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George Orwell's Vision of China:[*] From Beastly Tea to Sickly Rice-Spirit

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Orwell's vision of China from his first novel *Burmese Days* (1933) to his final novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and argues that Orwell's presentation of China/Chinese-ness proceeded through three stages. As a child and teenager growing up in the opening decades of the twentieth century, he encountered a late-Victorian Orientalist China which proliferated in music hall shows, colonial exhibitions, boys' adventure magazines, and other aspects of the popular culture, and he documented these stereotypical representations in his essays and other non-fiction prose writings. Later, during his five years in Burma from 1922-27, he acquired a more informed understanding of China and Chinese culture, and he continued to add to his knowledge following his return from the East through readings and personal contacts with Chinese intellectuals and British China experts. Finally, during the last decade of his career when he emerged as an influential political writer and public intellectual, he became interested in China as a geopolitical concept. This resulted in the vision of Eastasia as a global power in his last novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Throughout this study, the importance of this theme as an interesting barometer of Orwell's maturation as a writer is emphasized.

KEYWORDS: George Orwell, the Western imaginary of China, *Burmese Days*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell's reception in China, Orwellian China

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> 10.10.42: Today in honour of the anniversary of the Chinese Revolution the Chinese flag was hoisted over Broadcasting House. Unfortunately, it was upside down.
>
> (George Orwell, *War-time Diary*)

George Orwell served in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma from 1922 to 1927. Although apparently but a five-year interlude in his life—resigning from his post at the age of twenty-four, he would never again set foot in Asia—his time in Burma represents a key period in his intellectual development and profoundly inspired his career as one of the most influential political writers of the twentieth century. As I suggested in my foreword to the March 2014 special issue of *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* on "Orienting Orwell: Asian and Global Perspectives on Orwell," *Burmese Days* (1934), the novel which resulted from his experiences in Burma, represents the first complete articulation of his anti-colonial stance and signifies the emergence of an interesting minor theme in his fiction, namely China and Chinese culture. During an excursion in Chapter 11, the protagonist John Flory and his love interest Elizabeth Lackersteen leave the European enclave in the town of Kyauktada in Upper Burma and visit a Chinese grocer in the bazaar. When offered green tea by the store's proprietor Li Yeik, Elizabeth turns up her nose and comments: "This tea looks absolutely beastly. It's quite green. You'd think they'd have the sense to put milk in it, wouldn't you?" (Orewell, *Complete Works* [*CW*] 2: 134)

Using this scene as a starting point for a brief discussion of Orwell's image of China, I reached a tentative conclusion that "China, in view of its distant location, size, antiquity, continuity as a major non-Western civilization, and 'invincibility' . . . could be used flexibly by Orwell to suit various literary purposes. India/South Asia was always the lodestone of his Asia-centric vision of race, empire, and the capitalist world order, but China seems to have played an interesting supplementary role" (16). However, while calling attention to the emergence of China as a noteworthy minor theme in the Orwell corpus, my comments in "Orienting Orwell" did not reveal the larger context of the excursion to the Chinese grocer, nor did they offer a comprehensive survey of related mentions of China and Chinese cultural concepts in the Orwell corpus. The purpose of this study then is to follow up on my earlier reflection on the subject and engage in a much more thorough discussion of the role which China

played in Orwell's literary and political program. I now argue that Orwell's presentation of the China theme was not so much a function of his "flexible" literary usage; rather, it evolved from his personal and political development proceeding through three stages. Growing up in the opening decades of the twentieth century, he encountered a late-Victorian Orientalist China which proliferated in music hall shows, boys' adventure magazines, colonial exhibitions, and other aspects of the popular culture, and he pinpointed these representations in his mature work. Subsequently, during his time in Burma, he acquired a more informed understanding of Chinese and other Asian cultures, and he continued to deepen his knowledge following his return from the East through readings and personal contacts. Finally, during the last decade of his career when he emerged as an influential political writer and public intellectual, he became interested in China as a geopolitical factor. This resulted in the vision of Eastasia as a global power in his dystopian masterpiece *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

Orwell, to be sure, never set foot in China and, indeed, never got closer than the neighboring Burma. Nor did China ever become one of his major themes as it did for Paul Claudel, Victor Ségalen, Pearl S. Buck, Ezra Pound, Franz Kafka, André Malraux, Italo Calvino, and other Western writers who, either traveled in China and reported first-hand information, or, never having been there, created richly detailed imaginary visions of the Middle Kingdom.[1]

Nevertheless, Orwell's standing as "the best-known English literary figure of the first half of the twentieth century" (Rodden and Rossi 1) and "nothing less than a cultural icon" (Keeble 1) obliges us to take seriously not only the great themes which made him famous—such as the threat of totalitarianism, the uses and abuses of socialism, Newspeak, etc.—but also significant minor themes such as his literary representation of China within the context of his larger vision of the world order. As Douglas Kerr observes in his article "Orwell and Kipling: Global Visions," Orwell and Kipling were "global writers," that is writers who "thought globally" and were frustrated that their countrymen, "paid

[1] Orwell figures in discussions of Orientalism—Edward Said, for example, cites his essay "Marrakech" in *Orientalism* (1978) and references him as a kindred figure in his chapter on Albert Camus in *Literature and Imperialism* (1993)—but is not discussed by Gu Ming Dong in his study of Sinologism, that is, the colonial and postcolonial Western writings about China. Nor is he touched on in other relevant studies of the Western construction of China by Colin Mackerras, Jonathan Spence, Nicholas Clifford, Eric Hayot, or Paul French.

