

The Literary London Journal



Review

Anne Witchard, *Lao She in London*, Hong Kong University Press, 2012, paperback, 172 pages. ISBN: 978-988-8139-60-6. £12:50.

Reviewed by

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<1>Like Lao She's London, which is 'saturated with colour' (111), Witchard's charmingly written, highly engaging and well-informed book, *Lao She in London*, positively teems with life, providing the reader with a panoply of facts about the Chinese Revolution, the Literary Modernist Movement and London during the 1920s – a period characterised by race riots, Yellow Peril and Asian chic (Chinoiserie). More importantly, it contributes to putting a gifted yet often-neglected – in the Western academy – Chinese writer and thinker and his fascinating novel *Mr Ma and Son: Two Chinese in London (Er Ma, 1929)* on the literary London map. In fact, Witchard's book can perhaps be regarded as a corollary to the 2003 unveiling of an English Heritage Blue plaque in honour of Lao She at 31 St James's Gardens, Notting Hill, which remains the only plaque to commemorate a Chinese writer in London.

<2>Deftly weaving personal stories and public history, Witchard's book is a fine example of creative criticism or, more accurately, literary biography, and only occasionally runs the risk of being too anecdotal – a common pitfall of this genre. Diminutive in size, but wide-ranging in scope, its main aim, as stipulated in the Preface, is to negate claims that Modernism was a purely Western movement and to reconceive it as 'happening outside the boundaries of a single language or nation or timeframe' (Hayot 175-6). Thus, unlike most major studies in the field, even those recently published and claiming to reassess or reconfigure our understanding of Modernism, yet omitting or dismissing the 'China connection' (such as those by Levenson and Potter), Witchard suggests the movement was transnational, and Chinese and Western 'texts *interacted* in their fashionings of cultural Modernism' (Hayot xi).

<3>This is an interesting, provocative and timely thesis and serves to unsettle Anglo-American centric notions, for while it has long been acknowledged that Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot were inspired by Chinese aesthetics and 'Anglo-American

modernist poetry [in particular Imagist and Vorticist poetry] drew upon perceived conventions of classical Chinese poetry' (55), to suggest the relationship between writers, East and West, was constructed dialogically is more forward-thinking. Yet Lao She, as presented by Witchard, seems to have cut a rather solitary figure in the capital and there is little evidence that the man honoured with the title of 'People's Artist' was ever a significant part of the Bloomsbury set despite his close friendship with Clement Egerton. (For a literary biography, there are relatively few details disclosed regarding She's sexuality and personal life, incidentally). Certainly, he does not appear to have played as active a role in this controversial and influential group as the Chinese writers Ling Shuhua, Xu Zhimo and Xiao Qian were to do in the 1930s. (For a discussion of the literary and personal exchanges between these members of Chinese intelligentsia and Bloomsbury artists, see Lawrence). Nevertheless his writing style and representation of London in *Er Ma*, which is the only extant fictional account of 1920s Limehouse – the site of the city's first Chinatown – by a Chinese writer, is distinctively Modernist, bearing comparisons with Woolf and Huxley's London novels of the same period (64).

<4>Written in the flashback method of narration, *Er Ma*, Witchard informs us, is episodic, pluralistic, open-ended and concerned with the 'underlying patterns of linkage and metaphoric connection that we associate with Modernist writing' (75). Thus parallels can also be drawn with the works of Joyce, Conrad and even Synge. Sometimes, though, one suspects the similarities between She and famous Modernists are overstressed perhaps in an attempt to augment the former's inclusion in the Western literary canon. Equally problematic is when scholars refer to writers such as Ling Shuhua as 'the Chinese Katherine Mansfield', Xu Zhimo as 'the Chinese Shelley' and Cao Yu as 'The Shakespeare of China' as it implies Western writers constitute the yardstick against which to measure everyone else.

<5>Witchard avoids committing this particular critical fallacy and is careful to point out that the author of *Rickshaw Boy* (*Camel Xiangzi*, 1937) and *Teahouse* (*Chaguan*, 1957) 'formulated [Modernism] in his own Chinese terms rather than those of western mimicry' (6). Indeed, the style he wrote in was distinctively Chinese since the self-reflexive (or metafictional) nature of She's work, as well as the use of excess, parody and pluralistic viewpoints are all rooted in traditional Chinese *xiaoshuo* (loosely translated as 'fiction'). Rather than modelling himself on Western writers, then, She inherited and was heavily influenced by local literary techniques and forms. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to pin down the historical or geographical origins of Modernism or to determine precisely who was borrowing from whom.

<6>For this reason, Witchard's book makes a valuable contribution to both the reconception/expansion of the Modernist literary canon as well as to the ethnic diversification of London's cultural landscape, which, we tend too often to forget, has since much earlier than the advent of Postcolonial theory, been home to and a source of inspiration for many migrant writers. Fictional responses to the metropolis by foreign writers, in particular those of Chinese descent, in the pre-war years are still largely unknown even though, as in the case of Lao She's *Er Ma*, they can offer an alternative view of the city and its hidden quarters, in addition to 'countering the crude race analyses' of late-Victorian Western writers (64). Certainly, Witchard's book has prompted me to rethink the texts I encourage students of literary London to read in the future.

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