fishman*, ed. Geoffrey Alderman and Chris. Holmes, London, 1993, pp. 73–4.

17 *1881 British Census and National Index CD Rom Library*.

18 I am not sure how to explain the sudden and temporary jump in figures in 1891. I assume it is to do with different instructions being given to the clerks on how to tabulate the figures. Certainly many of the increased numbers are to be found scattered across the West End and the suburbs. I suspect the bulk of them are British people born in China. There is some relevant discussion in the census report of that year on the problem of calculating figures for nationality as opposed to those of place of birth: see the discussion in *Census of England and Wales 1891, Vol. IV General Report*, pp. 64–5.

19 J. G. Birch, *Limehouse through Five Centuries*, London, 1930, p. 144.

20 *1881 British Census and National Index CD Rom Library*.

21 1901 Census Returns, PRO: RG13/322/41-44, RG13/354.

22 In the early 1930s Orwell stayed in a Pennyfields lodging-house with room for between fifty and 100 men. He hung around the district for a day or two and noted that 'Limehouse was sprinkled with Orientals – Chinamen, Chittagonian lascars, dravidians selling silk scarves, even a few Sikhs, come goodness knows how': George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), London, 1966, pp.118, 120.

23 London County Council, Public Health Committee, *Special Meeting for the Purpose of Licensing Seamen's Lodging-houses*, 10 Dec. 1914: London Metropolitan Archive, LCC/PH/REG/1/23.

24 'Chinese London and its Opium Dens', *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 279, 1895, p. 276.

25 James A. Jones, 'The Life of London's 190,000 Foreigners', *Evening News*, 11 April 1931.

26 *Chung Hwa School and Club. London. Appeal for Funds*, printed circular dated 1933. See also *The Times*, 26 April 1935.

27 Peter Fryer, 'Chinatown has Good Laugh', *Daily Worker*, 12 Dec. 1951.

28 Ng Kwee Choo, *The Chinese in London*, Institute of Race Relations, Oxford 1968, pp. 27–8.

- 29 George W. Sims, 'Trips about Town: part 5. In Limehouse and the Isle of Dogs', *Strand Magazine* 30, July-December 1905, p. 37.
- 30 Jones, 'The Life of London's 190,000 Foreigners'.
- 31 'Chinatown Myth Exploded', *East London Observer*, 24 Feb. 1934.
- 32 *The Times*, 21 Feb. 1934.
- 33 Michael Banton, *The Coloured Quarter: Negro Immigrants in a British City* (1955), quoted in Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century*, London 2001, p. 425n.
- 34 English wives of Chinese men and their children raise a range of important questions to do with family, gender relations and national identity in this period. See M. Paige Baldwin, 'Subject to Empire: Married Women and the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act', *Journal of British Studies* 40, October 2000, pp. 522–56; and Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870–1914*, London 1997, chap. 11.
- 35 See for instance two accounts which Dickens certainly knew: Henry Mayhew. *London Labour and the London Poor*, Extra Volume, London, 1862, p. 231; [Parkinson], 'Lazarus, Lotus-Eating', in his *Places and People*, pp. 421–5. See also *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. Paul Schlicke, Oxford, 1999, p. 393.
- 36 Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Adventure 6. The Man with the Twisted Lip', *The Strand* 2, 1891.
- 37 Hubert Llewellyn-Smith, 'Influx of Population (East London)', in *Life and Labour of the People in London*, ed. Charles Booth, vol. 3, Part 1, p. 100.
- 38 'Chinese London and its Opium Dens', *Gentleman's Magazine* vol. 279, 1895.
- 39 *East London Advertiser*, 28 Dec. 1907.
- 40 As previous note.
- 41 *Illustrated London News*, 23 Jan. 1909, pp. 126–7; see also *The Times*, 26 Nov. 1913.
- 42 *The Times*, 15 Aug. 1918, 24 Aug. 1918.
- 43 For an excellent account of this case and of the whole issue of drugs, race and women at this juncture see Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: the Birth of the British Drug Underground* (2nd edn), London, 2001.
- 44 *Daily Express*, 1 Oct. 1920.
- 45 As previous note.
- 46 *Evening News*, 4 Oct. 1920; See for further examples at this juncture: *Daily Telegraph*, 23 Jan. 1919; *Evening News*, 5, 6 and 7 Oct. 1920; *Daily Graphic*, 7 Oct. 1920.
- 47 C. R., 'The Evil Trade in Opium', *The Star*, 9 Jan. 1919.
- 48 'The Evil Trade in Opium'; see also the final chapter, 'The Dope Smugglers', of Sidney Theodore Felstead, *The Underworld of London*, London 1923.
- 49 *The Times*, 25 April 1922.
- 50 Kohn, *Dope Girls*, p. 166.
- 51 As previous note.
- 52 *East End News*, 19 June 1908.
- 53 *East End News*, 8 Sept. 1908.
- 54 *East End News*, 11 Sept. 1908.
- 55 *The Times*, 20 October 1900.
- 56 *East End News*, 19 June 1908.
- 57 *East End News*, 12 and 15 May 1908.
- 58 *East End News*, 27 June 1916.
- 59 *The Times*, 9 Sept. 1916.
- 60 *East End News*, 9 March, 13 March, 16 March 1917, 4 May 1917.
- 61 Nicholas John Griffin, 'The Use of Chinese Labour by the British Army, 1916–1920: the "Raw Importation", its Scope and Problems', Ph.D., University of Oklahoma 1973; Michael Summerskill, *China on the Western Front: Britain's Chinese Workforce in the First World War*, London, 1982.
- 62 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *History of British Trade Unionism*, London, 1919, p. 691.
- 63 Nevertheless, the Chinese Labour Corps did lead to a degree of substitution. According to *The Times* (23 April 1919): 'The coming of the Chinese Labour Corps to France relieved our men from an enormous amount of heavy and miscellaneous work behind the lines and so helped to release a much larger proportion than otherwise would have been possible for combatant duties.'
- 64 *Morning Post*, 18 June 1919.
- 65 *East End News*, 20 June 1919; *Morning Post*, 18 June 1919; *Daily Chronicle*, 29 May 1919.

