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Re-investigating Limehouse Chinatown: Kandinsky's 2010 *Limehouse Nights* and early 20th-century Oriental Plays

Kandinsky's production of *Limehouse Nights*, performed in 2010, presented a story about the interwar British society seen through the eyes of Thomas Burke, a police detective named after Thomas Burke who wrote extensively about London's Limehouse Chinatown. By examining the trends and events in the years around 1918, which were extensively referred to in *Limehouse Nights*, this article discusses the Chinese images emerging from both Kandinsky's production and the plays from the early 20th century. The analysis underlines the lasting influence of earlier China-related popular entertainment on later developments in theatre as well as on the British public perception of Chinese culture at home and abroad. *Limehouse Nights* thus provides a contemporary refraction of the converging elements in the early 20th century that at the same time raises questions about factuality, representation and cross-cultural understanding. Lia Wen-Ching Liang is Assistant Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan. Her major research interests are contemporary British theatre, postdramatic theatre, early 20th-century theatre, and Deleuze studies.¹

Keywords: Limehouse Chinatown, British inter-war theatre, musical comedy, Oriental plays, Thomas Burke, contemporary British theatre, early 20th-century theatre

It is now debatable whether London's notorious "Old Chinatown" in Limehouse could actually have existed.² As historian John Seed rightly points out, "[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.”³ If we follow Seed, those dangerous back alleys filled with sinister Chinese men gambling or opium-smoking, as visualised in films such as *Piccadilly* (1929, dir. E. A. Dupont) or *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1923, dir. A. E. Coleby), may be no more than the imaginative creations of journalists, novelists, and filmmakers who needed an exotic space to embody their fascinations. Amongst writers such as Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Wallace, Sax Rohmer and Oscar Wilde who collectively created and immortalised this mystical, fictional Chinatown, is Thomas Burke, best known for his stories set in the poverty-stricken East London docklands, as represented in *Nights in Town: A London Autobiography* (1915) and *Limehouse Nights* (1916).⁴ Burke’s Chinatown might not be Fu Manchu’s headquarters, yet the underworld network constructed by the Chinese immigrants and working-class English men depicted in his writings, both fictional and non-fictional, is in some ways more realistic than that of the evil genius.⁵ Over the years, Burke’s readers have been led to believe that Burke grew up in East London, and that his insider knowledge of London’s Chinese community was indeed a result of his friendship with “real” Chinese workers. Burke thus established himself as an authentic author with first-hand experience of exploring London’s old Chinatown.

While the image Burke fabricated for himself—as a *bona fide* storyteller from the East End—has been challenged by scholars such as Anne Witchard,⁶ the nefarious “Limehouse Chinatown” Burke had helped to construct still remains a popular one. It thus seems fitting that playwright and director James Yeatman chose to assign the writer’s name to a fictional character in London-based theatre company Kandinsky’s entertaining production *Limehouse Nights* (2010),⁷ a new work that offered a contemporary perspective on this part of London Docklands set immediately after the end of World War One. Thomas Burke, in the play, is a police inspector who, not unlike the writer in real life, is fascinated by the presence of Chinese people in the docklands. Inspector Burke’s investigation of the Chinese community, in both an official and private capacity, parallels the writer Burke’s obsessive pursuit. Furthermore, like the real Burke who “often seemed unable—or unwilling—to distinguish between the Chinatown he ‘imagined’ in the stories [...] and the one he ‘observed,’”⁸ in the Kandinsky production the audience witnessed Inspector Burke’s own confusion between fantasy and reality. Kandinsky also managed to premiere the production within the restored Limehouse Town Hall, the Grade II listed building erected in 1879 on Commercial Road,⁹ which not only brought their 21st-century production to the geographical centre of the myth but also created an extra layer of authenticity that cleverly weaved fact with fiction.

Connections between Kandinsky’s contemporary production and the historical Limehouse are more than the parallels in nomenclature. *Limehouse Nights* not only offers a contemporary and intercultural view of the old Chinatown, the overlap between the real writer and the fictional character also becomes a means by which to investigate the public imagination. Set in 1918, the play shares with the contemporary audience a taste for Far Eastern culture. *Limehouse Nights* thus provides a window for a contemporary audience to look

back on the relatively overlooked musical comedies and Oriental plays from earlier times. By discussing cultural elements analogous to those taking place in the year of 1918, which are extensively referred to in the story, this article looks at the Kandinsky theatrical refraction of Limehouse Chinatown through an examination of Yeatman's sketch of Inspector Burke, in order to question why and when certain cultural practices and features emerged as references for the putative "Chineseness." While the article does not discuss the production theoretically due to space limitations, it is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage, which I will briefly refer to in a later section.

Chinese influence on London stages in 1918

The production of *Limehouse Nights* deliberately weaves fictional elements with historical events and creatively problematises the way in which a myth emerges from the combination of varied elements. Kandinsky's awareness of Limehouse's mythical reputation is specified in the show's programme, where the team comments on Thomas Burke's "far-reaching" short stories as being "entirely removed from the reality it claims to represent," and joining forces with other works to stigmatise the Chinese presence in the area. Director James Yeatman further acknowledges such fabrication, as he explains in the director's notes:

Growing up in Mile End, I had always been aware of the existence of the Limehouse Chinatown as an almost mythical place shrouded in a mysterious cloud of opium dens and criminals, informed I think by the Sherlock Holmes story *The Man With The Twisted Lip* [...] I rediscovered Limehouse and the story of Billie Carleton, the actress found tragically dead the morning after a marvellous ball to celebrate the end of the First World War. Reading about the cruel fate of Lau Ping You and his Scottish wife, Ada, as they were hounded by the press for selling [Carleton] opium and cocaine, I thought that here was a story that captured everything I'd been thinking about for the last couple of years – a story of lonely city dwellers, fantasists who drink, take drugs and go to the theatre to escape from the numbing alienation of their lives, and the terrible consequences such fantasies can have when they are projected to real, unfortunate people.¹⁰

In *Limehouse Nights*, Yeatman utilises such fabrication as a device to re-tell a murder enquiry, one not dissimilar to the Carleton case. Yet this time, the process leading towards these events is as important as the events themselves. Accompanying Inspector Burke's onstage journey, the audience are not only invited to visit Limehouse Chinatown, but are also asked to consider the dubious but not inconsequential relationship between reality and representation.

