

# Sine

The Publication of the  
Scotland-China Association



Issue 1

Summer 2024

苏格兰中国协会



苏格兰三中国协会

# Sine

## CONTENTS

### *Issue 1: Summer 2024*

- 4     **Update**
- 7     **Shiona Airlie 1953-2023**
- 10    **Marie Elisabeth Mills 1924-2023**
- 12    **The Hanfu movement in China: a study of  
the movement in Beijing, Chengdu,  
Shanghai, Wuhan, and Xi'an**  
by Andrew M Law and Qin Qianqian
- 22    **Chiang Yee and British Ballet**  
by Anne Witchard
- 39    **Reading Room**

**2024 is the Year of the Dragon**

**Cover image by Anisa Caine**

*Sine* is Gaelic for China

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The Scotland–China Association is a society of people, generally based in Scotland, who have an interest in all aspects of Chinese life and civilisation.

It exists to foster friendship and understanding between the people of Scotland and China to include peoples of Chinese ethnicity worldwide. The Association is non-political and non-sectarian.

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## Update: The Scotland-China Association in 2024

During the season Autumn 2023 – Summer 2024 we have continued to provide a programme of talks and activities, but somewhat scaled down. We have enjoyed three excellent lunches, one a goose hotpot at Dundun on South Bridge, and two at San Chuan, celebrating Mid-Autumn Festival and Chinese New Year. We were delighted to have the Consul General as a guest at our Mid-Autumn Festival meal.

As an Association we do more than just eat and drink, and we have enjoyed some stimulating and novel talks. In November Francesca Bray spoke about the importance of millet in the history of China's economy, and in April Douglas Prentice entertained us with insights into the Hash Harriers, a running group which is now international, but which started in South East Asia.



SCA Hash Harriers

December brought what seems to have been a first in the history of the SCA: a film show. Elizabeth Leith organised a showing of 'The Six' a docu-drama about the six Chinese passengers on the Titanic. Edinburgh University provided an auditorium, and the film showed to a full house.

In June the AGM was enhanced by a performance of Chinese music and dance by Wu Yanmei, Eddy McGuire, Wang Chenhao, Wang Jiayu and Jiang Yuxi - labelled a 'triumph' by one member!



Performers at the AGM

Despite our best efforts, the future of the Association is not assured. We have plenty of funds, but membership is dwindling and it is difficult to find people to carry out the necessary jobs. Our committee office bearers have been in post for years, some for decades, and perhaps feel that they would like to ease up. Audiences are also dwindling, as more people seek entertainment and information on their 'devices' in the comfort of their homes. Frankly, what we need is youth, but youth is not keen on in-person events. The committee has now met twice to discuss the future of the association, and on both occasions has decided to keep going, but with less frequent and more diverse activities. Please let a committee member know if you feel that you can help, or if you have any ideas for activities with a Chinese flavour.

You will have noticed that Sine is published less regularly, but we do aim at twice a year if possible. I hope that you find this issue worth waiting for; we have two significant articles which appeal to the general interest, both, coincidentally, concerned to some extent with costume. We are privileged and very grateful to Dr Anne Witchard for allowing us to publish an abridged version of her article on Chiang Yee and British ballet. This was first published in 2022 in *Chiang Yee and his Circle: Chinese artistic and intellectual life in Britain 1930-1950*, edited by Paul Bevan, Anne Witchard and Da Zheng, and published by Hong Kong University Press. We are also delighted to have an article by Dr Andrew Law on the Hanfu movement in China, a topic on which he spoke to the Association in 2023. We were sad to lose two members in 2023, Shiona Airlie and Elisabeth Mills, and have included obituaries. The Reading Room is now included in Sine.

We welcome articles, letters and photos. Please get in touch if you have something to contribute.



Dragon fu character by Jin Shih Hsi

## Shiona Airlie remembered



Shiona in front of the Terracotta Warriors

Shiona, who died on 8 November 2023 in St Andrew's Hospice, Airdrie, was a loyal member of the Scotland China Association and generous contributor to Sine. Her last contribution was published in our Winter 2022-23 issue.

Shiona's interest in China was originally inspired by her part-time job in a Chinese Restaurant in Portobello, while a student at Portobello High School. The passion grew as she went on to study Chinese Civilisation and History of Art at Edinburgh University, then Art Gallery and Museum Studies at Manchester University.

Prior to her postgraduate studies at Manchester, she was cataloguer of fine art slides at George Watson's College, and returned to the school in 1980

to curate the collection of James Stewart Lockhart. Lockhart was the first British Civil Commissioner of Wei-hai-wei in Shandong Province, and amassed an enviable collection of Chinese art and craft. The colonial administrator's artefacts were gifted to his old school by his daughter in 1967. Shiona played a key role in setting up the exhibition 'An Ardent Collector' at the City Art Centre in Edinburgh in 1982, which brought the collection to public attention. It was at Watson's that she met her husband Mike Gill.

Outstanding among her achievements was the exhibition of the 'Terracotta Warriors' under her aegis as Assistant Keeper at Edinburgh City Art Centre in 1985-86. Nine warriors and two horses from among the Xian tomb guardians were exhibited – this was a coup – the museum equivalent of pandas!

Following closely on the exhibitions came books: *Thistle and Bamboo: the Life and Times of Sir James Stewart Lockhart* was published by Oxford University Press in 1989, and *Reginald Johnston: Chinese Mandarin* was published by National Museums of Scotland in 2001. The latter was translated into Chinese by Ma Xianghong and published by Shandong Publishing Corporation as 回望庄士敦 (Remembering Johnston). Through the next ten years Shiona carried out further research which resulted in an expanded biography of Johnston published in 2012 by Hong Kong University Press. Her last publication, *Emperor Qinshihuang and his Mausoleum*, was translated into Chinese and published online in November 2022. Shiona was greatly loved and respected by fellow museum professionals in China, and enjoyed excellent working relationships with them.

Her professional life was diverse. In addition to her work on China, Shiona had a profound interest in glass, no doubt inspired in part by her father, John Airlie, a noted glass-maker. While working as Assistant Keeper with Glasgow Museums and Galleries she curated Glasgow Museums' Dutch Glass collection and in 2009 published *Scotland's Glass: 400 years of Glassmaking 1610-2010*. She also ran her own agency, Artis, promoting the work of contemporary Scottish artists.

We are grateful to Shiona's son Ben Gill for providing information for this appreciation.



**Shiona with one of the 'Edinburgh' terracotta warriors**

## Marie Elisabeth Mills 1924-2023

Marie Elisabeth Rasmussen was born in Denmark in 1924 to missionary parents who were working in China. Her father, Johannes Rasmussen, was General Secretary for the YMCA in Manchuria, and his wife, Ellen, was the Principal of a school for blind girls jointly run by the Bible Societies of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Denmark. This was located in what was then Mukden in Manchuria, now known as Shenyang. Elisabeth had what she described as a “wonderful” childhood, growing up in this large “family” of blind girls and school staff, the girls learning to knit to raise money, as well as skills essential for survival outside the school.

All this was interrupted in 1931, when the “Mukden Incident” and subsequent Japanese occupation of Manchuria forced a return to Denmark for Elisabeth and her younger sister Edith. A year later, the family was back in China, but the continued Japanese occupation created problems for both the school and the YMCA. From the age of 11, Elisabeth attended a boarding school in Dandong, which continued until June 1938. These years were difficult, but also had significant highlights, such as a visit to the blind girls’ school by Helen Keller in 1937.

