Re-investigating Limehouse Chinatown: Kandinsky’s 2010 Limehouse Nights and Early 20th-century Oriental Plays

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Abstract

Kandinsky’s *Limehouse Nights* (2010) presented a story about the interwar British society through the eyes of Thomas Burke, a police detective named after the writer Thomas Burke who wrote extensively on Limehouse Chinatown. By examining the trends and events in the decades around 1918, which were heavily referred to in *Limehouse Nights*, this paper discusses the Chinese images emerging from both Kandinsky’s production and the plays from the early twentieth century. The discussion follows Burke’s inquest on stage, and considers its connections to earlier theatrical pieces. The analysis underlines the lasting influence of earlier China-related popular entertainment to later developments in theatre as well as to the British public perception of Chinese culture at home and abroad. *Limehouse Nights* thus provides a contemporary refraction of the converging elements in the early twentieth century that at the same time raises sharp questions about factuality, representation and cross-cultural understanding.
Thomas Burke’s Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown reads Burke’s “Limehouse” fiction as part of “the tradition of literary chinoiseries” (4) in English from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth. Building on recent scholarship in literary and cultural studies that examines the significance of notions of China and Chineseness in modern Western cultures—including, notably, the work of David Porter and Robert Markley-Witchard expands the term to refer to “a wide ranging phenomenon that began in the fourteenth century and which has continued in various manifestations ever since” (12). A Chinese shop in Limehouse at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries. This image comes from the book ‘Wonderful London’. Courtesy of John Seed. ‘Chinatown’ was a key theme in Sax Rohmer’s early Fu Manchu novels in which an evil Chinese genius plots world domination – often from some kind of secret headquarters around Limehouse. Several other Rohmer novels published between 1915 and 1920 dealt with drug smuggling and the dangerous oriental presence in the London docks. Others jumped on the Fu Manchu bandwagon. Edgar Wallace’s novel The Yellow Snake published in 1926 had its Fu Manchu character Fing Su and an underground Chinese network in London (though, oddly, located in Peckham). Limehouse Nights book. Read 11 reviews from the world’s largest community for readers. One of the most frankly and brutally realistic books that has app... You know, too, the streets of plunging hoof and horn that cross and re-cross the waterways, the gaunt chimneys that stick their derisive tongues to the skies. You know the cobbly courts, the bestrewn alleys, through which at night gas-jets asthmatically splutter; and the mephitic glooms and silences of the dock-side.