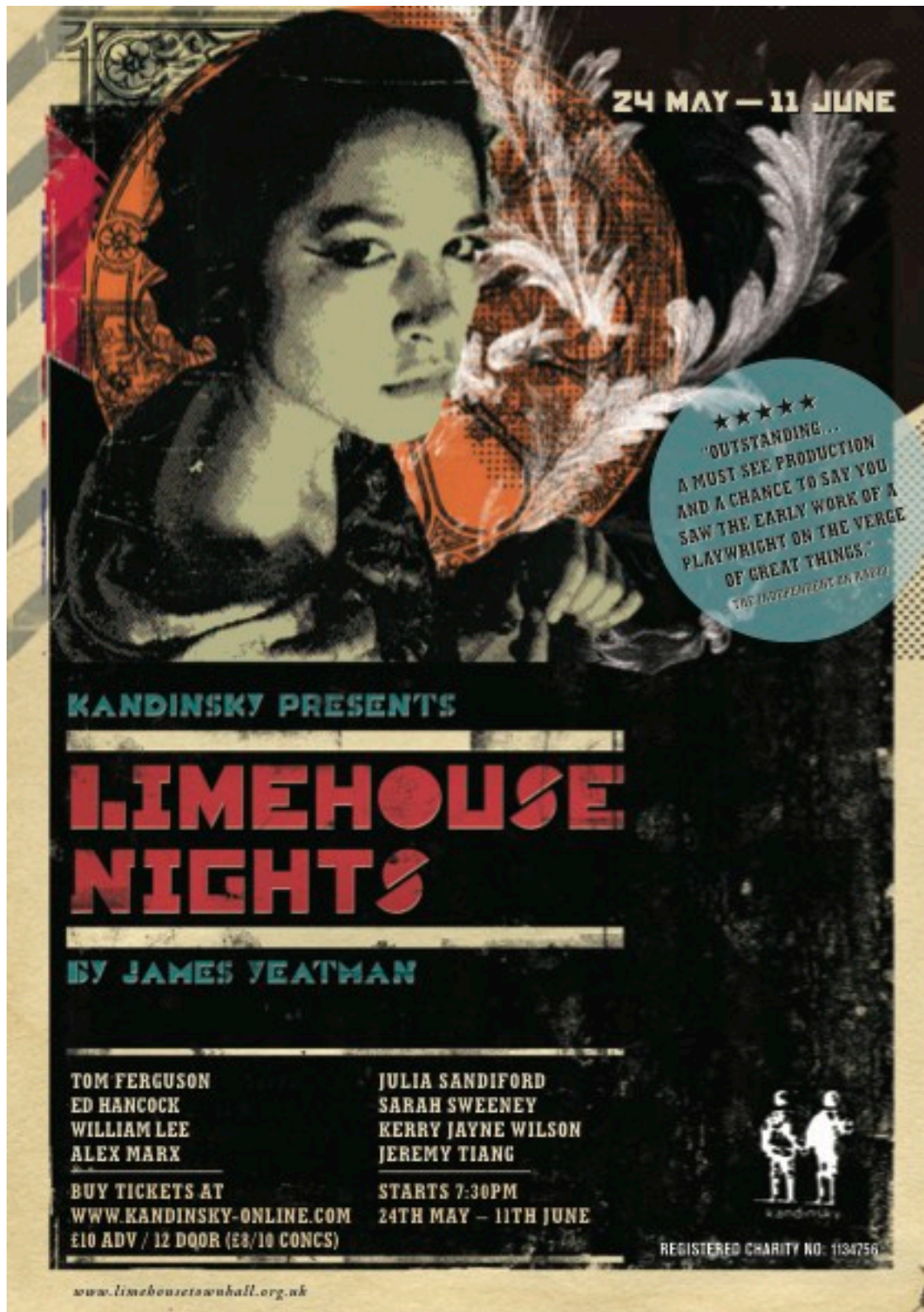


Figure 1. The flyer for *Limehouse Nights*, front. Courtesy of Kandinsky Theatre Company.

TWO TIMES SUNDAY TIMES PLAYWRITING AWARD WINNERS

KANDINSKY

PRESENTS:

LIMEHOUSE NIGHTS

BY JAMES YEATMAN

LIMEHOUSE, 1918. A DINGY, RUN-DOWN BACKWATER IN LONDON'S EAST END, SWARMING WITH SAILORS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. AND FROM ONE PART OF THE WORLD IN PARTICULAR: CHINA.

LIMEHOUSE, OR CHINATOWN AS IT QUICKLY BECAME KNOWN, HELD A DARK FASCINATION FOR THE ENGLISH. FOR SOME IT WAS THE HOME OF THE VILLAINOUS 'YELLOW MAN', WHILE FOR OTHERS IT WAS THE DOOR TO A MYSTERIOUS AND EXOTIC CIVILISATION.

★ ★ ★ ★

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Figure 2. The flyer for Limehouse Nights, reverse. Courtesy of Kandinsky Theatre Company.

Staged in a venue not originally designated for theatre performances, the design for the production was creatively simple. The performing area, located at the centre of the main assembly room in Limehouse Town Hall, divided the auditorium into two opposite areas by means of a red carpet. A temporary bar was positioned at one end of the stage, with a multi-purposed space suggesting an interior at the other end. The production opened with the cast as a crowd gathered along the strip of the performing area. It is soon revealed that the scene is a guided tour of East London, along the Commercial Road and Limehouse Causeway, in which Inspector Burke is taking part. The tour guide addresses his group as a “discerning bunch” who do not mind making the extra effort in order to have the off-the-beaten-track experience of visiting the “spoils of Empire,” and introduces them to the chief attraction, the heart of Chinatown.¹¹ It would be hard to miss the analogous connection between the crowd onstage and the seated audience which has also made the extra effort to see the performance in the heart of Limehouse, at an off-the-map, non-theatrical venue. The guide goes on to address both groups:

On this little street are washed up the yellow men from far Canton and Peking. In their blood flows the waters of the mighty Yangtze. In the air we can smell the distant perfume of the Orient. The speech here is not English but the lilting, musical cant of the Chink.¹²

Just as he is about to continue, a Chinese-looking man dashes onto the stage from nowhere, with another shouting and chasing after him. The tour guide comments upon this altercation and wonders if “something more sinister even than that” is taking place in this area of exotic food, opium pipes, and shrill voices.¹³

Following Inspector Burke’s journey onstage, the scene then switches to a West End theatre where the fictional character, an actor called Ginny Cazenove (short for Virginia Cazenove), is singing “Pletty Little Chinee” in the title role of the musical comedy *San Toy*:

Pletty little Chinee
 Pletty little Chinee
 Welly nice and tiny
 Livee on a mantel shelf
 Hi ya yu!