1938 saw a return to Copenhagen in a journey on the trans-Siberian railway, with stopovers in Moscow and Berlin, finally arriving in Denmark in July, some 14 months before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Elisabeth lived through the Nazi occupation of Denmark as a student and had powerful memories of the shortages and privations of this period, as well as her experience of Operation Carthage, when the British RAF bombed the Gestapo HQ in Copenhagen, with significant collateral damage to a nearby school. She also recalled acquaintances who were in the Danish resistance, many of whom were caught and executed. Nonetheless, as the war ended, she was one of the first to reach out and become penfriends with German citizens in an attempt to heal the recent past.

Following the war, Elisabeth travelled to the UK with her sister. As they had grown up together in China, they always called each other “jie jie” and

“mei mei” (“big sister” and “little sister”). It was here that, through mutual Scottish friends, she met her future husband, Reg Mills, an architect with the then Ministry of Public Buildings and Works.

Elisabeth had finished her training as an English and Physical Education teacher and taught at Aarhus Cathedral School between 1951 and 1957, then Virum State School until 1959, when she married Reg Mills in Copenhagen. They moved to the UK to settle in Reading.

Her son, Colin, was born soon after in 1962, and Elisabeth spent her life both as a homemaker and in translating. An important task she undertook was translating Lucy Ching’s book, *One of the Lucky Ones* (失明给我的挑战), which describes Lucy’s life as a blind child in a Chinese family during the 1940s and 1950s. Elisabeth formed a network with interested people around the world who supported Lucy Ching until her death.

Elisabeth was known as a champion of the young and disadvantaged, particularly where physical disability played a role. She had a lifelong interest in China and the Chinese people and even in later life would occasionally try her Mandarin out on unsuspecting Chinese doctors in the UK. Her last years were spent working with the Scotland–China Association to compile records and accounts of the blind girls school. These have now been placed under the curation of the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh.

Elizabeth’s account of the history of the Home for Blind Girls was published in *Sine* under the title “The Home of Happiness”, Issue 1, April 2019. Elisabeth was introduced to the SCA by members, including Mary Findlay, whose parents were attached to the hospital and medical school established in Mukden by the Church of Scotland, now the Shenyang Hospital and Medical School, and remained a member for many years.

# **The Hanfu movement in China: a study of the movement in Beijing, Chengdu, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Xi'an**

**By Andrew M Law,**

Senior Lecturer in Town Planning, Newcastle University and **Qianqian Qin,**  
Lecturer in Town Planning, Newcastle University

## **1: The Yuanmingyuan Gardens**

On a cold February Day in 2013, Qianqian Qin – who is also a lecturer in my school – and I went for a walk in the Yuanmingyuan, in Beijing also known in the west as the ‘Summer Palace’. The Yuanmingyuan, as Tythacott attests, was ‘one of the most important palace-garden complexes in Imperial China’ and ‘originally established in 1709’ they were ‘used during the eighteenth and nineteenth century as the principle [*sic*] residence of Qing dynasty emperors’ (Tythacott 2018: 3). Disgracefully, however, Yuanmingyuan is also a site of national humiliation because the palace-garden complex was ‘looted and destroyed by British and French troops at the culmination of the Second Opium War (1856-1860) (Tythacott 2018: 3; see also Law, 2014). When walking around, we noticed several young people rambling around the gardens wearing what appeared to be traditional Chinese attire. Fascinated by this spectacle, Qianqian and I began to question them, and we soon learnt that they were members of what is broadly called the Hanfu movement in China – a movement mainly composed of young people, who wear pre-Qing dynasty clothing. After some discussion we managed to meet these young people again at their school – Beijing 101 middle school – for a few brief interviews and after these fleeting meetings we then met some of these students again for further discussions in several Beijing cafes.



Members of Beijing 101 middle school Hanfu group (at Yuanmingyuan)  
pictures taken by the authors in February 2013.

After talking to these young students, we managed to make new contacts with other Hanfu enthusiasts in Beijing and beyond. As our research project developed across 2013, in addition to Beijing, we managed to meet members of the movement in the cities of Wuhan and Xi'an; then after receiving a small grant from the Sino-British Fellowship Trust and the British Academy Award – (BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants SRG 2014 Round), we managed to conduct a second round of fieldwork in 2015 in the cities of Chengdu, Wuhan, Shanghai and Beijing.

As our interviews developed and our questions became more sophisticated, we were surprised at the responses of the young people we met. Rather than a casual pastime, (something like Cosplay – where people dress up as their favourite film, comic, video game and/or TV stars for fun) the Hanfu enthusiasts were quite serious and some of their ideas and imaginaries of the past spoke to themes of nostalgia, disappointment with the present and a broader sense of longing for a 'distinct' Han ethnic identity. Here in relation to the latter, we were particularly surprised given that the Han are the majority ethnic group in China and arguably their ethnic identity is culturally ubiquitous; however, as our conversations progressed, we were amazed to discover that many of our respondents felt that their own Han

identity had been lost over time; moreover, as our interviews advanced, we were also struck by the way our respondents felt that, in recent times, Chinese people had lost a traditional sense of morality and a sense of courtesy.

What then had led our respondents to these feelings and these unusual practices? Why had these young people become so disillusioned with modern China and why did these people feel that their ‘own’ ethnicity had become ‘lost’ given that Han-ness to all intents and purposes is abundant in modern Chinese life? Moreover, why did our interviewees feel that China had lost a traditional sense of morality and etiquette? Why had these feelings emerged in young people, as opposed to middle aged and older groups of people. To try and answer these questions we ended up interviewing 63 Hanfu enthusiasts (and 2 people who had strong connections to the movement). Some of our interviews were several hours long and as well as the interviews we also took part in numerous Hanfu activities which included ‘traditional’ ceremonial rituals, archery sessions, ‘traditional’ games, photography sessions, and tea ceremonies.



Archery at the Han Yang Ling National Archaeological Site Park and Museum organised by the Han Yang Ling National Archaeological Site Park and Museum.  
Pictures taken by the authors on the 10th of June 2013.

Qianqian and I bought some Hanfu clothing for ourselves, and we also tried as much as possible to be accepted by the movement while keeping a critical sociological distance. In the cities we visited we sought to interview key individuals within well-established groups; our rationale here was that, if we could understand the perspectives and feelings of the organisers of the movement, we could better understand its core ethos. However, as we shall explain below, there might have been problems with this sampling approach.

## 2: Leaving the field and analysing our findings



The authors in Hanfu costume

Having completed the final round of fieldwork in 2015 we both returned to the UK and having employed the services of an excellent translator, we waited a couple of years to have the work translated. In some ways, waiting so long might seem a foolish thing to do given that the data was so novel. However, like academics everywhere we were met with a series of regular working tasks including heavy teaching, administration loads, and prior publication promises. In this regard and given our other commitments, we did not really begin to look at the data in this study until 2018.