too little attention to the rest of the world, and their obligations to it" (38).[2] China, in this sense, was one of those countries that Orwell "paid attention" to, and, while he was never as conversant about China as he was about India and Burma, he accorded China an important place in his geopolitical vision. It will be seen, moreover, that Orwell, the "revolutionary in love with the past" (Crick 408), was also an internationalist in love with his own country; that is, he often combined and, in fact, complicated his progressive anti-imperialist agenda with a fond preference for English traditions and popular culture.[3] This, in turn, impacted his image of China and led him to alternate open-minded reflections on China and Chinese culture with rather subjective and sometimes idiosyncratic observations. For all these reasons, a more extensive empirical review of Orwell's vision of China is called for, not only to advance our understanding of this iconic author, but also to facilitate further theorizations about Orientalism and/or globalism.[4]

I. "Debilitating Vice": Orwell and Opium

Before proceeding with this mapping of Orwell's China, however, it is useful to examine an important subject involving Britain's relations with China which he didn't tackle as openly as might have been expected, namely, the trade in opium from British India to China. As is well-known, following the First Opium War of 1839-42, Britain compelled Qing Dynasty China to allow the import of opium, and this arrangement remained in place throughout the age of the so-called unequal treaties between China and the Western powers. In 1860,

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[2] I also call attention to Kerr's earlier study *George Orwell*, especially Chapter 2 on "Asia," which further examines Orwell as a global thinker. Alok Rai acknowledges Orwell's international outlook and situates his main contribution within "the larger cultural narrative of liberal social democracy" (165). For Orwell and Asia, also see Peter Davison, "Orwell Goes East" and the essays by John Rodden, Douglas Kerr, Gita V. Pai, Angelia Poon, and Shan Te-hsing in *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1.

[3] Orwell's close friend Malcolm Muggeridge noted that "he was by temperament deeply conservative. He loved the past, hated the present and dreaded the future" (172).

[4] The rationale for a study of Orwell's image of China is boosted by recent discussions about two related subjects, namely, Orwell in China and Orwellian China. Orwell in China concerns the reception, translation, and adaptation of Orwell's work in China. As Michael Rank comments: "*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is all over the place in China in fact. A Chinese website lists no fewer than thirteen translations published in the PRC between 1985 and 2012, and it's easy to find at least three or four downloadable or online translations on a quick internet search." Orwellian China refers to the debate about surveillance practices in China similar to those described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, such as the Golden Shield Internet firewall, a.k.a. the Great Firewall of China, which blocks Chinese netizens' access to foreign Internet sites not approved by their government.

the trade in opium was legalized in British India as a government monopoly, and the Opium Department was established to oversee its cultivation. Orwell's father Richard Blair joined this department in 1875 and served until he retired in 1912. His career was a mediocre one; he was constantly transferred from post to post, and the highest rank he achieved was Sub-Deputy Opium Agent. The Opium Department, moreover, was generally viewed as one of the less desirable departments, and Orwell biographer Bernard Crick characterizes its standing among British civil servants as the "wretched Opium Department" (136).

As a child growing up in England, Orwell may not have been well informed about the particulars of the opium trade, but once he served in Burma he certainly witnessed its ruinous impact. Yet, while he spoke eloquently about many forms of economic injustice, such as the suffering of rickshaw pullers in India (discussed in his first book *Down and Out in Paris and London*), the wretched conditions in English coal mines (reported on in *The Road to Wigan Pier*), or the blind submission of African soldiers to their superiors in the French army (see his essay "Marrakech"); the India-China opium connection was one such injustice which he did not have much to say about. In *Burmese Days*, for example, opium use is mentioned, but at no point does the novel engage in a serious discussion of the politics and ethics of the opium trade, even though opportunities for doing so abound. When Flory and Elizabeth enter Li Yeik's shop, they note the "cool sweetish smell of opium" (*CW* 2: 132), and later on Flory is forced to deal with a work stoppage when his coolies do not receive their usual supply of opium. In Chapter 3, moreover, Flory, the self-proclaimed anti-imperialist, speaks at length about "the lie that we're here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them" (*CW* 2: 37). The way it works, he observes, is that "the official holds the Burman down while the businessman goes through his pockets," and he enumerates the various British commercial interests profiting from this scheme, including the timber firms (one of which he represents), the oil companies, the miners, the planters, the traders, and the Rice Ring which is "skinning the unfortunate peasant" (*CW* 2: 38). Conspicuously missing from this list of robbers is the Opium Department, and thus Britain's dominant position in the opium trade is not addressed here or, in fact, anywhere else in the novel.

Eight years following the publication of *Burmese Days*, Orwell also briefly discussed opium in his review of *A Modern de Quincey* by Captain H. R. Robinson (*The Observer*, 13 Sept. 1942). Robinson, whom he had known

personally in Burma, was an English opium smoker dismissed from the Burma Military Police, and he discusses the work of this "pioneer hippie drop-out" (Crick 154) as an interesting contribution to the literature of opium addiction. He points out that it is puzzling as to why someone should abandon himself to "such a debilitating—and in a European—unusual vice" and observes that "Captain Robinson merely explains that one night in Mandalay he happened to see some Chinese smoking their opium, decided to try what it was like, and thereafter became a habitual opium-smoker" (*CW* 14: 34). He also reflects that there must have been some other reason why Robinson wanted "to escape from real life" and mentions the author's "adventures as a frontier magistrate among the little-known tribes in the north-east corner of Burma" (*CW* 14: 34). However, once again his silence on the political backstory of this "debilitating vice" is striking. Perhaps he felt that the case against the opium trade was sufficiently established in the public record—missionaries and others had written about it—or perhaps his father's career as, "in essence, an imperial dope peddler" caused him to be more reticent (Ross 202). Even so, readers may wonder why Orwell did not rise to his usual level of indignation in his statements on this subject.