Nicee Chinee chappie
 Plenty much unhappy
 Wantch girlee all himself
 Hi ya yu!

Welly big mantel
 piecee clockee
 talkee so fashion
 tickee tockee

When littie Chinee
 Makee fun
 Clock strike one!

One piecee figure
 Want to be bigger
 Do what he likee
 That's his plan
 Likee man,
 Then he can
 Stopee clockee,
 When he stlikee.

One littee maidee,
 Poor littee maidee,
 Want to be a lady,
 Flirtee to!

Poor littee pairee,
 Both China waree
 Tching-a-ring-a-tching-tchang-tchu! ¹⁴

After seeing the show, Burke walks home through the streets of London in the rain. There, he puts some Chinese paraphernalia, possibly obtained after seeing the show, into a cabinet that is already full of other Chinese memorabilia. The performance of Cazenove as San Toy and the song "Pletty Little Chinee" becomes an element of Burke's Chinese world that expresses his stereotypical idea of the Celestial Kingdom before his encounter with real Chinese people. As if dictated by fate, Burke then finds himself at the house of a Charles Frobisher, investigating the scandalous death of Ginny Cazenove, who has died of an overdose of cocaine after returning from a party celebrating the end of World War One with Frobisher. Frobisher's account directs Inspector Burke to the doorstep of Lee Chee Kong,¹⁵ a Chinese man, and his Irish wife, Mita Lee, in Limehouse. The plot then tells a story very similar to that of the Carleton case, which will be discussed later.

To this point, Yeatman had gathered most of the ingredients commonly associated with the Limehouse Chinatown to narrate a new story featuring Inspector Burke in a play related to the interwar period. Such parallels between real events and fictions are an important theme in Kandinsky's refraction of the early-20th century British theatre.

While both the death of Billie Carleton and the production of *San Toy* are real events, Kandinsky rearranged these historical clues into something fictional, making *Limehouse Nights* a play to which a contemporary audience could relate. The original production of *San Toy, or the Emperor's Own*, was billed as "A Chinese Musical Comedy" and first performed at Daly's Theatre in London on 21

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October, 1899. The production ran successfully for 768 performances. The story revolves around a romance between the female lead San Toy, the daughter of a senior Manchu official, and her several suitors (both Chinese and British, including the Emperor).¹⁶ A measure of *San Toy's* subsequent popularity is demonstrated by its production souvenirs, such as an “engagement book” for the year of 1901, featuring fourteen sketches of characters in the format of a monthly planner. However, *San Toy* was not commercially staged again after its initial run in the United Kingdom other than at a brief revival with “a much more lavish scale than any other musical plays recently revived at Daly’s” in 1932.¹⁷ In other words, while *San Toy* remained well known in 1918, it was not performed professionally that year. Billie Carleton (4 September, 1896 – 28 November, 1918),¹⁸ moreover, had never played in *San Toy*. Her last leading role before her sudden death was Phyllis Harcourt in *The Freedom of the Seas* (1918) at the Haymarket Theatre, a romance combining seafaring and the secret service that featured on the cover of *The Play Pictorial*,¹⁹ but in actual fact had no Chinese content.

Portrayals of the Chinese on the London stage in 1918 were, however, less influenced by *San Toy* or the sudden death of Billie Carleton; rather, they were mainly created by two newly-opened productions: *The Chinese Puzzle* at the New Theatre and *Shanghai* at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, as well as the popular *Chu Chin Chow* at His Majesty’s, all of which were running concurrently when the death of Miss Billie Carleton was announced. Billed as a “Musical Tale of the East” on its programme and sometimes referred to as an “Eastern Revue,”²⁰ *Chu Chin Chow* began its 2238 performance run on 31 August, 1916.²¹ In essence, *Chu Chin Chow* was a variation of *Ali Baba and Forty Thieves*, and became immensely popular as a result of its spectacular staging and ever-changing costumes. Premiering on 11 July, 1918, *The Chinese Puzzle* was billed as “a play in four acts by Marian Bower and Leon M. Lion”²² and ran for 415 performances. The production was also the feature of *The Play Pictorial*,²³ in an issue just immediately before *The Freedom of the Seas*. The cover of the issue shows Leon M. Lion, wearing a ponytail, portraying Chi-Lung, a mandarin of the Manchu Qing Dynasty. Later the same year, on 28 August, London audiences also saw the premiere of *Shanghai* at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, “a spectacular operetta” by Isidore Witmark, William Carey Duncan and Lauri Wylie. With a mere 131 performances,²⁴ *Shanghai* was perhaps the least popular of the three productions and was not featured in *The Play Pictorial*, and yet, it formed the cover for *The Sketch*²⁵ and *The Tatler*²⁶ in one of their September issues, showing that the production had its audience.