When we finally began to analyse our transcripts, we quickly noticed several key themes that seemed to emerge repeatedly in the narratives of our respondents. The first theme related to ideas of decline. As we found continually some of our respondents blamed the Qing dynasty

(1644-1911) as a key historical moment in which an authentic sense of Han identity had been eroded. The Hanfu movement blamed the Manchurian Qing as key agents in the erasure of a discrete and/or an authentic Han-ness that they believed had existed prior to Qing rule. Thus, in a conversation with one of our respondents, Jian, he made the following comment:

We were still highly developed in [the] Ming. However, our culture was backward after the ruling of [the] Yuan and [the] Qing, especially the Qing Dynasty. Actually, what many people do not know is that the *Han culture* we know [today] was distorted by Qing rulers. When we [are] talking about the traditional culture the first word comes in[to our] mind[s] may be “Feudal,” and “Nucai” (slavery), actually this Nucai was invented by [the] Qing. Also, they had many literary inquisitions, like [the] Kangxi Dictionary. The aim was to change Chinese characters. So, under the rule of Qing, we fell behind and became very weak, and [we] end[ed] up [being] invaded by other countries. (Jian, no strong affiliation to any group, Shanghai).<sup>i</sup>

However, rather than the Qing period alone, the Hanfu movement also blamed the recent past for a sense of decline in contemporary China. In this regard, Hanfu enthusiasts were critical of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and a new era of moral decline, that seemed to have followed. Thus, in one conversation, Shan contended that ‘the revolution had broken the line between right and wrong, which [has then] reshaped people’s ideas and values. Nowadays when we see it, we feel there is an absence of the sense of recognition or the sense of binding and discipline. So now many people nowadays have no such an idea or awareness to do it in a polite or good-manner way.’ (Shan, Hanfeng Huayun Hanfu Society, Wuhan)

Moreover, in other conversations, our respondents compared the ‘values’ of the past with the values, standards, and behaviour that they saw in everyday Chinese people. Thus, in one conversation, Lanfen made the following comment:

For instance, in ancient times, there were many standards to judge whether a person is successful. One could earn the recognition and

respect of the society merely because he was a good man, he was filial and obedient to his parents, or because he was literate. Nowadays in China, however, there is only one possible standard to judge a person, money, and social status. We have abandoned many basics, morality, and good behaviours. (Lanfen, Beijing Hanfu Society, 2015).

Working through these themes within our transcripts, we found that rather than blaming Manchurian people for these changes, our respondents blamed a new culture of money, materialism, social status and even the pace of modern life as the causes of a new era of poor values and behaviour (Law and Qin, 2022: 241). In unpacking these themes even further, our interviewees also suggested that this new era of poor values and behaviour could also be linked to a vague ‘mass other’ which had certain sociological characteristics relating to China’s poor, China’s new rich and particularly an older generation that seemed to be only interested in material values as opposed to cultural ones. Thus, in one of our interviews, Qingling made the following reflective comment:

The elder generation they are also money-worship[ers], if they feel this can bring money to them, okay I will learn it. While our generation may think okay this thing makes me happy or comfortable, so I will learn it. So, these are conceptual conflicts. Because these elder people they are too fearful to be poor, but now we think we are rich now, so we don’t care about this...So, this is an economic problem. (Qingling, Guhua Cultural Society, Wuhan)<sup>1</sup>

In opposition to these trends, our interviewees believed they were part of a wider social, cultural, and pedagogical movement that would educate Chinese people about an authentic Chinese culture that, having been lost, could now be rejuvenated once again – including a sense of Han-ness. Moreover, as our respondents pointed out, the clothes themselves and the activities, practices, and rituals they partook in were also part of a new language of morality, good behaviour, and etiquette. Thus, in one conversation, Fengge made the following remark:

The development of Hanfu culture has a core; the core content is Chinese traditional etiquette culture... Chinese traditional culture is very big and includes many aspects. Hanfu culture is only one part of traditional Chinese culture, but it directly captures a core of Chinese traditional culture, which is etiquette (Fengge, Independent Hanfuist; Xi'an).

In this regard, Hanfu clothing and activities were not simply symbols of nostalgia; rather they were pedagogical tools by which a new cultural, traditional, moral, and ultimately refined Chinese society could be 'reconstructed'. In summary then, our feeling about the Hanfu movement is that rather than something progressive, the movement is inherently conservative, and in many respects, the movement is myopic. While we did not find the Hanfu movement to be explicitly racist – as has been suggested by other investigations, such as the ethnography conducted by Kevin Carrico, (2017) – in the main we felt that the movement is *implicitly ethnocentric*. Here by implicitly ethnocentric we would draw upon the theories of social scientists Cunningham et al (2004) and Hooghe (2008) who have made a conceptual distinction between what they call explicit and implicit ethnocentrism:

In the explicit condition, respondents are willing to express negative stereotypes toward outsider groups; the implicit condition is characterized by an inhibition to express these sentiments despite the fact that other responses clearly indicate that the respondent is unwilling to grant the same rights and legal protections to members of outsider groups (Hooghe 2008: 4).

In our own estimation then, the Hanfu are ethnocentric in an implicit way; that is, while they can be fairly critical of racism and/or what we might call Han chauvinism (or a sense of Han superiority) they nevertheless reproduce a highly ethnocentric view of Han-ness in the way that they: 1) conflate Han-ness with Chineseness and 2) the way in which they hold that Han-ness has somehow disappeared (or has been lost or dissolved) within contemporary Chinese society. Such views then, are arguably Han-centric because they ignore the way in which Han-ness is literally everywhere in

contemporary Chinese life from values, to food, to clothing and to broader political attitudes which shape the everyday nature of Chinese life. However, what is important here, is that while the Hanfu could reflect on the dangers of racism, nevertheless, they found it more challenging to reflect on these implicit assumptions which seemed to form the ‘taken for granted’ values (and attitudes) of the movement.

### **3: Reflections on the limitations of our study after questions raised by the Scotland China Association**

During my presentation to your association on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2023, many of your members raised excellent and interesting questions with regards to the movement. One of your members asked me whether the responses we had collected were representative of a majority of members of the movement or the views of a smaller number of Hanfu enthusiasts. Importantly, (and hopefully I have interpreted her meaning correctly) she suggested that there must be many members of the movement who hold ‘lighter’ views of the movement and the meaning of Hanfu clothing and practices. While of course, we cannot know for certain what all members of the movement think – and as one estimate has suggested there are well over 6 million members in the movement (Li and Xiong 2021) – nevertheless Qianqian and I mainly interviewed leaders and/or key agents/influencers in the movement within Beijing, Chengdu, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Xi’an. In this regard, while we questioned more leaders than everyday lay members, certainly we would argue that these key agents (or influencers) would also have a role in shaping the values of more casual and/or lay members of the movement. In this respect, while there might well be vast numbers of people within the movement who view the wearing of Hanfu as a ‘bit of fun’ – and undeniably I certainly had this sense when we interviewed Hanfu members associated with Beijing 101 middle school – we would also argue that the movement is composed of Hanfu enthusiasts with stronger views that speak to the themes we have discussed; moreover, we would also contend that this interpretation of the movement is reflected in other studies of the movement, such as those by Matthew Ming-tak Chew, (2010), James Leibold (2010) and Kevin Carrico (2017) who have all pointed to both racist and ethnocentric views within the Hanfu.

However, while we still stand by our arguments, we recognise that the movement is nuanced and complex and with only 63 interviews under our belt it would be interesting to learn more about how *lay members* of the movement feel about Hanfu clothing. In looking at the more ‘fun’ end of the Hanfu movement, we would also be interested to know whether age plays any part in the way that different members of the movement interpret and understand the meaning of Hanfu clothing; thus, we would be keen to know whether younger children regard the movement as a site of play or whether they themselves attribute strong values with the wearing of Hanfu clothing.