II. The "Gorgeous East": China in Popular Culture

In turning now to the imaginary China which Orwell encountered during his childhood, it is interesting that his earliest memory goes back to a time when he was only four or five years old. In his "Saturday Essay" entitled "Songs We Used to Sing" published in the *Evening Standard* on 19 January 1946, he reflects: "The earliest song I can remember, which must have been in 1907 or 1908, was 'Rhoda had a pagoda.' It was an inconceivably silly song, but it was certainly popular" (*CW* 18: 49). What makes this "silly song" relevant to his vision of China is that "Rhoda and her pagoda" is a song from *San Toy, or the Emperor's Own: A Chinese Musical Comedy*, which debuted in 1899 and featured a rich array of Chinese stock characters. The song concerns an upwardly mobile London lass who opens a tea shop featuring a Chinese architectural décor. Dressed like a Chinese girl, her intention is to attract an upmarket clientele to her Pagoda and possibly snare a well-heeled older husband, an ambition which she achieves, thus enabling her to close down her tea shop and become a wealthy socialite. The joke is manifestly on English class distinctions and social pretensions, but Orwell's recollection also highlights the

manner in which cultural others were routinely turned into commercial entertainment.[5]

Another childhood memory involving a musical concerns *Chu Chin Chow: A Musical Tale of the East*, which Orwell saw as a thirteen-year-old. As Orwell editor Peter Davison comments, the original production of this musical extravaganza of the East, written by the actor and theater manager Oscar Asche, "opened at His Majesty's Theatre on 31 August 1916—two months after the battle of the Somme began—and ran for 2,238 performances" (*CW* 12: 216). Decades later, Orwell attended a new production of the play as film and theater critic for *Time and Tide* and published a brief review on 13 July 1940. Davison notes that the new production "managed a successful but not outstanding run" (*CW* 12: 216), but the impact of the play should not be underestimated as there were also film adaptations in 1925 and 1934, and there were performances in the USA, Australia, and elsewhere.

Orwell begins his review by looking back at the original 1916 production and wondering out loud why so many people, including his younger self, at one time delighted in such nonsense: "Is it really possible that this tripe once ran for five years continuously?" (*CW* 12: 215) The word "tripe" appears as a typical Orwellian provocation; as Terry Eagleton observes, there was "a latently histrionic strain beneath Orwell's dispassionate documentation, a weakness for the verbal flourish and flamboyant gesture." A brief summary of the plot, though, suggests why Orwell may have felt such language was appropriate. *Chu Chin Chow* is set in the fairy tale Middle East of Ali Baba, and concerns a Chinese merchant, Chu Chin Chow, who is coming from China to visit Ali Baba's wealthy brother Kasim Baba. Before reaching his destination, the merchant is murdered by the robber Abu Hasan and the latter then impersonates his victim in order to infiltrate Kasim Baba's palace and carry out various intrigues. In his Chu Chin Chow disguise, Kasim Baba appears as a villain in the purest Fu Manchu tradition, with a skullcap, silk robe, narrow mischievous eyes, a thin, long, hanging moustache, and claw-like fingernails. As for the extraordinary success of the original production of *Chu Chin Chow*, "the greatest stage hit of modern times," Orwell relates it to the special circumstances of WW I (*CW* 12: 215). It was, he observes, the "fantastic

[5] The libretto and musical score of *San Toy* see are available online. For the career of George Edwardes, the producer who staged *San Toy* and similar musical comedies on Japanese and Middle Eastern themes, see Postlewait.

unreality of the whole thing" which fascinated an entire generation and conjured up "a never-never land, the 'gorgeous East,' where, as is well known, everyone has fifty wives and spends his time lying on a divan, eating pomegranates. In this vulgar spectacle a doomed generation of boys got a sort of dreamlike glimpse of all the ease and pleasure they would never have" (*CW* 12: 216). Ross Forman takes the analysis further and comments in his *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined* (2013) that representations of the Chinese on the Victorian and Edwardian stage

> all have one thing in common: whether they depict the Chinese as Christians in waiting or 'queer' creatures who inhabit the orbit of plates, farces, musical extravaganzas, and 'pyro-spectacular' dramas, they all conceive of the Middle Kingdom as a site on which to project fantasies about Britain's role in the world. In so doing, they present a dramatic tableau of how the spectator at home got swept up in the theater of empire (28).[6]

While musical comedies such as *San Toy* and *Chu Chin Chow* comprise one important source of imagination regarding China and Chinese-ness, another key source were various forms of children's literature, such as, for example, the boys' magazines which Orwell enjoyed as a child and critically re-examined as an adult in his famous essay on "Boy's Weeklies" (1940). Orwell's analysis of popular culture in this essay and elsewhere had a considerable impact and helped to direct academic attention towards popular culture studies. As Orwell scholar and biographer Jeffrey Meyers concludes in his comments on "Boy's Weeklies," Orwell's "innovative approach to popular culture opened the field to serious study and was extremely influential" (205), and Terry Eagleton agrees that "he managed to pioneer what is now known as cultural studies."