While the three productions running in 1918 might look “Chinese” to their audiences, the references made in each of them differed. Theatre historians now tend to consider *Chu Chin Chow* as not dissimilar to a Victorian pantomime. Brian Singleton describes the play as “a hybrid type of performance that borrowed from musical comedy its format, but also from pantomime its characters, stock devices, parades, pageants, and transformation scenes.”²⁷ In the story, *Chu Chin Chow* is believed to be the richest merchant from China, but is in fact not Chinese but the Arab Robber Chieftain in disguise. In the case of

Popular Entertainment Studies, Vol. 3, Issue 1, pp. 24-42. ISSN 1837-9303 © 2012 The Author. Published by the School of Drama, Fine Art and Music, Faculty of Education & Arts, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

Shanghai, the production was described as a piece of “pretty shreds and gay patches” at best; “never was that setting very Chinese.”²⁸ Some scholars consider *Shanghai* as “Drury Lane’s over-ambitious response to *Chu Chin Chow*,”²⁹ reflecting on the obvious visual influence. The Lord Chamberlain’s correspondence seems to confirm Drury Lane’s ambition, and also provides the best summary to the play:

This play deals with Shanghai much as *Chu-Chin-Chow* does with Bagdad. It has an extravagant story which counts for little as compared with the glowing local colours of the setting, and the pigeon-English of the comic dialogue. The main motive is supplied in the tricks played by Won-Hu the philosophic father of Sen-Sen, upon Kim-Foo her wealthy lover, in order to teach him that he cannot be truly happy until he has known misery. So by the aid of the chief humourist – a Chinaman who through his London birth is half-cockney – Wong Hu persuades Lim Foo that he is ruined, makes him pray for death, and takes him on board his junk to the Temple of the Green Jade God for execution. Other elements of the modern fairy-tale are the efforts of a couple of American “crooks” to steal the valuable Jade God, and the attempts of an American lady-journalist to make capital of it for her newspaper columns. The action is largely pantomimic, and it includes eccentric doings of the part of a Chinese policeman, a junk-captain and a waiting maid who is in love with the Chinese cockney. The oriental fun is effective if elaborated at too great length. The opportunities however for the display of chorus and scenery are numerous and varied: and if they are well handled they should afford an effective spectacular production.³⁰

Thus the “Chinese” associations in both *Chu Chin Chow* and *Shanghai*, as demonstrated by the correspondence, formed part of the “oriental fun” that simply contributed to a good night out for theatregoers.

Yet, it would be precipitate to conclude that these Chinese influences were all coming from light entertainment: *The Chinese Puzzle*, for example, was considered “a serious play.”³¹ Correspondence in the Lord Chamberlain’s office situates it in the well-made play tradition by pointing out that it was “an old-fashioned diplomatic play, on the Sardou model, plus a rather elaborate study of a Chinese character and sub-plots.”³² The Lord Chamberlain’s office further suggests that the character Chi Lung might be inspired by the late Li Hung Chang (1823–1901), who was a diplomat for the Qing Dynasty and was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1896.³³ In other words, the character Chi Lung provides a sharp contrast to the comical figures in other plays. Yet, “the diplomatic, secret treaty, business is absurd”³⁴ even though the production was received with “enthusiastic applauses.”³⁵ The formula for its success might have to do with its pairing of cast and characters, with Leon M. Lion as Marquis Chi Lung and Lilian Braithwaite as Lady de la Haye, the wife of the Marquis’s best friend, which is similar to the casting of *Mr. Wu* some years earlier,³⁶ with Matheson Lang enacting the title role and Lilian Braithwaite the wife of Amos Gregory, another

British national. Perhaps it would be safe to assume that the reference point for B. W. Findon, when he describes *The Chinese Puzzle* as the “same old story” and a “reinforced play,”³⁷ is *Mr. Wu*, which opened at the Strand on 27 November, 1913

and had a successful run of 404 performances.³⁸ *Mr. Wu* was billed as “Anglo-Chinese” and “a faithful presentation of some incidents such as demand the most serious consideration on the part of all concerned or interested in the future development of China.”³⁹ *Mr. Wu* was revived in 1916 at the Strand, with Lang and Braithwaite repeating their roles. Although this time it ran for a significantly shorter run of forty-nine performances, it did seem that there was public demand for something more than “Oriental fun” during World War One and the years that immediately followed.⁴⁰

Whether it is the “Oriental fun” associated with the likes of *Chu Chin Chow*, *Shanghai*, and *San Toy*, or a more serious offering in plays such as *The Chinese Puzzle* and *Mr Wu*, the “Chinese” images emerging from these productions, as well as other popular “Chinese” productions before 1918, such as *A Chinese Honeymoon* (1901) and *See-See* (1906),⁴¹ need to be seen in the context of the legacy of the late-Victorian and Edwardian theatre. It is known that the demand for spectacle, which dominated much of the theatrical practice at the time, had often resulted in the exoticised portrayal of non-Western settings. Perhaps this has led to the general conclusion that such productions are not serious enough for academic consideration—“too frivolous”⁴² or “light”⁴³—and thus remain comparatively under-researched. Indeed, their production strategies of presenting “[r]omance, sentiment, excitement, good dialogue, witty epigrams, dash and adventure, high-flown speeches and gallantry” quite often make modern critics look askance at the exoticism and escapism involved.⁴⁴ However, as Edward Ziter argues, the legacy of Victorian theatre and its numerous representations of non-Western cultures have become part of the Orientalist discourse.⁴⁵ Yet, while it is important to acknowledge the simplified and often erroneous imaginations associated with non-Western cultures,⁴⁶ it should be noted the lasting legacy of Victorian theatre as successful entertainment has influenced later theatrical productions, even as the genre itself became less popular in the mid-20th century. Here I share J. P. Wearing’s sentiment that these productions might deserve to be considered as more than mere entertainments:

Popular taste embraced musical comedies and plays, comedies, farces, revues, and melodrama, if longevity of production is an accurate gauge, and it was to that popular demand that the commercial West End theatre catered very directly.⁴⁷

Len Platt has argued that, being contemporary with the “great age of imperialism,” popular entertainment such as musical comedy “was a constituent part of the legitimization of a huge territorial carve-up,”⁴⁸ and therefore demands attention. Similar opinions can also be found in the discussion of Sax

Rohmer's works, which call for scholarly notice to be given to the political messages that underlined these fantasies.⁴⁹ Thus Inspector Burke's eagerness to learn all things "Chinese" in *Limehouse Nights* might guide the contemporary audience to learn something about the popular taste of almost a century ago. By returning to the discussion of *Limehouse Nights*, the following section aims to demonstrate that theatrical representations about China may not be mere escapism and instead can be used to interrogate the Victorian legacy from which these stories emerged.

A search for Popular Taste: A detective's game

Inspector Burke, not dissimilar to his other fictional Edwardian contemporaries, is passionate about Chinese culture and a collector of all things Chinese. As he conducts his investigations, Burke establishes an awkward yet increasingly intimate relationship with Mita Lee and Lee Chee Kong, and this brings him closer to the small Chinese community after he is introduced to the Lees' neighbours, husband and wife Ho Chi Chung and Ho Siu Ching,⁵⁰ who own a laundry shop downstairs. The five of them have a "Chinese" night at Lee's. Inspector Burke's eagerness to learn more about Chinese people leads him to ask Lee for a first-hand experience of Chinese culture. In the end, however, his relationships with the Lees and Hos are troubled because of his preconception about the Chinese community.