Furthermore, and in extending our studies, we would also be keen to understand the geographical variation of values and meanings ascribed to Hanfu clothing and practices in different parts of China. For instance, it would be interesting to know if there are differences in opinion in cities with a broader number of Chinese ethnic minorities within them. Likewise, it would also be interesting to know if the Hanfu movement has ever taken off in more provincial and/or rural settings. Qianqian and I mainly encountered Hanfu enthusiasts in urban settings, but it would be fascinating to know if the movement had sprung up in rural towns. Additionally, if we had the time, we would also be interested in understanding whether the Hanfu movement has moved from mainland China to other diasporic or Sinophone communities globally. Indeed, if such societies exist, it would be interesting to learn whether these organisations take a different view of Hanfu clothing in a culture influenced by western themes and influences.

Finally, one member mentioned that she had heard that Hanfu enthusiasts have taken up ancient Chinese and draw upon ancient words and language in activities and practices. While Qianqian and I did not come across conversational ancient Chinese, we did nevertheless note that at times some of our respondents referred to each other (in conversations with us) as ‘tongpao’ 同袍 (a traditional Chinese word that refers to comradeship; and literally the word refers to people that wear the same style of robe). In the future then, if Qianqian and I have time, we would also be keen to analyse the uses of ancient Chinese within the everyday speech of Hanfu enthusiasts.

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The full academic study on which this article has been written has been published in the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*. The full reference can be found here below: Law, A. Qin, Q. (2022) ‘Reflexive Han-ness, narratives of moral decline, Manchurian subjects and ‘mass’ societal others: a study of the Hanfu movement in the cities of Beijing, Chengdu, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Xi’an’ *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Sage Journals. Published on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November 2022. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/18681026221135082>

# Chiang Yee and British Ballet

## by Anne Witchard

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This article was first published in 2022 in *Chiang Yee and his Circle; Chinese Artistic and Intellectual life in Britain, 1930-1950*, edited by Paul Bevan, Anne Witchard and Da Zheng, published by Hong Kong University Press. We are grateful to the author, the editors and the publisher for permission to use an abridged version of the article.

Chiang Yee's contribution to the art of ballet is little remembered today, maybe because, as things turned out, it was to be a one-off. But it is an episode that has much to tell us, not only about his artistic versatility, but also about his significance as a Chinese artist to British cultural life. In the late summer of 1942, by now well known as an artist and author, Chiang was requested by Constant Lambert (1905–1951), musical director of the recently formed Sadler's Wells company, to design the sets and costumes for a new ballet, *The Birds*. British ballet as a national art form was then very much in its infancy.

Critics in the post-war decades were inclined to present a distinctly British ballet as having ascended, phoenix-like, fully fledged from the ashes of adversity (Eliot 2018). There was a tendency to skirt over the unglamorous war years and their privations, which had in fact confirmed the vitality of many small companies, in particular of Ninette de Valois's Sadler's Wells. Chiang's account of his own contribution to British ballet's wartime development is, in characteristically modest style, also rather underplayed, given just a couple of pages in *The Silent Traveller in Oxford* (1944).

Constant Lambert's commissioning of Chiang attests to a sincere cultural engagement with Chinese art forms during the inter-war years. Lambert was central to the artistic zeitgeist of the period. When considering the emergence of a British national ballet it is important to recognise that Lambert's role in establishing it was key. He was the first British composer from whom Sergei Diaghilev commissioned a ballet score, for *Romeo and Juliet* (1926). Lambert was one of the founding triumvirate – with de Valois and dancer Frederick Ashton – at Sadler's Wells, where, following Diaghilev's influence, the tradition was maintained of working with the

most innovative of fine artists rather than theatre designers, among them Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, Edward Burra, E. McKnight Kauffer, André Derain, and Rex Whistler. Altogether, Chiang was in distinguished company.

Lambert was something of a sinophile, as we shall see. His engagement of Chiang as stage designer for *The Birds* can be seen in relation to certain transcultural negotiations with ‘Chineseness’ on the British stage, cinema screen, and concert platform that were formative to his artistic development in the pre-war years.

### **‘Friday the Thirteenth’**

The penultimate chapter of *The Silent Traveller in Oxford* is entitled ‘Friday the Thirteenth’ and begins as a discourse on the global universality of certain superstitions, brought to bear on the local frustrations of erratic train schedules (Chiang 1944: 169). Removed from his Hampstead home to Oxford on account of the Blitz, Chiang reflects on the woes of his London commute given the inadequacies of the railway system, patently due to the exigencies of wartime rather than because, as an old lady repeatedly remarks: ‘To-day is Friday the thirteenth – that’s what it is’ (ibid: 172) Having been commissioned to design ‘the décor and costumes for a Sadler’s Wells ballet called *The Birds*’ he explains: ‘There seemed perpetually to be some detail or other for which my attendance was required – some costumes had been finished and were to be fitted, or certain materials that I had chosen had proved unobtainable and others must be selected. And always the matter was urgent. No time to be lost’ (ibid: 169–172). Intricate feathered dance costumes required frequent journeys back to London, invariably at short notice.

*The Birds* was a comic ballet intended to showcase the talents of the company’s up-and-coming young ballerinas Moyra Fraser and fifteen-year-old Beryl Grey (b. 1927).<sup>2</sup> It was staged by the Australian dancer Robert Helpmann (1909–1986), the company’s leading man and, after Ashton was called up for military service, its chief choreographer. The

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<sup>2</sup> Beryl Grey would be the first ballerina from the West to be invited to dance in Mao’s China in 1964. She worked with the Peking Ballet Company, then directed by Dai Ailian. See Beryl Grey, *Through the Bamboo Curtain* (London: Collins, 1965), 40.

musical inspiration was a 1928 orchestration by Ottorino Respighi – assembled from pieces by various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century composers that imitate bird sounds – music that represents not just birdsong but the sound of their movements such as fluttering wings or scratching feet. The story or ‘action’ of Helpmann’s ballet was as follows: the handsome Dove (Alexis Rassine) falls in love with the lyrical Nightingale (Beryl Grey) and the comical Hen (Moyra Fraser) who has fallen for the Dove, attempts to charm him by trying to impersonate the Nightingale. Meanwhile the arrogant Cuckoo (Gordon Hamilton) dons the plumage of the Dove and tries to gain the favour of the Nightingale. The two imposters, Hen and Cuckoo are a laughing stock for a pair of cheeky Sparrows (Margaret Dale and Joan Sheldon) and the chorus of attendant Doves (Anne Lascelles, Moira Shearer, Pauline Clayden, and Lorna Mossford). All ends happily with the nuptials of the Nightingale and the Dove.

Chiang, we learn, managed to get to his rendezvous at the Soho studio of costumier Matilda Etches just about on time, despite the ominous date. Helpmann was already there, erroneously attempting to ‘put on his head the tail-piece of the male dove’s costume, which was fan-like and looked, on him, like a Red Indian’s feathered head-dress’ (Chiang 1944: 172). Despite the testing conditions of food rationing, bombing raids, conscription, and the long, blacked-out train travel endured on provincial tours, Sadler’s Wells nurtured leading dancers who would become famous all over the world. Beryl Grey remembered her excitement that day and the novel ‘satisfaction of being fitted for my very own costume, designed on me’ (Grey 2017: 30). Chiang was understandably apprehensive, especially when fitting Moyra Fraser for her costume as the Hen:

I had been anxious about the execution of the elaborate hen costume, for the hen is an important character in the ballet, and her costume had to be perfect in every detail. Very little had been accomplished at that time, but when I looked at the broad smile on Moyra Fraser’s face and at her quickened humorous steps executed to see how the roughly-made part of the costume would fit the movements, I was confident that she would make the finished costume most attractive on the stage (Chiang 1944:174).