Orwell's reading of the weeklies focuses on the conservative pre-WW I outlook of such mainstays of the genre as the *Gem*, the *Magnet*, and others; as he notes, "their basic political assumptions are two: nothing ever changes and foreigners are funny" (*CW* 12: 65-66). The consequence is that, even in the late thirties, many of these weeklies still contained the same comic-book images of foreigners which had been in circulation for decades. These include: a French

[6] For the libretto of *Chu Chin Chow*, see Asche. For a study of China in European musical culture from the eighteenth century to modern pop music and film soundtracks, see Piotrowska.

public school master called Mossoo who looks like "the usual comic-paper Frog with pointed beard, pegtop trousers, etc."; an Indian boy by the name of Inky, who, "though a rajah, and therefore possessing snob-appeal, is also the comic *babu* of the *Punch* tradition"; an American, Fisher T. Fish, who is "the old-style stage Yankee . . . dating from a period of Anglo-American jealousy," and Wun Lung, the Chinese boy, who is "the nineteenth century pantomime Chinaman, with saucer-shaped hat, pigtail and pidgin-English" (*CW* 12: 66).[7] He further comments: "The assumption all along is not only that foreigners are comics who are put there for us to laugh at, but that they can be classified in much the same way as insects. That is why in all boys' papers, not only the *Gem* and *Magnet*, a Chinese is invariably portrayed with a pigtail. It is the thing you recognise him by, like the Frenchman's beard or the Italian's barrel-organ" (*CW* 12: 66).

Orwell would further comment on representations of racial others in children's literature in an essay on American's children's literature when he observed how books read in childhood tend to "create in one's mind a false map of the world" and he mentions "the China of Guy Boothby" (*CW* 18: 493) as one example; Boothby, it is to be noted, was the late-Victorian author of *Dr. Nikola Returns* (1896) and other adventure novels set in Shanghai, Tibet, and other exotic locales. A more forceful example illuminating Orwell's stance, however, surfaces in his "As I Please" column of 27 February 1947 when he quotes rhymes from a child's illustrated alphabet, a so-called "travel alphabet," published that year. The alphabet, he notes, still contained the word "Chinaman" and pictures of Chinese people wearing pigtails and traveling in junks decades after such representations had been rejected by Chinese people themselves. While he does not reference his assertion that Chinese people had long rejected such images with specific examples, one may surmise that he probably understood the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, when the wearing of pigtails was discontinued, to be a turning point. As for the usage "Chinaman," as late as 1937 the *Oxford Dictionary* still lists one possible definition as "A native of China" with the date 1854 mentioned as the first occurrence. Orwell's engagement with such issues was not new, nor had he always been unambiguously progressive himself in his word choice. The first edition of *Burmese Days* in 1934, for example, had made use of the word "Chinaman"

[7] The name Wun Lung was used for both male and female Chinese characters in British popular culture; *San Toy*, for example, features a corporal in the emperor's female guard named Wun Lung.

wherever Chinese were mentioned, and in his "As I Please" column of 10 December 1943 he admitted that he had been wrong to use this word and was currently replacing it with "Chinese" in the proofs of a new edition. He further also urged his readers "to avoid insulting nicknames" for Africans, Muslims, and others (*CW* 16: 24).[8] While it is difficult to determine exactly, therefore, when the lexical shift may have occurred and the word "Chinaman" assumed its derogatory meaning, one must take into account that, as Orwell himself notes in his 1947 column, China became Britain's ally in 1941 and this caused a revaluation of the relationship between the two nations. In any event, concludes Orwell, the stereotypes found in travel alphabets are bound to instill a "patronising attitude" in children which may influence them for the rest of their lives and then be passed on to the next generation. As such, they should no longer be accepted.

One more influential source of Orientalist entertainments and fantasies were the many international and imperial fairs and exhibitions which took place in early twentieth century Britain. An intriguing memory of such an international fair pops up—rather unexpectedly—in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell's memoir of the Spanish Civil War. As he narrates, he was shot in the throat one day while standing in a trench and was evacuated from the front over badly damaged roads. The terrible jolting, which went on for miles and terribly sickened several soldiers, occasioned the following reflection: "Bang, bump, wallop! It took me back to my early childhood and a dreadful thing called the Wiggle-Woggle at the White City Exhibition" (CW 6: 140-41). The White City was a fairground in London which hosted international exhibitions, sporting events, and other entertainments, and acquired its name from the marble which was lavishly used in its construction. As for the Wiggle-Woggle, Orwell biographer Gordon Bowker identifies it as a monster fairground ride and suggests that Orwell was taken there in the summer of 1909, when the White City hosted the International Imperial Exhibition (20). The Wiggle-Woggle, however, was featured not in 1909, but one year later in the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910. This exhibition, which was intended to celebrate friendship between Britain and Japan, included an impressive display of gardens, pavilions, gates, dioramas, and exhibitions of arts and manufactures, as well as two native villages, one featuring Ainu people from the Japanese frontier region Hokkaido, and another with Formosan tribesmen from Japan's

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[8] For a more in-depth discussion of this 1943 column, see Vynckier 13.