A closer examination of the dining scene at the Lees provides an example. Yeatman uses this scene to question directly what Burke considers to be known facts about Chinese culture. For example, Burke learns that the two "shifty-looking" Chinese men he saw during the Limehouse tour were played by Lee and Ho:

- LCK When you were on it, did you see two shifty Chinese men chase each other down the street?
 TB Yes. In fact
 LCK That was me and Chi Chung
 TB What really
 No
 Why were you
 CC We do it for every tour
 TB Why
 LCK Because they pay us
 TB They pay you
 LCK Every Friday, Chi Chung and I have to wear fake ponytails
 ML It's ridiculous
 LCK Hide in the laundry then at 6 o'clock we chase each other down the street. Looking shifty.
 ML Stupid. Don't know why they
 CC Ha'penny well earned [sic]⁵¹

By now, the authentic-looking Limehouse tour is revealed to be a staged version. Nothing “more sinister” is happening, as the tour guide had suggested. The men did not even have real ponytails. With this twist, the play clearly shows a discrepancy between the Chinese workers living in the docklands and the “Chinese” characters projected by West End theatre, such as Leon M. Lion’s portrayal of Chi-Lung in *The Chinese Puzzle*. While some Chinese males may still have kept their queues in 1918, the ponytail “tradition” had in fact been gradually phased out after 1895, following China’s defeat during the first Sino-Japanese War.⁵²

Yet, following the unveiling of the two “shifty” Chinese men, Inspector Burke’s interactions with his fellow diners are still dominated by his assumptions about the Chinese community. The friendly atmosphere immediately sours when Inspector Burke mentions opium: “Well opium’s a Chinese habit isn’t it? You shouldn’t be punished for it. It is the same as drinking. Don’t you think?”⁵³ The Hos respond to this remark by leaving abruptly, while Lee, as the host, tries to explain:

I don’t want you to think we, we are not what the papers say. [sic] We’re not fiends. We are not addicts. There are some, of course, often the sailors, they are, they smoke every day and they – but we don’t. Once a week maybe. Mita less, Chi Chung never... [sic] ⁵⁴

While Inspector Burke might just want to be considered a sensitive friend, Ho Chi Chong is clearly offended by Burke’s generalisation, retiring from the dinner with his wife immediately, leaving the Lees with Burke for the night. Although Burke’s patronising attitude is not well received, the night does in fact end with opium smoking. As Burke falls asleep afterwards, Mita and Chee Kong’s love story is enacted. The audience is introduced to a scene in a Piccadilly music hall in 1911, when the couple had their first outing together.⁵⁵ The first half of the play ends with Mita’s first experience of fireworks at the backyard of St Anne’s Church in Limehouse, which the couple gaze at admiringly. Although in a small production like *Limehouse Nights*, the use of spectacle was limited, the Victorian love of romance, sentiment, and excitement are duly embodied in the first half of the play.

The second half of *Limehouse Nights* reveals more about popular tastes in the early 20th century seen from the vantage point of the year 1918. As mentioned earlier, the death of Billie Carleton was announced on 29 November, at a moment when the three key theatre productions associated with Chinese culture were running in London. The curious case of Carleton’s death captured much public attention, as seen in detailed reports and speculation found in the newspapers. The development of the plot in the second half of the play roughly corresponds to what happened following Carleton’s death, in the period of November 1918 to April 1919, including witness accounts from friends of Carleton, the public inquests, the arrest of Mrs. Ada Song Ping You (the Scottish

wife of Lau Ping You), and later the trials of Raoul Reginald De Veulle, who was attending the Victory Ball held in Royal Albert Hall with Carleton on the night she was last seen alive.⁵⁶ The public furore generated by the death of Billie Carleton might have been less fervent had there not been another recent inquest on a similar matter. *The Times* had news items on 15 and 24 August about “East End Opium Dens” that firmly connected Chinese men with illegal opium supplies.⁵⁷ The news on 15 August reported a fact about the expulsion of one Chinese man

for managing an opium den in Poplar, located to the east of Limehouse. The item on 24 August featured the inquest into the sudden death of William Gibson Jr. (possibly caused by opium smoking) as well as into another Chinese man’s association with an opium den in Poplar; both helped paint a sensationalist picture of the connection between Chinatown and illicit drugs.⁵⁸ The string of reports beginning August 1918 generated a stark contrast between the evil drug providers and innocent users, which, in *Limehouse Nights*, is taken for granted by Neville Macready, Burke’s old friend and his superior. Inspector Burke, on the other hand, questions this simplistic point of view.

Through Inspector Burke’s persistent quest, the play attempts to undo the typified image of early Chinese immigrants. The uneasy friendship between a police officer and immigrants who just want to make a living on a foreign soil is incisively enacted onstage. One cannot help but feel for Burke’s perhaps wrongly placed sincerity towards these immigrants, particularly when he visits them during Christmas time. Meanwhile, prejudice against Chinese immigrants is explicitly expressed by Neville Macready, underlining the commonplace mistrust towards immigrant communities. The following conversation sums up how the image of the Chinese people was constructed as “yellow perils” in stories like *Fu Manchu*:

- NM Shame you didn’t find anything.
It’s funny, this case. Dead actress, degenerate aristocrat, Chinese master villain. It’s like one of those stories.
- TB Which?
- NM Fu Manchu. It is isn’t it? The elusive evil Chinaman, bringing down the country from the inside. Would’ve looked good in the papers, story like that.
- TB It would, except it’s not true, so. And the Chinese, it’s more opium than cocaine
- NM Fair enough. Fair enough. I’ll leave it up to you. In any case we’re going to need someone, foreigner preferably I’d imagine, who gave her, sold her, opium, whatever, cocaine. This’ll be all over the papers in no time. Need to look like we’re doing our jobs don’t we?⁵⁹