As well as Helpmann and Etches, Chiang tells us, Madame de Valois herself was there to help adjust each fitting: 'The founder of the Sadler's Wells ballet and its very busy director, she compelled my great admiration for the hard work she put in to make the new ballet successful. She even helped with the sewing of costumes!' Unlikely as it might seem, the Second World War was to prove the hothouse in which the seedling of a native British ballet was to flourish (Bland 1981: 71).

Until the arrival in London of Sergei Diaghilev's groundbreaking Ballets Russes in 1910, ballet on the British stage had been an amateur affair. The effect of the Ballets Russes was to raise the status of ballet in Britain from a rather risqué music hall entertainment to a respectable art form. A wave of wartime patriotism swelled London audiences as soldiers on leave joined Bloomsbury aesthetes and regular balletomanes. Arts-funding bodies as well as critics appreciated that ballet might enable wartime audiences to transcend the grimness of their daily lives with 'infusions of aesthetic beauty', so the morale-boosting benefits of ballet were extended to the nation at large as government-sponsored tours took metropolitan ballet troupes to town halls and military outposts across the country (Eliot 2008: 175). In a broadcast of the BBC Forces Programme, Helpmann spoke about dancing 'for troops in garrison theatres and for audiences of munition and other war workers in the provinces' and how they 'took to it like ducks to water' (Walker 1998: 65). Music critic Edwin Evans noticed approvingly that choreographers were responding to new populist audiences by collaborating with artists from other disciplines to create new works: 'unlike the concert world, they are not relying exclusively on the repertoire' (Evans 1939: 358). Nevertheless, Eliot observes of this surge of choreographic creativity that there was a distinct turn during wartime 'toward what was familiar and cherished' (Eliot 2018: 137). Lambert's notion for *The Birds* to be given a Chinese design can be seen in light of this as an homage to Diaghilev's various treatments between 1914 and 1925 of *Le Rossignol* (The Nightingale, 1914), based on Andersen's well-loved fairy tale, involving the Emperor of China and a captive nightingale.

## **Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and Chinoiserie Ballet**

Although a precocious devotee of the Ballets Russes, Lambert was just too young to have attended the London premiere of *Le Rossignol* at Drury Lane in 1914. While Stravinsky's 'Futurist' score ruffled critical feathers, Benois's chinoiserie decor and costumes were unanimously acclaimed for their spectacular beauty (Walsh 2003: 231). Neglected by the theatre management for the duration of the Great War, Benois's sets and costumes perished in the damp cellars of Drury Lane. From his wartime base in Rome, Diaghilev re-adapted the tale in 1916 as *Le Chant du Rossignol*, and commissioned the pioneering Italian Futurist Fortunato Depero to design new sets and costumes. After the war, and as ever in pursuit of the most cutting-edge artistic treatment, Diaghilev commissioned Henri Matisse to design two further reiterations of the chinoiserie ballet, first in 1920 with choreography by Leonide Massine and again in a 1925 constructivist version by twenty-year-old George Balanchine, fresh from the Soviet Union. Diaghilev had always sought out the most exciting artists rather than theatre designers to work on his ballets, and in inviting a Chinese treatment from a notable and newsworthy contemporary artist to design *The Birds*, Lambert was following suit.

## **Chiang Yee and Ballet**

Chiang first discusses ballet in *Chinese Calligraphy: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique* (1938), where he alights upon the art of the ballerina as the most instructive way to explain to non-Chinese readers the technique of Chinese calligraphy:

After some experience of writing one begins to feel a movement springing to life under the brush which is, as it were, spontaneous . . . The sensation is really very like that aroused by a ballerina balancing upon one toe, revolving, leaping, and poising on the other toe. She has to possess perfect control of her movements and amazing suppleness. The same qualities are demanded of the writer. A dancer's movements follow the rhythm of the accompanying music: a writer's movements depend upon the length and shape of stroke of the style he is practising.

During his three years in London (since 1933), Chiang continues, he had ‘heard a good deal of the Russian Ballet’ and had ‘seen several of its performances’ (Chiang 1938a: 129).

In *The Silent Traveller in London* (1938), published in the same year as *Chinese Calligraphy*, Chiang repeats the analogy of calligraphy and ballet dancing quoted above, giving it as ‘a reason special to myself for liking Russian Ballet’ (Chiang 1938b: 170). Here he describes attending the ‘Russian Ballet Season at Covent Garden Opera House’. In a later essay, ‘What Can I Say about Ballet’ (1948), Chiang states, ‘I became interested in ballet as soon as I made the first contact with it. Its combination of three arts – dance, music and painting – appealed to me’ (Chiang 1948). Nevertheless, his initial experience, as he relates it in *The Silent Traveller in London*, came with some misgivings: ‘I enjoyed the classical ballet *Fire Bird* [sic] particularly,’ he writes, ‘though I know nothing about dancing or Western music. Then came the modern one’ (Chiang 1938b: 169).

*The Firebird* (*L’Oiseau de feu*) had been created for Diaghilev by Michel Fokine back in 1910 and was revived in 1934 by Massine for de Basil’s and Blum’s Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo. In 1936, after de Basil and Blum split, De Basil’s Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo was performing *The Firebird* at Covent Garden (using the original 1926 designs by Natalia Goncharova) while the ballet Chiang Yee describes as ‘the modern one’ was clearly, given his detailed account of the performance, Fokine’s *L’Épreuve d’amour*; or, *Chung Yang and the Mandarin*, staged by Blum’s breakaway company, Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, at the Alhambra Theatre in nearby Leicester Square.

It was the first time since 1914 that Fokine had been present in London and wide press coverage was given to the return of Diaghilev’s renowned dance master. Fokine’s new ballet opened on 15 May 1936 to hysterically expectant London audiences, among them Chiang Yee.

The libretto, initially titled ‘The Love Test; or, Chung-Yang the Faithful Dancer’, was loosely based on the novel *Printemps Parfumé* (1892), a French translation of the well-known Korean folk tale. An imperious Mandarin (Jan Yazvinsky) wishes his daughter Chung Yang (Vera Nemtchinova) to marry a wealthy Ambassador from overseas (Anatole Oboukhov). Her handsome but impoverished Lover (Andre Eglevsky),

disguised as a dragon, frightens the Ambassador away whence he is set upon and robbed by friends of the young couple disguised as bandits. Now that the Ambassador is penniless the Mandarin agrees to the marriage of Chung Yang to her Lover whereupon the friends return his wealth to the Ambassador. Once again, the Mandarin tries to broker a marriage but this time the Ambassador refuses; he would prefer to be loved for himself, hence the ‘proof of love’. A chorus of playful monkeys, coy maidens, and a solo Butterfly role (Helene Kirsova) supplied conventional chinoiserie tropes while Derain’s striking décor provided contemporary appeal with its modernist approach. *The Illustrated London News* devoted a full page to photographs of the mise-en-scène (1936: 912). Derain’s stylized treatment with its jauntily upswept pagoda eaves, the gaily striped jousting tents of the Ambassador’s encampment, and inspired choice of a festive ‘lion dance’ costume for the Lover’s disguise was generally received as a masterpiece. From Chiang’s perspective, the ballet that he describes, with no little irony, as ‘the modern one’ was perplexing:

In it there was a male dancer with two long bunches of whiskers attached at both ends of his mouth, and another bunch in the middle of his chin, wearing a costume partly Chinese and holding a small painted parasol, which, I presume, Japanese ladies may carry. While he was dancing in peculiar contortions, the small parasol vibrated and the three long bunches of whiskers quivered in opposite directions, so that I could not stop my laughter. John suddenly said to me that that was how most Europeans imagined the Chinese. I thanked him in my mind for not using the word “Chinaman”! I nodded my head and continued the conversation: “It is very interesting to me, because I have never seen things like this before. Should we actually dress and behave like that, perhaps it would not be so laughable.” Luckily I managed not to blush when the interval came and many curious eyes turned towards me (Chiang 1938b: 169-70).