island colony Taiwan. The latter had been ceded to Japan by the Qing government in 1895 following the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, and the Japanese were keen to demonstrate their credentials as empire builders. The young Orwell, in any event, in addition to riding the Wiggle-Woggle, may also have strolled around the exhibition and viewed the Ainu and Formosan villagers.[9]

The commodification of non-Western cultures, including China, by means of international exhibitions, parades, dioramas, and other shows of this nature began long before the inauguration of the White City fairgrounds, and the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace already included a large Chinese stand with furniture, vases, lanterns, silks, a model Chinese junk, musical instruments, and an adult Chinese man and one female child. Elsewhere in London, the Chinese gallery in Hyde Park and a Chinese junk in the harbor of London attracted many thousands of visitors year after year, and various Chinese shows and entertainments continued in London throughout the nineteenth century.[10] As Timothy Mitchell comments in his study "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," international exhibitions and all the cultural and commercial events around them were one important example of "the new procedures with which Europeans began to organize the representation of the world, from museums and world exhibitions, to architecture, schooling, tourism, the fashion industry, and the commodification of everyday life" (289). He also observes that in 1892 "32 million people visited the Exposition Universelle, built that year in Paris to commemorate the centenary of the Revolution and to demonstrate French commercial and imperial power" and concludes: "The consolidation of the global hegemony of the West, economically and politically, can be connected not just to the imagery of Orientalism but to all the new machinery for rendering up and laying out the meaning of the world, so characteristic of the imperial age" (289-90).

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[9] Exhibitions of this nature were a mainstay at the White City. In 1908, there was a Franco-British exhibition, featuring an Irish village on the British side, and a Senegalese village on the French side, and the International Imperial Exhibition of 1909 and the Coronation Exhibition of 1911 also included ethnic villages. Other locations around London hosted similar events; in 1911, for example, there was a Festival of Empire exhibition at Crystal Palace in which the Crown Colony India played an important role.

[10] Richard D. Altick surveys Chinese shows in London in his *The Shows of London* (292-97). Other European capitals also hosted Chinese exhibitions, including the 1873 Vienna World Fair, which featured the first Chinese participation officially organized by the Chinese government, and the Paris exhibitions of 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900 all included Chinese stands and pavilions.

Two late-Victorian exhibitionary events which were of special interest to Orwell were Queen Victoria's 1887 Gold Jubilee and her 1897 Diamond Jubilee, both of which included substantial colonial shows and parades. We know that Orwell collected jubilee mugs from the 1887 and 1897 Jubilees, and in his short essay on his collecting interests "Just Junk—But Who Can Resist It?" he mentions Chinese ginger jars alongside jubilee mugs, glass paperweights, and other relics from the Victorian age among the "treasures" which could be found in the London junk-stores he frequented (*CW* 18: 18). The modern Western mapping of the world, in sum, remained in full operation in Edwardian and Georgian England throughout Orwell's childhood and Orwell, as an enthusiastic observer and collector, was fully immersed in the exhibitionary order.[11]

III. Chinese Tea vs. English Tea

As stated above, *Burmese Days* marks the first appearance of Chinese people in Orwell's work and results from the time in his life when he experienced real contact with cultural others and was able to begin moving beyond the popular caricatures he grew up with. Early in the novel, the narrator reviews the ethnic composition of Kyauktada, the fictional town in which the story is set, and notes the existence of a small Chinese community alongside the Europeans, the Burmese, the mixed-race Eurasians, and a sizable number of Indians. He later also makes scattered references to Chinese people in the streets and Chinese foods in the markets. The visit to the Chinese grocer Li Yeik is the principal scene involving Chinese characters, no doubt due to the important role the Chinese played in Burma's domestic economy and international trade. In an interview about Burma with G. B. Pittock-Buss published in the Autumn 1944 issue of *New Vision*, Orwell states that, while it will be important for an independent Burma to have a "strong and friendly alliance with China," it is also the case that "the Chinese are viewed with hatred and fear by many Burmans. The powerful economic position of the small Chinese community in Burma has already provoked riots . . ." (*CW* 16: 361). Flory in *Burmese Days*, meanwhile, considers the Chinese "more civilized"

[11] For the literature on international exhibitions, see: Geppert, Coffey and Lau; Findling and Pelle; Geppert; and Filipova.

than the English and, judging from the British point of view rather than the Burmese, observes: “They’re a favorite race in this country. And they’re very democratic in their ideals. It’s best to treat them as equals” (*CW* 2: 134). Elizabeth, however, does not share his cultural interests and finds the entire experience “infra dig” (*CW* 2: 132), that is below her dignity. As noted above, she also objects to what she considers the lack of sense Chinese people show when they serve tea; the fact that her father had been a tea-broker perhaps bolstering her self-view as someone who knows a thing or two about tea.