While Inspector Burke tries to persuade Macready that there is insufficient evidence to tie the Lees to the sudden death of Ginny Cazanove, Macready exclaims: “How can they be innocent, they are Chinese. How can you believe anything that comes out of their mouths for God’s sake.”⁶⁰ With the case being

deemed “easy” by the sneering Macready, Burke’s growing compassion towards his new acquaintances finally jeopardises both his career and friendship. Despite Burke’s effort to help the Lees, they are found guilty with Lee deported immediately and Mita sentenced to prison with hard labour. Ironically, the story ends with Burke attending the revised *San Toy*, with Ginny Cazenove’s good friend Lotti Marsh in the lead role, a reference that emphatically contrasts the difference between “oriental” fun on stage and the social reality faced by Chinese immigrants. Overall, the play introduces the audience to the image of Chinese

immigrants presented by the media in the first part, and, following Inspector Burke’s perplexed conversations with other characters, the second half confronts the received wisdom about Chinese communities and their culture, thus questioning the seemingly unavoidable connections between culture, places, and communities.

Inspector Burke’s lines of enquiry also differ from another fictional crime investigation popularised in 1918. The Christmas Special Issue for *The Illustrated London News*, published on 2 December, contains “a Complete Oriental Mystery Novel by Sax Rohmer, entitled ‘The Golden Scorpion.’”⁶¹ In that issue, Sax Rohmer is introduced as “Author of ‘The Yellow Claw,’ ‘Dr Fu-Manchu,’ ‘The Orchard of Tears,’ etc.,” with a statement directly underneath the title in small print informing readers that “all the characters in this story are purely imaginary.”⁶² The story itself is another version of Fu Manchu, but features police investigators from both Scotland Yard and Paris. If *The Chinese Puzzle* and *Mr. Wu* present powerful and dangerous Chinese mandarins who control the fate of white women, the evil Chinese scientist depicted by Sax Rohmer in *The Golden Scorpion* poses an even greater danger than Chinese mandarins. The images of the Chinese presented in the former are not exactly the prototypical “yellow perils” because it is in fact the misdeeds committed by the non-Chinese characters in those stage productions that prompt the responses of the protagonists. On the other hand, the concept of the “Yellow Peril” in fiction and the media, according to Gregor Benson and Edmund Gomez, “grew out of the perception of a deadly threat posed to the whites by yellow hordes, who had only to ‘walk slowly westwards’ to overwhelm Europe” and should be read along with the imperialist campaigns in the late-Victorian era.⁶³ Looking at reports following the Carleton case, it seems that the yellow fiends created by Rohmer exerted a greater influence over the general public than the theatrical representatives of “oriental fun,” and hence lingered on in popular culture.⁶⁴

Limehouse Nights is set in the era when “Oriental” plays or musical comedies were in their prime, yet its handling of an inter-racial love story departs from its “frivolous” predecessors and the production thus provides a critical perspective towards the old genre.⁶⁵ Inspector Burke’s enthusiasm for Chinese people and their culture is analogous not only to the real Burke’s proclivity for creating melodramatic stories featuring lower-class Chinese workers, but also to the crime investigations, both fictional and actual, that attracted so much public attention by the turn of 1919. When the contemporary audiences observe Inspector Burke’s fixation with collecting anything putatively

“Chinese” and witness his conceptual projection of Chinese culture, they are observing a process of evoking the idea of “Chinese people and their culture,” which corresponds to what Deleuze and Guattari consider in the creation of assemblages:

Assemblages are passionate, they are compositions of desire. Desire has nothing to do with a natural or spontaneous determination; there is no desire but assembling, assembled, desire. The rationality, the efficiency, of an assemblage does not exist without the passions the assemblage brings into play, without the desires that constitute it as much as it constitutes them.⁶⁶

In Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualisation, “assemblage” does not merely mean the assembling of random materials, it is the way in which heterogeneous elements can come together and form a non-centred multiplicity. The analytic focus could therefore be shifted from an investigation of pre-given categories to a study of the assemblages created as a result of the mixture of cultural references and practices in a performance. In other words, the important point here is to observe how the coming-together of heterogeneous elements can form new assemblages, which have no stable identities and go through continuous transformation, as new relations are brought into play. From this perspective, the play could be read as an examination of how Inspector Burke perceives what he considers “Chinese” via his encounters with various “Chinese” elements. Of particular interest to this article, as mentioned earlier, is how contingent connections can be made out of the citation of diverse cultural references putatively in relation to China, such as those from theatre performances, novels, and newspaper reports.

Conclusion

Kandinsky’s revisiting of Limehouse Chinatown is influenced by early-20th century popular entertainment and thus provides contemporary audiences with new critical perspectives when approaching the era. It also offers us an opportunity to explore the historical events surrounding the death of Billie Carleton, as well as to engage anew with the emergence of a “Chinese” image out of these events. *Limehouse Nights* can be considered a refraction of manifold influences, including fragments from the musical comedy *San Toy*, literary works by Thomas Burke and Sax Rohmer, and the inquest into the death of Carleton. In the performance, Inspector Burke’s investigation into the death of the fictional Ginny Cazenove interlaces with his curious passion about Chinese people and their culture. The audience thus witnesses the coming together of a collective assemblage in the course of his pursuit, created out of various “Chinese” elements fashioned at the time. The concatenation of all these various elements underlines the lasting influence of earlier “Chinese” popular entertainment to later developments in theatre as well as to the British public perception of Chinese culture at home and abroad.

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2011 meeting of the IFTR historiography working group and the conference on “Contesting British Chinese Culture” at the University of Reading, UK, later the same year. Thanks are due to the participants of both conferences, as well as to the reviewers, for their constructive comments. The author would also like to thank James Yeatman and Elly Hopkins of Kandinsky Theatre for generously sharing its production archive. This research has received financial support from the National Science Council, Taiwan and the National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan.

² Auerbach’s account gives the Limehouse “Chinatown” a clear geographical identification: “London writers were regularly referring to the area encompassed by Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway—two streets that ran east and west, respectively, from the West India Dock Road—as ‘Limehouse Chinatown’ or simply as ‘Chinatown.’” See Sascha Auerbach, *Race, Law, and “The Chinese Puzzle” in Imperial Britain* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 6.