Chiang Yee’s discomfited response to *L’Epreuve d’amour* anticipates that of his compatriot Hsiao Chi’en, who described his experience of watching *Aladdin* in his wartime publication *China but Not Cathay*:

as a child I was always fond of standing before those magical mirrors in a fun-palace to see myself twisted and transformed . . . since I grew up I have long missed this secret pleasure, until I went to a Birmingham Pantomime called “Aladdin” in which my country was made out to be a Turkish bath, with my people all in fancy flowery jackets . . . The only lamentable thing was suddenly to be discovered by a fair lady sitting next to me, who screamed out, ‘Look, here is one!’ (Hsiao 1942: 1).

Accounts of Fokine’s choreography suggest that he took inspiration from the pantomime tradition of the ‘Oriental’ villain that had transmuted into the stock ‘Yellow Peril’ characteristics of early cinematic melodrama. Judith Chazin-Bennahum writes that Fokine ‘exaggerated the overweening qualities of the Mandarin’ and that ‘the movements for the daughter also recall the caprices of film heroines, fawning and meek, with hollow “Oriental” poses’ Chazin-Bennahum 2011: 158). She cites an interview with Vera Nemtchinova, who remembered the ‘simpering behavior that Fokine insisted upon’ in order to give her character ‘a more farcical style’ (ibid.) Dawn Lille Horwitz describes the Mandarin’s ludicrous walk: ‘flat-footed, with the heel hitting first, and his lower back . . . curved forward, causing his buttocks to stick out’ (Horwitz 1985: 118). A silent rehearsal film from the period reveals other balletic expressions of ‘national character’ (essentially ‘Yellowface’ caricature) in Fokine’s choreography for *L’épreuve d’amour*.<sup>3</sup> Horwitz details ‘steps finishing in a turned-out plié in second [position] which, tongue-in-cheek, was supposed to represent the “Chinese” element’, as were ‘the fast parallel runs en pointe’ and ‘tiny handclaps’ of the maidens ‘in praise of the Ambassador’s virtuosity’.

While London critics generally received the ballet as a charming chinoiserie fantasy – Horace Horsnell in *The Observer*, for example, described the action, with its ‘detachments of bandits’ and ‘little bebies of maids’, as ‘full of mannered fun’ – others expressed a similar discomfiture to Chiang (Horsnell 1926: 19). Ernest Newman in *The Sunday Times*

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<sup>3</sup> A silent rehearsal film of *L’épreuve d’amour* was made by the Denham Company in New York in 1938 when the Ballets Russe de Monte Carlo performed there. See Horwitz, *Michel Fokine*, 117.

concluded that ‘the invention as a whole [is] rather childish’ (Horwitz 1985: 117-18). Horwitz cites a review that, corroborating the blanket Orientalism noted by Chiang, observed that the corps de ballet ‘displayed a flavour more Japanese than Chinese especially in hairstyles’, which must have been particularly jarring given the current escalation of hostilities between these two nations.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Fokine’s ballet came at a crucial point of transition for cultural representations of Chineseness in Britain, a shift taking place in no small way thanks to the endeavours of Chiang Yee himself.

### **Constant Lambert’s ‘Chinese Phase’**

By the time he was sought out by Constant Lambert, Chiang was singularly well positioned to bridge the disconnect between theatrical Orientalism and Chinese art. Nevertheless, it was an innovative move on Lambert’s part, and Chiang appreciated this:

The suggestion made by Mr Constant Lambert that I should do the décor for Mr Robert Helpmann’s ballet, *The Birds* . . . was an unusual request for, from my little experience, a Chinese artist’s work is not found on the Western stage even if the play or ballet has a Chinese setting. Mr Lambert foresaw that a Chinese rendering of a pictorial backcloth might be suitable for this particular ballet. He was not playing a game of curiosity or ‘Chinoiserie’ (Chiang 1948: 113).

Chiang appreciated that an earnest cultural eclecticism informed Lambert’s creative curiosity. Among Lambert’s visionary critical qualities was his early appreciation of jazz, ragtime, and blues music, generally viewed by ‘serious’ critics with derision. While commentators generally date Lambert’s ‘Chinese phase’ back to a youthful crush on Chinese American film actress Anna May Wong, this perhaps trivialises the sincerity of what biographer Andrew Motion describes as Lambert’s ‘vigorous inclusiveness’ (Motion 1986: 157). Nevertheless it was around the time he first saw Wong in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924) that Lambert became obsessed with things Chinese, a condition testified to by his friends:

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<sup>4</sup> Horwitz cites the *New English Review* but I’ve been unable to find this review there.

In Constant's rooms . . . there was a row of bottles of Chinese wine, earthenware bottles with large paper labels embellished with Chinese characters, and I soon discovered that these bottles of Chinese wine had a special significance for him . . . I don't think that at that time he'd ever met Miss Wong but she was his sort of *Princesse Lointaine* and in her honour he used to drink Chinese wine (Quennell 1966).

The list of composers in the West who set music to translations of Chinese poetry around the turn of the twentieth century is extensive (Motion 1986: 157). The stylistic simplicity of the eighth-century Tang poet Li Bai (Li Po) appealed to late-Victorian translators and after his inclusion in Ezra Pound's collection *Cathay* (1917) Li Bai was greatly influential on early modernist poets, especially those of Pound's Imagist school.<sup>5</sup> Musicologist Deryck Cooke has commented that the 'subtle simplicity and exquisite fragility of [Li Bai's] brief poems are . . . beautifully reflected in Lambert's cool, fragrant, allusive settings', an appraisal echoed by composer and critic Giles Easterbrook, who commends 'the economy of gesture, the correlation of poetic and musical image . . . the intuitively exact selection and balance of emotion with material and duration' (Cooke 1955). Lambert's aim had been to avoid the 'overloaded chinoiserie preciosity' of Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol*.

Between 1926 and 1928, Lambert composed seven songs (for Anna May Wong) for voice and piano based on the poems of Li Bai, which he would later score with an accompaniment of flute, oboe, clarinet, string quartet, and double bass.

Remaining absorbed in all things Chinese, Lambert dined regularly at Chinese restaurants in Limehouse and in Soho, and it was to the Shanghai Restaurant, some ten years hence, that Robert Helpmann was directed to make that overnight dash from Manchester, breaking his hectic touring schedule to be introduced to Chiang Yee. Over Chinese food they exchanged ideas for 'the "Bird" ballet', an ebullient Helpmann amusing nearby diners with his animated demonstration of the choreography (Chiang 1944: 172). In *The Silent Traveller in Oxford* there is a sketch of

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<sup>5</sup> See Zhaoming Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

Helpmann next to one of Charlie Chaplin in *The Goldrush*, where the Little Tramp spears two bread rolls with forks and has them perform a ‘dance’, a scene which Helpmann’s comic antics, demonstrating ‘by movements of his fingers on the table the steps of the dancers’, called to Chiang’s mind (ibid: 173).