Yet, for all of her talk about sense, she herself does not make much sense when she observes that the Chinese way of drinking tea—green and without milk—is wrong. Not only is the tea, as Flory explains, an excellent tea with orange blossoms imported from China, but Chinese people traditionally did not put milk in their tea regardless of its color—whether green tea, yellow oolong, black puer, or any of the other teas which China is famous for. Nor is it likely that they would have had milk on the premises as milk and dairy products in general were not a staple of the diet of the vast majority of Chinese people. Elizabeth, finally, in addition to being ignorant about Chinese culture, also seems to lack knowledge of her own culture’s history, as centuries earlier the English had initially drunk green tea when tea was first imported from—where else? —China and only gradually switched to black tea from British India. Even then, the upper classes and sophisticated tea drinkers would continue to drink Chinese teas throughout the Georgian age and in his essay “Old China” of 1833 the English essayist and antiquarian collector Charles Lamb noted that he and his sister were “old fashioned enough” to drink Hyson, a Chinese green tea, “unmixed still of an afternoon” (169).[12] Elizabeth’s bigotry, therefore, obscures the complex transfers of people and products, as well as changes in fashions, which shaped her personal tastes and her sense of her culture’s normative modernity.[13]

[12] The passage concerns a fine set of Chinese porcelain tea cups, which Lamb collected, and reads in its entirety: “I was pointing out to my cousin last evening, over our Hyson (which we are old fashioned enough to drink unmixed still of an afternoon) some of these *speciosa miracula* upon a set of extraordinary old blue china (a recent purchase) which we were now for the first time using . . .” (169).

[13] The Georgian’s love of Chinese tea makes for an effective set piece in episode 4 of David Dimbleby’s documentary series *How We Built Britain* (2007), when he visits the Georgian mansion of Saltram House, near Plymouth. After having inspected a precious antique tea set, he sits down for a period-style tea and observes how the pale Chinese tea, formerly the tea of choice for the British upperclasses, is not the kind of tea which he normally drinks.

Orwell would return to the subject of Chinese tea in his comic novel *Coming Up for Air* from 1939 when the protagonist, insurance salesman George Bowling, reflects on his happy pre-WW I childhood in the small town of Lower Binfield. Recalling his first job as a teenage school-leaver in a local grocery store, he observes how he learned all there is to know about cheese, eggs, slabs of butter, bacon slicers, and paper bags, and "could spin you some fair technicalities about grades of Chinese tea" (*CW* 2: 169). The most important passage involving Chinese tea, however, occurs when Bowling undertakes a sentimental journey to his hometown and discovers that his parents' house, which used to include his father's poultry-feed store, has been converted into a fancy tea-shop featuring a dark antique style very different from his parents' simple but cozy house. Although he does not really want tea, he enters and orders tea, thus giving him an opportunity to examine the renovations more fully. The waitress "was ten minutes getting" his order and when she finally brings it to him, he cannot suppress his disappointment over the tea selection: "You know the kind of tea—China tea, so weak that you could think it's water till you put the milk in" (198). Orwell, thus, reverses the dynamic of the earlier encounter between an English tea drinker and Chinese tea. In *Burmese Days*, a Chinese merchant welcomed a European visitor to his shop, but the latter reacted in a condescending manner and created an unpleasant scene. In *Coming Up for Air*, meanwhile, Bowling's rejection of the Chinese tea illustrates his nostalgic discontent with the changes taking place in his hometown.[14]

The above scenes, from *Burmese Days* to *Coming Up for Air*, exemplify Orwell's ability to weave his knowledge of Asian settings and cultural themes into his creative fiction, but they do not signify that he preferred Chinese tea himself. On the contrary, like Elizabeth Lackersteen and George Bowling, he liked English tea, that is, black tea with milk, and in January 1946, even published a twenty-paragraph essay named "A Nice Cup of Tea" on the proper method of brewing tea. We learn from it that he liked his tea very strong, but without sugar, and that it is essential to skim the thick cream from the milk, as

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[14] Orwell's second novel, *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), also features a pretentious tea-shop. It is, notes the narrator, one of the very few "definitely offensive buildings" in the small town in which the novel is set and has "a plaster front with sham beams nailed to it, bottle-glass windows, and a revolting curly roof like that of a Chinese joss-house" (*CW* 3: 35). Orwell may have used such a crude term as joss-house to highlight the incongruity of a building which copies a foreign style merely to stand out from its surroundings. He may also have indulged in a private joke involving his younger sister Avril who had opened a teashop in Southwold; the latter, like the town in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, is in East Anglia (Bowker 171).

cream which is too thick gives the tea a “sickly” taste (*CW* 18: 34). Orwell is reputed to have made a similar statement in 1950 shortly before his death when there was talk about sending him to a sanatorium in Switzerland. Although his doctors agreed that the Swiss mountain air might be good for him, his friend Julian Symons found him “worrying with fine Johnsonian insularity about the problem of tea. ‘I don’t know if I shall get proper tea in Switzerland,’ he said. ‘They have that filthy Chinese stuff, you know. I like Ceylon tea, very strong’” (Crick 578).

Words such as “beastly,” “sickly,” and “filthy” recur continually in Orwell’s work and biographical record. “Beastly,” for instance, the word Elizabeth used to denigrate Chinese tea, is associated with him from a very early age as it surfaces for the first time in an entry in the diary of his mother Ida Blair. On 11 February 1905, she commented on her son’s health and notes: “Baby much better. Calling things ‘beastly.’” As Crick implies, however, “baby” may well have been parroting the word from the conversation of his elders: “Who, one may well ask, had been calling things ‘beastly’ so that a not-quite two-year-old repeats it?” (49) Ida Blair, it is to be noted, grew up in Burma herself and only relocated to England from India in 1903 shortly following the birth of her son Eric Arthur, later known as George Orwell. Although the young Eric left India before he could take in the sights and sounds of the country, he seems to have mastered the peculiarities of Anglo-Indian speech at home long before he traveled to the East and was exposed to the conversation of Elizabeth Lackersteen.