³ John Seed, “Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900–40,” *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (Autumn 2006): 59. The classic jazz number referred to here is “Limehouse Blues” from the 1920s, which became a jazz standard soon after and was recorded by numerous musicians, such as Duke Ellington and the Grateful Dead. This number with added lyrics was turned into a hit record in 1931. Another hit record was George Formby’s “Chinese Laundry Blues” (1932), a comical song about Mr Wu, an owner of a laundry shop in Limehouse. A series of songs about Mr Wu followed. Note that the “Mr Wu” here is a very different character from the other “Mr Wu” this article discusses in a later section.

⁴ The British writer Thomas Burke (1886–1945) was born in Clapham Junction in south London. Two of his best-known books are: *Nights in Town: A London Autobiography* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1915) and *Limehouse Nights: Tales of Chinatown* (London: Daily Express Fiction Library, 1916). The former is a collection of observations about working-class Londoners, which includes the article “A Chinese Night, Limehouse” that describes a stroll at night with friends from Piccadilly to Limehouse. The latter, according to Anne Witchard, had drawn “instant notoriety” upon publication, and the link between Burke and the Chinese community in Limehouse had since been suggested. See Anne Witchard, “Thomas Burke, the ‘Laureate of Limehouse’: A New Biographical Outline,” *English Literature in Transition (1880–1920)*, 48:2 (January 2005): 164.

⁵ The evil genius was the creation of “Sax Rohmer” (the pen name of Arthur Henry Sarsfield Ward, 1883–1959). The first collection of stories about Dr. Fu-Manchu appeared in serialised form in 1912 and these were published the following year as *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* (London: Methuen, 1913). Some of Burke’s stories have been adapted into films that have reached wider audiences, such as D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919, adapted from “The Chink and the Child”) and *The Dream Street* (1921, based on “Gina of Chinatown” and “Song of the Lamp”), Charlie Chaplin’s *A Dog’s Life* (1918, from *Limehouse Nights*), and Maurice Elvey’s *Curlytops* (1924). For a detailed study of this topic, see, for instance, Jon Burrows, “A Vague Chinese Quarter Elsewhere’: Limehouse in the Cinema 1914–36,” *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 6:2 (August 2009): 282–301.

⁶ Anne Witchard, “Laureate of Limehouse”; also *Thomas Burke’s Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2009). While the character Inspector Burke was clearly inspired by the writer Thomas Burke, this article will not discuss the connection between the two Burkes mainly because those who were interested in this connection will find it contained in Witchard’s informative and detailed research.

⁷ The theatre company Kandinsky was formed in 2005. The company was actively involved in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and later had productions transferred to London venues. For more information about the company, see the website: <http://www.kandinskyonline.com/History.php> (accessed on 22 February, 2012).

⁸ Auerbach, *Race, Law, and “The Chinese Puzzle,”* 114.

- ⁹ The building was on the English Heritage's list of buildings at risk in 2003 and it was assisted by a restoration grant in 2006. See the website of Limehouse Town Hall Consortium Trust: <http://www.lthct.org.uk/home/history> (accessed on 22 February, 2012).
- ¹⁰ *Limehouse Nights*, programme notes. For Yeatman's online interview, see <http://www.dimsum.co.uk/culture/rediscovering-limehouse-chinatown.html> (accessed on February 22, 2012.)
- ¹¹ James Yeatman, *Limehouse Nights*, unpublished manuscript, 2010, 4.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁴ This song was not in fact a number for San Toy but a duet written for the character of British national Dudley and San Toy's girl servant Li, and was not listed on the programme. The most popular number in *San Toy*, however, is "Rhoda and Her Pagoda," which tells a story of social advancement "through the imitation of orientalist subjects, manners, and behavior." See Brian Singleton, *Oscar Asche, Orientalism, and British Musical Comedy* (Westport and London: Praeger Publishing, 2004), 24.
- ¹⁵ Played by William Mychael Lee, who is a London-based ethnic Chinese actor.
- ¹⁶ San Toy had been dressed as a boy since childhood because her father did not want the Emperor to find out he had a daughter, for fear that the Emperor would take San Toy as one of his concubines. The melodramatic plot revolves around the revealing of San Toy as a female.
- ¹⁷ *The Times*, 11 February, 1932, 10. *San Toy* was brought to the USA and premiered on October 1, 1900 at Daly's Theatre on Broadway, and revived in 1901, 1902, and 1905 at the same theatre.
- ¹⁸ The announcement of Carleton's death could be read on *The Times*, 29 November, 1918, 10, with no title and a mere twenty-six words: "Miss Stuart, better known as Miss Billie Carleton, who has been playing in *The Freedom of the Seas* at the Haymarket theatre, died suddenly yesterday afternoon." A longer piece, entitled "The Late Miss Billie Carleton," appeared on the following day, giving more detail about Carleton's activities before the death. See *The Times*, 30 November, 1918, 5.
- ¹⁹ *The Play Pictorial*, XXXIII: 197 (1918). The play was written by Walter H. Hackett.
- ²⁰ "Chu Chin Chow. An Eastern Revue at His Majesty's," *The Times*, 1 September, 1916, 9.
- ²¹ *Chu Chin Chow* was later revived by Asche himself in 1926 at the Regent for fifty-one performances, and by others on several occasions (e.g. 1940 and 1941 at the Palace, for eighty-seven and one hundred and fifty-eight performances respectively).
- ²² *The Chinese Puzzle*, programme notes, 1918.
- ²³ *The Play Pictorial*, XXXIII: 196 (1918).
- ²⁴ It should be noted that *Shanghai* was staged at Drury Lane, which had a capacity of about 3,000 seats, one of the biggest theatres in London, and therefore might make the total viewing number exceed that of *The Chinese Puzzle* in an 872-seat theatre. See J. P. Wearing, "The London West End Theatre in the 1890s," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 29:3 (October 1977): 320–332, for a detailed account of London theatres in the late Victorian period.
- ²⁵ *The Sketch*, CIII: 1336 (4 September, 1918).
- ²⁶ *The Tatler*, LXIX: 898 (11 September, 1918).
- ²⁷ Singleton, *Oscar Asche*, 113.
- ²⁸ "Shanghai. Spectacular Operette at Drury Lane," *The Times*, 29 August, 1918, 8.
- ²⁹ Gordon Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Re-evaluation* (London: Continuum, 2003), 21.
- ³⁰ Lord Chamberlain's Play Collection, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, 1918/14.
- ³¹ "'The Chinese Puzzle' Again," *The Times*, 28 January, 1919, 3.
- ³² Lord Chamberlain's Play Collection, 1918/11. This correspondence is dated 15 June 1918 and attached to the collection of manuscripts.
- ³³ The character Chi Lung was given the title "Dr" in the typed manuscript submitted for licence but was corrected with pen as "His Excellent, Marquis."
- ³⁴ LCP 1918/11.
- ³⁵ "The Chinese Puzzle," *The Times*, 12 July, 1918, 9.
- ³⁶ The play was written by H. M. Vernon and Harold Owen.
- ³⁷ *Play Pictorial* XXXIII: 2.