### ***The Birds***

As Beryl Grey became aware early on in her ballet career, the ‘right sets and costumes are vital for a successful production’ (Grey 2017: 28). She was barely fifteen when Helpmann chose her to star as the Nightingale, her ‘first ever created role in the Company’ (Ibid: 30). Lambert and Helpmann rehearsed the dancers through the early autumn of 1942 until the ‘breathtaking moment’ when the company finally got to see Chiang’s ‘delicate scenery’ and the ‘amazing bird costumes and headdresses’ (ibid: 30). Grey remembers their ‘impatience to see it all worked out in performance’ and then ‘everyone’s astonishment’ when ‘we took 15 curtain calls’ (ibid: 30). *The Birds* played to packed houses throughout the season. ‘During the war,’ Grey recalls, ‘*The Birds* was to become one of the most popular and frequently performed ballets,’ describing her pleasure that, ‘the first role created for me should be [so] well received’ (ibid: 30). James Redfern in *The Spectator* noted that the New Theatre (Sadler’s Wells’ wartime home, and where Lambert had seen Anna May Wong make her stage debut) was ‘full to standing every night’. ‘No wonder’, he enthused, given ‘the feast for ear and eye probably unrivalled anywhere in the world at present, including Russia’ (Redfern 1942: 11). Redfern commended Helpmann for the ballet’s ‘complete unity of style in music, choreography and *décor*’ (Ibid.) Redfern was impressed by the ‘intricacy and delicacy’ of Lambert’s musical arrangement, ‘a delight to hear’ that was ‘matched and repeated in the fascinating slightly Chinese character given to the English woodland and birds’ (ibid.). He singled out the costume of the Hen as ‘a brilliant *chef-d’oeuvre* of caricaturing fancy, while those of the Dove and the Nightingale’, he wrote, ‘are quite lovely’ (ibid.). This was high praise from a respected commentator. *The Times* (25<sup>th</sup> November 1942) reviewer commented that Moyra Fraser had surely ‘made a close study of poultry yard behaviour . . . her piquant costume and her performance provided most of the fun’. Other reviews concurred that the design, with

‘its ravishing garden setting and charming costumes’, was a particularly strong suit of the ballet (Walker 1998: 66). Elspeth Grant in the *Daily Sketch* (25 November 1942) thought it ‘light, sweet, delicious’. The addition of this ‘gay capricious trifle to the Sadler’s Wells repertory at the New [Theatre]’, wrote Horsnell in *The Observer*, (29 November 1942) delivers ‘a pretty piece of animated chinoiserie. The birds so oddly paired by the Argument are delightfully dressed by Chiang Yee, and roost, one feels, not in his decorative wallpaper trees but in cabinets of rare porcelain’.

Chiang Yee’s commendable achievement in response to Lambert’s not undemanding commission is indicated by how precisely his original backdrop designs and costume sketches (held in the Royal Opera House Archive) correspond to their realisation on stage. Not only do we have the black-and-white stage photographs of the performance, but thanks to the exhaustive epistolary reports of balletomane Lionel Bradley, who saw *The Birds* many times throughout its run, we have detailed descriptions of the fabrics and colour schemes of the finished costumes.<sup>6</sup> Only the Cuckoo is missing from the sketches held in the Royal Opera House Archive, but Chiang’s account of fitting Gordon Hamilton, in *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, not only corresponds with photographs of the Cuckoo but indicates a keen sense of the practical contingencies of costume design:

Next came the fitting of the cuckoo costume on Gordon Hamilton, who is such a contrast to Alexis Rassine, and whose short stature and witty smiling face are so suited to his part. My design for the cuckoo was intended for a more bulky bird, but the costume was adapted to fit him perfectly. The varied colours suited him, and the white feather-like collar seemed to add length to his neck and the long tail to add to his stature (Chiang 1944: 173).

Bradley’s detailing of Chiang’s variegated colour combinations for each dancer gives a sense of why Horsnell compared the costumed ‘birds’ to the ornamental kind that inhabit the porcelain cabinet: ‘The Cuckoo (Gordon

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<sup>6</sup> Lionel Bradley, ‘Bradley’s Ballet Bulletin, 1941–1947’, unpublished notebooks, Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Theatre and Performance. Notebooks are unnumbered and unpaginated. Citing the bulletin of 24 November–16 December 1942.

Hamilton) has a bright blue cap with a yellow beak, red cheeks, the body covered in a mixture of a yellowish orange and a paler blue, with a variegated pattern of a different shade of the same colour, his legs continue the paler blue to the knees below which are yellow stockings and he carries behind close fitting brown wings not unlike a tailcoat'. Bradley describes the costumes as 'a charming mixture of naturalism, imagination & the typical ballet costume, tho [*sic*] sometimes', he admits, 'they are a little unkind in obscuring the dancer's line. Most of them have close fitting "jockey" caps with a peak in the shape of a pointed beak, and a certain birdlike character is given to the face by a make up which accentuates the oval of the eyes'. Much of the Hen's comic effect was achieved by her costume of 'fluffy white feathery pantaloons', which to Bradley had 'a suggestion of the female bathing costume of Victorian days'. Of Chiang's scenic backdrop for *The Birds*, Bradley observes, 'the trees are chiefly of a peculiarly vivid green & the flowers large & red. These various plant forms are slightly conventionalised but are treated in a detail which verges on the practice of the pre-raphaelites [*sic*]'. The most difficult design challenge for Chiang had been the costume of the Nightingale because, he explains, 'the nightingale though singing beautifully at night, is a rather dull *looking* bird that has never earned distinction for the colour of its plumage . . . I was really worried about it, for the nightingale's part is one of the biggest in the ballet . . . Happily, however, after much discussion and numerous suggestions from every one, the costume finally turned out to be very pretty' (Chiang 1944: 174).

Although Chiang worried that his Nightingale design was 'not very good', Bradley's description together with photographs of Beryl Grey on stage gives us an idea of the quite minimal concession that she wore 'pink tights' rather than the yellow stockings patterned with scales seen in the design; thus her costume, as Bradley describes, was 'more like that of the conventional ballerina and less like a bird's'. Just as in Chiang Yee's original sketch she has 'a brown cap with a pink beak, a pale rose bodice, without decoration, a short greyish-white tutu . . . locks of fine gold thread at either side of her face, and epaulettes of the same gold thread . . . Little brown wings going back from the side of the waist and a short brown tail are the only suggestion that she is a bird'.

Bradley critiques the action of the ballet in close, step-by-step detail. Afterwards is inserted, in brackets and underlined, ‘(The above was written after I had seen the ballet five times)’. In early December he reflected on the ‘first night hysteria’, when the audience ‘yelled the place down for Helpmann as though he had produced a masterpiece’, while for Bradley *The Birds* improved greatly over the weeks of its performance as it ‘attained to greater fluency and precision as well as to an accentuation of its humour’. His ultimate verdict on its appearance however was reserved: ‘The décor is perhaps no more than pretty, therefore disappointing from an artist of Chiang Yee’s calibre’ (Bradley). Perhaps we might give the last word to Chiang, who notes that in designing for the ballet an artist ‘should not give too much prominence to his own character, yet must indicate what he thinks suits the dancing and music’ Chiang 1948: 114). He had clearly thought carefully about the requirements of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as put into practice by Benois and Bakst: ‘At first I thought *The Birds* admirably suited to go with a flower painting or a landscape by one of our Sung [Song] masters, very simple and full of imaginative intuition. I actually tried to make use of a Sung masterpiece – “The Cranes playing by a spring” by Hsia Kuei [Xia Gui] – as a base. However after further consideration of the dancing I felt that such a backdrop would be too simple, so I painted instead a rather detailed leafy wood’(ibid: 113). It is sad given Chiang’s keen interest in stage design that he would later fall out with Robert Helpmann over a cancelled commission to design a production of *As You Like It* that Helpmann was directing in 1955 at London’s Old Vic. (Zheng 2010: 162–63).