There were other Chinese imports which Orwell seems to have valued more highly than tea. As Crick reports, in the year 1931, that is, the year before the publication of his first book *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Orwell befriended the poet Edouard Roditi and the two of them “shared a taste for taking a cheap Chinese meal in Limehouse and then wandering around London together watching people and often talking to them at coffee-stalls” (213). Chinese food was not as popular in Britain then as it is today, but Limehouse, being the location of London’s first Chinatown in the East End near the docks, was one place where it could be obtained. Remarkably, it is also one of the areas where Orwell first began the famous tramping expeditions which he describes in Part 2 of *Down and Out in Paris and London*. As he explains in Chapter 9 of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, following his return from Burma, he took up tramping and living among down-and-outs to expiate the “immense weight of guilt”

which he felt after having spent five years of his life serving an oppressive system (*CW* 5: 138). The plan was to seek out "the lowest of the low" (*CW* 5: 139) and "to go suitably disguised to Limehouse and Whitechapel and such places and sleep in common lodging-houses and pal up with dock-laborers, street-hawkers, derelict people, beggars, and, if possible, criminals" (*CW* 5: 140). Orwell, in other words, began his journey to the social underworld by proceeding through zones of otherness which were the closest thing to the region in the East where he believed he had transgressed so grievously (*CW* 5: 139). If watching *Chu Chin Chow* and visiting imperial exhibitions as a child had immersed him in a Eurocentric "exhibitionary order," here then, where the colonial margin met the social margin, he began to hammer away at that order and, in Mitchell's words, "render up and lay out the meaning of the world" for himself.

IV. "China has to exist in the modern world": from WW II to *1984*

In turning now to the third and final stage of his engagement with China and Chinese-ness, it is clear that at some point Orwell, in addition to devoting himself to the debunking of stereotypes, also began to give more thought to the place of China in the post-WW II global order. In the "As I Please" column of 1947 regarding racial stereotypes discussed above, he cites a curious incident to illustrate the ways in which the patronizing attitude instilled by objectionable publications still "pops up in enlightened people, with disconcerting results; as for instance at the end of 1941, when China officially became our Ally, and at the first important anniversary the B.B.C. celebrated the occasion by flying the Chinese flag over Broadcasting House; and flying it upside down" (*CW* 19: 51). That his interest in this incident was genuine is attested by the fact that he first recorded it five years earlier in his "War-time Diary" on 10 October 1942: "Today in honour of the anniversary of the Chinese Revolution the Chinese flag was hoisted over Broadcasting House. Unfortunately it was upside down" (*CW* 14: 36) Such episodes help to bring into sharper focus Orwell's self-image as a man who considered himself more knowledgeable about Asian societies than most of his countrymen, including certain elites who should have known better, such as the BBC. The matter was all the more serious as China was an ally at the time and, as Rank comments, his "main interest in China was related to its attempts to resist the Japanese, who had first invaded the northeast in 1931 and

the rest of the country six years later, and he voiced his anger [over Japanese atrocities] in several BBC scripts."

This new geopolitical approach also emerges in his review of *The Dragon Beards versus the Blue Prints* by the Chinese journalist and writer Hsiao Chien (蕭乾) published on 6 August 1944. As Orwell editor Davison notes, Hsiao Chien, with whom Orwell collaborated during his time at the BBC from 1941-43, came to England in 1939 as a correspondent for a Chinese newspaper and also served on the staff of the School of Oriental and African Studies.[15] Orwell's review of *The Dragon Beards versus the Blue Prints* begins with some comments on Hsiao Chien's previous book, *Etching of a Tormented Age*, in which Orwell observes that the problems dealt with there are "curiously familiar": "In China, as in England, poets who would not have known which end to milk a cow wrote praises of the country life, others wrote proletarian literature which the proletariat was unable to understand, and the rival claims of propaganda and pure art were savagely disputed" (*CW* 16: 321). Orwell then notes that Hsiao Chien's new book continues the story and addresses the arrival of the machine age in China. Hsiao Chien, however, Orwell comments, was too polite to his English audience and should have pointed out "that for some decades the Chinese experienced the benefits of Western civilization chiefly in the form of bullets" (*CW* 16: 321). Later, he also observes that, though Hsiao Chien was right to affirm that China had ancient artistic traditions which could not be destroyed by the machine, "China has to exist in the modern world, and does not enjoy being told that pigtails are more picturesque than steel helmets" (*CW* 16: 322).[16]

Orwell's reflections in this review may have been influenced by Bertrand Russell's *The Problem of China* (1922). Although we cannot be sure whether Orwell was familiar with this book, we know that he reviewed several later works of the philosopher and corresponded with him at different times. In *The Problem of China*, Russell observed that China was beset by numerous

[15] Following his return to China in 1949, Hsiao Chien was suspected of political unreliability and sent to a labor camp. He later resumed his literary career and published an autobiography, *Traveller Without a Map* (English translation published in 1990), as well as a Chinese translation of Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1995 (*CW* 13: 124). One aspect of Hsiao Chien's ten-year residence in England which may be added to Davison's survey is that he developed a close friendship with E. M. Forster and corresponded extensively with him. See Lien.