³⁸ The comparison between *Mr. Wu* and *The Chinese Puzzle* could also be read in "The Playhouses," *Illustrated London News*, 20 July, 1918, 82.

³⁹ *Mr Wu*, Programme notes, 1916.

⁴⁰ The popularity of *The Chinese Puzzle* is also demonstrated by the two films adapted from the play (1919 dir. Fred Goodwins and 1932 dir. Guy Newall), and the novel based upon it: Marian Bower and Leon M. Lion, *The Chinese Puzzle* (London: Hutchinson, 1919). Curiously, while Chi Lung leaves for China at the end of the theatrical version, films have him committing suicide. *Mr. Wu* was also adapted into a silent film in 1919 (dir. Maurice Elvey).

⁴¹ *A Chinese Honeymoon* was first performed at Theatre Royal, Hanley, on 16 October, 1899, and opened in London at the Strand theatre on 5 October, 1901, for a record-breaking 1071 performances. *A Chinese Honeymoon* was billed as "A Musical Play in two acts" in the programme. It was revived in 1915 at the Prince of Wales's for a significantly shorter run of 36 performances. *See-See*, a "new Chinese Comic Opera" as described in its programme, opened at the Prince of Wales's on 20 June, 1906 for 151 performances.

⁴² Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War*, 1.

⁴³ Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1984), xv.

⁴⁴ A. E. Wilson, *Edwardian Theatre* (London: Arthur Barker, 1951), 41.

⁴⁵ Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Brian Singleton also comments on Asche's pictorialist approach in which the Orient was subjected to "fantasy in exotic spectaculars," as observed in popular entertainment in the same era. See Singleton, *Oscar Asche*, 14.

⁴⁶ Criticisms of such strategies, particularly found at the forefront of Asian-American studies, often argue that the Victorian and Edwardian onstage portrayals of Chinese people and their cultures were misrepresentative and created undesirable associations that continue to affect perceptions of ethnic Chinese today. For instance: James Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in American. Studies in Theatre History and Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁴⁷ J. P. Wearing, "Edwardian London West End Christmas Entertainments, 1900–1914," in Judith L. Fisher and Stephen Watt eds., *When They Weren't Doing Shakespeare: Essays on Nineteenth-Century British and American Theatre* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 230. See also Michael Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850–1910* (Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), for a detailed study on the taste for spectacle.

⁴⁸ Len Platt, *Musical Comedy on the West End Stage, 1890–1939* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 78.

⁴⁹ For instance, Jay Weinstein, "Fu Manchu and the Third World," *Culture and Society*, 21:2 (1984): 77–82; Stephen Hong Sohn, "Introduction: Alien/Asian: Imagining the Racialized Future," *The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 33:4 (Winter 2008): 5–22.

⁵⁰ Ho Chi Chung is played by Jeremy Tiang, a London-based ethnic Chinese actor.

⁵¹ Yeatman, 35. The lack of punctuation is reflected in the original unpublished script and shows the constant interruptions by those involved in this conversation.

⁵² Michael R. Godley, "The End of the Queue: Hair as Symbol in Chinese History," *East Asian History* 8 (December 1994): 53–72.

⁵³ Yeatman, *Limehouse Nights*, 43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁵ Research based upon a series of interviews with "Chinatown Annie" presents another couple (a Chinese man and a white woman) dealing in opium located in the Limehouse area in the 1920s and 1930s, and reveals a common attitude towards inter-racial marriage in the early 20th century. See Annie Lai, Bob Little, Pippa Little, "Chinatown Annie: The East End Opium Trade 1920-35: The Story of a Woman Opium Dealer," *Oral History*, 14:1 (Spring 1986): 18-30.

⁵⁶ For a detailed account of the night leading towards the death of Carleton, see Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London: Granta Books), 1992. Although Kohn's book generally presents a piece of sound research, there are some elements that need to be validated throughout.

⁵⁷ "East-End Opium Syndicate," *The Times*, 15 August, 1918, 3; "East-End Opium Dens," *The Times*, 24 August, 1918, 3.

⁵⁸ I consider reports on 15 and 24 August as two independent events, yet, there are confusions in these reports. The news on both dates does not report the names of those involved, yet both describe the opium dens in Poplar as some of the worst, and recommend the expulsion of the Chinese owners.

⁵⁹ Yeatman, *Limehouse Nights*, 22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶¹ "The Illustrated London News' Christmas Number," *Illustrated London News* (London), 7 December, 1918, 740. These words appear as the promotion for an already released Christmas Number and are repeated in the next issue, "The Illustrated London News' Christmas Number," *Illustrated London News* (London), 14 December, 1918, 780.

⁶² "Christmas Number," *Illustrated London News* (London), 2 December, 1918, 7–30, 35–48, 7.

⁶³ Gregor Benton and Edmund Terence Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain, 1800–Present: Economy, Transnationalism, Identity* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 293.

⁶⁴ Characters like Fu Manchu were often read as posing sexual threats to white women. See, for instance, Lan Dong, "Cinematic Representation of the Yellow Peril: D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*," in Linden Lewis et al., eds., *Color, Hair, and Bone: Race in the Twenty-First Century* (Danvers, MA: Associated University Presses, 2008), 122–146. For discussions on the inter-racial marriage and issues it has raised, see for instance, M. Paige Baldwin, "Subject to Empire: Married Women and the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act," *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (October 2000): 522–56; and Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870–1914* (River Oram Press: London, 1997).

⁶⁵ Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War*, 1.

⁶⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 399.