- 66 *Daily News*, 15 April 1920.
- 67 Sydney K. Phelps, 'Poplar – Apart from Politics', *Nineteenth Century*, April 1924.
- 68 *The Star*, 17 June 1919.
- 69 *East End News*, 13 June 1916.
- 70 *The Times*, 17 Jan. 1921.
- 71 Arnold Palmer, 'Down Chinatown Way', *The Sphere*, 8 May 1926.
- 72 H. V. Morton, *The Nights of London* (1926), 3rd edn, London 1941, p. 335; Frederick Arthur Mackenzie, 'Foreign London', in *Wonderful London* 22, 18 Jan. 1927, p. 1,011.
- 73 Lao She, *Mr Ma and Son: a Sojourn in London*, transl. Julie Jimmerson, Beijing, 1991, p. 25. This novel was first published in China in 1929.
- 74 To get inside the Chinese community in Limehouse requires a Chinese speaker, someone who can track the population back to China and begin to make sense of their experience in their own terms. It is too late now for much in the way of oral history of the period before the Second World War, though Ng Kwee Choo interviewed in the early 1960s a number of Chinese seamen who remembered Limehouse in the 1920s and 30s, and occasionally even earlier (*Chinese in London*, see n.28). Certainly much could be done through family history and memory of second, third and fourth-generation Anglo-Chinese.
- 75 Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation', in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, transl. Ben Brewster, London, 1977, p. 153.
- 76 James Greenwood, *The Wilds of London*, London, 1874, p. 1.
- 77 Thomas Burke, *Son of London*, London, 1946, p. 219.
- 78 Burke, *Son of London*, pp. 200–1.
- 79 Thomas Burke, *Out and About: a Note-Book of London in Wartime*, London, 1919, p. 33.
- 80 But not all readers. A scathing review of some of his Chinatown stories commented that these stories were 'a cinema life, an abstraction which becomes less and less convincing as its presentation is repeated... Outside the cinema life it is not all Eastern odours, fogs, electric pianos, bland but brutal chinamen, pugilists and "coppers' narks'", *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 April 1921, p. 258.
- 81 Sax Rohmer, 'Meet Dr Fu Manchu', reprinted in *Meet the Detectives*, London, 1935, and at http://www.njedge.net/~knapp/meet_dr_fu.htm (accessed 3 Oct. 2004). This is from Dr Lawrence Knapp's website, *The Page of Fu Manchu*, a treasure trove of source material on Rohmer.
- 82 Burke, *Out and About*, p. 33.
- 83 Burke, *Out and About*, p. 36.
- 84 Burke, *Out and About*, p. 47.
- 85 For elaboration of the concept 'heterotopia' see Michel Foucault, 'Different Spaces', in Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential Works* vol. 2, ed. James D. Faubion, London 1998, pp. 175–85; Edward Soja, 'Heterologies: a Remembrance of Other Spaces in the Citadel – LA', *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, ed. Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 13–34.
- 86 Sax Rohmer, 'The Daughter of Huang Chow', in *Tales of Chinatown*, London, 1916.
- 87 Sax Rohmer, 'How Fu Manchu was Born', *This Week*, 29 Sept. 1957; reprinted at <http://www.njedge.net/~knapp/howfu.htm> (accessed 3 Oct. 2004).
- 88 Stephen Graham, *London Nights*, London, 1925, pp. 12–13.
- 89 Morton, *Nights of London*, p. 335.
- 90 Morton, *Nights of London*, p. 335.
- 91 Morton, *Nights of London*, p. 355.
- 92 *Evening Standard*, 29 Nov. 1929.
- 93 H. M. Tomlinson, 'Down in Dockland' in *Wonderful London* 4, 27 April 1926, p. 153.
- 94 Henry Charles and Henry Major Tomlinson, *Below London Bridge*, London, 1934, pp. 32–3.