[16] On 11 November 1945, Orwell would review another book by Hsiao Chien, *A Harp with a Thousand Strings*, a compilation of texts translated from Chinese and writings about China by English authors from the Elizabethan age till modern times (*CW* 17: 366-68).

problems, but also offered a positive diagnosis for the long-term development of the country: "The culture of China is changing rapidly, and undoubtedly rapid change is necessary. . . . I believe that, if the Chinese are left free to assimilate what they want of our civilization, and to reject what strikes them as bad, they will be able to achieve an organic growth from their own tradition, and to produce a very splendid result, combining our merits with theirs" (13). Orwell's argument that China, while striving to preserve its own cultural identity, was aware of the need to obtain steel helmets, in essence, coheres with Russell's call for a homegrown modernization program.

The most intriguing references to China in Orwell's later years, however, are found in his last novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The protagonist Winston Smith, a Party member and Ministry of Truth employee, is confined to London throughout the events of the novel, only leaving the city once to meet with his lover in the nearby countryside. The country in which he lives, "Airstrip One," as Britain is called in the novel, is fiercely xenophobic, and citizens are continually on the lookout for people who might be enemy infiltrators. The only actual foreigners Smith and his fellow citizens ever see are prisoners of war, that is, soldiers with Asiatic faces from the rival superpowers Eurasia and Eastasia. As Kerr notes in his article "Law and Race in Orwell," "Both Oceania's serial enemies are Oriental" and whenever an enemy soldier is described the image is that of "an explicit racial antagonist, disciplined and reduced to a figure of abjection" (325). At no point, therefore, do feelings of sympathy or human interest develop towards these prisoners among the citizenry, as Oceania's rabid nationalistic culture does not leave the least room for such sentiments among its dehumanized populace.

Smith's only source of what appears to be reliable information about Eurasia and Eastasia is a forbidden book from the political underground, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* by Emmanuel Goldstein, a former revolutionary leader who was accused of treason. In his book, Goldstein explains that Eastasia comprises China, Mongolia, Tibet, parts of Central Asia, Korea, and Japan, and is governed by an ideology with "a Chinese name usually translated as Death-Worship, but perhaps better rendered as Obliteration of the Self" (*CW* 9: 205). While this gives Smith some basic knowledge about Eastasia, the fact that his superior O'Brien later tells him that he helped to write *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* casts doubt on the status of this book as a supposedly reliable opposition manifesto and source of

information about a faraway Asian society.

All the references to Asian people and societies throughout the novel, therefore, whether coming from the government mass media or the pseudo-opposition, are propaganda constructs, but there is one startling image from a Chinese cultural context which breaks through the hard surface of xenophobia. I started with a reference to a Chinese beverage from Orwell's first novel, namely, green tea, and I end with another reference to a Chinese beverage, quite intriguingly rice-spirit, from his last novel. In Chapter 1, namely, Winston Smith leaves the Ministry of Truth at noon and returns to his flat in order to begin writing his diary and commence his rebellion against Big Brother. Before he sits down and begins to write, the hungry Smith, who sacrificed his lunch in the Ministry canteen, goes into the kitchen to find something to eat, but, as he does not have any food in his cupboard, all he can do is drink a cup of gin: "He took down from a shelf a bottle of colourless liquid with a plain white label marked VICTORY GIN. It gave off a sickly, oily smell, as of Chinese rice-spirit. Winston poured out nearly a teacupful, nerved himself for the shock, and gulped it down like a dose of medicine" (*CW* 8: 7).

This reference to Chinese rice-spirit to describe Victory Gin in the opening pages of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is startling as nothing within the lived experience of the protagonist explains the appearance of this simile. The Britain of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a hermetically sealed society in which citizens and especially party members are watched at all times and live their daily lives in strict compliance with government directives. The country being continually at war, foods such as coffee, sugar, chocolate, etc., which in times past were imported from overseas, are now only available in the form of tightly rationed second-rate substitutes. As for his childhood, all Smith remembers is that he lived in a ravaged city amidst endless wars, that there never was enough food, and that his father, mother and younger sister disappeared. Nothing in his past or current life, therefore, suggests that he was ever at leisure to sample an exotic import product such as Chinese rice-spirit. In fact, when he later visits his superior O'Brien in the latter's apartment, he is offered a glass of red grape-wine and tastes such wine for the first time in his life. One cannot but wonder, therefore: if a once common European wine such as red grape-wine has been so completely erased from the daily life and cultural memory of people in Airstrip One, how could Winston ever have tasted Chinese rice-spirit, which comes from an equally closed and xenophobic enemy nation on the other side

of the world? Nor would Chinese rice-spirit for that matter have been familiar to many people in Britain at the time when Orwell wrote the novel.

One may surmise of course that the young Orwell tried rice-spirit in Burma and, not fancying it, remembered it, in the phrases learned from his mother, as smelling "sickly." What we witness, therefore, in this passage in Winston Smith's flat is the author drawing from his rich reservoir of Asian experiences and intermingling the three layers of cross-cultural imagery and experience encountered over the course of his life. The adjective "sickly," first of all, evokes the Eurocentric mental outlook and verbal tags prevalent in the social milieu which provided him with his earliest schooling about the world beyond Britain's shores. The reference to Chinese rice-spirit, however, brings to mind the Orwell who actually sampled Asian culture during his years in Burma and developed a more international perspective than many other English writers. The dominant type of information regarding East Asia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, though, is the propaganda discourse streaming from the telescreens, a discourse which reflects the emerging post-WW II geopolitical order at the time when he wrote his last novel. Thus, Orwell, the internationalist in love with his own country, engaged with China till the end of his life, persistently rejecting some of its characteristic traditions and flavors, while increasingly recognizing its historical and political significance. And all this in regard to a country he never set foot in.

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