In 1943 Arnold Haskell put together the extensive *Exhibition of Ballet Design*. Chiang’s sketches for *The Birds* were included alongside designs by his British contemporaries as well as works by Bakst, Benois, Goncharova, Derain, and Picasso, among other international luminaries. While English ballet ‘is too young to have produced the scenic innovations of a Benois, Bakst or Larionov,’ Haskell’s introduction observes, ‘the level is a high one and some of the most important work has been produced during the war years’ (Haskell 1943)<sup>7</sup> Funded by the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), the show toured the British

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<sup>7</sup> *Exhibition of Ballet Design* (London: CEMA, 1943–1944).

Isles, opening in Leicester and culminating in 1944 at the Brighton Pavilion.

The end of the war saw the Sadler's Wells company 'promoted' to the Royal Opera House and its subsequent incorporation as the Royal Ballet. Its golden jubilee was marked in 1981 with the publication *Fifty Years of the Royal Ballet*, which includes a colour plate of Chiang's design for *The Birds* backdrop, together with the Cuckoo costume (the latter was clearly not returned to the archive!) (Bland 1981: 71).

Chiang's foray into the world of ballet is worth remembering not only because it demonstrates his artistic versatility and professional adaptability. *The Birds* is a landmark in the history of British stage design because Chiang's involvement makes an early intervention in the perpetuation of outdated caricatures and offensive stereotypes in ballet. This is something that troubled him, as we have seen, and that has only recently begun to be addressed with any seriousness, principally thanks to the recent activism of the Asian American dancer Phil Chan, whose book *Final Bow for Yellowface* has been making significant inroads in rethinking race representation and inclusion in ballet.

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*The Silent Traveller in Oxford*  
*by Chiang Yee*



牛津畫記  
蔣彝

Illustrated by the author with 12 coloured plates,  
8 monotone plates, and 70 line illustrations in the text

The Silent Traveller in Oxford Dust cover

## Reading Room

by Millie Bowie

*Dear Members, I shall be stepping down as editor of the Reading Room as of now, and our current Convener Valerie will be taking over the column. It will be in good hands! With my best wishes to all. Millie.*

Hayton, Bill (2015) *The South China Sea: The struggle for power in Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN: 978-0-300-21694-3

Hayton takes us back to ancient times, when no-one actually laid claim to the South China Sea, and from there, on through the days of the VOC and the BEIC<sup>8</sup> when the maritime nations of Europe sailed the world's seas, creating colonies where they saw opportunities, and discovering new lands. The world of course has continued to change over the centuries, until this marginal sea, which is actually part of the Pacific Ocean, has taken on a greater significance than ever before. Today, the South China Sea plays host to ships carrying more than \$5.3 trillion dollars-worth of global trade per annum – including 50% of the world's oil.

In 1947, the Republic of China boldly announced that the majority of the South China Sea belonged to it, and when it was overthrown by the new regime after the Chinese Civil War, the new regime simply announced that it had inherited the claim. China has drawn an arbitrary U-shaped line (the nine-dash line) which encompasses enormous swathes of the SCS, and claims it as its own. There are several other countries who also claim that they too have rights on parts of the sea, in accordance with their own EEZs<sup>9</sup> namely, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. And these countries have their own diverse allegiances and agendas. And therein lies the rub! In the meantime, the words “oil and gas” are never far from anyone's lips in Southeast Asia, and there have been many exploratory

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<sup>8</sup> The VOC was the Dutch East India Company. (Verenigde Oostindische). It was the earliest of the trading companies in Europe, founded in 1602 and wound up in 1795. BEIC Was the British East India Company.

<sup>9</sup> An EEZ is an Exclusive Economic Zone over which the adjacent nation has jurisdiction. It is generally 200 nautical miles from a nation's coastline and gives that nation special rights regarding exploration and use of resources.

operations into the sea bed; so far, without the discovery of any really major strikes. But the samples taken so far lead experts to believe that one day there will be a major strike, and then, I guess, the world will hold its breath!

The South China Sea is literally littered with atolls, shoals, reefs, and islands: the Spratlys, the Paracels, Macclesfield Bank, Louisa Reef, to name only a few. Most are incapable of sustaining life, and many are only visible at low tide. But this has not deterred China from laying claim to many of them, and even creating new islands where none existed before, in order to claim territorial rights.

“The South China Sea” is an important book for anyone interested in fully understanding what is at stake and who the major players are behind the simmering disputes that flare up with increasing regularity in the SCS. The task of untangling the knot of nautical boundaries, Exclusive Economic Zones, agreed boundaries, or China’s 9-dash-line seems an impossible undertaking, but Hayton is up to the challenge.

I quote from *The Economist*: “Hayton tells a good yarn, even when the topic is as dry as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”

And from the *Wall Street Journal*: “Hayton excels in distilling the complexity and absurdity of the SCS disputes into a manageable narrative.” “This is a book for the layperson, not the lawyer.”

I myself have found the narrative gripping. There were many chapters where I could not put it down, others where I learnt many new things or ways of looking at things. For anyone interested in the world order, and the two superpowers of China and United States at the heart of the SCS conundrum, I cannot rate this book highly enough.

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|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Monkey        | 1908        | 1920        | 1932        | 1944        | 1956        | 1968        | 1980        | 1992        | 2004        | 2016        |
| Rooster       | 1909        | 1921        | 1933        | 1945        | 1957        | 1969        | 1981        | 1993        | 2005        | 2017        |
| Dog           | 1910        | 1922        | 1934        | 1946        | 1958        | 1970        | 1982        | 1994        | 2006        | 2018        |
| Pig           | 1911        | 1923        | 1935        | 1947        | 1959        | 1971        | 1983        | 1995        | 2007        | 2019        |
| Rat           | 1912        | 1924        | 1936        | 1948        | 1960        | 1972        | 1984        | 1996        | 2008        | 2020        |
| Ox            | 1913        | 1925        | 1937        | 1949        | 1961        | 1973        | 1985        | 1997        | 2009        | 2021        |
| Tiger         | 1914        | 1926        | 1938        | 1950        | 1962        | 1974        | 1986        | 1998        | 2010        | 2022        |
| Rabbit        | 1915        | 1927        | 1939        | 1951        | 1963        | 1975        | 1987        | 1999        | 2011        | 2023        |
| <b>Dragon</b> | <b>1916</b> | <b>1928</b> | <b>1940</b> | <b>1952</b> | <b>1964</b> | <b>1976</b> | <b>1988</b> | <b>2000</b> | <b>2012</b> | <b>2024</b> |
| Snake         | 1917        | 1929        | 1941        | 1953        | 1965        | 1977        | 1989        | 2001        | 2013        | 2025        |
| Horse         | 1918        | 1930        | 1942        | 1954        | 1966        | 1978        | 1990        | 2002        | 2014        | 2026        |
| Goat          | 1919        | 1931        | 1943        | 1955        | 1967        | 1979        | 1991        | 2003        | 2015        | 2027        |

